

INSERIMENTO: A STRATEGY FOR DELICATELY BEGINNING RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNICATIONS

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Italian society has made an investment in high-quality education for children less than 3 years of age. The care and education of very young children has come to be seen as the responsibility not only of the family but also of the broader community (New, 1993, 1998). The public has come to accept the existence of the services and to trust that they will be good for parents and children. As described in this book, general principles of pedagogy and organization have been laid down in several cities in Italy, allowing for gradual evolution of new services and continued quality improvement of existing services.

In recent years, a widespread debate throughout Europe about how to define and describe "quality" in early childhood services has stimulated Italian educators to reexamine what they do. One particular issue upon which we have focused concerns the *inserimento*, the time during which the family and the professionals first meet and begin to work together.

THE CONCEPT OF *INSERIMENTO*: THE ITALIAN PERSPECTIVE

Inserimento (which can be roughly translated as "settling in," or "period of transition and adjustment") is our term for the strategy of beginning

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relationships and communication among adults and children when the child is entering an infant-toddler center or a preschool program for the first time. The Italian concept of *inserimento* indicates the initial process of the child's adjustment into the new community. Interpreted as a delicate event in the child's and family's life (Mantovani & Terzi, 1987), the practice of *inserimento* is primarily based on a great variety of strategies aimed at encouraging parents' involvement, and it begins even before the child's first day at the center or preschool.

The presence of someone who is very well known to the child for the entire duration of the *inserimento* is highly valued and supported. After a series of communications and visits between the family and the center, parents are invited to spend some time at the center with their child. During the first days, the parent and the child will remain for a few hours playing, observing, and communicating with the teachers and other families. Day by day, parents and children increase their stay in the center until their full schedule is reached. The center provides flexibility in the way parents can respond most effectively. With a great range of variation covered, parents' full-time presence may last from a minimum of a few days for some families to a maximum of several weeks for others.

Thus, during the period of *inserimento*, the center staff provides for children to be cared for and nurtured by their parents in the out-of-home context. Although this privilege will not last forever, it gives young children an initial feeling of familiarity and emotional security that usually carries over when the parent is no longer present. These practices also aim to give teachers the opportunity to learn about individual patterns of interaction and about differences in parental style.

Gradually, as parents begin to reduce their presence, parents and children will experience the first separations and reunions. Most of the time, educators facilitate a positive initial separation by offering a context strategically designed to support and show delicately beginning relationships.

The process of *inserimento* requires a carefully designed and prepared environment, which immediately conveys messages of welcome and respect to parents and children. Such messages must be evident in the care given to the physical space, in the positive attitudes and behaviors of the educators during this process, as well as in the great variety of personalized responses to each family's requests. The main indicator of *welcoming* to parents is that they are seriously invited to spend as much time as possible in the center. At the same time as the mother or father is getting to know the teacher, the teacher has the opportunity to socialize with the parent. Eventually the child will benefit from the relationships growing between parents and teachers.

Furthermore, while the child is offered the opportunity to gradually familiarize him- or herself with the teacher, the other children, and the environment, the parent may assume a more relaxed approach to infant care. As the center provides new children with a prepared space that invites them to play with peers, it gives parents many opportunities to ob-

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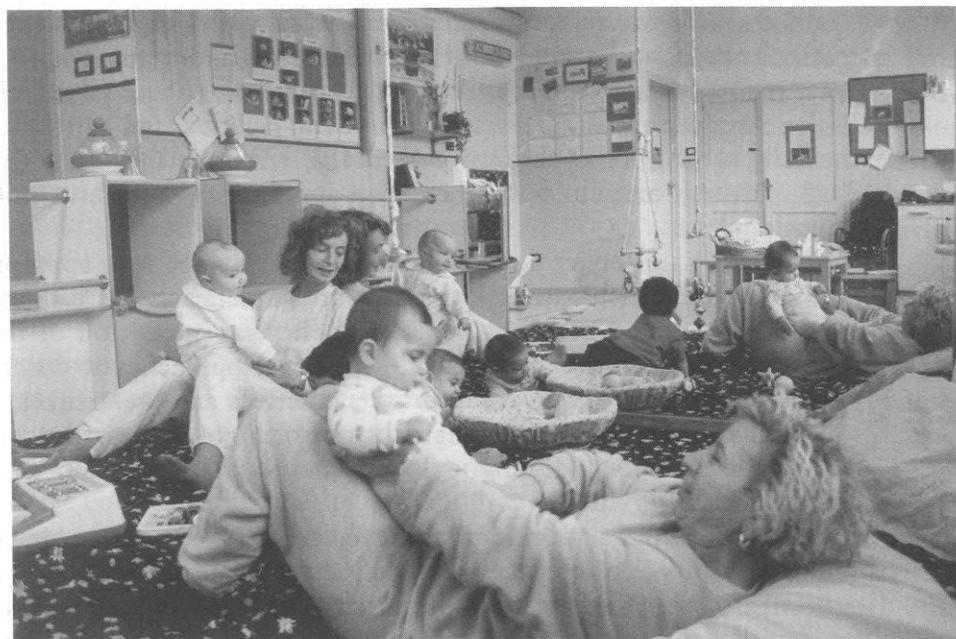


FIGURE 9.1. Teachers hold and play with infants in a way that imitates the style of parents. (Infant-toddler Center Sagittario, Modena)

serve their own child's behavior in a social context. The teacher, acting as a supportive figure for both adults and children, facilitates reciprocal observations.

During this period, some specific group experiences with other families are offered in order to give parents the opportunity to learn that other parents share their concerns about entering infant care. The practice of sharing among adults may reduce individuals' anxiety and at the same time provide them with a context for autonomous reflections on their own style of relationships.

GUIDELINES FOR INSERIMENTO

Over the years, by practicing *inserimento*, educators (both teachers and professional development coordinators) have defined some general guidelines for this transition. They have devised models of gradual, predictable, and recognizable ways of welcoming and interacting with new families. Based on these general models, a wide variety of educational strategies have been developed to facilitate this experience. These include teacher-parent interviews and home visits before the child starts at the center; parent-teacher meetings before, during and after the initial transition process; various forms of documentation; large or small group discussions with parents; and daily communications between parents and teachers.

Through these various strategies, centers have attempted to meet each family's needs, to sustain parental involvement, and to respond to the parents' requests for emotional support in caring for their young children. Each center aspires to offer a thoughtful and personalized adjustment into the new setting for each family involved, with the intention that each dyad of parent and child will have the opportunity to receive individual attention.

There is no longer debate about whether or not it is appropriate to provide a gradual separation with the adult's mediation. Instead, the question is what is the best way to support the first transition of the child from the family to the infant-toddler center. Approaches to *inserimento* vary as a function of each community's practices and preferences, but because it represents an important indicator of high quality, almost all infant-toddler centers and preschools must now give more attention to this aspect of their service.

In Italy, two main alternatives have been worked out. In some centers educators focus their attention on the individual child and family (*inserimento individuale*). In others, they emphasize group practices where a few families participate together in the transition process (*inserimento di gruppo*). In the first case, each parent-child unit enters infant care at a different time, so that the teachers can focus on that new family without jeopardizing attention to others. In the second case, the process of *inserimento* involves a small number of families together. This provides adults, as well as children, with opportunities to socialize and relate to each other during this initial phase. In this situation there are still plenty of opportunities for individuals to experience their own particular transition. And in both cases, teachers must have had appropriate professional development in order to successfully facilitate both individual and group communications and interactions.

The ultimate goal in both strategies of *inserimento* is to support and value relationships between children and adults and, as it has been recently thought appropriate, to extend the value of relationships among all adults.

THE ROLE OF ADULTS

When thinking about the role of the adults in this relationship, it is important to consider the close attention that is required of them, as I described above. Some theoretical frameworks are useful to understand the complexity of *inserimento*, which is considered a critical and delicate event for both children and adults.

Theoretical Frameworks

In former years, when educators were more focused on the child's experience of "separation" upon entering the center, they embraced the signifi-

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cant theoretical contribution offered by attachment theory. They used this theory to study and understand the early mother-child relationship. From this perspective, they focused on the child's separation experience at the time of entering the infant-toddler center. They sought first and foremost to provide the child a safe and secure environment to facilitate separation from the mother and thereby to prevent negative consequences for the child's development (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1988).

However, through repeated experiences and sustained attention to *inserimento*, educators developed further concepts and ideas especially addressing the context of out-of-home care. In contrast to the first attachment theorists who looked at mother-child dyads in the home context, they now focused on relationships within center-based care. They realized that the center context involves, right from the moment of the family's first contact, other adults and children beyond the focal family; it is the site of many interpersonal exchanges, all relevant for the process of *inserimento*. For the educators, therefore, there emerged the critical issue of recognizing that each individual transition is mutually defined with other adults, children, teachers, and even the environment.

In addition, educators became aware of other relevant contributions recently provided by social constructivism theorists. These contributions led to a focus on the intersubjective and relational aspects of development and suggested more new ways of thinking about *inserimento*. A critical aspect arising from this theoretical approach is recognizing the interpersonal construction of one's own development and the coconstruction of knowledge (Rogoff, 1990). This is of great interest for understanding *inserimento* because it gives attention to both adult-child and peer-peer interaction as contexts of learning (Dunn, 1993). As educators address these complexities and give growing pedagogical attention to adults as protagonists along with their children, they have contributed to developing a balanced model of *inserimento*. The model includes a balanced focus on the child's well-being, the parents' needs and resources, and the broader system of relationships in the child's life at home and at the center.

When educators encourage parents to be an active part of this transition, they allow the child to experience the new context with more security. At the same time, they give parents the opportunity to adapt to the new context gradually. This is an important point because scientific evidence highlights the interdependence between the quality of life of the primary caregiver and that of the child (Emiliani, Gelati, & Molinari, 1989; Musatti, 1992). The child's well-being is strictly linked to the well-being of the mother (or primary caregiver) and the support of the father, extended family, and institutions. This emotional framework effectively influences the whole transition process. The importance of the mother's well-being, whether she is *with* or *away from* her child, is validated and taken seriously during the process of *inserimento*.

Recent research studies highlight the complexity of the process of becoming a mother, which implies the development of a new identity.

The "mother's mind-set" (Stern, 1995; Stern & Bruschweiler-Stern, 1998) emerges even before the child's birth and continues to develop in relationship with the child as the child develops. In recent reinterpretations of attachment theory, the mother's mental and representational world is considered an important factor in her relationship with her child (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Her relational style reflects her personal history and experiences as a child and as a woman, as well as her internal world (Ammanniti & Stern, 1997). From this perspective, the mother-child interaction is perceived to be in dynamic interdependence with the mother's childhood experience (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985).

Inserimento as Opening Oneself to Others

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At this point, *inserimento* has come to be viewed as an experience of building new relationships, rather than one composed around separation from the mother. A range of recent interpretations based on research and local practice now associates the experience of entering into infant care with opportunities for constructing a broader social world rich in relationships. In the infant-toddler center, it is necessary to build closeness with the family, always considering the complex nature of human relationships so that the relationships created will be characterized by genuine curiosity, suspended judgment, and an attitude of respect and attention toward one another. By observing each infant-adult dyad, professionals develop new patterns of relationships that are predictable, recognizable, and stable in their development. Thus, the transition experience is no longer only about ensuring each single child's adjustment, but instead is also concerned with ensuring a more extended and interpersonal transition.

As a result of such attention to *inserimento*, several strategies have emerged to support the interpretation of separation as opening oneself to others. Both researchers and educators involved in practice related to infants recognize the value of parents' involvement during the process of transition. Moreover, most recently emerging is an interpretation of parents' involvement as a professional need for the teacher. This includes the interpretation of *inserimento* as a period that should not be rushed but instead a time for listening, observing, and discovering. *Inserimento* can be a time when all involved value the pleasure of getting to know one another closely.

Constructing Adult Partnerships

Building close relationships entails complex emotional involvement for both parents and teachers directed toward the goal of transforming emotions into guidelines for behavior. That is to say, if we recognize emotions and consider their strength, then we can develop new ways of activating their positive potential. In fact, adults can create spaces, strategies, and attitudes that provide a place and a time that is a thoughtful "holding

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environment" where people can express their full range of emotions and feelings.

Adults achieve a sense of security by discussing, sharing, and understanding their own feelings connected with leaving their child in someone else's care or, in the case of teachers, with taking on someone else's child. The experience of entering infant care can develop into a time and a place in which adults, gradually opening up to one another, can be partners rather than antagonists. In this situation they can share knowledge rather than showing off competencies.

INSERIMENTO OF VERY YOUNG CHILDREN: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

All of this new thinking about *inserimento* holds implications for both teachers and the people involved in teachers' professional development. By broadening the focus beyond the single child's experience, we make way for practices that welcome the parent-child dyad into the life of the infant-toddler center to become something more: an opportunity for professionals to experience the intense learning involved in inquiring into and observing human relations.

The attention to very young children (under 12 months of age) is an emerging issue in Italian care and education. Several infant-toddler programs in Italy, which in the past received mostly children over one year of age, now are asked to welcome very young children. This requires each program to develop new strategies to respond effectively to the new demands. What does it mean to welcome a child just a few weeks old, as opposed to an older one, into the infant-toddler center? What about a child of 3 months? Once again we must examine the connection between high-quality care and continuing investment to respond to the increasing demand for care of very young children.

It is well known that a mother's relationship with a very young infant, especially soon after birth, is intense, deep, and exclusive. Therefore, when a very young infant first enters the infant-toddler center, all the adults are asked to become completely involved, both physically and mentally, as they strive to support the infant's ability and developmental accomplishment of feeling united even when separated from the parent or primary caregiver. This process represents a meaningful professional opportunity for educators. What follows is the interpretation of *inserimento* as a context for research and further professional development.

Action Research: Welcoming Very Young Infants

One recent experience of high-quality care in contemporary Italy involves an action research project currently going on in Modena, a small city of the Emilia Romagna region. The project aims to promote a deeper understanding of the *inserimento* of the youngest infants and to define new

strategies to facilitate this experience. The research, designed in cooperation with Susanna Mantovani of the University of Milan, was funded by the Modena municipal administration. It was promoted by Laura Saitta of Modena, noted for her admirable efforts to promote good-quality settings for young children both in the past and today. This project has brought about a deeper understanding of the first transition process, which we consider to be a complex interpersonal event that involves parents, teachers, and children in the process of getting to know one another.

New strategies of professional intervention have emerged from our partnership with teachers and pedagogical coordinators from the infant-toddler centers that enrolled an increased number of young infants. During the research, we videotaped the child-mother entrance, the first separation experience, and the very first reunion. We did the first videotape during the first week and the second one two weeks later. Then we conducted interviews with both the mothers and teachers who were videotaped, including two more interviews at the end of the process. These final interviews were videotaped to produce other material to promote further collective discussions. Both interviews and videotapes were discussed with mothers and teachers in large groups. The process of looking at the videotapes with parents and teachers gave value to all of the protagonists' interpretations and also was helpful in defining supportive strategies for early intervention with parents.

The result of this work, based on intense teacher involvement, was to increase our attention to the parent-child interaction, along with emerging competencies in observing relationships. In addition, we carefully considered the teachers' emotional involvement. For teachers, their already existing professional skills in observing and recognizing different patterns and styles of relations were further enhanced by this collaborative research project.

During this research, we asked the teachers and educators to construct—as a professional competence—a mental place in which each child could be contained, recognized, and considered in relation to the adult. It is a mental place in which the adult can think of the child, in which the adult can keep in mind each child's emotional effort, remembering the child's, as well as the mother's uniqueness (Pawl, 1995). This requires teachers and professionals to have strong in-service professional development as well as space and time to reflect, interpret, and discuss their own interpersonal involvement. Furthermore, professional development depends upon the group of teachers working together. By collaborating, they become resources to one another when they discuss, share, rethink, and conceptualize in a new way their experiences, expectations, and interpretations.

An Illustration of *Inserimento*

The following account of a child and her mother entering an infant-toddler center in Modena is not a complete story, but it illustrates the complexity

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of the beginning of new relations among three important people: an infant, a mother, and a teacher. The passage points out the richness of the process of getting to know one another, the intensity of the emotions, and the delicate buildup of the relationship. The *inserimento* unfolds slowly and gradually, and the passage reveals how the new relationships develop and lead mother and child to be in the center "naturally." Above all, the passage highlights how much attention and professional skill the teacher must have in order to observe, support, respect, and facilitate these important experiences in the lives of children and parents. The account, based on a videotaped observation, is divided into three short scenes.

I. First Day. A mother and her child attend gradually to the new experience of entering into the infant-toddler center. They look around and explore the new environment, trying to understand what is happening and how to become a part of it. The scene describes their behavior and way of attending to something new; it describes their unique style of approaching the *inserimento*. At the same time, it describes the beginning of the relationship of mother and daughter with the teacher, based on delicate sequences of observing, listening, and getting to know one another.

A mother and her child Luisa, 5 months old, enter the room and sit in a comfortable chair. The mother holds the child so she faces outward toward the teacher, who is sitting on the floor. Looking at the teacher, the mother says, "Good morning! Today we rushed!" "Buon giorno," responds the teacher. Holding the baby's hands in her own, the mother notes, "Now we are paying attention. . . ." And she greets other children in the room: "Ciao, Matteo. Is Giovanni here?" The teacher responds, "No, he will be here later, and Franco will come back on Monday." The mother glances down and asks, "Luisa, are we comfortable? Are we ready?"

After looking around for a few minutes Luisa smiles and looks directly at the teacher. The mother stands and carries Luisa to the floor where the teacher is waiting for them. A game of "getting to know you" takes place. The child is placed on the floor between her mother and the teacher, and the adults begin to talk, sharing their ideas about the baby's entry into infant care. Luisa turns from one to the other as she lies quietly between them. (Bove, 1999, p. 32)

II. One Hour Later. The mother, child, and teacher take the first steps in their new relationship. Here it is important to note the link between the mother-child relationship and their new relationships with the teacher. During this sequence, the mother leaves the room for a short time while the teacher continues to build her relationship with the child as they await the mother's return (see Figure 9.2).

The teacher has Luisa in her arms. The mother is still in the classroom, observing from the other side of the room. The teacher (seeing the mother's image in the mirror) positions Luisa so that she too is looking in the mirror. The teacher asks, "Can you see your mother?" Luisa



FIGURE 9.2. When the mother returns to pick up her child, the two of them greet each other with smiles. (*Infant-toddler Center Sagittario, Modena*)

looks at the mirror and smiles. The teacher turns so that they can both face the mother. The mother approaches, all the while looking at her child, and the teacher gives Luisa back to her mother. Now the mother gets down on the floor and begins to play with Luisa. This time the teacher watches from a distance. When the mother leaves the room for a brief period later in the morning, the same play routine takes place between the teacher and Luisa. (Bove, 1999, p. 32)

III. *Two Weeks Later.* The mother and child enter the infant-toddler center and prepare to separate. The sequence provides clear evidence of the evolution of familiarity between child and teacher. It also reveals the mother's increased security about both *being* with the child in the center and *leaving* her child with the teacher.

Luisa and her mother enter the room. The teacher greets them with a cheerful, "Ciao, Luisa! How are you?" The mother responds "Hello. We are fine this morning." They sit down in the same chair that they sat in two weeks earlier, and the teacher asks Luisa, "So, are you coming to play?" The child smiles and puts her arms out toward the teacher. The mother says, "Look, she is reaching for you!" "Are you ready?" asks the teacher. "Come here. Let's try. . . . Have you seen Matteo and Giovanni?" The teacher takes the child and kisses her

while they move to the floor where another child is waiting. The mother watches from her chair for a few minutes and, as soon as the infant begins to respond to the teacher's playfulness, goes there and asks the teacher if it is appropriate for her to leave. After a brief conversation, the mother—watching her daughter—says, "Bye-bye, I am going. Mom is going." Then looking at the mother, the teacher says, "Watch. Luisa is following you with her eyes." At this point, the mother leaves the room. (Bove, 1999, p. 32)

LOOKING AT *INSERIMENTO* AS A CULTURAL CONCEPT

Assuming that the notion of *inserimento* is a theoretical issue as well as a practical concern, this final section will discuss the concept of *inserimento* as a dynamic, culturally constructed interpretation of the child's entrance into out-of-home care.¹

Contemporary understanding in Italy values high-quality infant-toddler care as a pleasant and desirable experience for both parents and children (New, 1993, 1998). For some time, the child's experience in the infant-toddler center has been considered appropriate, as well as beneficial for the child's development, but it is evident now that it is also supportive for parents. This reflects our understanding of infant care as a complex relational experience in the early years and suggests that infant-toddler care is a "system of relationships" in which the emotional, social, and physical well-being of the protagonists are interdependent (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998).

Changes in the Child-Rearing Support System

The interpersonal system of each infant-toddler center is today replacing the traditional supporting system that once was represented by the extended family. The debate has progressed far beyond considering mainly the needs of working mothers. We see evidence in the fact that there is a continuing discussion about providing high-quality care for children under 3 years of age (Musatti & Mantovani, 1996) and that there is agreement that such care is an effective response to children's developmental needs as well as to the needs of parents.

Traditionally, the notion of well-being for individual children involved a broad picture including extended families, relatives, friends, and neighbors. Child rearing was shared, involving all of these participants from the very beginning. In our society today, the traditional support system has in part been replaced by new strategies for sharing the experiences of motherhood (and parenthood). These are especially helpful for first-time parents. To extend the natural intergenerational experience of sharing one's pregnancy and motherhood with one's *own* mother, efforts have been made to create other contexts in which to share also the process of "becoming a mother" (Byng-Hall, 1995). These sometimes take the form



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of prebirth and postbirth interventions. There may also be group sessions in which women share the experience of "becoming" and of "being" a new mother with other women in the same conditions. Usually these programs are promoted by the local hospital or by the local health unit (*consultorio*).

Many Images of Parenthood

The *asilo nido*—conceptualized and practiced as a place open to families—provides these adults with a variety of opportunities to share, debate, and discuss the major issues of their parental roles. At the same time, it provides them with a variety of occasions to observe others interacting intimately with their children. This affirms and reassures them and offers them a model of appropriate behavior.

The infant-toddler center is, for Italian parents, a place where one's image of parenthood can be supported and validated or modified through relationships with others. This requires teachers and professionals to be aware of the wide variety of ways of being a parent of a young child, that is, to be aware of a thousand different images of parenthood. Once again, *inserimento* represents the initial phase of this process of building new relationships among parents, children, and other adults.

A variety of cross-cultural studies of child development and education point out the relationship between culture and education (LeVine, Miller, & West, 1998; Sharma & Fischer, 1998) and highlight cultural relativity: what is important, fundamental, and reasonable for one community may be unimportant, nonfundamental, and unreasonable for another. Working with children and families requires teachers and professionals to be prepared to recognize and respect the tremendous variety of cultural systems that families present.

The notion of flexibility—a key concept in planning the *inserimento*—helps professionals respond to such cultural variations. How can we adjust the center schedule to everyone's needs, desires, and expectations? How can we deal with a mother who has to be back at work very soon? Careful observation and inquiry will indicate the best way to proceed with each family; teachers will be able to define flexible strategies rather than fixed protocols. Eventually parents and children will show us how to enter into relationship with them.

Our practice of *inserimento* represents the process of transition into an infant-toddler center in the Italian cultural context in which the idea of family generally represents a stable context of growth. The ideal Italian family has always centered on close, intense, and daily relationships among family members (nuclear and extended). In other cultural contexts, different ideas and values about the family and child growth and development pertain. For example, in North America greater geographic mobility gives rise to an earlier transition to autonomy for children and young people than in Italy. There is a greater value given to individual independence in the United States than in Italy (New, 1999).

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In Italy, therefore, the best way to provide a smooth separation into infant care is through building close, intense, and daily relationships with child and family. *Inserimento* occurs as a culturally relevant answer to a culturally determined need. For Italians, the idea of *inserimento* refers to a complex event that reflects the mother's status in modern society as well as her possible multiple roles. The strong expectation to be a "good" mother might describe both *being close to the child* and *being independent*. For example, at the moment of transition, the expectation for the good mother to be good at leaving the child and for good teachers to be professional in taking care of the child is connected to our cultural notions of maternal role and professional role.

But the emerging attention to the experience of mother-infant separation as an adults' shared responsibility, rather than an exclusive responsibility of the mother in her role as the primary caregiver and of a teacher in her role as an expert, opens the possibilities for a more complex view of both roles. Is a mother good in leaving a child in someone else's hands? Is a mother good when she is not having a hard time separating from her child? Or, is she good when she is showing less pain than what we expect? Is the teacher good when the child doesn't cry? Rather than focusing on defining good or bad in evaluative terms, we should concentrate on the idea of constructing positive relationships for both mothers and teachers. Efforts to involve parents as active participants during the *inserimento*—both in the process of thinking and planning the event, as well as experiencing it—represents a constructive and helpful answer to the strong pressures that characterize the mother's condition and multiple roles in modern society.

A FINAL CONSIDERATION

Inserimento can be seen as a cultural concept that reflects the larger Italian interpretation of childhood and education, and that functions to further the child's sense of belonging to the society (Mantovani, Saitta, & Bove, 2000). We need to remember that no educational strategy can be transplanted directly from one cultural setting to another. However, continuing to examine cultural practices and to sustain reciprocal, cross-cultural understanding may promote further development of high-quality of infant-toddler care in each cultural context. This requires a serious commitment to establishing relationships between families and educators even before the official entrance of the child into infant care. *Inserimento* is a never-ending process of growth, transformation, and getting to know each other.

NOTE

1. Reflections on *inserimento* as a culturally constructed notion and practice are based on a cross-cultural study on the child's transition experience from

family to out-of-home care in Italy and North America. The research was funded by a scholarship awarded by the University of Milan and conducted by Chiara Bove under the scientific supervision of Susanna Mantovani (University of Milan) and Rebecca New (Tufts University).

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