Between training and planning: 
the partnership with parents within an Italian ECEC service

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Abstract

A good relationship with parents is a very central topic within early childhood education (ECEC) services because it is a fundamental element to build a co-constructive educational project between children, educators and their adult relatives. Although, this kind of relationship can’t be improvised, but has to be developed by the work group, that need specific training and competences to choose the style of intervention in line with agreed common goals and targets, within the particular project of welcome of each educational context. With a perspective that enhance the educational alliance between educators and parents, the paper intents to present a case study on the implications that a particular educators’ training (about the theme of families-services relationship) had both on the educators’ beliefs and on the educational practices and activities about this relationship, within an infant toddler center managed by a Municipality in the North of Italy.

Keywords: Early childhood education and care, parents-educators relationship, partnership, educators' training.

1. Introduction

Today, throughout Europe, issues and problems relating to families in educational services for children are much debated. The ecological approach has led to increasing attention on the family figures, especially parents who experience the ECEC community together with their children. There is strong awareness regarding the need for ECECs to include both child and family in the experience. The focus on this aspect in different ECEC services, through research, guidance documents, legislation, as well as in popular and scientific literature is widespread. It is no longer a new topic nor particularly original in itself. However, this theme that needs to be expressed, articulated and translated and continues to merit special attention because it is an invitation for educators and parents to join efforts in order to co-construct the educational project for their children.

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2. Active participation and co-education

The first question is about the perspective from which to observe and analyze the relationship between educational services and families. The orientation in the direction of educational co-responsibility, partnership and educational alliance (Guerdan, Bouchard, & Mercier, 2002; Milani, 2008; Guerra, Luciano, 2009; Rayna, Rubio, & Scheu, 2010), identifies - through different linguistic expressions - similar yet specific approaches, which have in common a strong sense of participation by all those involved in the field of ECEC services: the families, teachers and children themselves, as well as the communities they are situated in. Thanks to this perspective, successful transition from acting "on behalf of" families to acting "with" them (Rayna, S., Rubio, M.N., & Scheu, H. 2010) is made, which opens up possibilities for exchange and comparison, but especially powerful reciprocity.

Such an approach makes participation a key foundation for the building of a shared educational project, which is considered a right, and every member, each according to his or her abilities and intentions, has the duty to do their part. This makes the exercise of this right an unavoidable responsibility that each person is called on to assume, always respecting the singularity of the individual (Guerra, Luciano, 2009).

On the one hand, this orientation can open up to the size of the community, where each person has the possibility of becoming an actor, on the other hand, sometimes it is variously interpreted, considered to be a promoter of participation but then translated into forms that are inspired by traditional approaches to training and support of (good) parenting skills. The mutual accountability of both parents and educators to be present and committed aims first and foremost at the co-responsibility towards children, shifting the focus on the approach the issue of the relationship with the families that goes beyond mere information, education and the education of family figures, parenting support and “good and competent parent” training, to realize a close relationship, cooperation and co-education.

The evolution of the educational project within a public infant toddler center in a small mountain town in Northern Italy falls within this participatory perspective, where a case study was conducted over a three-year period 2010/2012. This paper summarizes the results of this qualitative investigation, aimed at analyzing whether and how the relationship with families evolved, both in practice and in the representations and beliefs of the operators of this service.

3. The context of the problem and the decision to invent in forming an alliance with families

The study was conducted in a public ECEC service for children aged between 3 months and 3 years and their families.

The Center is located in a mountain village of about 3000 inhabitants and is the only educational facility for children of this age group within the municipality. In the neighboring towns there are several other early childhood education services; some of them are public, other are managed by private associations or social cooperatives. The building is centrally located, very close to the Town Hall, Primary School and Preschool, located in a strategic position with respect to industries in the valley.

In recent years, the studied infant toddler center, along with nine other municipal services, was involved in a project to network educational services for early childhood in the valley. This system ensures that all citizens benefit from any vacancies in public ECECs.

The service was opened in the late seventies with a minimal number of users, but over the years the number has been slowly increasing thanks to the demands from families with small children in the territory. Today 37 children attend this educational service.

The opening hours are Monday to Friday from 7:30 to 16:30, with the possibility of extension up to 18:00 based on the needs of the families. They also guarantee part-time enrollment, both in the morning (7:30 to 13:00) and afternoon (13:00 to 18:00). Any special requests or changes are evaluated on a case-by-case basis, respecting the needs of families and the needs of the service.
The service starts in the first week of September and ends in late July, with the possibility of summer projects during the first ten days of August.

The educational staff consists of 6 educators with specific qualifications, a cook and a cleaner. One of the educators also coordinates the infant toddler center.

The work group meets on an ongoing basis to share educational planning, participating in in-service training and supervision, followed by a pedagogical consultant and a pediatrician. In recent years the issue of the relationship with the family has been deepened continuously and systematically, the object of reflection, discussion and debate. The choice of work group to address this issue is closely related to their need to deal with a number of critical cases with the families enrolled in the service, the source of discomfort for educators, children and their parents.

The opportunities to meet with parents during the year are:
- meeting before settling-in
- meeting upon completion of settling-in
- meeting at the start and end of school year
- theme nights
- final meeting at year-end
- Christmas and end of year party

In particular, what the educators shared about the critical issues relating to the relationship between the service and the families is summarized below:
- The lack of sharing the objectives of the relationship with families (what role do we want for families in this infant toddler center? What idea of participation do we want to promote?) in the work group.
- The absence of a specific plan for each type of meeting with families, in order to define the objectives, methods, times and therefore envisage the type and level of participation expected.
- The lack of documentation regarding the various meetings with the families, for keeping memory and continuing to reflect on and learn from them.
- An urgent need to abandon the more directive, unidirectional practices and highlight the importance of dialogue implied in the meetings. To be able to promote meaningful discussions and communication for all parties involved.
- The lack of family involvement, their scarce presence, and the resulting awareness of how important it is to re-evaluate and carefully plan the opportunities to meet (not only the timing at a more or less accessible hour but also the underlying meanings) to enable parents to be real players.

The work group widely recognized a problematic situation in various ways, due to the presence of several critical incidents with the families. For example: the frequent dissatisfaction of educators when faced with specific requests or parental behaviors, fear and discomfort due to attitudes of families which indicated a lack of recognition of the role of some educators, the recognition of certain contradictions and ambiguities in the messages sent to families by the various teachers, the perception that on some occasions the climate during the meetings with the families was not relaxed and some teachers found families allied in venting their discomfort with the service and the work group.

The educators' beliefs about some families, about their needs, behaviour and requests, were quite negative: they were often considered inappropriate, sometimes intolerable and unacceptable.

Beyond the above, the problem on the part of the work group regarding the inconsistency between statements about the theoretical principles behind the teaching program on the one hand and the practices carried out with and for families on the other, was also recognized. For example, the declaration of a specific educational intentionality about the active involvement of families in the service and the promotion of a partnership was inconsistent when families were invited to a meeting to inform them about the educational project designed by the teachers in the service.
4. Training to promote change

During the process of reflection and change that the infant toddler center undertook, an important element was training for the educational group which focused precisely on the relationship with the families.

This process was part of a larger training process promoted by the local authority in a network that involved many of the public and private services in the same area. The choice by policy makers to invest in education is not trivial, and resulted in a specific training method based on active strategies and active educators, enabling them to experience what was being discussed. Interactive methods were used, engaging educators in the learning process, working and reflecting together on their beliefs and experience, promoting confrontation, discussion and active and reflective learning.

The 3-year training program was divided into phases each of which had different specific objectives. During the first year, the focus was on supporting the group’s often expressed need to analyze the new requests made by the families, reflecting on the practices implemented to involve families and define the teacher’s roles in their regard. During this first phase, preliminary theoretical framework aimed at exploring the forms of current-day families was singled out while deciding some initial guidelines for the possible responses by the ECECs.

We analyzed the practices employed by ECECs in their relationships with families to single out common strategies and discuss any critical issues.

In the second year the aim was to review and possibly re-design practices in ECECs, with particular reference to reception, settling in, interviews and meetings, where each work group shared the outcomes of and the documentation regarding their projects.

The last year encouraged the deepening of transversal practice with regard to the relationship with the family in its various aspects, but also to the more general educational work, namely the documentation in its various and multiple meanings, but especially in its values which were more directly related to the relationship with the families, and exploring possibility for it as a tool to document the relationship, but also to communicate with adults of reference to the children in order to share their actions and meanings of the educational program and to strengthen practical co-construction of knowledge and the culture of childhood.

Parallel to this process, the educational group benefitted from pedagogical supervision and meetings with the coordinator, who promoted - through dialogue - the reflection on the training process, in terms of the practical relationship that in the meantime were evolving, thus able to grasp and monitor the in itinere dynamics and new potential. In this phase, the educators' beliefs about families seemed to change; they were more and more ready, willing and able to welcome families without judging them, gradually considering them as collaborators and partners.

5. Constructing (good) relationships to promote educationale alliances

The process is still in progress and requires constant and continuous effort, as well as many difficulties. However, some aspects represent an initial, interesting outcome of this case analysis, to be explored further. This is a first occasion to reflect on the relationship between training on the one hand and the relationship with families on the other.

An obvious fact about the evolution of practices within which the report has to be articulated, which led to a gradual but significant shift from a phase in which this relationship is expressed primarily through tools and practices designed "to satisfy the demands of parents", "to avoid being in conflict with the families," "to have good relations with them," to the objective of working with families. This much more ambitious aim is to promote collaboration with the families, to know and motivate them in order to build alliances with educators and actively participate in the educational project.

In this new phase, the work group rendered the practices and moments with families (see above) the object of reflection, critical analysis and review both during individual class meetings and collective pedagogical
supervisions; over time the group has gradually shown a constant effort in working with the families, getting to know them better and be interested in them, to avoid losing contact with them and continuously feeding a virtuous reciprocity. This has certainly not ruled out particular moments of fatigue on the part of the educational group, especially when it was necessary to revise some choices proven to be impractical or when it is necessary to accept that families sometimes have different times and ways (as opposed to educators) in understanding and appreciating the changes.

In particular, one of the practices subject to the observation, evaluation and re-design process by educators was the meeting with families at the start of the year. This meeting was originally planned as a general rather formal assembly, held with all the families attending the educational service and the entire educational staff to present the infant toddler center and, in particular, the projects and activities that would involve the children.

According to the educators, who reflected together both in group meetings and through observations and documents submitted over the previous years regarding the lack of participation of families, they commented on how this meeting loss importance both for teachers and families. It became increasingly a moment for information and organization and thus became monotonous, repetitive and unidirectional, leaving little opportunity for families to really understand what was presented by the educators. The role of the educators was to present the year-long ECEC project, families listened then made requests for clarification, but were not active and involved.

Over time, it became a formality and families were not able to take part but only be informed, to passively accept the ECEC project created by the educators.

A first idea of the teachers was to replace the plenary meeting with individual class meetings, which would allow them to meet with a smaller group of families and present them with the educational project aimed at a specific group of children, hoping that this would motivate more families to participate. A continuous, systematic and thorough reflection by the group together with the coordinator and pedagogical supervisor on these issues highlighted the need to re-establish the project, i.e. to renew objectives, methods, roles, times, spaces and materials, rather than looking for solutions that would probably present the same problems, even if on a smaller scale.

The meeting at the start of the year was under revision in order to promote educational alliances with families according to the wishes of the educators, and the initial objectives were to offer the opportunity to get to know the families and allow them to get to know each other. The revised objectives for this meeting became:

- to welcoming families in a warm atmosphere;
- to allow teachers and families to get acquainted with each other;
- to allow families to know the spaces, materials and educational proposals of the service;
- to allow each family to express - each in their own way - questions, concerns or curiosity about what was important for them.

Thus the formal meeting was replaced with one held after dinner where they were invited – with a written invitation delivered to each family - all the mothers and fathers of the children enrolled at the ECEC to start the year together. They were able to meet each other and collectively experience the spaces that children inhabited every day. The families were invited to bring food and drink to share with the others. Parents and educators thus had the opportunity to spend time together and get acquainted with each other, to discuss the educational goals and observe the spaces and materials offered by the service, to address the issues, questions and the problems that were important and necessary for the families and to share the meaning of certain documentation tools designed to keep the relationship between families and the ECEC alive. They talked to each other spontaneously in small groups which formed in the different areas of the service about their doubts, fears, curiosities, they posed questions and reflected on themselves, the children and the opportunities for growth and learning. They discussed their roles as adults (parents or educators), the meaning of educational work in the ECEC services, the educational choices and school and at home, the spaces and proposals meant to promote the potential for the children’s development, the possibility for meeting, exchange and the relationships between adults in the ECEC regarding the education of children.
Concluding thoughts

The case analysis described and realized through the collection of documentation, the observation and the project of new relationship practices, the educational supervision meeting transcripts and questionnaires given to the teachers showed substantial rethinking of the choices underlying the relationship with the families and, accordingly, the practices implemented. This was made evident both by sharing within the ECEC service but also within the territory with other similar ECECs, the objectives regarding families and the new practices, aimed at fostering greater reciprocity. The novelty seems to affect not only the practices but also the relationship that binds them together in a more integrated way also visible in documentation geared towards greater understanding and further sharing with adult family members.

In brief, these changes appear related to several closely intertwined elements that can be summarized as follows:
- The role and the decisions of the public municipal administration undertake to guarantee an integrated system through their policies and investments so that all types of ECEC services can exist with dignity, above all fostering the possibility for dialogue between significantly different images of services, children and, in this case, families;
- The leading role played by the territory, which becomes the primary place for networking between the services and their practical relationship with the families, but also for the mutual visibility of experiences, projects and evidence, as in the seminars in which each service publicly presented and discussed their choices and eventual modifications;
- Structured training over time, strategically designed on a territorial basis and constantly monitored and verified by the coordinators of all the educational services involved, methodologically oriented towards active participation to promote awareness of some potential ambiguities inherent in the relationship with the families, communication strategies, stemming from preconceptions, stereotypes and prejudices;
- Relevant pedagogical supervision within each service, which becomes an indispensable element for transferring what was experienced, explored and discussed in training into everyday life and over time, not remaining limited to that moment, as educators have highlighted. This case study and these coordinated actions in particular were singled out as being favorable elements for change with regard to the group’s approach and their relationships with the families. The possible perception of change on the part of the families involved remains to be explored more precisely. Analysis on a larger scale, geared towards verifying the impact on both work and training of this experience promoted by the local administrations within all local services which took part needs to be carried out.

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