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The 'Nido'[i] as a Place of Cultural Integration

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Abstract

The European Union acknowledges that early childhood education and care (ECEC) is the essential and fundamental paths towards permanent learning and social inclusion, particularly regarding migrant families and their children. Which educational methods have proven to be the best for the integration of migrant families? What strategies have been implemented to improve relationships among peers and to help children from immigrant families master the Italian language? What scenarios have been the most difficult to manage? The purpose of this study was to find the best educational practices used by Italian nursery school teachers to promote integration. Moreover, we wanted to identify the most significant obstacles the teachers encountered. A qualitative survey was done within a phenomenological frame. The research data includes full transcriptions (low-structured interviews) of interviews with educational staff who work in the Italian public and private nursery school system. Data analysis was done according to the grounded theory principle in order to define a "local theory" of education based on practical experience. There were numerous children from immigrant families in the educational centers where the survey was conducted (50% or more) . This was considered an advantage for everyone involved- natives and immigrants alike. Cultural diversity produces more flexibility at different levels of the educational system and improves the ability to acknowledge and accept each individual's uniqueness. The best educational practice we found were workshops where children, parents and teachers were all involved. Workshops are situations/sessions of informal learning where one's first language and culture are appreciated , thus, bilingualism can be fostered.

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1. **Introduction:** In recent years, an important line of discussion has drawn a connection between the decline in scholastic and occupational performance in many developed countries and insufficient and delayed

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investment in human capital. Economic cost/benefit analysis has, in fact, brought to light that investing in early childhood brings greater returns (Cunha and Heckman, 2008; Carneiro and Heckman, 2003) because it has lower costs[ii], and achieves better results thanks to the "mental fertility" exhibited during the first years of a child's development. There is also a cumulative effect over time. James Heckman, winner of the 2000 Nobel Prize for Economics, expressed this theory in the "Heckman Equation": investment in education resources during the first years of an individual's development equates to long term gain because it generates social capital that can, in turn, lead to economic and social development, which may also benefit future generations. But while it appears, at the beginning of the 21st century, that economic research is "discovering" a golden age in infancy, research in the fields of neuroscience and developmental psychology have, for some time now, been converging on a recognition of the brain's increased plasticity during early childhood, and the fundamental importance of "early intervention" educational strategies.

2. Problem Statement:

Early childhood services, therefore, assume importance from a social point of view insofar as they are invested with a decisive function and role, both in terms of promoting human capital, and as a preventative strategy. It is necessary, though, that we recognise that early childhood services vary greatly from country to country; in some cases they are still scarce, or are not designed with education in mind. Additionally, educational research in this sector is still very young. The effects of attending childcare services have been studied in greatest depth in the English-speaking world and in the field of psychology (NICHD, 2000; Love et al. 2003). The results seem to confirm a correlation between more positive cognitive and social outcomes for the children and higher standards of service (Howes et al., 1992; Andersson, 1992; Rosenthal, 1994) with greater statistical significance in the case of children from less advantaged families (Love et al. 2003; Votruba-Drzal et al., 2004)[iii].

An important Communication from the European Commission, in February 2011, made clear the "political" value that it would assign to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) – as the foundation of permanent learning outcomes, social integration, personal development and future employability –with its unambiguous title "Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow"[iv]. It states, making reference to the most recent international surveys of basic skills:

"There is clear evidence that participation in high quality ECEC leads to significantly better attainment in international tests on basic skills, such as PISA and PIRLS, equivalent to between one and two school years of progress." (COM 2011/66: p. 1)

Used as a compliment to the central role played by the family, ECEC can therefore have a profound and lasting impact on learning and can break the so-called "vicious cycle of disadvantage" (Del Boca, Pasqua, 2010), in other words, the tendency for a child born into a disadvantaged family – in terms of precarious economic conditions or difficulties linked to immigration – to become, in turn, a marginalised individual.

Providing high quality early childhood education and care is, therefore, beneficial for all children and is especially important for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, including migrants. The benefit of ECEC in these situations is that it favours cultural integration by providing an opportunity to interact, at an early stage, with children of the same age from different cultural contexts, and offers multiple educational stimuli, which differ from those found in the family environment alone.

For children who do not belong to the dominant culture, in addition to the developmental challenges that characterise this stage in life, the development of identity presents aspects of complexity that are linked to their own and/or their family's experience of migration. For some time, the psychological and sociological literature has brought to light the condition of bi/pluricultural belonging and the delicate processes of transculturation related to it (Moro, 2002, 2005), in addition to the condition of being part of a social and ethnic minority, which brings exposure to discriminatory ideologies of identity (Dal Lago, 2004; Sayard, 2002) and the risk of downward assimilation (Portes, 1997). The combined presence of these factors makes the early, contemporaneous processes of integration and identity formation particularly complex, exposing children to a particular form of vulnerability[v], and thus to developmental risks (Pastori, 2010). The issues that arise from the dichotomy between the processes of enculturation and acculturation, and from forms of discrimination, may remain latent during infancy only to erupt during adolescence. As such, preventing or

recognising these issues early on, and intervening in the best ways possible, becomes one of the fundamental duties of ECEC.

3. Research Questions

We mentioned above that the effectiveness of ECEC is closely linked to the quality of the services offered, in terms of the educational programmes adopted, the training of personnel and the organisational models in place.

This study focuses on educational practices implemented in the Italian Nido[vi] in order to encourage the integration of foreign children and families. More precisely, it focuses on the practices that are considered the most effective by the practitioners who designed and developed them.

How to encourage access between cultures? What strategies proved to be most effective in valuing different languages and cultures of origin?

4. Purpose of the Study:

Analysis of educational practices offers a research procedure through which to investigate the occupational experience of educators and teachers, with the aim of drawing out their "practical knowledge". Starting with D. A. Schon's definitive (1983) work on the reflective practitioner, the Nuova Ricerca Didattica (New Didactic Research) (NRD: Damiano, 2006; Tochon, 2000) has investigated the knowledge inherent in practice, evaluating it as a form that is epistemologically different from theoretical knowledge. Rather, it is the product of knowledge, abilities and skills that have been developed in the field, and in situ. This is knowledge built through practice, through constant dialogue with the concrete reality of actions. However, it risks remaining unrecognised, because it is understood only tacitly by those who possess it. The analysis of educational practices, therefore, presupposes that occupational experience be valued as a privileged space in which revealing and meaningful professional learning can originate. As Shulman underlines, in contrast to other professional activities, education "is missing a history of practice" (Shulman, 1987:12), a history that could capitalise on this precious knowledge that is otherwise destined to disappear without a trace (Mortari, 2010).

The educational practices analysed in this study are those of educators working in Nidi in the Veneto region of northern Italy, which has seen the numbers of foreign national residents triple in the space of a few years[vii] (Regional Observatory on Immigration/Osservatorio regionale sull'immigrazione, 2013 Report). The Nidi have gradually received an ever larger number of foreign children, particularly in certain areas of the region's towns and cities and especially those in the public sector.

5. Research Methods

Current studies in the epistemology of research have identified phenomenologically directed, qualitative methods as the way forward in investigating the world of experience (Giorgi, 2006; Mortari, 2010). Knowledge of practice is a "dense" form of knowledge that is frequently only implicit. It requires a methodological approach that is able to tune in to a practitioner's way of thinking and grasp specifics without distortion or obfuscation, and that can use reflection on experience to stimulate a process through which this knowledge might be made explicit. We decided that the "conversational interview" was the most appropriate technique for uncovering data. In this approach, the interviewer is guided by a few precise questions without these constituting a definite path to be followed through the interview. Their deployment is "determined by the situation, considering the quality of the dialogue exchange with each research participant as it develops" (Mortari, 2010: 5).

Fifteen Nido professionals participated in the research (5 coordinators and 10 educators). We used two criteria to select the participants: a) a substantial degree of experience, enhanced by working with a multi-ethnic user base (at least 5 years of service in establishments with large numbers of foreign children); b) experience of experimentation with culturally sensitive educational activities for incoming children.

The research data comprises the complete transcripts of these interviews. Our analysis followed the precepts

of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This method of research operationalises the true spirit of phenomenology by the way it conceives of the process of data codification, defined as 'open coding'. Categories are not established a priori, rather they should emerge from the data. The job of the researcher is to "make the data speak", taking extreme care to ensure what the father of phenomenology, E. Husserl, described as "faithfulness to the phenomenon". Two researchers, working separately, carried out a provisional conceptualisation of the transcripts, identifying a number of "labels", which were subsequently compared and cross-referenced to reach a consensus on the "units of meaning" that had emerged. The units of meaning were then grouped under specific headings.

6. Findings:

Contextual information

The proportion of children whose parents are migrants is particularly high in the institutions where the people interviewed work (over 50%). In almost every case, the children themselves were born in Italy. The main geographical areas from which the parents come are, in decreasing order of frequency: Countries in North and Central Africa, countries in Eastern Europe, countries of the Indian subcontinent, China, and countries in South America.

One feature of the Italian Nidi is that very few of their education professionals come from other cultures themselves; the phenomenon of international migration is more recent here than in other European countries like the United Kingdom and France. Cultural mediators are frequently employed in training activities for education personnel, and are occasionally used for linguistic mediation, in all cases working with adults (educators and parents). In some of the services involved in our research experimental educational projects have been launched that relied on the participation of cultural mediators alongside educators.

Another characteristic of early childhood education and care services in Italy is that the education personnel are exclusively female.

Encountering cultural differences: a challenge and an opportunity

In the interviews, experience of the multi-ethnic reality of the services emerges across the board as a common element of the working experience. For the educators and coordinators, working with foreign children and their families represents a constant challenge and opportunity. Even with years of experience behind them, the destabilising 'mental baggage' still accompanies an encounter with the 'foreign' - "It undermines your certainties, your beliefs, your way of working" (E3), "it's destabilising" (E2) - and forces the practitioner to recognise her own prejudices and fears. A number of educators underline the processes of self-awareness that accompanied their practice – "you need to take a step backwards to open your own mind" (E9), realise that "when we think, we do so starting from a point of view that is culturally located" (E10) – and the necessity of detaching oneself from the mechanisms of ideological influence in which we are immersed: "the fundamental thing, for me, is not to consider immigration as a problem." (E5)

"It is a great opportunity to be able to work with foreign families, especially if you manage to get them to participate and relate to their diversity, experiencing it as a form of wealth. This broadens our own knowledge, and encourages the development of a flexible and open mental approach in the children, too, through encounters with new languages, both verbal and non-verbal." (E4).

From the accounts in the interviews, it emerges that multiculturalism, when addressed with greater commitment, particularly in terms of the mental energy expended, produces an increase in self-reflection and flexibility: greater availability, on both a personal and organisational level, and innovation through research into new operational strategies for working with both children and parents. One coordinator says:

"Coming face to face with these families gives rise to a lot of questions. Being genuinely open to getting to know the other person is fundamentally important for establishing a good relationship, which in turn is the cornerstone of the educational alliance. (...) What matters is having a strong commitment to the project of education, because children have the same need to be cared for and made welcome, wherever they are from in the world. Above all, you need to equip yourself with the mental flexibility that leads to tolerance. Tolerance is the prerequisite for true comprehension; it allows you to overcome difficulties. For example, when you encounter the needs of parents, in terms of the timetable, showing greater understanding of the work issues they are facing tends to bring a greater effort on their part to satisfy the rules of the service." (C10).

Working in a multi-ethnic context seems to produce a sort of epistemic rupture in the practical knowledge that the practitioner has previously acquired, leading her to abandon "consolidated schemes and seek new strategies and solutions." (C1) Many of the units of meaning identified signify, in relation to the effects produced by the presence of children and families from other cultures, that this presence brings forth a profound growth, in both professional and personal terms, through a re-examination of practices, of relational styles and of one's emotional reaction to that which is foreign.

Best practice

"Workshops" with parents

In the opinion of those interviewed, the educational practices that have produced the best results in terms of integrating foreign families are experiential group activities, which they call "workshops". The overall aim of the activity is to encourage parents' participation in the life of the Nido. Their involvement in encounters traditionally planned for families turns out to be rather limited. The specific objectives vary from one "workshop" to the next. They may concern the parents' familiarity with the Nido and the type of educational service it offers, encouraging contacts between parents and the creation of support networks, celebration of different cultural backgrounds or providing parenting support.

"The quickest way to introduce the Nido is to open the doors and invite (the parents) in for a cup of tea. The "afternoon snack" (the workshop) has been very successful because it seeks to accommodate the difficulties that the parents have in getting to meetings. It is held at the time that the parents come to pick up their children, and involves a number of educators (and cultural mediators). It is much more effective than endless discussions. Parents need to see the space where their children will be spending so much of their time and it's faster and easier for us to demonstrate how we work." (C4)

The "workshops" end up being informal learning spaces in which the challenges of linguistic communication are overcome by turning to non-verbal codes (gestures, images, music). This condition creates a climate of genuine "equality" among the participants (educators, parents and cultural mediators), which leads them to overcome the "initial diffidence" that might arise when faced with reciprocal foreignness. From the interviews, it emerges that these experiences generate a feeling of openness and availability on the part of the education personnel towards all of the parents, and encourage a process of 'devolution' both of their professional role, and of its culturally implications. "Seeing things from the other person's point of view", "being able to empathise", "being able to step outside yourself", "knowing how to listen and understand", "being able to use different languages": these are the skills that the research participants believe are fundamental for an education professional working in multicultural contexts, and which they believe can be developed and honed through the activities used in the Workshops.

Intercultural teaching

In the Nidi where the interviewees are employed, encountering children and families from other cultures has led to a profound and ongoing process of reflection on practice. Current educational planning is exploring new models and didactic strategies that will support the simultaneous processes of enculturation and acculturation in children from other cultures, and ensure that cultural differences are genuinely and adequately valued. Previous research in analogous contexts (Messetti, 2013) has demonstrated the presence of a widespread educational model that is assimilative, warm and welcoming in tone but which is not very decentralised from a cultural point of view. Indeed, while the statements of the teachers outline an inclusive and protective educational model – "children are all equal, with the same needs and the same rights" – and which is aware of the uniqueness of the individual – "every child is different" – analysis of working practices suggests that differences tend to be denoted in an emotional-relational register, rather than a cultural one. The total dominance of the Italian language, the non-use of "mother tongues", the scarcity of cultural mediators (and absence of bilingual educators) all describe a context that effectively imposes a sort of linguistic and cultural colonialism.

This study wished to investigate the reality of a few such services in which reflection on cultural difference has given rise to a rethinking of educational practices. In these establishments, having worked on the welcoming of families, the educators felt driven to design educational activities that addressed the specific needs of non-Italian children, who were required to manage two linguistic and cultural codes.

"This was possible because the educators, as a group, took on the job of researching the possibility of accessibility between cultures and the creation of situations, within an intercultural space, in which the children would feel comfortable." (C1)

Adopting a heuristic approach, the plan featured a cultural mediator working alongside an educator in activities aimed at a small group including children from the same cultural background as the mediator and Italian children (the children in the group were aged between 18 and 36 months). Each project was developed starting from an initial proposal and from observations of the reactions of the children, whose responses would guide the design of the following phases. Individual projects followed different paths through the introduction of stories, songs and music, and manipulation and symbol-based activities, which were all characterised culturally.

What emerges from the reflections of the practitioners interviewed is the complex and demanding process that accompanies the task of assessing their working practices in the face of unfamiliar concepts of identity, relationships, learning and, most radically, of the meaning of existence.

One educator recounts, referring to the reaction of children from the same cultural background as the mediator:

"We observed that at the beginning the children maintained constant visual contact with their educator, and seemed to be asking her for permission to switch their attention to the mediator. In the following encounters, the children were more relaxed in their interactions and, above all, in their linguistic exchanges with the mediator, helped to some extent by the option of activities such as drama. Significant interactions between the mediator and the educator also played an important part." (E8)

The different reactions of the children in relation to their mother tongue, and the importance of its ongoing use, also become apparent:

"After they get over the shock and emotion of hearing their own mother tongue in the unfamiliar space of the Nido," one coordinator comments, "they would begin to use their family language, both in their interactions with the mediator and in dialogues with their peers." (C4).

A number of educators were struck by the reaction of the Italian children: initial curiosity, brief interest and detachment from activities offered using the unfamiliar language.

"We are giving careful thought to how to prepare Italian children for encounters with the mediators. For us, it is important that they have the experience, which is perhaps a little frustrating, of feeling disorientated in terms of language. We hope this will push them to seek other channels of communication." (E1)

It is interesting to note the importance that the educators assign to the processes of "learning from experience" (Bion, 1962), which their approach stimulates in the children.

"We believe the chance to experiment with the situation of cultural "otherness" that their non-Italian companions more normally experience is of great educational value to our children, as is experiencing the legitimisation of other cultures." (E6)

7. Conclusions:

Reflections in conclusion, with an eye on training

The projects set up by the educators interviewed to encourage the integration of foreign families and children seem to have kick-started a process of introspection regarding the practices they use, in intercultural terms.

The relationship with parents proves to be crucial, in terms of sharing thoughts on the development of their children in relation to the plurality of cultural references, and negotiating educational practices and models.

The understanding that their work involves constant research and appraisal also seems to have been consolidated. "The challenge remains, because everything is constantly moving. The user base changes in the space of a few years: different families, different cultures" (E4). Practices, therefore, need to be re-examined.

The way forward, in any case, seems clear, new paths exploring the landscape of interculturality are unavoidable. One involves considering how to help children and parents from other cultural backgrounds integrate the meaning of "the unity of the self" present in the plurality of representations. Another aims to reduce antagonism between the cultural worlds to which people belong, and a third looks to educate children in cultural decentralisation and in the pluralities of points of view. These are paths that ask educators to refine both their receptivity to the signals that communicate unease (prolonged silences, restless behaviour or marked passivity) and their ability to interpret them in order to create appropriate educational activities. Promoting full self-development and managing key issues at an early stage and in the most appropriate fashion: these are the essential duties of ECEC.

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[i] The 'nido' (plural nidi) in Italy is the close equivalent of 'nursery' in the UK, catering to children between 3 months and 3 years in age, delivering early childhood education and care services. 'Nido d'infanzia" in Italian means, literally, 'nest of infancy'.
[ii] Costs are lower because they do not include the cost of "remedial action", as there is no need to modify already established situations.
[iii] In Italy, a preliminary study, published in 2010 (Del Boca, Pasqua, 2010) explored the relationship between investments in human capital in early childhood and subsequent cognitive and behavioural outcomes, and confirmed the data found in the literature, relating to other countries.
[iv] Communication from the European Commission COM (2011) 66 (17 February 2011)
[v] By vulnerability we mean a state of reduced resistance to damaging and aggressive factors, in contrast to a state of *resilience*, by which we mean the capacity to react and take control.
[vi] The category of education service addressed in this study caters for children between 3 months and 3 years in age, and is denominated "nido d'infanzia" in Italian (literally, "nest of infancy").
[vii] 86% of foreign residents are concentrated in the regions of northern Italy. Data from the annual reports of the Veneto region's Observatory record an increase from 3.4% of the total population in 2001, to 10.7% in 2012.