

SAGGI – ESSAYS

0-6 EDUCATIONAL SERVICES AND THE CULTURE OF  
CHILDHOOD: THOUGHTS ON THE GENERATIVE  
ROLE OF FAMILIES

*SERVIZI EDUCATIVI 0-6 E CULTURA DELL'INFANZIA.  
RIFLESSIONI SUL RUOLO GENERATIVO  
DELLE FAMIGLIE*

*Elisa Maia (Università “Gabriele d’Annunzio” di Chieti-Pescara)*

In the global social context already worn by the consequences of the economic crisis, the pandemic brought unique life conditions for families, burdened with additional educational and care responsibilities in a dimension of isolation and solitude. Material and educational poverty increased, projecting further scenarios of marginalisation for vulnerable children and families. The criticalities imposed by historical contingencies, however, can be seen as an opportunity for rethinking the educational role of 0-6 services. In an ecological perspective, here we reflect on the role that these services – places structurally founded on an educational relationship practised authentically in the values of inclusion and multiple participation of their actors – can play in promoting a renewed culture of childhood, starting from the mobilisation of the educational potential of families from a generative viewpoint.

Nel contesto sociale globale già provato dalle conseguenze della crisi economica, la pandemia ha delineato condizioni di vita inedite per le famiglie, le cui responsabilità educative e di cura sono aumentate, in una dimensione di isolamento e solitudine. Sono cresciute le condizioni di povertà materiale ed educativa, prospettando ulteriori scenari di emarginazione per bambini e famiglie vulnera-

bili. Le criticità imposte dalle contingenze storiche, tuttavia, rappresentano l'occasione per ripensare il compito educativo dei servizi 0-6. In prospettiva ecologica, si intende riflettere sul ruolo che tali servizi – in quanto luoghi strutturalmente fondati su una relazione educativa autenticamente praticata nei valori dell'inclusione e della partecipazione plurale degli attori – possono rivestire nella promozione di una rinnovata cultura dell'infanzia, a partire dalla mobilitazione del potenziale educativo delle famiglie in ottica generativa.

### 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic that broke out in 2020 marked a time of huge upheaval and transformation. Humanity has been, and indeed still is, exposed to many consequences: isolation, as well as the widespread worsening of general socio-economic conditions, which have led many segments of the population – already at risk of marginalisation, but not only – to see their quality of life exacerbated, both in terms of human relations, limited due to the isolation measures needed to stop the spread of infections, and in terms of economic and working prospects underlying any broader life project.

According to ISTAT<sup>1</sup> estimations (2022), in 2021 7.5 percent of families – 5.6 million people – were in a condition of absolute poverty. The greatest hardships are recorded particularly in Southern Italy, where 195,000 more people are in a state of poverty compared to 2020, confirming the most significant poverty rate: 12.1 percent of individuals (up from 11.1 percent) and 10.0 percent of families.

The *Poverty Report 2021*, published by Caritas Europa (2022), focuses in particular on the work-pandemic paradigm. The survey, conducted in 18 European countries<sup>2</sup>, reports a dramatic picture,

<sup>1</sup> The Italian national statistics agency.

<sup>2</sup> The Report includes contributions from the Caritas organisations in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Ireland,

the result of the negative effects of the pandemic on employment and the economy. As underlined in the Report, the health emergency affected already fragile workers even more, increasing unemployment levels with inevitable consequences on social inclusion for many citizens.

A worldwide emergency that has affected everyone, in an absolutely unique condition of both pain and hope in our most recent human history, revealing unexplored aspects of communities, in terms of both criticalities and resources. The media stories following both the pandemic and the war, particularly in the first few months of 2020, were incessant, contributing to fuelling a scenario already marked by public and private uncertainty and worries. In this sense, it should be underlined how the emergency – as a collective moment – represents a complex matter, understood in kaleidoscopic terms (Isidori & Vaccarelli, 2012), therefore a polysemic matter that can be variously interpretable in the many macro-meanings it offers. Isidori and Vaccarelli (2013) highlight three possible macro-meanings:

- the emergency as a psychic experience: a traumatic event that causes disorientation in space and time, but also an experience of personal derealization in relation to the world known up to that moment;
- the emergency as a territorial and social issue: this refers to a highly complex and problematic social condition that overturns consolidated orders;
- the emergency as a functional-strategic-contextual character: this refers to a circumstance of threat, which demands rapid counteracting reactions, determining the perception of a strong imbalance between actual needs and the possible responses that can be activated with the available resources.

Italy, Estonia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia.

Isidori and Vaccarelli (2013) underline three routes of meaning that all characterised the Covid-19 emergency in Italy, on several occasions and with varying intensity, outlining an extremely complex framework of meaning for this time, which demands an effort to interpret necessarily problematizing educational, social and political phenomena in order to understand the contradictions and intrinsic possibilities.

In educational terms, the health emergency led to many multifaceted consequences. Of them all, one in particular can offer an interpretative framework of the complexity of the educational phenomena generated by the upheaval caused by the pandemic, i.e., that related to the sphere of relationships: the suspension of encounters, and the materiality of relations with others. This aspect has affected people's perception of others, suddenly becoming a potential threat to our own health, as well as the everyday assertion of being in the world, occupying a complex and plural public space: the roads and squares that more informally connote urban contexts, and the formal places of education. In this sense it must be underlined how, for 0-6 educational services in particular, this condition represented an even more challenging phenomenon. The characteristics of this segment of education, which is developed around specific pillars – including the educational relationship, presence, ties and emotional resonance (Amatori, Maggiolini & Sannipoli, 2021), demanded an effort to rethink educational and teaching strategies for the personnel of 0-6 services, aiming to maintain the focus of action on relationships, not only with the children but also with their families.

Within the complexity outlined above, and with particular reference to the educational mission of 0-6 services, pedagogic thought has the task of tracing and enhancing those pioneering features that marked educational and didactic practices during the Covid-19 emergency. This condition posed significant issues for educational and school services, demanding both unique solutions for the performance of educational and care functions and precious stimuli for re-interpreting the intrinsic possibilities of these

services in the promotion of plural and inclusive processes involving all stakeholders, starting from the children and their families.

## *2. Covid-19 and 0-6 services: what space is there for the educational relationship?*

Due to the health emergency, the Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers dated 4 March 2020 ordered the suspension of preschool services as well as teaching activities in schools of all levels. This marked the beginning of a long period of isolation affecting both children and adults, creating scenarios in which domestic life was the only theatre for the existence of everyone. The social category of children was however that which, more than the others, was particularly damaged by the consequences of this narrowing of public life (Amatori et al., 2021; Romanazzi, 2021). In this regard, as the Working Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child underlined, following the outbreak of the pandemic in Italy 53 days passed before children were named in a speech by the President of the Council (Guidetti, 2021), highlighting a vacuum of thought and intention towards minors (Amatori et al., 2021). A cultural and political vacuum, which underlines the pedagogic urgency in implementing a collective discourse on childhood in terms of social agency, promoting its representation based on the exercise of a specific citizenship located in this historical contingency, which is neither prospective (i.e., forward-looking) nor variously determined by the duties and desires of the reference adults.

The various stages of the pandemic had some significant repercussions on educational and school services. While during the first emergency phase linked to the lockdown the greatest criticalities related to the actual closure of the services, during the second phase – and subsequent phases, although with different intensities – the difficulties can be ascribed to the need for the educational and school staff to tackle a further stress, as Gigli underlines (2021), due to:

new tasks to be performed, an increase in paperwork, the reduction in opportunities for group work and co-working, the need to re-design educational settings, adapting communication styles to the limitations imposed for hygiene purposes, dealing with new rules to be explained to the parents (p. 18).

Moreover, particularly during the first phases of the health emergency, the closure of educational and school services had a significant impact both on the children, relating to their learning paths for the progressive acquisition of fundamental skills and competences in the early years of their lives, and on the parents, denied the space for dialogue and emotional sharing with educators and teachers (Amatori et al., 2021). The parents' viewpoint on the children thus became the only one, and the only adult access to the children's rapid changes (Infantino, 2021).

A recent extraordinary survey on 0-3 educational services<sup>3</sup> (2022), conducted through collaboration between the Department for Family Policies of the Presidency, ISTAT and the "Ca' Foscari" University in Venice, investigated the effects of the pandemic on these services in Academic Year 2020/2021. One of the difficulties underlined in the Report relates to the widespread fear among families of using a collective service during the pandemic period. In addition, the dimension relating to relationships with parents – concerning both the difficulties faced by the families in paying the fees, and the opportunities for supporting parenthood – was particularly critical in private schools and in Southern Italy. In this brief reconnaissance of the resulting data, further data worthy of attention concern the significant drop in the demand for educational services compared to the previous year, once again referring more to the private sector and the South. In relation to this evidence, however, it is important to understand how far this is related to the fear of using the service for health reasons and how far, on the other hand, it may be due to the negative impacts – in terms of

<sup>3</sup> The survey, carried out on sample of 2505 services active at 31/12/2018, concentrated particularly on crèches, company nurseries, micro-nurseries and "sezioni primavera" – classes for children from 24 to 36 months.

isolation and impoverishment of the population – of the pandemic (Department for Family Policies – Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Istat & “Ca’ Foscari” University of Venice, 2022). What strikes us about this survey is certainly the evidence that the difficulties were even more accentuated in services in local contexts that can be defined as already “unequal”, in particular Southern Italy (Department of Family Policies, cit.).

In this sense, the virus has been a revealer and generator of diversity (Contini, 2021), at times highlighting latent contradictions, at others spotlighting overt criticalities which demanded – and continue to demand – urgent pedagogic thought and educational practice placed within an interpretative political perspective of 0-6 services, acting within a militant, and therefore inclusive, educational action.

From this standpoint, therefore, the public dimension of educational and school services for children emerges, also referred to in the *Orientamenti pedagogici sui LEAD: Legami Educativi A Distanza. Un modo diverso per fare nido e scuola dell’infanzia* (2020), defined by the Commissione Infanzia Sistema Integrato Zero-Sei<sup>4</sup>. This document not only refers to the affective and relational nature of these educational spaces (Romanazzi, 2021), but also underlines their dimension as the first environment of public life for children, fostering their sense of belonging to the community. It also underlined the aim of re-negotiating the educational pact between educators and families, within a logic of inclusion, active collaboration, co-planning and educational partnership (Antonietti, Guerra & Luciano, 2021).

In this direction, some interesting considerations emerge from a research project promoted by the CREIF (Centre for Educational Studies on Children and Families) of the University of Bologna between May and June 2020, involving, among others, nursery school educators and teachers from some municipalities in Emilia-Romagna. With reference to the methods identified by the educational and school staff to maintain a significant educational

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Education Committee for the integrated preschool system.

alliance with the families, combating the growing sense of isolation and disorientation, Chierigato (2021) describes the many technological tools (Padlet, Classroom, WhatsApp) used to ensure the continuity of the relationship; a strategy accompanied by a consciously open and flexible, non-judging attitude, exercising an authentic educational co-responsibility as the pillar of the alliance between services, schools and families.

It is therefore clear how the restrictive measures imposed by the pandemic activated specific competences among the educational and school staff, allowing them to give new meaning to their action within the framework of intentionality and educational responsibility (Chierigato, 2021).

### *3. The participation of families in 0-6 services: the road to democracy*

The relationship with families is recognised as a decisive dimension of children's educational services, representing a principle of essential quality (Antonietti et al., 2021). Generally, many international documents identify the accessibility of educational and school services for all children and their families as a fundamental criterion for fostering inclusion and combating social disadvantage. Among these, one important reference is certainly the *Proposal for Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* (Lazzari, 2016), defined by the European Commission, which emphasises the active involvement of families with a view to enhancing socio-cultural diversity. In this direction, the issue of accessibility also involves the introduction of educational proposals to encourage participation and strengthen inclusion, with particular attention to promoting the involvement of less visible families in the local communities (Lazzari, 2016).

In this perspective, the family becomes a vital link in the local education network, an element of synthesis between the various institutions, meeting within a path of mutual corroboration (Pati, 2019). The indications offered by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education also lie within this framework:

among the five key messages defined in 2015 for inclusive education, the Agency underlined how these are a common good that demands the support of the whole community. The health emergency refocused attention on the central role of educational and school services, recalling the inalienability of access to 0-6 services and underlining their key role in social terms: accessibility is a universal and sacrosanct right, which must be guaranteed by the community (Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2020).

In an ecological perspective, Milani states (2018),

the most direct route for “investing in childhood” is to include the parents in the contexts and educational processes in which their children are involved at the nursery, at school and in the various life contexts the children participate outside the family (p. 97).

This participation constitutes a kind of accompaniment to parenthood (Milani, 2018), helping to raise awareness of the necessity – for educators and teachers – to invest in the educational relationship with the parents, to better understand the personal history of the children, acting as “agents” of family education (Catarsi, 2008).

With a view to inclusive education, the theoretical ecological and social approach fosters interventions that do not merely target individual children and their family, but which consider the systems they relate to: from parents’ associations to other educational, social and cultural services, from health services to the reference community (Malaguti, 2017). This direction is also hoped for by the *Linee pedagogiche per il sistema integrato zero-sei* (2021), which identifies the interaction between family micro-systems and educational services and socio-cultural macro-systems as a decisive element in the learning experience and growth of competent children rich in potential.

The ecological perspective thus fosters the possibility for an educational management that can offer educational actions promoting the participation of each and every one, from an inclusive standpoint, fuelling the theory and practice that can interpret and combat the phenomena of educational marginalisation and poverty

worsened by the pandemic (Arcangeli, Bartolini, De Santis, Falcinelli, Fornari & Sannipoli, 2020). In the same direction, Italian Legislative Decree 65/2017 advocates educational planning that can offer equal opportunities for all children, overcoming inequalities and economic, territorial and cultural barriers.

Generally, participatory processes imply a generative movement of the self and the other (Milani, 2018) able to consolidate the political sense of authentically emancipating education in the interaction between the service, the families and the territory, and able to develop joint projects involving all the actors in the community, in order to support widespread learning environments. In this sense, childhood services represent a cultural fact (Appadurai, 2014), places in which «educating to critical thought which investigates the existence of contradictions and ambivalence» (Tramma, 2015, p. 150), offering opportunities for the revelation of the real which, in the words of Capitini, offer new opportunities for the legislator, anticipating the law of tomorrow (Zangrilli, 1973).

Educational services for children thus also represent educational and learning spaces for the parents, especially where the construction of alliances aims to promote stable relations of trust and generators of development (Malaguti, 2017) based on discussion and dialogue, fostering encounters and creating educational contexts that are enriched by the original features of everyone (Bartolini, 2021). From this viewpoint, therefore, the perspective of a “promotional” family education assumes value and assigns value to existing family resources (Catarsi, 2008), recognising families as a competent educational space (Pati, 2019).

The principle of co-education, in this respect, represents a fundamental stimulus for exercising co-responsibility among the various actors of the educational process (children, educators and teachers, parents, citizens), who all take part in a democratic active citizenship, enhancing their mutual differences (Pileri, 2021). In this sense, it is underlined how inclusion is also exercised in the ability to involve institutions and the community, going beyond the mere educational relationship with the children (Arcangeli & Sannipoli, 2021). The viewpoint of co-planning, starting from the

families and involving all local actors, offers the possibility to inhabit spaces and times useful for the construction of a common narrative that supports generative action, fostering change and transformation processes (Arcangeli et al., 2020).

#### 4. *Conclusions*

«The concept of alliance and collaboration between families and children's educational services suggests a certain type of relationship, built on mutual respect, listening and acceptance of the perspectives and knowledge of all partners» (Moss, 2014, p. 17). Co-responsibility thus refers to the idea of a democratic relational arrangement (Pati, 2019) to be exercised in a place – that of the service – which is also a space for active citizenship, through participation in the collective action and democratic practice (Moss, 2014).

In a historical time like this, in which social and educational inequalities have worsened, the need to enhance the role of 0-6 services as spaces for the construction of a democratically oriented children's culture emerges even more clearly. This culture identifies the cipher of an emancipating and militant educational commitment in the encounter and dialogue with the many subjects living in the community. In this sense, educational and school services represent places for approaching differences, starting from the enhancement of the educational potential of each family. Once again, the relationship with parents thus emerges as an inalienable element of the services, to be supported through the many languages and instruments that a condition of crisis such as the pandemic has demanded. The encounter with families can therefore become a political laboratory that places the children in the centre (Sità, 2020) and a competent social category.

«Nurseries and childhood services, in this perspective, [...] are [...] political subjects, able to dialogue with the context and contribute, [...], to the idea of childhood, growth, educational community that permeates the territory and its choices» (Sità, 2020, p.

195). In conclusion, 0-6 services can become spaces that reverse fates, certainly in relation to conditions of disadvantage affecting anyone, but also in relation to the enrichment of the contexts in which these services operate (Arcangeli & Sannipoli, 2021), fuelling a democratic conversation on the future (Facer, 2011) in which the families – each with their own baggage – represent the actual or symbolic space of encounter and cross-contamination.

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