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The socialization of children of migrant parents during their first year in crèche

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Introduction

Recent policy documents stated that the attendance of children at high quality ECEC services supports their social inclusion and has positive effects on their long run school success. The quality of this experience *matters* particularly in the case of children from migrant families (European Commission, Communication 66/2011; Recommendation 112/2013).

As several studies have pointed out, the presence of children with different cultural backgrounds requires that ECEC everyday practices would take into account the plural identity of these children as well as their families' linguistic and cultural diversity (Almodóvar & Atilas, 2015; Brougère, Guénif-Souilamas & Rayna, 2008; Favaro, Mantovani & Musatti, 2008; Vandembroeck, 2005; Vandembroeck, Roets & Snoeck, 2009).

Also in Italy, we see teachers' increasing demand of professional support in questioning their practices according to children's and families' needs.

Which experiences do Italian ECEC service offer to children from migrant families? Which practices can be realized in order to support their social inclusion?

We faced these issues in a previous study, in which we analysed the first experience of two young children from migrant families in an Italian municipal *nido* (crèche) (Picchio, Mayer & Pettenati, 2014).

Aim of the study

In this contribution we present the main results of an action-research initiative aimed at better understanding how children of migrant parents cope with the transition from the home to the *nido*, which difficulties they encounter, how their experience in the new context changes over a whole academic year and which conditions support or impede their participation in activities and in social interactions with peers and teachers.

This initiative was carried out in collaboration with the Department of Education of the Municipality of Pistoia, which over the years developed attentive policies aimed at support continuous professional development of ECEC professionals (Musatti, Picchio & Mayer, 2011; Musatti, et al., 2013).

Methodology and empirical data

Our research group was composed by 12 teachers, 2 pedagogical coordinators and 2 researchers. In September and in October 2013 researchers spent some days in a municipal *nido* in Pistoia in order to become familiar with children and adults and the organization of daily activities. Then, from November 2013 to May 2014, they filmed the activities and social behaviour of children and adults during their everyday life using two video cameras simultaneously. The videos were recorded from 8.30 to 13, once per month, for a total of 50 hours.

Teachers produced weekly written reports focused on children's daily experience in the *nido* (Picchio et al., 2012). Their situated perspective, as actors taking part in the *nido* everyday life, provided

further elements for understanding the meaning of events and children's behaviour and grasping their evolution over the months.

Video and written documentation were analysed and discussed by research group in periodical meetings.

The group of children was composed of 26 children (aged from 19 to 34 months), 17 of whom were of migrant parents from different countries (Nigeria, Albania, Estonia, Ukraine, Somalia, Philippines, Romania). Most of the children of migrant parents (13 children) have been attending *nido* for the first year, 7 of whom before attending *nido* were exposed only to the family language.

Children's experience during their first period of attendance

During the first months, most of the children expressed discomfort and experienced difficulties in participating in daily activities and social interactions with peers and teachers. Their discomfort emerged more or less noticeably. In the following we report 4 examples of children's reactions to the new experience.

Ex. 1. Marcus is 27 months old. During the first period of attendance, according to the nido procedure, his mother spends several mornings with him in the service in order to allow child to experience brief separations and become gradually familiar with teachers and environment. Nevertheless, as soon as Marcus enters the nido, he starts crying and shouting and has trouble in separating from his mother, who seems to be reluctant to leave him. Often he cries and shouts continuously until breakfast time despite the teacher's efforts to reassure him. However, when the teacher involves him in setting tables for breakfast or lunch he feels comforted. During transitions between daily activities or when the group move to another room, he gets again very uncomfortable; he cries and shouts.

Ex. 2. Isaac (30 months old), lives with his mother in a difficult condition. She is unemployed and hasn't any relatives or friends in the city. Teachers reported that they encounter difficulties in communication with her because of her poor knowledge of the Italian language and she appears to be uneasy and uncomfortable during exchange with them. Isaac seems to cope with the daily separation from her mother easily but during all over the day he is very upset. Repeatedly he tries to open the door and when he sees the door open, he rushes towards the nido's exit. He throws play materials around the room and spends a lot of time climbing every kind of furniture. He is particularly able to climb. At his first lunch at nido, he is completely upset and lost, he speeds around the room crying and shouting and he doesn't let teachers approach him. Some days later, teachers will know from his mother that he never has regular meals at home seating at the table. In the following days, during breakfast and lunch time, he starts seating at the table with the other children, though for a short time. He leaves his place a lot of times but he comes back quickly when the teacher proposes Italian rhymes and jingles. Although he doesn't understand Italian, he gets involved in this activity happily, having positive and significant interactions with teacher and peers.

Ex. 3. Jordan (26 months old) lives with his mother and siblings in a residential home for single mothers from disadvantaged background. Particularly during the moments of free play, Jordan spends a lot of time wandering all around the room; he often seems confused. Sometimes he plays apart, usually browsing through books. Jordan is often excluded by his peers in several situations (for instance when Jordan tries to approach them) and assaulted without reasons (for instance while he is playing apart). During moments of transition between activities, or when the noise in the room became too high, he appears uncomfortable and suffering. He cries, plugging his ears and hiding himself under the table.

We found that other children expressed their effort to cope with the new experience in the *nido*, in a less impressive and evident way. We report an example.

Ex. 4. James is 21 months old. His family is well integrated in the city. The child copes with the daily separation from his mother quite easily. All over the day, he is very attentive and interested in activities and social interactions between other children and adults, though he doesn't get involved in them. He spends a lot of time observing at a certain distance children's and adults' behaviour in the different daily activities. He studies how children use play materials, how they move in the environment, how they interact, how teachers intervene in the different situations, for instance, during conflicts or in order to make children respect the rules. Although he doesn't understand and speak Italian yet, often he gazes at children who are chatting during meal time attentively. This behaviour reveals James's engagement in understanding norms and habits of the nido and behaviours expected in the new context.

While teachers spent a lot of energies to alleviate Manuel, Isaac and Jordan's unease and to support them to cope with the new experience, we observed that James's behaviour was unnoticed by teachers in many situations. Unlike Isaac, Marcus and Jordan, apparently James was calm all over the day. He expressed his effort to cope with the new experience silently; this fact often made him *invisible* at adults' and peers' eyes and his need to be facilitated in knowing the new context could be neglected.

During the first period of attendance none of these children used verbal communication: they didn't understand Italian language and the use of their family languages was not encouraged at all. Rarely, we could catch someone of them mumbling in his family language while playing apart. However, most of them used non-verbal communicative modalities competently, such as gestures, facial expressions and body posture. We report an example.

Ex. 5. Isaac, who has banged his head against a door, goes near the teacher, takes her hand and put it on his head in order to be consoled.

Practices that support children's participation

We found that children's participation in the social context of the *nido* increased over the months. After some months of attendance:

- each child seemed to have a happy time at *nido*; each one appeared relaxed and at ease throughout the day;
- each child had positive relationships with teachers and other children (or at least with some of them); each one had significant interactions and communicative exchanges with them, though she/he didn't master Italian language yet (most of migrant children didn't speak Italian but seemed to understand it);
- each child participated actively and with pleasure in both care and play activities;
- each child seemed to have developed a feeling of belonging to *nido*'s community.

During meetings, the research group analysed and discussed which educational practices facilitated and supported these changes.

The first aspect discussed was the role of teachers. Teachers have an important role in mediating between each child and the context, interpreting her/his specific difficulties and needs as well as valuing her/his capacities and desires, and, most important, making her/him explicit and visible to other children (for instance giving voice to child's emotions and feelings, commenting her/his actions, *echoing* her/his non-verbal communications). This kind of mediation contributes to establish a positive relationship not only between child and teacher but also between children, because it helps them to pay attention to their respective needs and moods and develop a mutual respect.

We observed that the role of mediating between child and the context can be played also by a peer. We will present two examples.

Ex. 6. Isaac, during lunch time, after having eaten a plate of pasta seated at the table with the other children, climbs up the windowsill with a piece of bread in his hand. Although Isaac breaks a rule (no getting up during mealtimes), shared and respected by the group, his behaviour is accepted by teachers and peers, who acknowledge Isaac's effort to be seated, allowing him an alternative. In this situation a little girl values Isaac's behaviour as she says: "Isaac loves eating bread looking out the window!"

Ex. 7. Jordan - the child often excluded by his peers during the first months - goes near a small group of children who are drawing. He struggles to find his place at the table, so the teacher, engaged in reading a book to another small group of children not far away, asks Ramona (34 months) to help him to seat down. The girl answers: "Jordan desires to look what we are doing", interpreting and giving voice to Jordan's intention. In fact, Jordan observes children's activities for a long time, then takes a piece of cardboard, but he hasn't any marker pens for drawing and he doesn't ask one to the other children. Ramona notices him and passes him a marker pen. Jordan starts to drawing. Some minutes later, Giulia (29 months) approaches Jordan and tries to wrestle the marker pen out of his hands. Jordan starts to complain, looking for teacher's attention, but immediately Ramona intervenes once again to sustain Jordan, reprimanding Giulia: "Giulia, leave him in pace! He wants to draw!"

We point out that these examples confirm that the organization in stable small groups of children during play and care activities can support children's reciprocal familiarity and understanding of each other's needs and intentions.

The teachers' organization affects the experience of familiarization of each child as well. During play and care activities each teacher had the primary responsibility of a stable small group of children (7-8 children). This organization helped teachers to better focus their attention on the needs of each child and her/his family, adapt their communicative and relational styles, and support child's involvement in activities and interactions within the large group of peers and teachers.

Furthermore, a stable organization of physical environment, time and activities can provide children a clear, recognizable and predictable reference framework. We found that this frame supported particularly children who didn't understand the verbal communications by which teachers explained the organization of *nido's* daily life (for instance announcing the end of an activity or a move from a room to another). In particular, we found that children's participation increased when activities were marked by stable routines and habits (for instance preparing and rearranging together materials after play, preparing tables before lunch) or rituals (for instance singing rhymes and jingles at the end of breakfast in small group). These practices contributed to develop children's familiarity with the organization of *nido's* everyday life and their feeling of belonging to a community (Musatti et al., 2013).

As in our previous study (Picchio, Mayer & Pettenati, 2014), we found that during the process of second language acquisition, some children from migrant families went through a silent phase (Tabordos, 1997). However, we noticed that the ritualized proposal of nursery rhymes or reading, facilitated children's active participation and learning of the new language, as it is also pointed out by Rayna, Sèguret and Touchard (2015).

Discussion

Our analysis has shown that some educational and organizational practices particularly supported a positive evolution of children's social experience over the months. However, it also has highlighted the difficulties that children's of migrant families had to cope during the first period of their

attendance. Indeed, when children enter an ECEC service they have to cope with a double transition. As any child, they have to cope with a new experience in a wider and different context from their home where they meet unfamiliar adults and many peers. Moreover, as children from migrant families they make experience of a context which is different from the one they are familiar with, from a cultural point of view (different rules, habits and behaviours) and, most important, because of the language used. This experience requires a great emotional investment as well as an important engagement of children's cognitive and social competences.

Analysing children's experience, teachers became aware that children from migrant families could be particularly disoriented during the first encounter with the *nido* context. At their eyes the *nido* appeared to be a mono-cultural place because of its material and symbolic features. Diversity was not represented among the staff because all the professionals were Italian natives. Even linguistic diversity was not considered, as teachers used only Italian language in verbal communications to children and their parents, and the use of family languages of migrant children was not expected or favoured.

Furthermore, teachers became aware that communication with migrant parents was too often brief and poor - especially with migrant parents from disadvantaged background - and despite teachers' efforts, during the first period of children's attendance, they encountered difficulties in promoting parents' involvement by their usual welcoming practices. Teachers acknowledged that these difficulties affected children's experience of familiarization with the *nido* and that improving quality of children's experience in the ECEC services claimed to rethink procedures and goals of practices not only towards children but towards parents as well (Picchio, Mayer & Contini, 2014).

As Vandebroek (2011) outlined, for many children the enrolment in an ECEC service represents their first step into out-of-home social world and the service reflects how society looks at them and thus how they look at themselves. Therefore, it is essential to construct an educational context that will value their identity, in which cultural diversity will be immediately recognized and made visible to the eyes of all children and their families.

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