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Family education and childhood services in Tuscany

Enzo Catarsi

Over the last thirty years in Italy as well as in Tuscany we have witnessed the spread of a unique childhood culture, which first originated within early childhood centres and the newborn childhood services. These contexts also featured challenging and remarkable initiatives for both babies and relevant parents, who could acquire knowledge for the development of their parental responsibilities. A useful driving force should be anyway represented by early childhood centres, which, while initially featuring excess of welfarism, is now acknowledged as educationally valuable. Their projects imply parents' presence as a necessary and qualifying aspect, as stated even by foreign scholars (Moss-Pence, 1996; New-Mallory-Mantovani, 2000; New, 2001; Huber, 2003).

Childcare services and parents' "participation"

The awareness of the importance of parental presence in early childhood centres is results from remarkable initial observations regarding affection and later in virtue of the ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979 and 1992). Such awareness, however, comes from the cultural climate relating to the 1968 protest movement and the will of people to participate, this leading to the first institutional decentralization and laying the foundations for the so-called "school democracy". This phenomenon, moreover, has been consolidated by the "social management" proposal, which was the hallmark of child public schools in Emilia Romagna, whose devisers were Loris Malaguzzi (Catarsi, 1998 and 2004) and Bruno Ciari (Catarsi, 1992 and 2001).

Since the '60s the pedagogic proposal of these two authoritative pedagogists features a deep social scheme and the will to contextualize and historicize the educational process, by involving both teachers and families, and the whole social community in the management. This approach

is named «social management». Even before the establishment of early childhood centres in 1971, provided for by law 1044, the social management plans for parents' participation in nursery school, as part of a wider decentralization process and a progress towards State democracy.

On the strength of this initial experience, early childhood centre educators realized that parents' presence also benefited the relationships with children. This point of view contributed to the replacement of institutional perspective with a range of relational approaches providing for moments of joint efforts in big and small groups, besides individual meeting occasions between educator and parents. Individual talk, in fact, modified the nature of relationships, which was previously starting from educators and addressed to parents.

The new perspective provides for a bidirectional relationship and focuses on the educator's ability to listen to parents and better know the child through their speeches. A major and first task of educators is to reassure parents on their educational skills, thus dampening that unsuitability feeling typical to today's young couples, who then tend to appoint childhood centres as responsible for upbringing. Parents and relevant anxiety and fears need to be understood by educators, whose task is to establish a confidential relation, while soothing the guilty feeling arising from their need to leave children in childhood centres (Galardini, 2003).

It is not by chance that a dedicated "talk room" has been created in order to improve the relationship between educators and parents, a quiet and warm place especially intended for individual meetings. They are crucial for parents to be prepared for initial settling in, while taking part in big and small group experiences. It is very important for parents to share the childhood centre experience and avoid to consider it as an impoverishing one. Their involvement allows them to be reassured on the worth of their children's experience and induces them to further collaborate.

Lab activities for parents taking place during the evening are therefore appreciated and deemed as valuable, them consisting in making useful objects, costumes, arranging books and puppets, etc. The goal of such activities is to promote parents' aggregation and offer them opportunities to go out and experience social events. Good occasions for relating to parents are those of "Holiday Time": Christmas, Carnival and Last Year's Day, these featuring convivial and festive moments when parents sometimes arrange and act in brief shows, for the benefit of a shared joy.

The whole event experienced by the child in childhood centres is to be meant as a support activity to parents, consisting of welcome mo-

ments and first settling in, as well as talks, meetings and parties. The communication between educators and parents is, in fact, a crucial element to qualify the educational project of the different children supporting services (Fortunati, 2006). Childhood services are a sort of educational “agents” for families’ everyday life: they provide parents with various *educational style models*, which reveal themselves through educators’ relationships with children.

Early childhood educational projects have led to the creation of new childhood services being addressed to children and parents, who first spread in Italy in the second half of the eighties. The reality of new childhood services derives from a range of assumptions and is willing to fulfil the socialization need of those children who cannot attend early childhood centres or whose families did not make such choice. These new services could, at the same time, meet the need for care, on a short time term, of those children who could otherwise not benefit from such assistance; moreover, they represent an opportunity for parents to meet, thus promoting the spread of a new parental culture (Catarsi, 1993a and 1993b). Among their goals, psychological support to parents, who feel more and more unprepared for the commitment they are going to face.

The following experience of the new childhood services has proven, indeed, how they showed up as a context for parental education in their promotion of confrontation among parents and the monitoring of children’s natural behaviour, whose potentials were finally improved in the parents’ eyes. Such qualification process of childhood picture especially featured those culturally upper class, who most exploited these new services (Catarsi-Faenzi, 1997 and 2000; Musatti-Picchio, 2005; Catarsi-Fortunati, 2009). In Italy, in fact, family centres, and even more, centres for Children and Families, were developed according to an educational perspective.

Family education in early childhood services

The results produced within early childhood centres, come on the other hand, from a thirty-year work, which saw educators – in Italy and especially in Tuscany – committed with frequent refresher courses being focused on communication and relationships with families. The attention paid to these issues is today much higher, even thanks to the presence of these childhood services, which exist in virtue of relationships and express themselves through the development of educators’ figures (Terzi-Mantovani, 2002; Mantovani, 2006). Early childhood centres,

therefore, combined with the other childhood services, show up today as an educational context for parents.

Though, in view of what remarked so far, we think it proper to assume a further significant improvement leading early childhood centres and other services to show up as a unique and unequivocal context for family education, which provides for training pathways for parental qualification. We feel we could rightly reassert the importance of family educational groups' and early childhood centres' proposals, also as resulted from similar initiatives organized and managed with the parents of older kids (Catarsi 2002 and 2003).

The family educational perspective shall therefore include a real involvement of parents in the training activity. In these contexts, indeed, these activities should be performed by creating small groups being made up of 15 to 18 members, who, with the aid of a "mature" and qualified educator, could compare one another to acquire new skills according to a confrontation process that has nothing to do with passive emulation.

According to the same principle, the matter is to be fully aware that each family features an own specific "educational style", which is to be taken as a reference for further examination and development. It is desirable for parents taking part in these initiatives to be confronted with other educational styles with self-criticism, to lately ponder new consistent "educational directions" being accordant to their cultural, ideological and existential creeds, on the basis of the experiences lived. This process would enable young couples being seized by the urgent doubt about their ability to fulfil the parental task.

The «Parents project» should be intended as an opportunity of aggregation and thus include play and practical activities intended for parents in groups, who could through them acquire new skills, such as building a game, reading a book together with the child, and so on. Such activities are already carried out in many early childhood centres, where dedicated spaces are present.

It is apparent how educators taking on this new task shall feature specific preparation on subjects like communication, play, identity formation, fears, television etc., which are the heart of parents' curiosity and confrontation. This way, among other things, they are reassured by the good relationships featuring educators, this meaning good living conditions within the centre. All of these reasons make us clear how this work with parents within early childhood centres and nursery schools (and in general within all training institutions) is not just a secondary element, rather, a basic and distinctive one.

Educators and communication “smoothers”

In such perspective, all kinds of educators shall be able to develop an “equal” relationship with parents, while helping them to put on a positive and constructive attitude within school and family contexts. This is even more important when dealing with problems being typical to the relationship between families and professionals, especially in school and social and health services. This relation seems to improve in the presence of activities of support to parenting with professionals’ and parents’ educational activities. Partnership perspective even seems to be easily realized as a result of a confrontation and of a shared reflection on what experienced (Bouchard-Kalubi, 2001; Bouchard et al., 1998).

Many different researches, on the other hand, have proved that the quality of social and educational work clearly depends upon the surrounding ecologic context, while mainly connected with the operators’ professionalism, which shall be full of sympathy, partnership and aggregation. On an international level, families’ involvement in the planning of activities results to be more and more crucial in order to improve the qualification degree and effectiveness of social and educational interventions (Morris-Shepherd, 2000). At the same time, the professionalism of social workers is more and more conceived as a technical skill aiming at optimizing the potentials of those people they work with (Prévot-Pithon, 2003).

In this connection we feel proper to remark, once again, that early childhood centres and the new nurse services could represent a decisive factor for the qualification of parenting and, from this assumption, explain the characteristics being necessary for educators to offer. A main task of operators is, therefore, to reassure parents on their ability to grow their children, rather, to appease that unsuitability feeling largely affecting young couples, which often leads to a need for delegation of one’s educational responsibilities to childhood centres.

Family educational groups could therefore represent a support to parents’ educational task even within early childhood centres and will reveal to be as much as useful if educators are able to set parents at ease and allow them to open up. Within family educational group, “directors” establish a kind of relationship with parents with the purpose to fully involve them in the activities (Miron, 2003).

The professionalism of early childhood centres’ educators would find a further opportunity for qualification in this new training context, which could also concern other activities, such as those supposedly addressed to upcoming parents and taking part in birth preparation courses. To

this purpose, as already and clearly stressed, a need for rearrangement of family advisory centres emerges, which should feature both health and psychological and pedagogic expertise, so as to be classified as proper contexts for support to parenting, especially during children's first months and years of life.

A new need for interventions within family educational sector is taking shape, regarding the taking in consideration of the educational models followed, whether deliberately or not, by parents, so that they could be fully involved in training activities, which may question and eventually even modify their educational styles. In other words, we firmly believe that family education lies in the enhancement of parents' potentials and supply of the necessary tools for them to be sympathetic and encouraging towards their own and others' children.

Family educational activities are, in fact, aimed at providing parents with knowledge on children's development, while making them independent in the management of their own educational styles and values. These training experiences should equally be capable of developing parents' relational abilities and making them reflect on their fallibility degree and emotions (Pourtois-Desmet, 1989 and 1991; Pourtois-Desmet-Nimal, 2000). "Well-balanced" and almighty parents will ever badly affect their relations with children; those parents being able to sympathetically listen, on the contrary, will be able to recognize and share children's feelings. Even any possible necessary denial will be made within a meaningful relationship.

The activity proposals set their sights on the promotion of communication in circles, so that all of the members are able to express their points of view and stake themselves. Even for early childhood centres and child care, educators play a crucial role as "directors" of the group and communication "smoothers". In this context, simulation is of main importance, since enabling parents to act spontaneously, to be used to listening and being listened to, to accept and be accepted (Milani-Orlando, 2001).

This is why, as exhaustively remarked so far, interventions should be arranged so as to involve parents without uprooting them from their habits. The task, instead, is to start from their own culture, to be intended from an anthropological point of view, to further compare and discuss attitudes, behaviours, ideas and values, so that even all occurring changes could result from new awareness and produce a qualification of family and social relationships.

Early childhood centres and other child care services are capable of making a decisive contribution to this goal, since they foster parents' ag-

gregation and own all proper tools to compare the various educational styles besides allowing parents to acquire renewed basic skills for an aware parenting practice.

Experiences of some Tuscan councils, which are presented in this pamphlet, are inspired – even if in different measure and in accordance with different contexts, by this perspective and they pursue the objective of supporting parents in their very difficult task. This characteristic almost constitutes an enrichment of the educational project of the Tuscan infancy services which, even for this reason, deserve that international attention capable of making them, to great extent, become points of reference for all the ones looking after small children. Moreover, this journal has already illustrated some of these experiences (Bottigli, 2006; Bertelli, 2007; Cortecci-Tomaselli, 2007), loyal to its double mandate of giving importance to significant researches in the family pedagogy field and promoting the most interesting experiences of family education.

In this specific case the omen is that the Tuscan infancy services can widen actions of partnership with councils from all over the world, so that they can encourage the comparison and put on everyone's disposal their own "good practices". This is exactly the intention of this publication too, from the belief that valorisation of experiences constitutes a central passage in the building of an innovative infancy culture.

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