

Parents' protagonism and family education

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The context and the history of the experience

After the period of the first and most important development of the nidi's system (during the seventies and the eighties) and after the commitment in the definition of service's identity in the nineties, many important changes happened in the situation of education and care services for early childhood as there was a diversification of the types of provisions.

In fact during these years, with the law 285/97, at national level the experimentation of new services for children and families was started together with an educational strategy aimed to promote children's rights and parents, families and local communities' well-being and skills.

With the activation of services that are integrative and complementary to nidi's experience and planning qualification, the demand of education and care services for early childhood got really diversified, becoming oriented also towards experimental kind of services being able to offer children the opportunity of living early experiences out of family and of creating relations with other children and other adults, but also being able to support families, that often feel isolated in the education and growing process of their children.

In this framework, in 1994, the Municipality of San Miniato expanded the provision of its services by opening a play and meeting area for children and families named «Il Paese dei Balocchi». The project of this service made possible on one side the diffusion of the cultural proposal about childhood and education that was developed in the nidi also towards the families that weren't interested in services like nidi. On the other side it made possible to offer at the same time an opportunity for

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children to play and meet together and an opportunity for parents to meet and discuss.

Because of the strong demand for the new service right from the opening (30 users), it was necessary to organize three groups that had the possibility to attend the service for one afternoon per week.

The staff charged for the organization and the management of the service was composed by an educator, an assistant and a psychologist, periodically present and oriented to the management of the adults group, both through more informal meetings during the afternoons and through the evening meetings dedicated only to parents.

The service has been activated in a "micronido" that is opened in the morning and in the early afternoon; in the micronido the space for children is integrated with the space dedicated to parent's staying, the two spaces are open and interconnected and this solution was considered the most suitable.

The requests for the services gradually increased and in a short time it became necessary to open the service for five afternoons per week. The service was open from 15.30 to 18.30 receiving 60 children from zero to 36 months that could attend one or two afternoons per week with a parent or a family member; an afternoon has been dedicated to children in the first year of life and to expecting couples.

The ordinary management of the service has been given to two educators: one more charged for working with children's group, the other more oriented towards the relation with the adult's group.

Therefore the experience was very strong from the beginning and gradually consolidated, remaining anyway opened to new perspectives; in fact, during last years, one of the three groups moved in a new site – another micronido with the same characteristics of the other – supporting in this way on one hand a better decentralisation of the service and on the other a lower over-crowding of the long-standing site.

During the more than 15 years of opening, the play and meeting area Il Paese dei Balocchi has met a large number of families together with a path of growth has been shared; among the families have been established relations of friendship still lasting, families have chosen same schools for their children and they come back to Il Paese dei Balocchi with second and third children also after many years.

The investment in new nidi's opening to keep the waiting list down has encouraged a restructuring of the provision of the service that at the moment receives 40 children from zero to 36 months with a staff composed by only one educator and smaller groups. The service maintains

the same organizational characteristics and it guarantees the constancy of the group during the year apart from the case of resignation in which other families that registered for the service are admitted.

The service's main guidelines

The active involvement of parents has been from the beginning a fundamental point of the project, for the elaboration and the collective management of the activity programme of the service, with the full shared responsibility for space and materials, with an autonomous management of a cash for small adult's expenses (even if it is requested a small money contribution from families).

The organization of everyday experiences in the services plans gradual occasions of separation between the child and her/his parents even if adults remain inside the service; this moment of separation offers to adults the possibility of finding personal spaces and to children the possibility of living moments of increasing autonomy.

The associated presence of parents and children inside these kinds of services requires further skills and attentions for educators from whom it is expected the ability to connect new ways of relating for children and parents, both giving suggestions and play activities and supporting parents in reading their images about the potentials and the skills of their children.

During the first period of attendance children are supported and encouraged in exploring and experimenting the different possibility of spaces while the parent accompanies and encourages the child in this new experience with her/his presence.

This period make children able to satisfy their curiosity towards the new context, to orient themselves, to discover the many opportunities of experiencing and playing that are offered and to choose.

The constancy and regularity of the group allow building a significant level of familiarity both among children and among children and educators and consequently an increasing autonomy grows in children towards the family member that accompanies them.

Observing and listening make the educators able to see in children and parents behaviour elements and characteristics that can support the appropriateness and the effectiveness of the educational action, promoting a continuous reflection on realised experiences and their meanings.

In this view, during the afternoon, some moments of discussion are scheduled and these are aimed to promote experience and opinion's ex-

changes about everything is related to educational relationship and in general to the role of fathers and mothers in real contexts of family life.

These situations represent an interesting opportunity for sharing and supporting personal reflections of parents that face everyday new and old difficulties and uncertainties about which can be useful to have occasions of shared reflections. These moments can also support the discussion about the pluralism of educational messages (family culture, literature specialised in educational “receipts”, advertisement, technician’s advice...) that often are given in a contradictory and confused way so that they create more anxiety and disorientation rather than self confidence.

Thus, the playing and meeting area Il Paese dei Balocchi, during the years, offered to adults different opportunities and every group nurtured and enforced some aspects that mainly corresponded to their real needs; some parents found in the service the opportunity to observe children playing in a new context and with persons different from the familiar ones, others had the chance to share perplexities and doubts together with people that were facing the same parental experience.

It is easy to understand the complexity of the educator’s role in this service with the presence of children and parents together.

The first commitment of the educator is on one hand to “facilitate” the relation among adults and on the other to “support” the relation between the child and her/his family and among children, adopting a mediation and direction role that get shaped in the organisation of experiences paths open to children individual potentials and differences and at the same time significant to stimulate parents reflections.

The attention that this kind of service gives to family as a system is clear; it is aimed to support parents, to give meeting opportunities – meetings among peers (parents) and among parents and educators – to discuss and share all the issues related to children growth and education.

The investment in the sharing of the educational project with families is based on the professionalism of educators and of the entire technical staff that have the responsibility of elaborating and realizing the project itself, in a empowerment perspective, that is parental skills strengthening, family knowledge supporting.

Of course this does not mean renouncing – as professionals in the education field – to be able to suggest possible and different examples about «how it is possible to» get to educational objects with authority and without abdicating to adult’s responsibility towards children, but supporting parents in their growing path alongside and with their children so that every family system can find its original and possible balance

among education choices, that is what can be done rather than what must be done.

The experimentation of an autonomy's space for family participation

In this planning framework and together with a well-established history of the service, the idea of strengthening the parents sharing and participating took shape; in the education year 2009-2010 the autonomous management (self-management) of some afternoons in the week by families was activated in an experimental way.

The buildings that were not used during some afternoons already suggested in parents the call for using the service for meetings for the second or third afternoon in a self-managed way, as some families already used to meet in other occasions (park, houses...).

This looked like an important occasion to evaluate how an educational and organised context – spaces, times, experiences – already known by parents in the previous months and the work done by the educator explaining the service's objects could be considered in continuity in a situation in which families assumed the complete responsibility of service's management.

Of course this choice had to face all the issues related to safety laws, to privacy, to all the subjects on who all the responsibilities fall on; at the moment some hurdles remain to overcome, trying to coordinate cultural visions about the value of this experience and juridical and administrative views.

The use of the service spaces has been requested for five months, from March to July, by each parent and one representative for each group has been identified, with a commitment in respecting the given space and in putting in order the structure (an assistant paid by the Municipality cares about cleaning).

The pedagogical coordination accompanied, even if “at a distance”, the new experience: meeting occasions with the educator and with other members of the coordination were provided to reflect on the experience, with a particular attention on the actions of parents towards children, that is towards their children and towards all the children of the group.

Parents took notes about attendance, described the organization of the self-managed afternoons, also asked for further information about activities they could present to children; they demonstrated to take care of spaces and materials and to manage the service with the same time articulation than the afternoons with the educator.

Besides parents described the experience evolution also producing brief observations, photos and personal comments to testify the importance of the experience itself, taking as reference and stimulus the documentation planned by the service project and realised by the educator.

Of course the possibility and the effectiveness, thinking about families satisfaction, of this experience is strongly based on the ability of the adults that are in the group to mediate, to find shared solutions to management problems, to collaborate and discuss with a democratic attitude that takes into account and respects differences.

As a matter of fact, in other groups with different adults, that is with stronger communicative difficulties but above all with leaders oriented to underline problems rather than possibilities, after a months of self-management parents asked to stop the experience.

It has been noticed that this new and different kind of family participation in an education and care service has been made possible by the clear organizational and pedagogical framework that identifies the project, by the previous experience of some months managed in the ordinary way and by the alternation, in the week time, of ordinary situations with the educator and self-managed situations.

It is possible to think that this alternation can be a kind of reinforcement and support to the personal parents skills and resources; parents observe the educator and observe themselves in similar situations, with the ability of reflection, understanding and choosing among which behaviour they can activate towards children even not fearing to discuss in the group without the educator.

This experience surely opens to the possibility of integrating family participation to education and care services with different forms, giving attention to changing needs that characterize this period, and offering meeting and socializing occasions about children education in early years, with the double perspective of enlarging occasions even when the public system does not have the chance to expand and of offering to the process of parents skills building – above all of mothers in this our experience – contexts of expression and recognition of a value that is not ritual but substantial.