

The role of caregivers in children's linguistic-conversational development: A review of Italian pedagogical studies

Il ruolo dei *caregivers* nello sviluppo linguistico-conversazionale dei bambini: una rassegna degli studi pedagogici italiani

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Abstract

This paper contains a review of theoretical and empirical Italian pedagogical studies conducted from the Seventies to today on the topic of caregiver-child conversation, with particular reference to the role of adults in promoting the development of linguistic and communication skills, especially within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services for children aged zero-six years. The studies analysed here – considered a highly representative selection – show that research aimed at exploring the conversations between caregivers and children, conducted in Italy and especially over the last twenty years, has inspired reflection on linguistic interaction, also within Early Childhood Education and Care services. All in the belief that it is imperative to promote educators' and teachers' awareness of the key role that *words* play in children's linguistic-communication and affective-emotional development, with a view to increasing the quality of ECEC.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC); caregiver-child conversation; children's linguistic-conversational development; role of caregivers.

Abstract

Nel contributo è riportata una rassegna degli studi pedagogici italiani, sia di natura teorica che empirica, condotti dagli anni Settanta a oggi, incentrati sul tema della conversazione tra *caregivers* e bambini, con particolare riferimento al ruolo dell'adulto nel promuovere lo sviluppo delle competenze linguistiche e comunicative, in special modo all'interno dei servizi educativi zero-sei. Dagli studi, ritenuti maggiormente rappresentativi, selezionati in questa sede, emerge come le ricerche volte a esplorare le conversazioni tra *caregivers* e bambini, condotte in special modo negli ultimi vent'anni, abbiano stimolato, anche in Italia, la riflessione sulle interazioni linguistiche anche all'interno dei servizi per l'infanzia. Ciò nella convinzione che sia importante promuovere la consapevolezza di educatori e insegnanti sul ruolo-chiave della *parola*, sia nello sviluppo linguistico-comunicativo che emotivo e affettivo, al fine di offrire ai bambini servizi educativi di elevata qualità.

Parole chiave: servizi educativi per l'infanzia zero-sei; conversazione *caregivers*-bambini; sviluppo linguistico-conversazionale; ruolo dei *caregivers*.

1. Development of linguistic and communication skills and the role of the socio-cultural context: the theoretical reference framework

The study of children's linguistic development and the role of linguistic, communication, social, and affective-emotional interactions between caregivers and children aged zero-six years is part of a broad pedagogical, socio-linguistic and psychological framework concerning the ways in which an individual's mind immersed in relational contexts is structured, while at the same time shaping his/her own world. A framework, as we shall see, which much of the pedagogical research on the topic is still anchored to.

The first cornerstone of this framework are the studies by Vygotsky, who, as is well known, assigned to the relational exchanges between an individual and the world a key role in the building of that individual. Social interactions that take place in the various contexts of children's lives are keystones of the construction of thought and individuality. This emerges, *ex negativo*, in those passages on Thought and Language in which Vygotsky criticized the Piagetian concept of language, according to which egocentric language precedes the social kind (Vygotsky, 2018). In fact, for Vygotsky the inner language develops starting from the social one, contrary to Piaget's view (1962; 1967; 2013). According to Vygotsky's approach, children experience language primarily on an intersubjective plane, especially when interacting with adults; only later do they begin to use language to draw the attention of the others. Inner language therefore represents the last phase of the process of acquiring linguistic competence, and not the first.

Hence the attention given by Vygotsky to the dynamic relationship between thought and words, seen as a key tool through which thought is embodied within individuals' socio-cultural reference context (Vygotsky, 2018). The *word*, therefore, as an expression of human historicity and culturality: children building their own language by interacting with their caregivers.

Bruner too assigned a central role to the relationship with others – starting from reference adults – as essential promoters of development, including linguistic, human development. “Language and culture are deeply interrelated, and the child develops his/her communication skills through interaction with others” (Bruner, 1987, p. 22).

As far as language acquisition is concerned, Bruner does not deny that predetermined biological components also come into play; even in this case, however, social and cultural dimensions remain central, since human skills have both biological and cultural origins. Indeed, intellectual-cognitive abilities are based on solid biological grounds; however, their implementation is instead culture-based, and depends on the individual: on his/her acting, or rather, “interacting, within the pertinent socio-cultural context” (ivi, p. 21). In addition, this is where the central role of caregivers' ‘scaffolding’ action emerges, ensuring that the child achieves his/her goals and, more generally, in the fostering of his/her integral development.

It was within this scenario, between the late Seventies and early Eighties, which Bruner looked with interest to Chomsky (1965/2015) and his Language Acquisition Device concept (LAD). However, at variance with Chomsky's belief that a child learns the use of language thanks to an innate presence in the human brain of the aforementioned LAD, Bruner believed that the LAD alone does not allow the acquisition of language skills (Harris & Coltheart, 1986/1991). In response to Chomsky's LAD, Bruner therefore proposed a Language Acquisition Support System (LASS), in which the support is provided by the adult-scaffolder. It is undeniably the interaction with adults that *triggers* a child's LAD;

and, in turn, in a sort of domino effect, it is the interaction between the LAD and the LASS that allows a child to enter the world of language (Bruner, 1983/1987).

In the USA, also in previous years, and in Dewey's reflection on language, the relationship with *others* was seen as central. For Dewey, language essentially meant communication: the key tool through which individuals not only share meanings but co-construct them. Hence, language is the key medium for the transmission of *habiti*, and the belief system of the culture an individual belongs to (Dewey, 1974; Dreon, 2007). According to Dewey, communication is, among all things, "the most wonderful" (Dewey, 1929, p. 166): there can be no language without communication – and, therefore, relationship – between individuals. In this framework, Dewey's approach already showed analogies with recent neuroscientific research on mind-body, cognition-emotion, and nature-culture relationship, regarded as profoundly interrelated: "Logos has been correctly identified with mind; but logos and hence mind was conceived supernaturally. Logic was thereby supposed to have its basis in what is beyond human conduct and relationships, and in consequence the separation of the physical and the rational, the actual and the ideal, received its traditional formulation. In protest against this view, empirical thinkers have rarely ventured in discussion of language beyond reference to some peculiarity of brain structure, or to some psychic peculiarity, such as tendency to 'outer expression' of 'inner states'" (Dewey, 1929, pp. 168-169).

The centrality assigned to the context and social interactions by Bruner and Dewey in linguistic development, is in turn part of a wider reference framework, which, from the Sixties to the end of the Seventies, especially in the United States, included linguistic studies, communication sociology, and the philosophy of language, with a focus on the pragmatic-functional aspects of language. In this same vein, we can recall the studies on the pragmatics of communication conducted in the second half of the Sixties by Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson. In their *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1971), the three scholars analysed interpersonal communication in its practical dimension, within a context, namely, a set of essentially implicit rules that allow us to understand the interactional situation we are involved in. The individual is therefore investigated as an *inter-active* member, within complex relational systems and in a socio-cultural context – which in the communication field have fundamental importance – paying attention to the impact that communication inevitably has on both the sender and the recipient, according to the famous 'five axioms' (ibidem).

In keeping with what has been stated so far, and as an ideal introduction to the next paragraph, we conclude with the words of Cocever and Chiantera (2012), who have underlined that the role of the context is equally central in the pedagogical-educational field, particularly in situations "related to early childhood, when verbal communication skills are still weak" (p. 334)¹. Once again, the centrality of the context is therefore highlighted, also and above all in relation to the pedagogical practices carried out in ECEC services as key locations for the promotion of children's linguistic, cognitive, but also affective-emotional development.

¹ From now on, unless otherwise stated, all English translations of Italian sources quoted here are my own.

2. An overview of Italian research on conversation between adults and children from the 1970s to the 1990s

In Italy, we have been studying communication, mainly between children, and between children and their parents, since the late Seventies. These have been essentially theoretical-speculative contributions, in which scholars have reflected on the topic of communication within educational contexts and, more generally, intersubjective relationships, in the wake of US studies on human communication, conducted in those same years in the cognitive and pragmatist fields. For example, the studies of Mariagrazia Contini, published between 1980 and 1984 (1980; 1984a; 1984b), dealing with interpersonal communication according to a philosophical-pedagogical perspective. Contini emphasized the contextual and social nature of language, underlining the importance of shifting the focus of investigation from the individual and intrapsychic communication processes, to intersubjective ones; in fact, in her view it is the relationship with others that becomes central, also for the development of language and communication skills.

In those same years, further pedagogical studies focused on the topic of verbal communication – mainly between children and relatives, in many cases with reference to an age group older than zero-six. Suffice to consider the studies conducted by Lucia Lumbelli between the mid-Seventies and early Eighties, adopting a phenomenological-microanalytic approach (1974; 1976; 1981). Lumbelli's research explored the communication methods of pupils and teachers in educational contexts in order to optimize the effectiveness of their communication strategies. With reference to the three-six age group, the focus was on the importance given by adults to children being able to verbalize their behaviour, especially in cases of non-verbal manifestations of discomfort or aggression.

Likewise, in the early Eighties, in the psychology and pedagogy fields, the focus changed to conversations between caregivers and children as a particular form in which communication can take place. Although many of the studies, especially the psychological ones, focused on the linguistic-communication interactions between children and parents, the *caregiver* concept was gradually expanded to include all the child's reference adults, such as ECEC educators and teachers. In this context, the first field research to explore the conversation between educators and children in 0-3 ECEC services (i.e., *asili nido*, and today, *nidi d'infanzia*) included studies coordinated by Mantovani and Musatti (1983), which highlighted the key role of adults in promoting children's linguistic development and communication competence.

The key role of the caregiver – first and foremost, the mother – in supporting children's acquisition of linguistic-communication skills was also highlighted by Camaioni, Volterra, and Bates (1986). In their studies, conducted between the late Seventies and the first half of the Eighties, these researchers focused on the biological and contextual factors that allow a child to learn to speak, in order to identify the inputs that can trigger the transition from gestures with communicative intent to words. The three scholars show how children learn to communicate intentionally through deictic gestures long before being able to do so verbally. In this case too, the role of the context turns out to be central, since such gestures are understandable by the caregiver only if interpreted within the interactional framework they occur in.

In the same period, Volterra coordinated some research (Volterra, Antoniotti, Pennavaja, Rivardo & Vassallo, 1978) aimed at detecting potential differences between the skills and linguistic-communication methods of children aged 0-3 attending an ECEC service, compared to those educated at home. From this research, it emerged that early socialization

experiences in an extra-domestic context seemed to favour children's ability to decontextualize.

Between the late Seventies and early Eighties, also Bertolini and Callari Galli (Bertolini, 1979) studied communication in early childhood from a pedagogical perspective, by analysing linguistic-communication interaction between children within ECEC services, and between children and parents, especially in reference to the three-six age group. Once again, what emerged was the key role adults play in promoting – or inhibiting – children's linguistic skills and their development in general (ibidem).

In the late Eighties, attention gradually shifted from communication – understood in a broad sense and tackled from a theoretical-critical point of view – to the issue of the *word in action* between adult and child in the family and, to a lesser extent, in ECEC services. Suffice to think of the studies conducted by Morra Pellegrino and Scopesi, along with D'Aniello and Zanobini, which highlighted the importance of the caregiver's role in giving the necessary inputs to a child who is learning to speak (Morra Pellegrino & Scopesi, 1989).

In those same years, D'Odorico and Franco conducted some studies on the interaction between adults and children, intended as a tool to promote linguistic and communication development (D'Odorico & Franco, 2002). Some scholars have pointed out the importance of investigating children's acquisition of linguistic skills starting from the preverbal phase, thereby highlighting the strong correlation between the type of maternal attachment and language development (Bell & Ainsworth, 1972). Additionally, these scholars reflected on the essential characteristics of *motherese*, or *baby-talk*, such as syntactic-lexical simplicity; the use of linear, short sentences without subordinates consisting of relatively simple words; repetitiveness and redundancy; distinctive intonation. However, what really seems to make the difference is not so much the grammatical-syntactic modifications, as the conversational intent expressed by the caregivers. In fact, adults seem to modify their own language in a way that is aptly geared to interaction with children, emphasizing the communication purpose of linguistic interaction, “rather than its structural and learning aspects” (D'Odorico & Franco, 2002, p. 189).

In tandem, Levorato (1995) were confirming the importance of caregivers in promoting children's linguistic skills. Starting from the definition of language as a system with high productivity composed of meaningful sounds, which can be combined according to a finite set of rules to give rise to more complex meanings, the importance of exploring language considering the context was highlighted. Similarly, in these studies, the importance of facial proto-conversations with the mother was emphasized, against the background that they represent a real “prelinguistic communication dance” (idem, in particular, p. 220), showing the characteristics of verbal dialogue in its infancy. Intersubjectivity and the acquisition of linguistic skills – and, we might add, no less relevant emotional-affective aspects – evolve “starting precisely from proto-conversations” (ibidem).

At the end of the Nineties, further theoretical-empirical studies on the role of words within educational relationships were published. In 1999, Fasulo and Pontecorvo (1999) explored adult-child conversations both at school and in the family, adopting the methods of video-based observation, and conversational analysis, respectively. That same year, Fasulo (1999) published a further contribution focused on the acquisition of conversational competence in children, which is not tantamount to linguistic competence *tout court*. Conversation takes place only in an interpersonal dimension, in which adults play a key role.

In this context, it is once again in caregiver-child proto-conversations that the acquisition of linguistic-conversational skills originates and develops; skills which, although having a biological basis, are triggered only because of a constant and significant interaction with caregivers (ibidem).

3. The most recent developments in Italian pedagogical research in the linguistic-conversational field

From a linguistic-communication and conversational point of view, the most recent Italian studies conducted include those on conversation in the family and in school contexts, carried out by Clotilde Pontecorvo (Pontecorvo, Ajello & Zucchermaglio, 2004). These studies explored the different strategies adopted by teachers for teaching, starting from Vygotsky's assumption that the human mind is fundamentally built through relationships with others. Starting from this premise, Pontecorvo focused on adult-child interactions, taking up Bruner's concept of 'scaffolding', and underlining that, through conversations, "the adult (parent or teacher) offers the child an external regulation, starting or completing the action, saying or indicating what needs to be done, focusing attention, supporting the action with encouragement, and confirmation. This is what is called [...] *scaffolding*" (idem, pp. 56-57). Once again, the social and co-constructed nature of knowledge – and, more specifically, of language – emerges, therefore.

In 2007, Clotilde Pontecorvo further developed her studies on adult-child linguistic interactions by adopting Conversation Analysis methods to study conversations taking place during family meals (Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono, 2007), in the wake of a similar project on conversations between family members carried out in Los Angeles by Elinor Ochs in 1989 (Ochs 2006; Ochs & Taylor, 1992). The conversations were videotaped, not written down, but transcribed using the *Jefferson* method, and analysed from a qualitative-quantitative point of view.

In recent years, in the pedagogical field, Vanna Boffo has delved deeply into the issue of family conversations (Boffo, 2005), exploring the topics of communication and conversation from an interdisciplinary perspective, by interrelating pedagogy, psychology, philosophy of language, history of conversation, and sociolinguistics. Conversation has been investigated as a potential "formative model" in the family, in order to reflect on the relationship between parents and children, today (ibidem), starting from the awareness that "communication is configured [...] as a primary event, both inside the linguistic relationship [...] and [...] the social relationship [...], moreover, representing a determinant manifestation for the intersubjective and intrasubjective relationship." (ivi, p. 22)

In speaking of communication that is *embodied* in words, as *loci deputati* of human existence, Boffo relaunched Heidegger's invitation (1987; 2014) to take care of words, first of all by welcoming those of others, since there is no "I" without a "you" (Boffo, 2005, p. 29). The scholar deals with the topic of linguistic-communication interaction from a pedagogical-educational point of view, decreasing reflection on conversation in practice within family relationships. Words 'donated' within the family actually become an essential tool to promote and share communication, empathy, emotions, and affection; hence the importance of promoting a real "education for conversation" (ivi, p. 225).

Vanna Boffo returned to the topic of communication within the family in 2010, once again highlighting both the relational nature of human beings, and the precocity of children in acquiring social and communication skills. In this context, Boffo reflected on a further key factor of communication interactions, especially between children and adults: namely, the

emotional dimension. From the very beginning of childhood, children manifest “an undoubted ability to ‘feel’ emotions appropriate to their own life context. [...] The structuring of the infantile-self [...] requires the development [...] of affective regulation skills [...]. It is precisely the characteristics of affective regulation and good communication quality that influence the behaviour and life of every adult” (Boffo, 2010, pp. 22-26).

In 2010, the process of language development within communication exchanges between adults and children was also investigated from a psychological and pedagogical point of view by Andrea Peru (2010). The researcher underlined the precocity of children in acquiring language skills, in light of the fact that “by the end of kindergarten [...] every child is already an effective speaker, having mastered most of the syntactic structures of his/her mother tongue” (ivi, p. 75). From here, the neural bases underlying the acquisition of linguistic skills are explored, highlighting the role of the left cerebral hemisphere. Peru illustrates the stages of language learning, emphasizing both the role of context and social interactions – in particular, with the mother – and the precocity of this type of learning, which already begins *in utero*. Likewise, caregivers act as social *biofeedback*, helping children to regulate their affects and emotions, and to acquire the ability to understand mental states: both their own, and others’.

In the same period, Scopesi and Viterbori (2008) were analysing the relationship between language development and ECEC services as educational contexts with relevant pedagogical aims. These scholars dedicated ample space to the issue of accessibility of ECEC, in Italy and in Europe; to the reference regulatory framework relating to Early Childhood Education and Care; to the effective use of ECEC; and finally, to its quality. In relation to this last aspect, the scholars reflected on the effects of zero-three ECEC services in relation to children’s development; on this point, the research – in Italy but especially abroad – is inclined to agree on the existence of a positive correlation between the quality of zero-three ECEC and children’s development, and not just in respect of deprived families. In this case, we can therefore affirm that zero-three ECEC services can “mitigate the negative effects for cognitive and linguistic development” (ivi, pp. 38-39).

In Italy, from 2000 to today, increasing attention has been dedicated, also in the pedagogical field, to the linguistic interactions between caregivers and children, albeit to a lesser degree in relation to the zero-six age group. In 2010, Luisa Molinari explored teachers’ and pupils’ conversational styles, both at kindergarten and primary school. Molinari’s studies (2010) investigated some issues that remain crucial also in ECEC services, such as the importance of taking care of the teacher-pupil relationship, also from a linguistic-communication point of view; adult scaffolders’ language; teachers’ educational responsibility; the importance of a sound adult-child relationship, “while valorizing its emotional-affective dimension, without which it is impossible to teach or learn effectively” (idem, pp. 57-59).

On linguistic interaction between caregivers and children in relation to the zero-three age group, in 2012, the aforementioned Coccever and Chiantera (2012) also dealt with zero-three ECEC educators’ language and communication style. It has been said that communication between children and caregivers represents a pivotal aspect, upon which the educational relationship is based (idem, pp. 334-335). In this case, the reflection on educators’ communication methods is central, from a theoretical-practical perspective; the essays collected on this topic by scholars have sought to promote good educational practices in zero-three ECEC services, also through the attention that caregivers pay to the spoken word.

In the psycho-pedagogical field, the language addressed to children in early childhood is also being investigated by Longobardi, who in 2013 analysed the results of the research on this topic, essentially in the psychological field, that has been conducted both nationally and internationally over the last forty years (Devescovi & D'Amico, 2013). Of the data which emerged from that meta-analysis, once again the most interesting fact is the key role played by the caregiver, who with his/her action compensates for the difference between the skills required by the interactional-communication sequence with the child, hence allowing the less-experienced interlocutor to develop his/her own skills.

In the pedagogical field over the last decade, Italian research on the topic of adult-child conversation within ECEC services has been progressively funneled into an empirical and theoretical-reflective way. In this regard, we mention the research path on the theme of the word between educators and children conducted between 2013 and 2015 at the University of Milan-Bicocca, in collaboration with the University of Tennessee, entitled *Dire è fare*². Likewise, between 2014 and 2017, at the Department of Education and Psychology of the University of Florence, some field research entitled *La parola al centro*³ was carried out, which involved a shortlist of Tuscan ECEC services.

The research conducted at the University of Milan-Bicocca took place within a wider international research framework launched in 2009, on *Teacher Behaviour Analysis in Infant-Toddler Centres: Instruments and Methods for Training*, with the collaboration of the *Bambini Bicocca* University ECEC service for the zero-three age group, and Knoxville University. The research was conducted using the method of video-observation, in order to film moments of life within services considered suitable for investigating linguistic interactions between children and educators, and also to encourage the educational staff's self-reflexivity on language. Promoting in educators the ability to reflect on their conversational styles, embarking on paths of research/action/training aimed at 'supervising' words, represents a key self-educational opportunity, especially in those contexts – such as ECEC services – permeated with words, and utilized by individuals who are beginning to become familiar with verbal language.

The Milanese research group – and in particular, in this case, Chiara Bove – returned to investigate these issues more deeply in 2016 (Bove, 2016), highlighting the crucial role of verbal interaction with adults in the acquisition of linguistic and communication skills. Their essay emphasizes the importance of conversations with adult (parents, but also educators), who allow children to experiment with multiple communication styles, in the knowledge that words represent quintessential *educational tools* (idem, pp. 26-31).

4. Conclusions

The aim of the research/action/training path entitled *La parola al centro* was to investigate and encourage educators' reflection on language addressed to children. To this end, the research represented both an opportunity to investigate educators' verbal language, and to reflect on the role of caregivers in promoting the acquisition of linguistic-communication, and also emotional-affective skills in children, within zero-six age group ECEC services (Silva, 2016b, 2016c, 2016e).

² *Words are deeds.*

³ *Putting words at the centre of attention.*

From a methodological point of view, this research used multiple methods and tools. Firstly, conversations that took place between adults and children, and only between children, during breaks, lunchtime, and play-educational activities, in a shortlist of ECEC services in Florence and its urban area – Empoli and Pistoia – which were video-observed. The videos were run, and the conversations were integrally transcribed using the Conversation Analysis approach and the *Jefferson* coding system. The whole transcript was analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively and interpreted in the light of Italian and international research results on the development of infant language and the role of adults. In tandem, the videotaped conversations were analysed using specially constructed grids, taking into account both the lexical-syntactic and prosodic dimension of language, and the emotional-affective side.

The research showed the presence of different types of linguistic-lexical approaches and relational-conversational styles, with a greater or lesser appreciation of the emotional-affective dimension of the spoken word by the educators, according to the cases observed. It emerged that, tendentially, younger caregivers speak Italian in an appropriate way, articulated according to the structure of Child Directed Speech (CDS), not characterized by strong Tuscan inflexions, and with a slight or absent prosodic intonation. On the contrary, older educators – 55 years and older – impart to the children an Italian that is generally less correct on the lexical level, often characterized by ‘tuscanisms’ and inflection, with a prosodic intonation typical of CDS but, overall, affectively *denser* than educators aged 25-40.

Finally, the data that emerged prompt one last reflection. *La parola al centro* let us outline an overview of the educators’ speech, understood both from a linguistic-lexical point of view, and from a relational-conversational and affective point of view, confirming the profound interrelation that exists between these two dimensions. This correlation invited us to link the topic of the word *in action* between adults and children within educational services, to that of the training of educators and teachers. We saw first-hand how the communication-conversational attitude is constitutively part of the human being. And yet, although these were case studies and not statistically representative samples, the interactions examined showed that talking to one another, especially in the case of preschoolers, is anything but simple. Hence the importance of designing – and *re-designing*, both for the initial and ongoing phases – training pathways for educators and teachers of zero-six services that foster linguistic, conversational and communicative awareness.

We would like to conclude this summary review by mentioning recent contributions by Laura Vanni, and Francesca Zaninelli. In 2016, again within the framework of *La parola al centro*, Vanni reflected on those discursive practices within zero-six ECEC services which represent a “complex frontier of current research” (Silva, 2016b, pp. 169-176). In this regard, Vanni (2016) focused on caregiver-child conversations, underlining that ECEC services represent very interesting research contexts, also from a conversational analysis point of view, since they are *permeated* with words and animated by a dense network of interrelations.

Finally, that same year, Zaninelli (2016) showed the results of some research investigating the knowledge of educators and teachers of some ECEC services in the Emilia-Romagna Region, in relation to children’s language and the role of interaction with their caregivers. This research, conducted using a focus group method, showed that many of the educators and teachers involved were not fully aware of children’s linguistic-expressive potential, thus highlighting the importance of promoting pathways of reflection that can prompt

caregivers to become more and more aware of the implicit pedagogy inherent in words (idem, cf. in particular p. 53 and p. 60).

In light of the studies considered here, we have therefore seen that research aimed at exploring the conversations between caregivers and children, conducted in Italy and especially over the last twenty years, has inspired reflection on linguistic interaction, also within Early Childhood Education and Care services. All in the full awareness that ECEC services can, and must, daily offer children a *bath of words*, which is essential for their cognitive, linguistic-communication, but also emotional-affective development. A bath of words which is not merely quantitative, but also – and above all – qualitatively significant, and carefully thought out from a pedagogical point of view.

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