FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AND EDUCATIONAL CORESPONSIBILITY IN ECE: A CASE STUDY

PARTECIPAZIONE DELLE FAMIGLIE E CORRESPONSABILITÀ EDUCATIVA NELLA SCUOLA DELL'INFANZIA: UN CASO DI STUDIO

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Abstract

The process that changed the original socio-assistance function of educational services in a "socio-educational function", has now been fully carried out. At the same time, the relationship between the educational services and families has also gone through a process of change. In fact, paying attention to children's growth processes also means involving their families and the community in the educational service. The concept of "reciprocal circularity" between educational services and families refers to the importance of ensuring a continuity that connects in any ways the educational experience and the family background, so to enhance virtuous processes of educational alliance. On this conceptual basis an explorative research has been grounded, which includes and analyses a textual corpus of semi-structured interviews of 72 families involved in the Associazione di Promozione Sociale (Social Development Association, SDA) AgriBimbi, in Lecce province (Galatina), that is engaged in planning and developing experiential paths in nature, for 3- to- 6 year old- children. The collected results offer new paths of theoretical reflection and didactical action towards a desired review of educational activities in the ECE schools, that fully enhances the family involvement with the perspective of the harmonious education action and the education for sustainability.

Abstract

È ormai compiuto quel percorso che ha trasformato la originaria funzione socio-assistenziale dei servizi educativi in "funzione socio-educativa". Parallelamente si è andato modificando anche il rapporto tra servizi educativi e famiglie di bambini che li frequentano. Dedicare attenzione ai processi di crescita dei bambini, infatti, significa includere le famiglie e la comunità nella vita del servizio. Il concetto di "circolarità reciproca" tra servizi educativi e famiglie rimanda all'importanza di garantire forme di continuità tra l'esperienza familiare e quella educativa così da sostenere percorsi virtuosi di alleanza educativa. Da tali premesse prende avvio un lavoro di ricerca esplorativa di tipo qualitativo che ha raccolto e analizzato un corpus testuale di interviste semi-strutturate a 72 famiglie che partecipano al contesto dell'Associazione di Promozione Sociale AgriBimbi in provincia di Lecce (Galatina), una realtà impegnata nella progettazione e nella realizzazione di percorsi esperienziali in natura per bambini/e dai 3 ai 6 anni. I risultati prodotti offrono piste di riflessione teorica e di azione didattica per una auspicabile rivisitazione delle attività educative nella scuola dell'infanzia che valorizzare a pieno la partecipazione delle famiglie nella prospettiva dell'agire armonioso e dell'educazione alla sostenibilità.

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Key Words
Educational coresponsibility, family involvement, Kindergarten, education for sustainability, harmonious action.

Parole chiave

Corresponsabilità educativa, partecipazione delle famiglie, scuola dell'infanzia, educazione alla sostenibilità, agire armonioso.

1. Social innovation and bottom-up involvement in ECE services.

The attention paid to the quality of the ECE services and the increased awareness of the educational processes that these services promote, implement, support and monitor, also encourage the desire of looking inside and outside one's self to experiment, to overcome a consolidate experience (Cipollone, 2001, Becchi, Bondioli, Ferrari, 2002, Bove, 2012, Grange, 2013, Martiniello, 2014).

This attention creates educational planning paths, characterized by high social innovation[2], starting from the active family involvement and of the local community in the identity building process and in the defining of the activities of such services (Murray, et al, 2010).

Moreover, these stimuli lead some educational services to differentiate, specialize, build a new identity based on peculiar parameters generated by sensemaking processes, i. e. a contextualized meaning and culturally connotated by the relationship among educational services, community, land (Weick, 1997; Patera, 2017).

The choice of innovating, anyway, always has an axiological reference that allows to identify the value of the desired new condition with respect to the actual situation that causes the change. In this respect, the social innovation processes (Murray, et al, 2010) become the goal of a comparison and sense co-building among diverse community actors, since they increase the involvement level and participation towards the co-making of experimentation of relational services.

As Losito notes (1996, p. 44), «Innovative projects represent an "intentionality" of changing. The way they are concretely implemented, the real processes that get activated, the purposes

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[2] The social innovation is about "the development and implementation of new ideas (products, services and models) able to respond to social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. They are new responses to such particularly urgent social needs that affect the processes of social interaction. The social interaction aims at improving the social welfare. The social innovation are innovations that are "social" both in their objectives and in their means" (European Commission, 2013a - p. 6).

that are concretely pursued and realized, largely depend on the way these projects are interpretated by whom is implementing them, as well as the conditions where the changes are grafted».

These meanings can take form and change along with the process, till they lose their original meaning due to implicit or explicit actions, ingenuous or intentional, undertaken by the involved subjects to accommodate the novelty to one's own representations, expectations, needs, conceptions: maneuvers that Huberman (1982) calls «*marchandage*» (bargain).

For this reason, if the successful innovation is accepted and shared by a multiplicity of connected subjects (Hadij, 1991), we need to be aware of the dynamism of a continuous negotiation of meanings, to prevent the self-referential development of silent unilateral reinterpretation that can go as far as preventing a real change also where partial and for-show transformations, not relevant changes that, anyway, give the illusion of a substantial renovation. The resistances, as well as the conditions and the reserves, are part of the innovative process and, therefore, have to be taken in charge and handled; the competent support to an innovation, apart from helping the actors in their paths for a reliable critical interlocution for the interpretation and transaction, plays a strategic role for the safeguard of the changing process.

In this process, participating gains a particular relevance, especially to the extent in which it implies a change at different levels: organizational, socio-cultural, educational, pedagogical and political.

Such levels represent the complexity of a negotiation of meanings and practices among diverse actors: children, their parents and, more in general, the parental figures that every day take care of their care and education; all the professionals involved in the services (educators, pedagogical coordinators, auxiliar assistants, pedagogists, directors and officials…), and, to conclude, the community all children, adults and services take part of.

This thick and complex net is made up of all the actors in the same land, of the other ECE services, of the other types of services, the neighborhood and the community as a whole (OCSE, 2012).

The international OCSE research on the policies related to the Early Childhood Care and Education that involved in the past years several countries, highlighted many times the centrality of the participation in *Early Childhood Education and Care* (ECEC) inserting, among the ten strategical dimensions that require the attention of the diverse governments, that focusing on family and community involvement in ECE services, so to deepen the understanding parents have of their children, the educators' training about listening to the

families, the representation and the equal participation of families coming from diverse socio-cultural contexts and the idea of community meant not only as service supplier but as a space for a partnership with families and their democratic involvement (OCSE, 2006).

In the framework of *Starting Strong III* it has been exactly the involvement of families and community to be recognized as one of the five fundamental *policy levers* useful to enhance quality in the ECEC system (OCSE, 2012).

More recently, in the proposal for key principles for the qualification ECE services, the European Commission Telematic Working Group for ECEC has stressed many times the importance of the family active involvement.

The idea is that this involvement «aims at boosting the planning of ECE services and schools, in a perspective that values the socio-cultural diversity, which means the actual hyper-diversity, that characterizes so much each context in Italy as well as in the other European countries» (Lazzari, 2016, p. 7).

Lastly, we must underline how these processes in which diverse actors participate to social life (Lave e Wenger 1990), cannot but constitute forms of social and cultural learning at a community level and, in any case, based on processes of negotiation and co-building of meanings and practices among the actors variously interested into such educational services.

At this regard, the creation of a space of meanings and practices shared in the same territory can constitute the base for promoting large territorial nets, expression of an articulated and systemic projectuality on diverse plans of personal interaction and correlation, as well as organizational and systemic - *learning region* - (Costa, Dal Fiore 2005).

This way, the nexus participation and learning represents the educational challenge that involves ECE services, families and community actors along a process of participation and social inclusion (Margiotta, 2012).

2. Rethinking educational contexts: the harmonious education action

In this innovation process there is a research line on ECE that, in these recent years and after some hints, also very distant in time, starts gaining form and relevance. It aims at highlighting the extracurricular educational potential or, in parallel, the unthinkable resources connected to a in deep- rethinking of formal educational context (Grange Sergi, Bobbio, 2011; Valbusa, Mortari, 2017, Scarinci, 2020).

In both cases, we see that the references recur to two "factors" that deserve to be cropped and examined to better understand their meaning and action line. We mean, on one hand, what we can define the *appeal to nature* and, on the other hand, the highlighting, always more persistent, to *acting harmoniously* (Paparella, 2014).

These are not unprecedented aspects.

A rich path of experiences winds from the pioneers of the beginning of the twentieth century to the present time: A. Ferrière, R. e C. Agazzi, M. Montessori, C. Freinet, A. Neill, O. Decroly, P. Geheeb, J. Korczak, to mention just a few.

The reason why we keep on talking about it, and even with more intense vigor, maybe is because the risk of artificialism is constant in the culture and life styles of the third millennium and also because, starting from the polemics on de-schooling, the stereotype emerges of a school confined in a frame of evident – assumed or confirmed – unnaturalness.

Many of the outdoor educational entities created and active on the national territory for Early Years and Kindergarten, highly heterogeneous with reference to the timing, environmental type, spaces, ways ad global service management, selected pedagogical and methodological orientations, parents-educators relationships, all share the same common denominator: a strong participation in the values of the territory where the various projects are located; they represent, in other words, "educating communities" (Del Gottardo, 2019).

Educating communities because:

- They select and undertake educational paths: in this case they are more oriented towards action and experience;
- They habilitate to exercise some values: education in the nature, respect and environmental sustainability;
- They supervise and take part in the educational task, moving from a model of complementarity of the positions to a model of reciprocity and participation between school and family.

The community, in its turn, is nurtured with interrelations, reciprocities that are accomplished in the intersubjective-communitarian dimension, properly defined as social and, evidently, educational.

From these premises an explorative research work takes place, of qualitative type, that gathered and analyzed a textual corpus of semi-structured interviews of 72 families that experience the

context of Associazione di Promozione Sociale AgriBimbi in Lecce province (Galatina), which is active in planning and implementing experiential paths in the nature for 3- to 6-year-old children.

The results that have been reached offer trails of theoretical reflection and didactic action towards a possible proposal of revising the educational activities in ECE schools, with the perspective of the harmonious education action and the education for sustainability.

3. Research question and methodology

From our point of view, the educational research has its roots and its core reason in the need of directing the practice as its best, assuming a transformative function with relation to the awareness the subjects involved in the research can gain, starting from its results (Mortari, Valbusa, Ubbiali, 2020). The methodology that we have chosen to adopt respects this primary assumption.

The educational research, therefore, responds to the need of exploring and understanding the reality, also giving operational instructions that can help starting a reflection or gaining awareness with regards to the possible changes for the context and the actors a research path is made of (Fabbri, 1994).

The importance of the educational research in ECE services, in particular, refers to the possibility of improving the actors' awareness (educators, families, stakeholders) of the educational practices and the pedagogies subtended to these practices, so to redirect them in view of the formative evaluation (Bondioli, Ferrari, 2004).

From a methodological point of view, our purpose was exploring the knowledge in the specific context "AgriBimbi", with reference to the representations of 72 families involved, along with their children, in the educational activities that this association promotes. This allowed to understand the way they conceive the educational experience their children *in primis* and, in second instance, themselves, are involved in, so to explicit their way of understanding their particular cultural context, its educational practices and its explicit and implicit goals (Bruner, 1992).

This represents a heuristic chance to appreciate their situated and cultural point of view on that context, offering at the same time pedagogical and educational insights in ECE services.

Starting from these premises, we report the research objective: when considering the point of view of 72 families involved, with their children, in an ECE experience, how can the

pedagogical reflection and the educational experiential practices in nature benefit from it?

The research question is formulated as follows: at what conditions the themes of the harmonious education and of the education for sustainability can be considered two sides of a coin?

From a methodological point of view, we adopt the case study (Yin, 2003) for exploring the educational context that is the object of this research.

The cultural and situated dimension that characterizes the specific methodology of the case study refers to a strategic choice when the purpose is exploring a not well-known phenomenon, where the researcher has no way to control the variables and when the research question type is expressed as follows: Which, What, Where, Why, How.

The knowledge created by the case study, in fact, allows to join the pedagogical knowledge and the professional service thanks to reflections of transformative effect that are implied in the study of a particular context.

The case study (Merriam, 1988; Bassey, 2003) is even more appropriate thanks to the adoption of the qualitative research methodology: «situated activity, that places the observation inside the reality: it is made up of a series of interpretative and factual practices the reality acquires visibility from» (Denzin, Lincoln, 1994; p. 3).

The qualitative research allows to understand the subjects' local cultures in a particular context, thanks to the explicitation of representations and practices (Trinchero, 2002; Cecconi, 2002).

Moreover, it can highlight the situated point of view of some subjects face to the same topic, thanks to the discursive reconstruction of the representations and the everyday practices explored in an interview (Bruner, 1992; 1997).

That is why we opted for a semi-structured interview (Bichi, 2002, Zammuner, 1998) that explored 3 thematic nuclei with relations to the research objective and question:

- Reasons for enrolling their children in AgriBimbi;
- Opinions on their children acknowledged formative achievements;
- Proposals to improve the educational practices in AgriBimbi.

We used a finalized (not probabilistic) sample of 72 adults that, in the last two school years, have enrolled their children in the educational courses of AgriBimbi, selecting the participants because the researcher had them at hand and also because they were considered to be well aware of the topic in this particular context (Patton, 2015).

The subject inclusion criteria in the sample are the following:

- Parent of children enrolled in AgriBimbi;
- Children attendance in the last two school year;
- Willingness to take part in the research.

The selection strategy corresponds to the method of convenience sample. ⌞SEP⌟

The research timeline:
- Tool building, piloting and recalibration: 08-09/2020;
- Administering the interviews: 05-2020/05- 2021;
- Building of the empirical base and data interpretation: 07-08/2021;
- Restitution of the results and validation: 09-19/2021.

The analysis unit is the textual corpus of 72 interviews. The creation of this corpus followed the collection phase, treatment and building of the empirical base starting from the transcription of the interviews (Kvale, 2007). ⌞SEP⌟

The analysis strategy is explorative, with an inductive approach not guided by the theory and oriented towards the discovering context (Guba, Lincoln, 1989; Silverman, 2016).

The analysis methodology is interpretative (Richards, 2005) with analysis technique "Thematic Coding" (Creswell, 2014; Kuckartz, 2014), structured as follows: corpus reading, individuation of the thematic subcodes and their gathering in superior thematic codes (STC) and building of interpretative categories. ⌞SEP⌟

The results have been validated on the 5 quality criteria of the qualitative research (credibility, transferability, reliability, authenticity, conformability) (Seale, 1999), as well as two specific phases (Creswell, Miller, 2000):

- *Collaboration* (inception phase, referred to the tool design and its piloting);
- *Member checking* (final phase, following the result production and restitution). ⌞SEP⌟

For space reasons we do not present here neither the detail of the quality evaluation procedure of the qualitative research, nor the results validation. ⌞SEP⌟

4. Results

The analysis of the *thematic coding* on the textual corpus of the interviews (Patera, 2020) is carried out throughout the construction of the superior thematic codes (STC) that gather the 21 subcodes the corpus abstracts have been labeled with. Afterwards, the interpretative categories that we analyze in the next paragraph have been built. The chart 1 reports the *thematic coding* result: in the first row the superior thematic codes have been reported, while in the second row are reported the subcodes and in the third and fourth respectively the number of the codifies segments in all documents in absolute value and in percentage. In the last row, instead, we have reported in how many documents were found the single subcodes the corpus has been labeled with. ⌈L⌉⌊SEP⌋

Superior Thematic Codes	Subcodes	Codified segments in all documents (N.)	Codified segments in all documents (%)	Documents (N.)
Educational Proposal	Real, and not artificial learning spaces	82	6,0	71
	Authentic relationship with the natural context	80	5,9	70
	Prevalence of *doing* and then of *talking*	78	5,7	69
	Focus on the experiential and explorative dimension in the nature	77	5,6	69
	Socio-cultural dimension of the vegetable garden	77	5,6	69
	The educational offer enhances the synergy among body, mind and emotions	75	5,5	70
	Spontaneous and structured outdoor play	64	4,7	57
	Use of non-conventional objects and materials	52	3,8	50
	Environmental education as the order of the things in the world	47	3,4	41
TOT STC		**632**	**46,2**	**n/a**
Formative achievements	Children selfesteem improved	70	5,1	60
	Children positive state of mind	69	5,0	58
	Children awareness of limits and autonomy	69	5,0	58
	Children creativity and inventiveness	61	4,5	57
	Children interest in using mobile phones is reduced	59	4,3	51
	Aspects related to children corporeality	50	3,7	40
	Children inclination towards sociality and relation increased	49	3,6	48
TOT CTS		**427**	**31,2**	**n/a**
Relationship school – family - territory	High attention paid to the harmony of school- family	72	5,3	50
	Formative activities with and for the families	66	4,8	46
	Sharing of the activities of the school with the families	65	4,8	44
	Technical and psycho- pedagogical support to the families	59	4,3	40
	Involvement of local entities in planning educational activities	46	3,4	40
TOT STC		**308**	**22,5**	**n/a**
TOTAL		**1367**	**100**	**n/a**

Tab. 1: Thematic Code on textual corpus

To summarize, from the chart 1 we infer that:

- The corpus of the interviews has been codified with 1367 abstracts considered to be relevant

for the analysis;

- 3 STC have been produced that saturate the corpus interpretation with respect to the objective and the research question;

- The STC reported in saturation level (codified segments in the corpus in absolute values and in percentage), are: "educational proposal" (46,2%); "educational achievements" (31,2%) and relationship school- family- territory (22,5%);

- The subcodes distribution in the interview corpus as a whole is almost homogeneous (Average = 4,7).

Starting from the results synthetically presented in the Chart 1, the interpretative categories for each superior thematic code have been produced in order to answer to the research question.

Each interpretative category has been formulated based on the subcodes it is made of, explaining, at the same time, the relevant abstracts that quality -wise saturate the interpretative category where the diverse subcodes are inserted.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The analysis synthetically depicted in the previous paragraph highlights three interpretative categories that can represent an equal number of criteria for the harmonious education.

A first criterium, referred to "educational proposal", is related to the affective ecology as an ineludible educational responsibility. The affective ecology is «the study of the affective and cognitive relationships that the human beings create with the living and non-living world» (Barbiero, 2017, p. 24). Educating to the affective ecology, means creating the conditions so that a child or an adult can affirm their ability to understand the natural world developing, at the same time, affectivity, awareness and naturalistic intelligence.

Therefore, it is not a mere cultural transmission but of immersive moments and of discovering in natural contexts, so to reach specific learning objectives.

Experiencing in contact with the nature, dialoguing with what rural life proposes, offers to children the chance to note a multiplicity of links and relations: between the life of a plant and the land quality, the compost effects and the growth of flowers and plants, the vegetal life and the climate, the life of an insect and the temperature, each and every thing has to be considered

and experimented in relation with the whole.

As Lombardo Radice had noted, it is not important the tree itself, or part of it, but the wood, i. e. «the entire life ensemble that the wood is, both as vegetal association and correlation of plants and animals, not the frog but the pond as an ensemble of biological and physical appearances: the river, the meadow, the mountain, and similar: harmonies and fights of the natural existence; competitions and contrasts of the single beings» (Radice, 1954, p. 64).

With reference to the "formative achievements", in the AgriBimbi context, children are always engaged in the world exploration, learning how to have self-mastery even before controlling things. They handle and take care of people and objects, plants and animals, everyday rituals (washing, setting up the table, tidying up the used objects, organizing the "art gallery" where the handcrafts created during the activities are collocated etc.).

Thanks to these actions children perform seriation exercises, as well as exercises of classification and distribution; they get the chance to make their choices, create their own "ingenuous" theories about the world, fill their industrious life, collaborative, solidary, that has its own relevant contents; they can put themselves to the test using denotative and connotative language, learning how to read the contexts and their related regulation systems.

With regards to the "relationship among school, family, territory", it can be inferred that the educational quality of the service is measured for its capability of becoming an educational workshop for kids and adults, in an exchanging game where the child's ideas, the educational practices, environmental organization, are continuously discussed and verified.

The educational center not only provides pedagogical contributions, but also meets demands and expectations, evokes and educate the needs of adults and kids of all ages.

This aspect, as it is expressed by the families, represents the participatory figure of the community (Patera 2017) towards a social innovation (Murray et al. 2010) based on the construction of meanings and cultural and contextual practices (Weick 1997) between community and ECE school. In this ecology, ECE school becomes the core of a proposal that is not just educational meant for the children, but also formative and meant for families and communities in the perspective of a co-building of a *learning territory* (Margiotta, 2011).

Being aligned with this idea of educational service, also the educational specialization path must be the result of a shared work among researchers, coordinators, operators and institutional officials.

When we talk about specialization, we mean the adoption by the service of a "model and educational method", agreed and in line with the educational needs of all social actors that take

part in the service: children, families, operators and institutional officials.

As a consequence, two factors have an impact on the construction of the indicators and their organization in a system. On one side, the same indicators do not represent just phenomenic and observable variables, but also dimensions of life experience, images, motivations and expectations. On the other side, children, educators, families, play an important role in this system, since they are subjects with rights in the educational center. In the examined case, the specialization is configured in the macro area of "school in the nature" and this is a grassroot choice, generated among an informal group of families.

Behind this experience and so to support it there is a community of people that share a particular way of thinking, that share the same culture that deserves to be pass on to the new generations. This is not a neglectable aspect, since a culture, to be vehiculated by a project and by an educational action, must preliminarily exist and not merely in abstract but as an ensemble of knowledge, believes, values, attitudes, behaviors and life choices that adults testify day by day. Another relevant aspect that emerges from the opinions expressed by the families is the idea that they have of the educational service: «a place where families and educators meet and discuss».

It has definitively been accomplished that process which transformed the original socio-assistance function of the educational services into "socio-educational function".

Parallelly, the relationship between the educational services and the families of the children who are enrolled is strengthened. In fact, paying attention to the processes of children growth does not mean excluding families form the service operational life.

The concept of "reciprocal circularity" between the educational services and the families reminds to the importance of having a sort of continuity between the familiar and the educational experience.

From this research work we see how the education is harmonious when (and if) is able to establish a sustainable balance between the child and the world.

This surely implies giving harmony and therefore totality and balance to the solicitations that reach the person, but also involving the person in the elaboration of a behavior that shall, by itself, promote harmony and integration, both with relation to itself and to the context which is co- built by a culture shared by diverse subjects that, in different ways, take part in it.

In other words, this means valuing acts, behaviors and meanings that unite and lead back each experience to the person's center, to their being place of decisions, ability of signification, place of freedom and values in a harmonious relationship overlaid with the environment.

6. Conclusions

Although the research work involved 72 families, the next research efforts are characterized by the need of involving the educators' and operators' point of view with reference to the proposed topics in the interviews administered to the families.

This represents a form of triangulation of the points of view through the comparison of several observation levels and of the analysis of the relationship among the positionings (Ligorio, Spadaro, 2010).

In this sense, it consists in an intersubjective form of comparison and meaning and consensus building among the actors involved in it, in different ways. Another possible research development is about the comparison among the educators' representations of their own professional action and the practices effectively conducted in the context AgriBimbi. This comparison is developing through class observations figures crossed among the educators, so to compare the results of such observations with the representations on their professional action expressed in the interviews. This result could be then be compared with the families' point of view and restitute, in a process of collective validation, in a participative setting (Patera, 2022; Denzin e Lincoln, 2018).

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