

Education in ECEC services. Didactic and relational competences

Educare al nido Competenze didattiche e relazionali

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abstract

In today's society, the childcare centres are considered a context of learning and a space for relations between adults and children, and no longer a welfare site for the care of children. Therefore, compared to the past, many aspects have changed, from the idea of child and family to the role of the practitioner. This paper focuses on the professional competences of the practitioner in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services, or better to say of the female practitioner, since in services from 0-3 years of age, both nationally and internationally, it is mainly women who do the work. In Italy, over the last three decades, this professional figure has gained a holistic knowledge that is a meeting point between didactic and relational competences, and defines a new professionalism that has been built and developed both in a theoretical and an empirical way, innervated by pedagogical knowledge, methodological devices, operational tools and relational strategies that, by intersecting, substantivize the educational work.

Keywords: *professionalism, childcare centre, (female) practitioner*

Nella società attuale il nido d'infanzia è considerato un contesto di apprendimento e uno spazio di relazione tra adulti e bambini e non più un luogo assistenziale destinato alla custodia dei piccoli, perciò, rispetto al passato, sono cambiati molti aspetti, dall'idea di bambino e di famiglia al ruolo dell'educatore. Il presente contributo si concentra sulle competenze professionali dell'educatore dei servizi educativi per la prima infanzia, o per meglio dire dell'educatrice, dato che nei servizi 0-3, sia a livello nazionale che internazionale, lavorano prevalentemente donne. In Italia, nel corso degli ultimi tre decenni, questa figura professionale ha maturato un sapere olistico che si configura quale punto d'incontro tra le competenze didattiche e relazionali, e che definisce una nuova professionalità che si è costruita e sviluppata sia in direzione teoretica che empirica, innervata da conoscenze pedagogiche, dispositivi metodologici, strumenti operativi e strategie relazionali che, intersecandosi, sostanziano il lavoro educativo.

Parole chiave: professionalità, nido d'infanzia, educatrice

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1. The childcare centre: from assistential to educative value

Childcare centres¹ were born in Italy as welfare and health services, alien to any educational purpose: suffice it to think of the first kindergartens developed starting from the second half of the nineteenth century by some benefactors horrified by the terrible, inhuman conditions of the children of the poor and the consequent high rate of child mortality (Ulivieri, Cambi, 1988). In the early part of the twentieth century, the attention of the Italian state towards children and families generally manifested itself in the establishment of the services of National Maternity and Childhood Charity (ONMI), implemented throughout the country from 1925 on. However, ONMI, whose main purpose, was that of defence and enhancement of the birth-rate, was the first true government programme aimed at families and their children (Riera, Silva, 2016). The law setting up public childcare centres, namely 1044/1971, despite first declaring the duty of the state to be responsible for the childcare centres and envisaging a balanced development throughout the country, recognising it as a social service, continued to highlight its custodial nature (Balduzzi, 2005). This law also strengthened a decentralisation perspective which unequivocally demonstrated the lack of a coherent and homogeneous national childhood policy. The law provided funding for the childcare centre from the state but, unlike the state pre-school set up a few years before, attendance was not for free. Indeed, families took part in the financial management of childcare centres; planning, however, was entrusted to the regions and their management was the responsibility of the municipalities: it is no coincidence that the ministry of reference was the Ministry of Health and not the Ministry of Education (Macinai, 2011). The framework law, therefore, remained locked in the custodial view linked to the origins of the childcare centre and the different investment of resources in it created

1 In Italy “nido d’infanzia” an ECEC service for the age group 0-3.

confusion and disorientation in both parents and practitioners: this situation inevitably slowed down and hampered the development of childcare centres in our country (cf. Frabboni, 1980; Ghedini, 1991; Ferrari, 1992; Caroli, 2014; Catarsi, 2008).

Childcare centres did not have much support from legislation, in fact it was in 2015 that law no. 107 approved the reform of the national education and training system, *La Buona Scuola* (The Good School), a provision that recognises the 0-6 age range as a unique and comprehensive phase of the individual and social development of each person, and the replacing the childcare centre under the Ministry of Education, University and Research, just like the other educational levels. Over the years, however, this service has built up a training offer for younger people that is worthy of note and recognition, obtaining the consensus of families and public opinion, and the attention of specialists at national and international level: the choice of the childcare centre, indeed, is being made more and more not only to respond to specific care needs but also on the basis of an intentional option. This result has been made possible thanks to pedagogists and university scholars who believed in the childcare centre as an educational site and thus favourable to the child's growth by developing a true pedagogy of the childcare centre, but also through the work carried out by the practitioners in the service, who have managed to convey and spread a culture of childhood in which the child is placed at the centre (cf. Gandini, Edwards, 2001; Grange Sergi, 2013; Bondioli, Savio, 2015; Silva, 2016; Mariani, 2015; Catarsi, Fortunati, 2012; Guerra, Braga, Luciano, 2008; Bobbio, Grange Sergi, 2011).

2. A new educative professionalism

As can be inferred from the document published by the European Commission-EACEA-Eurydice-Eurostat (2014) and the studies conducted in the field of education and training (cf. Peeters, 2008; Dalli, 2006; Urban 2008; Pirard, 2011; Schenetti, 2011; Bove, 2009), the question of the professionalism of the childcare centre practitioner seems urgent for both institutional and socio-cultural reasons. In Italy, however, for a long time, the job of practitioner has not been linked to an idea of professionalism such as for a pre-school or primary-school teacher: there is a secular difference between the training of these two subjects, a diversity that today, in the light of the Draft Law 2443 of 2016, is fading away, although many critical issues and doubts remain to be clarified. Indeed, despite the fact that a process of regulating the practitioner's profile has been initiated, by

providing for university education, there is no uniformity either for the curriculum of study or for the years of study between the path provided for the practitioner and for the primary-school teacher (cf. Federighi, Boffo, 2014; Galliani, 2001; Manini, 2013; Bondioli A., Ferrari, 2004). This inconsistency in training is a disadvantage for the practitioner, but it has not been a real hurdle because in the last three decades we have invested heavily on in-service training and thanks to the great deal of research carried out in ECEC services and through numerous seminars organised throughout the country, it is possible to outline a sort of specialised identity (cf. Zaninelli, 2010; Falcinelli, Falteri, 2004; Catarsi, Fortunati, 2012; Mantovani, Silva, Freschi, 2016; Contini, Manini, 2007, Mantovani, Calidoni, 2008; Mattatti, 2008; Musatti, Picchio, 2010; New, Mallory, Mantovani, 2000).

In this regard, Milena Manini (2013, p. 23) wrote:

The search for a professional educational profile (or multi-profile) can be achieved especially considering both the, quite numerous, educational and didactical publications from the seventies to the present, as well as reports on local or national conferences and research results, and internal-circulation documents between educational staff and those working in the profession².

Even though from the state-of-the-art at the national level the lack of guidelines and programmatic indications is evident for childcare centres, the educational projects of the services reveal a professional identity of those who work with children from zero to three years.

When talking about the childcare centre, reference is made to the female practitioner, since, traditionally, the work done within this service is assimilated to the maternal figure because our culture delegates the raising of children to young generations of women. This is also confirmed by the publications in the field of science and literature. In fact, many studies show that in most cases women work in childcare centres (cf. Cattaruzza, 2015; Terlizzi, 2004; Ciccone, Mapelli, 2012; Malavasi, 2010; Cooney, Bitner, 2001; Ongari, Molina, 1995; ISTAT, 2014; Grieshaber, Cannella, 2001; Mukuna, Mutsotso, 2011; Wardle, 2004), the role of educational professionalism in the childcare centre therefore appears to be marked by a gender identity (cf. Ulivieri, 1995; Demetrio, Giusti, Iori, Mapelli, Piusi, Ulivieri, 2011). This finding, however, must not be a source of misin-

2 Italian translation made and edited by myself.

terpretation and misunderstanding, as a practitioner is not required to have a “natural” knowledge about children, but a scientific and rigorous knowledge that is fuelled both by theoretical knowledge and practical experience. Working in a childcare centre is a job of care, but unlike in the past when care was identified with satisfaction of the physiological needs of the child, today it is the epistemological foundation of pedagogical reflection and educational practice:

Education realises its original sense of direction to the extent that it takes on care as its paradigmatic axis. Precisely because caring for and cultivating life, this way of being stands out as a fundamental ontological and existential phenomenon³ (Mortari, 2006, p. 14).

Recognising this assumption means thinking of an educational professionalism different from the traditional one, which has historically marginalised emotions and relationships and their very same meaning for learning purposes; this means approving a new professional profile in which relations play an indispensable function in a child’s growth: “knowing”, “knowing how to” and “knowing who you are” is the triad that constitutes the architecture of the competences of the practitioner (Le Bofert, 2000). The latter has didactic tools such as observation, programming, documentation and testing-evaluation, which allow her to organise and propose a variety of activities and games according to a work plan where the goals, the means and the educational strategies are planned. However, in the childcare centre, unlike at other educational levels, the constructive process of didactic pathways, operational methodologies, organisational structures, and networks of relationships is seen in a flexible way and within an evolutionary conception in which two essential moments are foreseen: the productive one typical of adults, which sets goals, prepares materials, prepares environments, and sets times; the random one introduced by children, characterised by unexpected situations that cannot be anticipated in advance, but which also play a significant role as they are also opportunities for learning and relations (Catarsi, Fortunati, 2004). This way of working not only communicates an adult’s democratic attitude towards children and explains a shared and deliberated pedagogical commitment, but is also synonymous with encouragement in the sense that he/she promotes the growth of children with a mediation role by offering them habits to know and recognise behaviours and attitudes, activities to

3 Italian translation made and edited by myself.

create exploration and discovery situations, words to express the feelings they experience, and opportunities to weave bonds and build relationships (Bondioli, 1997).

On a daily basis childcare centre teaching staff is confronted with new situations, sometimes even problematic, and therefore must be able to “categorise” from experience, learning from the same and thus building new knowledge. Within this perspective, two aspects are essential, experience and reflection on experience, i.e. the essential combination of every training device that sees training as a construction of sense and meaning (Bondioli, Savio, 2009). In their work with children and families, practitioners use a form of heuristic-reflective rationality, identified by Dewey (1951) and subsequently by Schön (1993) as fundamental to an “epistemology of professional practice”:

This form of rationality (which takes on various and complex articulations in relation to the different courses of action in which professionals are involved) is an essential constituent element of the educational act in that it is both a theoretical-praxical dimension in which experience is investigated and one builds new knowledge functional to proper interpretation and management⁴ (Striano, 2001, p. 154).

From this perspective, one can and must speak of a “reflective practitioner” because that figure is capable of developing learning and innovation in her work starting from a reflection on her own experience (cf. Fabbri, 2007, Fabbri, Striano, Malacarne, 2008; Mortari, 2003, 2009; Nuzzaci, 2011; Osterman, Kottkamp, 1993; Brookfield, 1995; Moon, 1999; Merirow, 2003; Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2007). Reflecting on action means giving meaning to what you propose to the child and at the same time grasping the sense of an activity organised in one way rather than another: in a word, it means explaining learning and relations in all educational situations that occur in the day at the childcare centre.

Conclusions

The change in educational professionalism is moving its steps into a reference framework that ECEC services are facing, namely the need to re-

4 Italian translation made and edited by myself.

spond to the new educational needs of both children and their families. So, the need for practitioners to be able to take advantage of a richer and more diversified “toolbox”, capable of containing tools and methodologies that can foster relations and development of children’s skills emerges with ever greater vigour. A knowledge that, as has been highlighted, feeds on various and different competences, which integrate and perfect each other so much that it is from their balancing that this figure draws force. Relational competences and theoretical-methodological commitment are thus configured as the two peculiar characteristics of the practitioner’s professionalism, aspects that can never, however, be considered definitely reached because they are closely linked to social and cultural dynamics. Therefore the educational act follows a programming of evolutionary-reflective type that allows the practitioner to seek and therefore find new and possible answers to his/her own questions (Catarsi, Fortunati, 2004). As Franco Cambi (2003, p. 49) states,

Reflexivity works in two ways: regarding the general and the particular; with respect to the global and intentional aspects of the act of educating and with respect to the specific, unrepeatable local ones that make each educational process a “case”. On both sides, reflexivity realises a detechnicalisation of education and brings it back to its constituent complexity, as well as to its open processuality, to its problematic structure, and forces it to think, with determination and precision, about this non-circumventable condition⁵.

In this scenario, Edgar Morin’s reflection (1999) shows that the educational challenge is to move from a full head to a well-made head:

the practitioner must be able to activate knowledge processes in the child, to support their emotional growth, to plan the environment where such paths must take place, and to refer to an empathic relationship that is based on a deliberate pedagogical content made explicit through a methodology of mediated intervention⁶ (Sharmahd, 2007, p. 58).

5 Italian translation made and edited by myself.

6 Italian translation made and edited by myself.

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