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Early Education: responsibilities and cooperation to grow up

Doctor Elisa Barni
Doctor Irene Maddaluni

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Introduction

“The child shapes the man and there is no man who has not been shaped by the child he once was” (Montessori M., 1992, p. 14)¹. With these words Maria Montessori says that we are now the adults because of the child that we once were. She highlights the high value of childhood in a humans’ life. Much time has passed and today research confirms that the first years are very formative in a human being’s life: it confirms that the foundations of the main habits and behavioural patterns are laid and established at this time.

Early childhood is a time of remarkable physical, psychological and social development. As our development is strongly related to experiences had in childhood, so the work involved with early childhood education can profoundly influence the form of a human being. It can shape the person and society: if solid foundations are laid in the early years of the person, a solid future society can be created.

In Italy, early childhood education and care services were created to look after the primary needs of children and support the family in its daily life. Since then, they have taken on a very important social role. They changed with the needs of citizens. Today they provide a safe environment for the full development of a child and a support to parents in learning parental responsibility and educational skills. We believe that a good adult depends on a good early education and a good early education depends on good adults.

But society is changing and faces many problems. What about the current situation of early childhood education and care services? The main problem for Early Education system (0-6 years old) seems to be maintaining a constructive relationship between the child, the parents and the educational services. Italy is facing a deep economic crisis and many families struggle to afford early childhood services. Italy is facing a deep cultural crisis due to high school drop-out and low-qualified workers. The lack of a compulsory pre-school educational system entrusts to citizens the responsibility of the early childhood education. This means that it depends on the needs and resources to the citizens.

In this paper, we are going to supply a wide framework of Early Childhood Education and Care system in Italian society. We will deal with the topic through four sections. In the first one we want to cover the Italian historical background of early childhood services. Parents play a fundamental role in the life of the child and, in the second section, we will look at parents’ education and parents’ educational training as it currently happens. But our society is changing and in the third section we are going to discuss on the current situation of Italy by looking at official data. The responsibility of all European countries towards education will be the topic of the fourth section.

We are going to research and collect the information from public documents, such as Italian pedagogical studies and the European Commission communications. All the information will be enriched by our experiences and knowledge into a complete world sight connecting us even to UNESCO’s offer. Our research aims to open the reflection on our country situation and supply a wide overview of early childhood, for a constructive comparison with the other European countries. We want to underscore the general tendency to participate responsibly in the building of the future of Italy and Europe, as European citizens.

¹ N.d.T. English translation by Barni E. and Maddaluni I.

1. Early childhood in Italy. From support to education

The Italian services that deal with early childhood education covers two types of structures: kindergartens from 0 to 3 years of age and childhood schools from 3 to 6 years of age. Their history starts with a support intention in the XIX century as consequence of women's work during the industrialization. So they was born as a social need and not as a child's right towards education.

The first initiatives that support early childhood, from 0 to 3 years of age, appearing in Italy about 1850. The first form of assistance was the 'crib', it was a Michele Bravo's idea for the children of its textile workers. It was an institution for children. The first asylum was that one of 'charity for children', opened by the priest Ferrante Aporti in Cremona in 1828. And the first charitable institution for children from 0 to 3 years of age was conceived by the educator Joseph Sacks in 1850 in Milan, called the "Shelter for infants". It was a private funding institution, which facilitated breastfeeding and child upbringing for poor mothers who worked outside their homes. This shelter was divided into two sections: one for not weaned children and another for weaned children. It welcomed children every weekday from morning to evening, and nursing mothers went there 3-4 times a day, while those that were weaned ate soups and food made by milk and rice. This institution was useful especially for mothers who worked at home, because it was difficult to go away from the factory to breastfeed their children. This institution helped to save the society from cases of neglect and infant mortality. There were very similar problems to those of the kindergarten today: the high cost of the day and the discontinuity of attendances because of illness or non-availability of working parents.

The care institutions for early childhood spread since 1850 forward, mostly in northern Italy and a few even in the centre. In 1885, in Italy there were 21 'cribs' and can be divided into: cribs of territorial type and cribs of firm type. The first weren't linked to the factories, but to neighbourhoods, the second were open structures in factories, called 'firm nurseries'. A new initiative begins with the Institute pro infants, opened in Mantua in 1905, through the work of the paediatrician Ernesto Soncini. This date indicates the actual birth of the kindergarten. Thanks to the artificial breastfeeding, with the formula, there could be the main maternal and health care.

From 1905 to 1925 these structures became widespread and, together with these, the training of the staff: mostly middle-class girls attending schools and childcare Normal School where teachers were preparing to work. Institutions pro infants were helped by counselling, places used for the distribution of infant formula, had mostly hygienic-sanitary nature direct to demographics' prevention.

During the years of fascism the early childhood services were administered by the ONMI: National Opera for Motherhood and Childhood's protection. They were relating to protection and care of mother and children from 5 even to 18 years, favouring the spread of hygienic integrating and supervising all other childcare institutions. But in this period the protection of the population had a politic aim: its aim was to increase the population to apply a policy of war. The children were cared only in their physical and health needs. This poor educational function was also clearly visible in the building structure: kindergartens ONMI seemed like a hospital, with staff dressed in white, the dining hall and the living room for recreation strictly divided. In the hall the children often played with deafening noises without the possibility of organizing any special activities. There was a simple childcare without offering them an educational

contributions. In these kindergartens there was a forbidden access to anyone who was not involved in the operation of nursery, parents couldn't even enter!

Today childcare services are reborn with the law no. 1044 of 6th December 1971. They work now with regards towards educational goals. Today the access to parents is not forbidden, indeed, is encouraged, and there is the problem of low participation of parents to the realities of kindergartens and childhood schools, such as inserting, meetings, meetings with the teachers into groups, parties and observations about the outcomes of the children during their growth. Thanks to this law early childhood services are social services of public interest (law 1044, paragraph1, 1971) they're open to all families. There is just a limitation because of the requirements. Their aims are to assist the family, not just when the mother works, but also facilitating the access to employment. This law includes parents in childhood services and qualified teachers and educators with psychological and pedagogical knowledge of children.

So early childhood services have now a social function in Italy, before this function was only of assistance aimed at working mothers, large families, or single mothers. Today the staff tries to be more unified as possible, between educators, children, operators and parents. But when did these services begin to have a specific educational role in children's life? With the work of the educators at the beginning of XIX century. Friedrich Fröbel, a German educator, created and put into practice the term kindergarten giving to the child the opportunities to a free expression of himself through the play and the nature together with parents and teachers. In Italy Agazzi sisters and Maria Montessori based their methods on Fröbel's mind. They proposed the kindergarten as an occasion to discover and to develop children life skills. They created a setting based on child-world size inside these structures, they believed in affection and love as basic for children's life, and other values such as freedom in learning through environment experiences.

Thanks to the pedagogical studies and to the law 1044 children in Italy are not just considered as people who need hygienic and health care or support to grow up, but like people who need the right to receive an education through love, personal care, for a complete development of their life. Childhood services, kindergarten and childhood schools, are founded by public economic resources and other by private organization such as cooperatives. In Italy the State delegates educational and support services so it doesn't check deeply their quality. This means low motivation, low participation, in a word, a low care.

Childhood schools are a right to education since CRC, 1989. They join into the Italian school's system (law 53/2003) even if people aren't obliged to let their children go there because they're not compulsory schools. They ensure an educational opportunity (decree 59/2004) connected to improve a good development of the children. Nowadays this function isn't formally and universally recognized to the kindergarten, for children from 0 to 3 years of age. Even if they are responsibly managed into the educational system and not into the one of support.

In Italy and in Europe kindergarten has a low cultural basis so an insecure institutional identity. Because of the unsure usefulness of these services some countries have given more time to the parents to stay at home with their children after the birth, a higher parental leave. Countries such as Sweden, Norway, Finland. In France people don't have this time for long so there's major offer of this service. In Italy people cannot choose to afford kindergarten when they want because there are strictly requirements and ranking to respect. Even its cost is high. So kindergarten is not considered a service

for all, its access is limited and it isn't yet a right for all children to receive an education from 0 to 3 years old. If we want it to become a right we couldn't look at it as a place where parents leave their children but as a place where education and care can be given through the cooperation between parents and teachers. Education as a pooling of educational knowledge.

2. Parent's education and parent's educational training

As Italy's historical background shows, in our country early childhood services were created to look after the primary needs of children. They also supported parents in their daily life, supplying facilities to help them to reconcile family and work time.

Since then, parents have shown the need of a wider support. In fact, when a child was born, the life of the family changes significantly and each of its members need to adapt to the new situation. The birth of a child requires each person to transit to a new social role, e.g. from wife to mother, from husband to father, from only child to sibling, from only child's parents to more than one child's parents. It requires each person to learn to interact a constructive relationship with all the others. Especially for parents, it faces the need of grow in competences and responsibilities.

Today some parents ask to enhance their parental skills to do the best work they can with their children. They want to help their children to grow up and become caring, responsible, confident, able to live. They also want to learn to comprehend and cope their emotions. In fact, some parents don't know how to handle their fears or frustration and they run the risk to develop anxiety or loose their self-esteem. But first of all, parents are caregivers and they must be supported in learning to take care of themselves, to be self-reliant and develop their potential.

In Italy there is not a compulsory system about parents' training. There are not public policies or training agencies for learning parental skills. A parent who needs some help can ask for an individual support to a doctor or a psychologist, by private or public service. Lots of parents education programs are organised in early childhood education and care services. In these contexts, the training mainly takes place through the educative relationship between parents and between parents and educators, namely by the sharing of doubts, knowledge and experiences and by the support in thinking over the experience. Some specific programs are organized to enhance parental skills.

In Italy, the parents education's project in early childhood services aims to enable parents to improve their ability involving them in educational activities. It takes form in:

Daily meeting with parents:

daily meeting between educators/teachers and parents, in the morning when parents leave the child to the service, especially when they pick the child up. Here, parents and educators are used to talk about the daily activities, the behaviour of the child or about special facts happened during the day. Usually parents talk about their child's behaviour at home. The daily meeting is a very important informal moment to know each other, to share child's life and build/increase mutual confidence;

Parent-educator meeting:

private face-to-face meeting between a parent and his/her child's educator, to discuss about child's progress at the service or behavioural problems, to share special needs of the child or of family and come across the best solution. Usually the meeting takes place

in a private room of the service; it is very confidential and efficient for discussing issues that are specific of a particular family;

Meeting with families:

meeting between multiple parents and multiple educators to give general information about the service. A meeting at the beginning of the year is useful to explain the educative goals, planning and strategies; further meetings can be organized to talk about new activities, events and changes in regulation. Parents meet each other and stay together; generally the meetings take place in a room of the service and either the staff or parents play an active role in discussion on the policy of the service;

Meeting to discuss about specific topics:

meeting with multiple parents to deal with specific topics or common problems concerning the childhood and the educative relationship (e.g. “sleep and time to rest”, “eating, food and nutrition”, “moments of crying”). A meeting can also be a short session with multiple educators and experts like doctors, neurologists, paediatricians, psychologists, pedagogues; in this case, meetings are generally led by the experts who take a more active role in information sharing, with parents relegated mostly to the role of listeners;

A day in the service:

some early childhood services offer to parents the possibility to spend a day in the service. This is a great chance to observe the child out of the family and in a different social group. Parents can cooperate in the daily activities or just to look at educators’ work. “A day in the service” is efficient for getting awareness of own educative patterns by the comparison with different educative possibilities;

Workshop:

workshop between parents for supplying practical skills, for instance how to build a toy or to read a story. Workshop can also take the form of cooperative games: they facilitate parents to know each other by playing together in a funny way. Workshop can also take the form of simulation games with parents and children: they aim to get their relationship stronger in a novel way;

Meeting among parents:

some early childhood services involve parents in organisation of national holidays’ celebration, birthday’s parties, small markets or cultural events. On these occasions, parents cooperate to achieve a common goal; first of all they stay together, talk and know one another. The group provides a platform to share experiences, doubts, curiosities, information and ideas; sharing and exchange of point of view help parents to grow in reflexivity and awareness.

Parents education in pre-school programs wants to enable parents to identify their capacities and competences. It wants to support parents in develop theoretical knowledge and practical skills on how to guide, nurture, manage their life paths with their children. It also wants to facilitate the formation of parent support groups, namely a social support network for sharing information and for further learning. As professor Enzo Catarsi highlights, they “show also a ‘civil’ connotation aimed toward improving citizens’ ‘life quality’” (Catarsi E., 2010, p. 23)². Parents education through early childhood services is a wide social project for the training of each person and of society, as a whole.

² N.d.T. English translation by Barni E. and Maddaluni I.

3. A glance at Italy

Europe faces crisis and “Europe 2020” is a strategy to emerge from the crisis stronger than in the past. For its smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, European Union has set five targets to be reached by 2020, leaving each Member State to adopt its own national target in each area. Here the EU five targets:

- Employment: 75% of the aged 20-64 to be employed
- Education: rata of early leavers from educational and training below 10% + at least 40% of aged 30-34 completing third level of education
- Poverty and social inclusion: at least 20 million fewer people in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion
- Research and Innovation: 3% of the EU's GDP to be invested in R&D
- Climate/Energy: “20/20/20” climate/energy targets should be met

Concerning Education, the European Union has recognized that enhancing the quality and effectiveness of education system across the EU is essential for the future of Europe. On the Communication from the Commission “Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow”, Brussels 17.2.2011, we read that “In this context Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is the essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability” (COM2011 66 final, p. 1). And more “High quality early childhood education and care makes a strong contribution – through enabling and empowering all children to realise their potential – to achieving two of the Europe 2020 headline targets in particular: reducing early school leaving to below 10%, and lifting at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion” (COM2011 66 final, p. 2).

Italy faces a deep crisis. Referring to “Europe 2020 Strategy”, here follow the IT five targets:

- Employment: 67%-69% of the aged 20-64 to be employed
- Education: rata of early leavers from educational and training below 15%-16% + at least 26-27% of aged 30-34 completing third level of education
- Poverty and social inclusion: at least 2,2 million fewer people in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion
- Research and Innovation: 1,53% of the EU's GDP to be invested in R&D
- Climate/Energy: IT target: “13/17/20” climate/energy targets should be met

In Italy, employment rata at 2011 was 61,2%, people in condition of poverty at 2011 were 28,2% of the population and school drop-out at 2012 was 17,6%. Because of the high levels of unemployed people and economic poverty, today many families are obliged to select among the services and the goods they can afford, also concerning pre-school services. While school drop-out and cultural poverty increase, research highlights the complexity of human being and the high value of a full development bio-psycho-social starting from the begin of the life. Each of us is unique and education plays the central role in the development of the person and of society as a whole.

We foster the idea that *high-quality* education means to look at the *integral development* of the person, namely cognitive and non-cognitive skills such as emotions and affectivity, awareness, self-control and self-confidence, curiosity, persistence, spirituality, ability to interact with others and more again. ECEC system should be designed to meet all children’s full range of needs. We foster the idea that human development happens into relational contexts and early relationships affect the

interpersonal behaviour in adulthood. ECEC system should be based on the *quality of relationship* and interaction with the others.

European Commission highlights that high-quality ECEC services need *qualified staff working*, and we agree. In Italy the overall staff profile remains very different. A five-year academic training is compulsory for working with children in childhood school; the course's name is "Scienze della Formazione Primaria". A non-compulsory three-year academic training is recommended for working with children in kindergarten; its name is "Scienze dell'Infanzia". A training through a vocational school is enough for working with children in kindergarten. This different allocation of the educational work to qualified staff and less qualified staff often leads to a lack of continuity in the individual child's care and education.

Qualified staff working also means the capacity to sustain workers in terms of levels of education/training, higher wages, good working conditions. Educational training on the job is often supported in early childhood services; it takes form by meetings, stage, workshops. Italian law guarantees time off at full pay for study or attend courses. Wages of educators and teachers are quite low: often they cannot realise a well-being of life in term of training as wished, or building of their own family as well.

European Commission highlights that all the people must have the possibility to access to high-quality services. We agree that an ECEC system must be *inclusive*. A high-quality early education is efficient to fight poverty by reducing the gap between children from socially advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. It is also a great aid to disadvantaged families. For example, referring to migrant families or poorest one, the research shows that parents can learn by supporting their children's learning. An *inclusive high-quality pre-school system* can stop the transmission of social injustices from one generation to the next and lead to a social equity.

But in Italy the economic crisis has been reducing the families' capacity to demand and the citizens' capacity to offer pre-school services. Poverty and social exclusion are big problems: social cohesion is strongly threatened. Italians are developing new approaches based on free solidarity between different cultures and between different social groups. Anyway we sustain that the free solidarity is a great drag force to hold out against the fragmentation of community. It is not the solution for a new smart, inclusive and sustainable social system.

A glance at the social, cultural and economic situation of Italy leads us urgently to reflect on an efficient way to emerge from the general crisis, and built a smart, inclusive and sustainable society. We believe that a good formation of the person and of society also depend on a good early education. We foster the building of an *inclusive high-quality pre-school system*. Anyway to pursue this goal Italy needs a new approach - politic, economic, pedagogical - of aid, support and develop of all the people and society as a whole.

4. The responsibility of all nations towards education

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the European Union have recently announced that they will strengthen their cooperation and scale up their joint operations on areas of mutual interest, such as education and more. The decision comes in 2012 one year after the signing of a

partnership agreement (Memorandum of Understanding) between the Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission, Catherine Ashton and the European Commissioner for Development, Andris Piebalgs, to exchange information and work more closely together on areas of common interest.

Within this Memorandum of Understanding, the two organizations have undertaken a range of projects in education, especially for disadvantaged backgrounds. The agreement builds on a longstanding cooperation between UNESCO and the European Union, and a shared conviction of the importance to promote human rights and fundamental freedoms as cornerstones of stability and development.

Education ministers from across the EU set a target that by 2020 at least 95% of children between four years of age and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education. It is also increasingly recognized that the high-quality of such services is paramount.

Supporting Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is among the best long term investments that countries can make. Children with supportive and stimulating environments in their lives are more likely to complete school, have better health outcomes, and are less likely to develop 'anti-social' behavior later in life.

ECEC is featured as the first EFA goal and it is a basic foundation for lifelong learning. It's also a right for young children as it's written in CRC.

Each child counts. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) affirms the right of *all* children to relevant and good quality education. It confirms the belief of many cultures that there is a social contract and moral commitment on the part of states to ensure the equity and well-being of all citizens as they implement action to achieve Education for All (EFA). It's a study originally published by UNESCO for the International World Education Forum held in Dakar (Senegal) in April 2000. Through the Convention EFA agreed to ensure that all young children benefit from high-quality ECEC services. Countries can build approaches to deliver their quality and their low costs.

EFA and CRC are the confirm of an expanded vision of education: that all children have the right to learn at all stages of their development, and to do so in ways that are appropriate and easily accessible. This means that learning must be a contribution to children's physical, psychosocial, emotional and intellectual development.

According to the aim of CRC and the EFA, children's right to education cannot be forget, it can't take a second place in determining national priorities. National and international policies, development analysis and planning, and interventions, each must take an inclusive focus in ensuring that *all* children realize *all* their rights, including the right to education.

Education must enhance the potential of children and young people to respect themselves and others, participate in the decisions of their society, live in peace and dignity, and earn a living.

Quality counts. All children have the right of access to effective opportunities for learning. There should be no excluded children.

Why is education so important and essential? Because education refers to learning, and only in a free access to education it's possible to create a new way for inclusion and social participation. Children should be fully prepared to live their own lives into society, and this could be possible through education.

Education offered through a lifelong learning is a way to change and avoid social marginalization, policies and actions have to give an education for all not just as knowledge but also as empowerment of human values, which are: motivation, attitudes, interests, personal life skills. This is good explained in the six aims of EFA:

1. An early care and childhood education
2. A basic education for all
3. The recognition of people's learning needs
4. Adults literacy
5. The elimination of gender inequalities
6. The education's quality

We believe that a worldwide cooperation can really help Europe to emerge from the crisis stronger than in the past.

Conclusion

Italy recognizes the importance of a *high-quality inclusive* ECEC system, and the current situation lead us to think over what type of pre-school system is best for our country. Crisis seems to threat the work we have done up to now. Great difficulties in financing the services oblige lots of early childhood workers to leave their working activities, despite the citizens' needs. Most families, especially dysfunctional and low-income families, have a great need of a childcare support but they cannot afford a private funded service.

The tendency seems moving toward a higher economic and cultural poverty and social exclusion. There is a strong need that public funds are used in the most efficient way. To ground a compulsory high-quality inclusive pre-school system, financial assistance must be given to services and families. Italy faces a deep structural crisis and the future doesn't seems to be very bright, but our biggest responsibility is to lead consciously this transition time.

As citizens and educators, we underline the necessity to work on the cultural recognising that a high-quality early education has a very important role in human being life, especially for disadvantaged families. It concerns the foundations of the society. We sustain a compulsory pre-school system which integrate care and education, with qualified staff able to remain in a lifelong learning process. Italy needs to grow in quality, equity – education for all – and efficiency.

In this moment, the cooperation at EU level can deeply help Italy to learn from the others' good practice and experiences. But it is worth underlining that a well-disposed policy of aids is urgently requested.

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