

# Nursery school, families and diversity

## Asilo nido, famiglie e diversità

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This paper describes the complementarity among nursery school and family. Each educational perspective oriented towards early childhood comes from the concept of the child as a subject with his/her own identity and characteristics, as well as the beneficiary of education. The early educational intervention is fundamental for the solicitation of motor, cognitive and linguistic child capabilities which, if properly encouraged, in a prosperous and stimulating environment, allow the start of a psychophysical harmonious evolution, adequate to the social and environmental requests.

Educational institutions become therefore a meeting and exchange place for partners interested in achieving a priority goal: children's education and appraisal. Several researches explain and highlight the importance of an early education, made of affective and cognitive solicitation and motivation.

It is then essential to promote parental participation within the life of the nursery school, so that children gain awareness and confidence in their own capabilities.

The approach of the researches which focus on families with disable children highlights how the cooperation strategy with the teachers puts into action strategies aiming at recovering personal abilities, and improves the relationship between parents and their children.

**Keywords:** Educational institutions, families, social support, cooperation, disability.

abstract

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## 1. The childhood recognition in the housing policy

Italian educational policies come out from a long path towards the acknowledgment of the childhood as a basic moment for the life of a human being. And it is just this exactly path, no matter how long and difficult, that made possible the creation of nursery schools first and later other kind of educational services, which all together represent the so-called “early childhood” and contributed to the child vision and definition in the collective imaginary.

The story of the nursery school as educational and social service is characterized by the slow evolution of what Ariès calls “childhood feeling” and the importance given to the physical, psychological, social and emotional child development. Thanks to the advancement of several theories on the evolutionary age, together with an increasingly conscious will of child education, a path became definite, which went far beyond the mere social utility of the nursery school, leading up to the recognition of child as a unique person, author of his/her own destiny, and at the same time, as individual in need of a physic and relational milieu, to be stimulated and comfortable. The development of the nursery school as a social and public service has been of course conditioned by economic and political choices; often people thought that small children should have their experiences just inside the family, underestimating the educational intervention out of the native environment. Such ideology takes advantage of the family worries’, as well as of the interpretation, taken to the extreme, of the “separation shock” asserted in Bowlby important dependence theory (1989), which highlights the sufferings coming from the separation. It is also true that such researches, published in Italy in the 70s, are related to total separation, typical of the children life in hospital and crèches (orphanage), and not partial as that of the nursery school.

Even if the dependence theory, on the one hand, contributed to the mistrust towards multiple reference figures, on the other hand we must give great credit to it, as it introduced to the relational and reference point mode, in order to offer to the child a context respectful of the primary but also enlarged relationships (Mantovani, Restuccia Saitta, Bove, 2000, p. 35). The entry of the nursery school as a social public service comes with the law n. 1044/1971, in which the Government entrusts the Municipality and the family the management of the service, and gives to the Italian Regions the planning; in the 90s, moreover, the increasing demand by the families produced an increase in the variety, together with a deeper awareness, of the children needs as main subjects of the supply. Many academics of the childhood development give specific attention the children socialization process. Among those stands out Schaffer (1984), who highlights the interactive-cognitive development characteristic, underlining the fact that the relation among mother and child is to be enclosed in a systemic perspective, considering that it grows in a given environment, with all the different characters playing in it. Therefore, the origin of the child progression cannot be connected just to the mother-child relation, but has to go back to the whole spectrum of relations which he develops within the family, and, in wider terms, to the relation created with all those people, with whom the child gets in touch, starting from his/her peers. The nursery school is integrated in such framework as a care context which can be considered corresponding to the family one, and



that enables parents and educators to follow a complex and integrated educational project. It was Urie Brofenbrenner (1986) that proposed the ecological theory of the human development, according to which the relationships among teachers and parents were effective not only for school achievements, but also for the long duration of positive achievements in the path of socio-emotional and cognitive development of the boy/girl. Such theory changed the pedagogical perspective on parental involvement, to be promoted and supported also for facilities such the nursery schools. Thanks to the law n. 285/97 the basis for the facility improvement has been certainly laid down: the innovative feature lies in the fact that they think themselves in close cooperation with one another, using administrative obligation in order to formalize agreements and projects in a harmonic perspective, so that they become complying and not, as often happens, conflicting. Such law created a framework in which all the facilities can be properly developed, whether they are addressed to wealthy people, or to people in economical, social or cultural disadvantage. The nursery school begins to be organized according to the “pedagogy relationship” theory, taking on the epithet of “relations place”, that means a meeting and exchange space for the people who live in it. The social development of the child gains a wider meaning, that is the development by the child of his/her own identity, which depends on the connections that he/she will be able to create with him/her-self and with the others, and also on the conception that he/she will internalize of those relationships. In this way, the nursery school will become an emotional box, with the function of consolidating the different experiences.

## 2. The complementarity among nursery school and family

Each educational perspective oriented towards early childhood comes from the concept of the child as a subject with his/her own identity and characteristics, as well as the beneficiary of education. Nowadays children live in a society where advertisement, consumption, television and everyday life impose a model based on eternal youth, expressed through the look, the anxiety of being successful, visible and rich enough to satisfy advertising-driven needs, or collect ephemeral appeal objects. Understanding the negative aspects of society and family, and addressing them with a critique, represents the first step towards the recovery of an ethic centered on human being dignity and importance, and more specifically, dignity and importance of the child; it means starting from a critical view in order to face the problems and to identify the family as main environment for childhood education and formation: it is necessary to invest on family and on parents' competences, giving value to their ability in finding inside themselves the instruments to create substantial connections with their children.

Family is a complex and structured system, present in every recognized social system and can be defined as a cooperation unit based on cohabitation, which aims at providing its members with development as well as physical and socio-economical protection, emotional steadiness and help in the difficult moments. It develops by one's decision of sharing a part of life with somebody else. The development of the different roles and rules of relationships grows in the time through a mutual influence, starting from the birth family or other couples' ex-

periences, beliefs system and expectations towards marriage, that have a strong influence on the way of thinking and of being wife and husband. Couples develop a common life structuring, where the individual starting conditions are mutually shaped up, modified and strengthened through the time by their shared experience (Walsh, 1999).


A fundamental moment in the life of a couple is the birth of children, which represents in every family a big news and a great change. Prior balance breaks up and the couple has to find a new one (Sorrentino, 2006, p.31). The new family is a nuclear and post-nuclear and is based on horizontal relationships; it is a non-authoritarian family, which invests on children and their education, and considers proximity and communication as fundamental; it is based on a balanced relationship among the spouses, on the capability to listen to the other, on the support and on the empathy.

The transformations which occurred in family relationships contributed to the creation of a process in which individual members have got a wider freedom in comparison with the previous generations, but they live in situations of great frailty and isolation; so, once they access an enlarged social framework such as the nursery school, they reveal all their difficulties, due to the lack of self-confidence in their potential and capabilities (Gigli, 2007). The nursery school keeps adjusting to the needs of a family that changes. Educators receive often messages (more or less explicit) which highlight such sense of incompetence towards one's role, often fostered by social isolation, that increases anxiety and concern.

Educational institutions become therefore a meeting and exchange place for partners interested in achieving a priority goal: children's education and appraisal. Several researches explain and highlight the importance of an early education, made of affective and cognitive solicitation and motivation (Zappaterra, 2010). The early educational intervention is fundamental for the solicitation of motor, cognitive and linguistic child capabilities, which, if properly encouraged, in a prosperous and stimulating environment, allow the start of a psychophysical harmonious evolution, adequate to the social and environmental requests. Thus arises the complementarity among nursery school and family, which doesn't express anymore with institutional structures of social management, but is characterized by an intense participation, even emotional, to the experience lived by the children. Educators are asked to do a serious job, in order to build, together with the families, that confidence role which is necessary to start outgoing strategies, aiming at recovering confidence in one's own abilities, which represents a very important part of the creation of good relationship among parents and children. It is then essential to promote parental participation within the life of the nursery school, so that children gain awareness and confidence in their own capabilities.

### 3. Parents facing disability

The life of families with disabled children is a complex circumstance, which can hardly be connected to one-way interpretative patterns or family typology. Every past is unique and totally personal, and therefore there can be several different adaptive reactions regarding the same disability. Each parental couple, waiting



for the birth of their child, experiences deep and rich emotions, full of dreams and expectations; they create their idea of child, projecting their own wishes, which are unconscious most of the times. In fact, the more child's image appears to be coherent with parents' expectations, the more child will be accepted and recognized as son/daughter, since the parents look forward at finding a correspondence between the dreamt images and the real ones. During the pregnancy, parents, but above all the mother (who lives a faster parenthood process in comparison with the father), are led to dream of their child, representing him/her in a perfect dimension, not at all responding to reality: usually, it is a heterogeneous idea, made up of oneself, the partner, the beloved people, and, if there are, also other own children. The fictional creation of a child that complies to the parents' dreams and expectations, and the burst on the scene of a real child that doesn't respond to the desired one causes a narcissistic wound and a great pain. The perfect child myth is a common dream, that lies beneath the fear of having a disable child (Gargiulo, 1987, p. 10). When, by contrast, the parents discover that the dreamt child is affected by disabilities, they enter a circuit of distressing, frustrating and tragic experiences. The process that launches and strengthens the children's representation, in the disability situations, is likely to turn out to be mono-directional, and often the disable child appear as a sick person or a child to be protected (Caldin, Casarotto, Zaltron, 2009). The myth of the beautiful and healthy child falls down, and is replaced by anguish, due to own guilty feelings: it is a instinctive reaction, that comes out from a wrong evaluation of the surrounding situation, and finds breeding ground in self-critical personalities. Besides all the regular readjustments and difficulties which come along with the birth of every child, such situation carries along a wound to one's individuality, originated by the procreation of an inadequate child, who constantly stimulates and renews a deep guilt feeling with his/her physical and real status (Galanti, 2001, p. 142). In the event of the birth of a disable child, such feeling of big responsibility can be identified in both parents, although to a greater extent in the mother, and originates from the fear of having to protect him/her all the time, without the certainty that he/she will become independent and capable one day. Such destructive and self-punishing feelings involve not only the couple, but the all family system, compromising it. The birth of a disable child requires a distressing transformation process to the family group: rethinking the family system, and reformulating the individual and shared expectations, rethinking also future expectations (Mannucci, 2005, pp.27-28). Parental crisis has repercussions on the couple, that often isolates from the world, causing an internal fracture. The reaction to the disability results from several aspects: the feelings that the disability provokes in the two parents (as individual and as a couple); the quality of the pre-existing relationship; the influence exerted by the social and cultural environment. The diagnosis, therefore, carries along a strong pain, caused by the narcissistic wound and depressive disturbs of the mother in front of the real child, different from what she ideally expected (Lebovici, Soulé, 1972). Suddenly, the parents have to coop with a deep crisis and the loss of self-esteem, feeling totally powerless. This situation fosters anger and frustration, creating a vicious cycle where the child behaviours, unsuitable with parents' expectations, provoke parental reactions, characterized by the alternation of reactions that can be apprehensive and overprotective, or punishing and refusing (Fratini, 1997, p. 126). The

family system is then forced to reconsider the internal and external organization, where parental role needs new expertise, competences to be developed and, of course, support. The period of the child rearing represents a fundamental moment in the adult life, characterized by two important psychological events: the parents' desire of feeling competent and useful (which is essential to strengthen and confirm their experience of successful adults) is fulfilled, and children find in such interaction, the foundation of their psychology and the cornerstone of their existence. The relationship between the couple obviously affects the quality of the parenthood. The parents have to meet and face, in their imaginary, the specter of disability and the role of the expert. The latter, on the one hand can contain and control the family distress, and on the other hand, is bound to inform, as much as possible, on the effects and the chances of disability recovering. Predicting the evolution of a disable child is not always possible, as well as it is not possible to suppose someone else's evolution. The development of a disable child is definitely anomalous, and differs from every benchmark or indicator of the so called "normal" evolution steps. The parents, therefore, are bound to attend a different kind of progress, that, although not satisfying, they have to get to respect and accept. Becoming aware of such situation, surely complex for the necessary imaginary rearrangement, will convince the parents on the importance of acknowledging every child equal rights and suitable opportunities, irrespective of the kind of disability (D'Alonzo, 2008).

#### **4. Social support for the families' well-being**

The support for the family is definitely one of the most effective strategies to put in action, so that the family can find again self-confidence, in order to go on closely, leading in this way to the consequent promotion of the child well-being. The cognitive and emotional reorganization of the couple will surely benefit the child. Although these parents could undergo stressing situations, some studies tried to highlight also the existence of positive aspects connected with the experience of living with a disable child, however demanding this can be. Certainly, one of these positive aspects is the development of a feeling of personal growth, nevertheless achievable only through analysis and identification of suffered loss. (Soresi, 2007). The huge fracture between the desired child and the real one is often likely to cause a depression to the mother, who can hardly be overcome without the help of the partner or the wider family group. The reaction of the family is another element that can affect the personal overall development. The study method of families with disable children has been enriched during the time. The first researches used to highlight only the negative effect on the family, particularly on the mother. Progressively, the research focus has been widened, going from a tragic point of view to a more optimistic vision, that takes into account also other family members. Today the researches highlight how the family of the disable person, although facing many problems, is not doomed to undergo a crisis and fall apart, but can survive, adjusting to the situation and, sometimes, benefiting from it (lanes, Celi, Cramerotti, 2003). Unconditional love of the parents for disable children is not so easily predictable as that for "normal" children: disable children have to gain the love of their parents, and the response of par-

ents who succeed in overcoming the sorrow is extremely important for the elaboration of a real him/her-self by the child, making way for an achievable path of happiness for the family and of independence for the future of the child (Trisciuzzi, Zappaterra, Bichi, 2006, p. 10). Every child, and all the more a disable child, has got his/her own way to face the world and the surrounding environment, giving his/her own explanation of it, developing explanation and positive or negative imaginary, and creating relationships; all these elements will be essential in order to find his/her personal way of knowledge, that cannot be standard, but will be characterized by achievements, interruptions, pauses and restarts (Caldin, Gajo, 2002). The framework becomes therefore a basic landmark for the development of the relationships (with people, both adults and children, places and raw materials) in a mutual connection that, while growing, creates the right context for the relationship between the different experiences. The context thus represents the integration element for the several aspects of educational path: using the impulse that it offers, it is possible to build up an integration path, producing educational and didactic activities. A disable child can be seen as a freeze of life history for his/her parents, who expect endless parental tasks. The impossibility of experiencing amusement gaps with only adults, for instance, or the impossibility to enjoy a short vacation due to the difficulty of leaving a teenager or young adult alone, as not capable of looking after him/herself, in lack of educators who assume directly the responsibility of his/her care, can cause incurable fractures in the couple, that doesn't find the possibility to renovate. The family education tends to a perspective based on mutual attention, comparison, empathy, mutual understanding, so that the person can find him/herself the right answers to his/her questions. The parents' thinking and acting have to be supported by a coalition involving other parents, children, teachers, social and health services, all bound to undertake clear and coherent joint responsibilities; an alliance that enables parents to regain their ability to make plans for their own children. Consequently, also the gaze given to the diversity changes, in particular the subject regarding the integration of disable children, which brings all the educational agencies to face the need of rethinking the whole arrangement of pedagogical structures and interventions, in order to welcoming all the children, who are different for needs and improvement levels. In this view, we recall the theory of the Russian psychologist Vygotskij (1980), who sees the development of a disable child not as a pathological development, but as a different development, that means, a development in a different way, through another path and with other means. The empathy practice concerns what Winnicott (1968) calls "mirror purpose": according to this theory, the nursery school educator plays an important part in shaping the child self-image. The role of the adult working in the nursery school is characterized by a strong and essential feature: it is pedagogical, thus aiming at letting the child grow up in a game of input, supervision of activities, and practices were the main aspect is the incentive and the development supervision. The project of a facility for the little ones laid the foundations for the examination of children's rhythm and timing, allowing educators to get ready to listen to their needs and their care in case of problems. Children diversity is appreciated as an opportunity of learning, exchanging and opening to the new aspects of experience (Catarsi, 2008). The organization of meeting with parents, the preparation of the setting and the day-schedule has to be made bearing in

mind the integration as common background to the educational action. Cooperation among educational group, family and public services will make possible finding personalized and adequate solutions: childhood services thus become relational, social and learning contexts for children and adults, where the parents' participation and empowerment are stimulated; they will become contexts with an added value on the educational level, that is a background where traditional knowledge, feminine and familiar, match the knowledge of the other parents and of the educators, who aim not only at promoting the children development, but also at creating a support opportunity and, in a certain way, family education.

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