

Support for parents as a cornerstone of public ethos

Il sostegno alla genitorialità a fondamento di un'etica pubblica

Elisabetta Musi

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Piacenza Campus | elisabetta.musi@unicatt.it

SERVIZI PER L'INFANZIA E FAMIGLIE: LO SGUARDO DELLA PEDAGOGIA

ABSTRACT

Recent family legislation in Italy and Europe has been focused on children's and adolescents' rights and vulnerable parents. This is with a view to protecting minors and preventing critical situations. While the current approach offers some promise, I argue that it overlooks the potential benefits of a keener policy focus on fostering the resources available to families as a cornerstone of public ethos.

Le recenti disposizioni di legge nazionali ed europee sulla famiglia concentrano la loro attenzione sui diritti di bambini/e e adolescenti e sulla genitorialità fragile secondo una logica di *protezione* dei più piccoli e di *prevenzione* delle criticità. Ma questo – secondo la prospettiva che la riflessione presenta – se da un lato schiude scenari promettenti, dall'altro rischia di trascurare i benefici che potrebbero conseguire politiche maggiormente attente alla *promozione* delle risorse familiari come fondamento di un'etica pubblica.

KEYWORDS

Parenting | Family policy | Professional development | Community
Genitorialità | Politiche familiari | Formazione | Comunità

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Corresponding Author: Elisabetta Musi | elisabetta.musi@unicatt.it

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1. An encouraging time for family policy

The pro-family measures contained in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan are associated with the reform agenda laid out in the Family Act 2022-2023¹, a package of benefits targeting parents, children and the disabled. The goal is to set up a systemic and well-organized framework for overseeing the implementation of the Plan, while taking into account the specific characteristics of different local areas and the inequalities among them; this should lead to better management of processes beyond the mere provision of services.

On 10 August 2022, the National Family Plan by the National Observatory on the Family (Presidency of the Council of Ministers – Department of Family Policy, National Documentation and Analysis Centre for Children and Adolescents) came into effect. The aim of this Plan is to enhance family welfare, social cohesion and social equity. It is a programmatic tool for informing and monitoring the impact of family policy and intervention across the different stages in the family life cycle. For example, the *generativity and parenting* section provides for an increased supply of early years education, services for helping parents to reconcile the demands of family and work, more balanced welfare interventions, and greater support for foster and adoptive families; meanwhile, the *family dynamics* section envisages intervention to reinforce family stability in situations of vulnerability or conflict, and to prevent and address domestic violence, including by further developing family centres.

Within the complex network of social services for individuals and families, we should also recall the 2021-2023 National Intervention and Social Services Plan: the aim of this program is to bolster the efforts of public and voluntary sector organizations engaged in responding to everyday social needs, fighting social and economic disadvantage, and fostering well-being with the active participation of beneficiaries (families, adults and parents, children), especially those experiencing hardship and vulnerability who have a greater need to access social services in the domains of housing, employment, legal assistance, welfare benefits, healthcare, education and schooling. Again within the overarching framework of social and healthcare services for families, two further key documents have been drawn up to enhance health protection and human services, including those targeting minors: the National Prevention Plan 2020-2025 (PNP), approved on 6 August 2020 and the guideline document *Investing early in health: actions and strategies for the first thousand days of life*, drafted by the Ministry of Health and jointly approved by the central and regional governments on 20 February 2020. The PNP is intended to guide the planning of health prevention and promotion interventions. It too is based on the “life cycle” model, looking to promote well-being by age group and by setting (schools, workplaces, communities, health services, cities). In contrast, the policy document *Investing early in health: actions and strategies for the first thousand days of life* (State-Regions Conference, 20 February 2020) is based on the principle that awareness and action surrounding the main risk and protective factors for health during the first thousand days of a child’s life – from conception to age two years – can radically influence health prospects across the entire lifespan. This document is aimed at parents, health professionals and institutions and is focused on key preventive actions, of proven efficacy, which may be adopted by parents and caregivers, or by national and local policy-makers, with a view to reducing risk factors and boosting protective factors during this delicate period of life².

Developing children are also the focus of other key national documents: the *Fifth National Action and Intervention Plan for protecting the rights and development of subjects of developmental age: 2022-2023* (which recalls the contents of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child), the UN Sustainable Development Goals - Agenda 2030, the European Union Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2021-2024 and the Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2022-2027. The *Fifth National Plan* covers three areas of intervention – Education, Equity and Empowerment – for which it lists 12 general objectives and 31 action points. As an in-

- 1 Law No. 32 of 07 April 2022: *Mandate to the Government for the support and promotion of the family - Family Act*, which contains «provisions aimed at supporting parents and the social and educational function of families, combating the falling birth rate, promoting the harmonious and inclusive development of children and young people and supporting the independence and financial autonomy of young people, as well as fostering the reconciliation of family life with the work of both parents and promoting employment, especially for women».
- 2 This is in keeping with the recommendations of TB Brazelton and SI Greenspan in their key work, *The Irreducible Needs of Children*, Da Capo Press, Cambridge (MA), 2000.



tegral part of the Fifth Plan, *the National Child Guarantee Action Plan* (PANGI) was approved on 29 March 2022 under the auspices of the National Observatory for Childhood and Adolescence. Finally, with a view to ensuring that all children and young people at risk of poverty or social exclusion have access to essential services (early childhood education and care, schooling, healthcare) and decent living conditions, the European Commission has defined the European Child Guarantee, a comprehensive policy framework for guiding Member States' legislation, policies, programs and funding in the domain of children's rights.

2. Developing a keener focus on family ties

Working to mobilize the educational potential of families and communities is a question of social justice, a must if we are to «break the cycle of social disadvantage». It begins with a «cultural shift» towards thinking differently about the family, not focusing so much on family composition – which could induce a certain mistrust towards family units that do not display the traditional «modal» form (mother, father, children) – but rather emphasizing the quality of the relationships and activities that underpin the bonds among family members, and to which the broader community and educational agencies can offer significant support. From this perspective, the family is a privileged place of symbolic and affective generativity that preserves and supports the flourishing of the human (Anscombe, 1958; Mortari, 2006; Ead, 2015; Ead, 2017). As suggested by Alessandra Gigli:

instead of referring to the 'normal' family (perhaps so defined because it coincides with the nuclear and conjugal model), we will need to adopt, as our model of reference, 'functional' families, that is to say 'stably flexible human societies', in which the quality of relationships (especially between parents and children) is such as to resist separations, conflicts, the existential crises of its members and the failure of romantic relationships (Gigli, 2016, p. 9).

This implies the need to cultivate a new gaze on families, and to reflect on the human need for care, protection, education and on the settings that fulfil this need.

Re-inventing implies re-inventing ourselves as observers of families and revisiting the perspectives and practices that we draw on. Trying a different approach: shifting our focus from the discipline and from academic or vocational knowledge to the system 'for what it is', that is to say in terms of how it appears and how it works (Formenti, 2012, p. XVII).

The ongoing social transformation calls for a change in perspective. It demands dynamic and flexible instruments for engaging with changes as they occur. Given that today more than ever the family is not represented by one predefined format, it is more prudent to use the adjectival term «familial» to define the affective long-term relationships within which identity and developmental trajectories originate and unfold. Learning to live in transformative and indeterminate conditions helps to weave the threads of a possible society, one that abandons the mirage of predefined model family that is often unattainable, in order to welcome existential epiphanies as they are given to us. It is a question of cultivating a love for what is possible, without losing sight of the *limitations* of reality and its roots in *imperfection*. In the educational relationship, this means seeking out and fostering the developmental potential of the other, which does not imply ignoring the contingent situation, but rather intuitively grasping its highest degree of fulfilment. Thus, in the family-community setting, «pedagogical love» (Pati, 1984, pp. 165-188) stems from a trust in the generativity of the human (Vinciguerra, 2022) that extends to the peaks and abysses of existence. The Other transcends my existence, ex-tending it without any kind of pre-tension. The developmental space that is generated in the encounter between *tension* and *ex-tension* reflects the inextricable relationship between dependence and freedom:

Freedom is not the absence of constraints, because it is impossible to conceive of human beings living in solitude. Each person is born into a bond, lives within social relations, and needs others. [...] Free-



dom, therefore, is not the absence of constraints, although it certainly implies *independence from the will of others* (Natoli, 2008, p. 107, italics in the original).

Contemplating the Other as part of one's perceptual and existential horizon means feeling a degree of involvement in that person's life (Levinas, Casper, 2012), even in the absence of an explicit invitation; it implies experiencing the Other's presence as enlivening one's own existence, as directing its undertakings and its unfolding.

The forms in which we, as human beings, open up and encounter the Other constitute our capacity to respond to our existential needs, to our need to be. These needs are universal constants, although they come in different, historically determined forms. As we are reminded by Laura Formenti:

The family, as a specific (and let us remember, partial) solution to the human need for care, protection and education, has taken different forms – united only by their self-myth-poietic organization – [and is] to be understood and respected in its evident and constitutive autonomy (Formenti, 2012, p. XVI).

The outcome is an ethics of responsibility, an openness to individual development as a process of constant negotiation both between different parts of the self and between the self and the different environments and systems of relationships to which the individual belongs.

3. Fostering positive parenting as a public responsibility

If we truly believe that human educability (Ducci, 2002, pp. 25-44) is not limited by age, role or social position, then parenting can be learned, and must therefore be the object of cultural, political and economic investment in order to benefit both individual parents and the community as a whole. Yet adult education and parenting courses do not appear to be sufficiently acknowledged as investments that can contribute to reducing poverty, attaining sustainable development goals, and guaranteeing the rights of children and adolescents in support of the collective renewal of our society.

Facilitating the inclusion of parents in their communities and organizing parenting support courses (Thomas, Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007) helps parents to respond more competently to their children's developmental needs. Studies on resilience show that people (primarily children), families and communities are better able to cope with difficult situations when a set of protective factors are in place, when they are helped to understand and mitigate their risk factors and when they can recognize their personal, familial and social resources and developmentally leverage them to benefit themselves and the socio-cultural context to which they belong (Maurovi, Liebenberg, Feri, 2020). A society that supports the development of its members must allow adults to offer role models and support to the children in their care, but also to experience and share a growth trajectory of their own in relation to their educational task. Relationships among adults must therefore be conceptualised, designed, and cared for in the same way as our relationships with children, for which they offer a framework and support. This is not a «pass» with which to access children nor a passepartout enabling adults to decrypt children's behaviours and experiences, which are largely enveloped in the implicit and in the unsaid. At core, relations among adults are underpinned by mindful responsibility for a (familial as well as individual) life plan that is sustained by the joint contribution of all. Education takes place where there is a community dimension, where community services successfully establish positive alliances with parents, in support of the social fabric that they contribute to weaving through «distributed parenting» interventions (for example, the nursery introduces new parents into their local area network of families, services and opportunities). From this perspective, families become places where the input and stimuli received from community services are creatively reworked and redistributed. However, none of this can happen without «educated intentionality» (which is different from mere «good will») and specific skills. Taking care of settings, relationships and families requires theoretical and practical knowledge that cannot be improvised. Yet basic training and continuous professional development courses rarely offer tools, methodologies and opportunities for systematic learning and guided assessment that would help practitioners to appreciate and evaluate whether the parents of the children in their care are making



parallel gains in knowledge, competence, observational awareness and reflexivity concerning their child's development.

Educators and teachers act as “encouraging witnesses” and role models “within an increasingly disorganized and fragmented welfare system and in schools that have been made vulnerable by the complexity of the social environment and violently upset by the inequalities that mark our contemporary era” (Milani, 2018, p. 10). In the everyday, educators initiate and oversee a participatory and communitarian process (Menheere, Hooge, 2010; Madrigal Sapungan, Mondragon Sapungan, 2014) of educational action, which is also circular in that it benefits both its recipients and its implementors. As observed by Bronfenbrenner: “The psychological development of parents is powerfully influenced by the behavior and development of their children” (Bronfenbrenner, 2010, p. 51).

Support for parents may be defined as a helping practice aimed at fostering and drawing out the educational potential of mothers and fathers (Simeone, 2008), whereby educators do not set out to modify parents' knowledge, attitudes or behaviours, but rather to make available their professional competence with a view to enhancing the parents' degree of mindfulness and openness to positive change.

Practitioners with an educational role use their position as experts, not to instruct or to provide material responses to needs, but rather to help families to evaluate themselves, to actively seek out external resources and value internal ones, and to negotiate the solutions – among the many that might be envisaged – that make the most sense at that point in their history (Formenti, 2000, p. 163).

Embracing and guiding the experience of children and their families can foster new work practices with the power to regenerate the educational system, starting from everyday micro-contexts. Indeed, as suggested by Paola Milani: “The way in which the experience of educating a child is attained can change the destiny of that child, but also of that parent” (Milani, 2018, p. 14). At the same time, developing strategies for improving the quality of parenting represents a key public health challenge (Sanders, 2012) and therefore a key challenge to developing a public ethos.

4. Raising awareness of family education during basic training

Treating family education as a permanent investment, which is integrated into public policy, and which demands structure, planning and coordinated intervention down to the local level, implies revisiting the professional skills and professional development trajectories of education practitioners. More specifically, more systematic training in family education is required for both in-service and trainee educators and teachers.

A family education perspective encourages the direct engagement of parents with their educational role, abandoning an overly didactic approach based on the formal teaching of skills, in favour of the idea that parents can join with practitioners in a process of individual and joint reflexivity. Family education proposes a “weak” model of relating to parents that is not top-down but rather focused on the resources of individuals, families and communities. Thus, specific training is needed for the various kinds of practitioners who work in the fields of family education (Catarsi, 2003) and social policy. The key concept underpinning such training is that

the family is a bearer of social capital that must be supported throughout all phases of its life cycle and across different settings, rather than merely ‘repaired’ via clinical or welfare interventions, or defended using the rhetoric of discourse on the family in the singular, which overlooks the multiple ways in which people today desire to and/or actually manage to set up a family (Milani, 2009, p. 30).

Thus, professional development trajectories, beginning with university courses, should: foster empirical research with a view to transcending the current excessively theoretical and axiological perspective on family education; initiate forms of multidisciplinary interaction between future health, social, education and school professionals; integrate family education with strategies and methods drawn from the “community work” paradigm, with a view to restoring the spirit of cohesion and solidarity that interprets education as a collective en-



terprise; reinforce instruments for and competence in *outcome evaluation*, so that practitioners can learn how to evaluate not only the processes implicated in educational action, but also their impact on the overall health of children and parents. This strengthening of the link between theory and practice fosters both *outward* and *retroactive* thinking (Van Manen, 1990, p. 56); in other words, as subjects prepare to learn about the reality that surrounds them, they will be led to consider what they have learned to date, as well as their own shortcomings and resources, thus also pursuing a progressively deeper self-knowledge.

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