

“Promoting from the inside: the role of the 'facilitator' in supporting dialogical and reflective forms of self-evaluation, Anna Bondioli, University of Pavia (bondioli@unipv.it)*

This presentation is a reflexive and dialogical approach to the educational evaluation that has been developed over the course of about twenty years by an educational research group at the University of Pavia and has been tested in the field in various experiences and research conducted in Italy. It is an approach that follows a particular theoretical framework from which some basic assumptions and a precise choice of field are derived. From the operational point of view the approach is divided into a series of steps each of which is dedicated to accomplishing a specific task within the evaluation process as a whole. After briefly outlining the characteristics of this approach, I will focus my attention on the role played in it by the figure of “facilitator” and, more particularly, on the communicative functions performed by that figure in promoting processes of self-evaluation in groups of educators and teachers.

As for the theme of this conference, ie the interventions in favor of inclusion in education, two observations can be made concerning the usefulness of the evaluation approach that will present. The first is that all the literature on early childhood education agrees on the fact that only high quality services for early childhood can prevent situations of hardship and are an important resource for academic success for all those who are at risk of exclusion and marginalization.

The second is that the implementation of inclusion practices aiming to the personalization of educational processes, strongly depends on the acquisition of a reflective and self-evaluating attitudes from the part of educators and teachers, especially if developed within working groups.

With increasing frequency Italian day care centres and nursery schools, especially but not only in the big cities, are attended by children from different cultures and children "at risk" coming from situations of social and cultural deprivation.

Educators who have been trained through processes of formative evaluation such as those that I will introduce showed a more marked sensitivity to the needs of each individual child of her own group and a greater capacity to find creative solutions to problems arising in the educational relationship and practice.

In the course of about twenty years the research group of pedagogical disciplines at the University of Pavia has conducted several evaluation experiences with groups of educators and teachers, mainly in the field of early childhood educational services (day-care centres and nursery schools). Such experiences have been developed following theoretical guidelines inspired on a participative model of evaluation; in some studies the research group analyzed different aspects of such experiences in depth (Becchi, Bondioli, 1997; Cipollone, 1999; Bondioli, Ghedini, 2000; Bondioli, Ferrari, 2000; Bondioli, Ferrari, 2004, Bondioli, Savio, 2010; Savio, 2011) coming to individuate the hallmarks of an approach that we called “negotiated quality” (Bondioli, Ghedini, 2000; Bondioli, 2002).

1. The “negotiated quality” approach: the main theoretical references

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Our approach fits within the framework of the so-called fourth-generation evaluation of Guba and Lincoln (1989). Guba and Lincoln propose a constructivist approach to evaluation according to which the evaluation data do not have an objective quality but are of a co-constructed character and as such require an attribution of meaning. Other sources of inspiration are: Democratic evaluation (House and Howe, 1999, 2005), Participatory evaluation (Cousins, Earl, 1992; Ulrik, Wenzel, 2003), Communicative evaluation (Nieme, Kemmis, 1999), Empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 1994)

2. The “negotiated quality” approach: some basic assumptions

Object of evaluation is **educational experience**. The *evaluandum* is the educational context (Bronfenbrenner) understood as a complex set of material, human and symbolic resources that an institution organizes and brings into play with the aim of producing an impact on recipients of educational actions: children, students.

In order to be **effective** the evaluation must have the following characteristics:

- **NEGOTIABLE and PARTICIPATIVE**
- **SELF-REFLECTIVE**
- **FORMATIVE**
- **TRANSFORMATIVE**

NEGOTIABLE and PARTICIPATIVE

Searching for quality means **reaching an** agreement through confrontation among the social actors who have an interest in the service (*stakeholders*) so as to:

- **define** values, objectives, priorities and ideas as to **how the service is** and on **how it should and could be** in a **consensual manner**
- **as a result** act in a synergic way

hence: quality should be determined intersubjectively through democratic processes of discussion and negotiation. The validity of the criteria on which to base the evaluation is ensured through proper forms of inter-subjective negotiation of the participatory type).

SELF-REFLECTIVE

Evaluating implicates:

- **reflection on practices**, on contexts, on habits, on uses, on the traditions of a service
- in order to **verify their significance** with respect to **purposes** and to **intent**.

It is a reflection that does not occur “in the abstract” but always with a precise reference to the facts, what is actually done and is done within a particular and situated educational reality. Evaluation as a thoughtful process implies that, according to a participatory and negotiating method, a group of individuals involved in a particular educational reality, raise, both individually and collectively, questions such as: “Why do I /we do what I/we do ? ” “How can I /we do better? ”. The reflective function of the evaluation also aims at making pedagogical beliefs about established and undisputed practices explicit. Reflecting over practice means help people to make explicit “latent pedagogies” (Becchi, 2005; Bondioli, 1993) – i.e. theories and representations that steer the educational experience, often in an unaware way.

FORMATIVE

The **reflexive and participated** nature of the evaluation renders it an instrument of **formation** and those who participate, are, as a consequence, enriched professionally.

- **Increment in awareness**
- Ability of **acting in a more intentional manner**
- **Empowerment.**

The outcome of the evaluation process is in fact a "co-construction" of meaning around the educational institution, which enriches the participants. The evaluation is, from this point of view, also an exchange of knowledge. Those who participate enrich professionally gaining growth of awareness, ability to act in a more intentional manner, professional empowerment..

TRANSFORMATIVE

The evaluation is orientated to **changing for the better** through the elaboration of **thought out and feasible innovation projects.**

IN SHORT, EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION:

- Consents **reflection** on the **aspects that “enhances the educative quality”** of a service and renders the various protagonists **more understanding.**
- Permits one to take advantage of **the strong and critical** points in an **educative (educational)** service.
- Gives advice on **various ways of improving.**
- Induces **greater understanding of the intents and educative practices** in educators and the commitment to **an ethics of responsibility .**

3.The “negotiated quality” approach: the different steps of the evaluation process

The working methodology is based on:

- the creation of an evaluation process characterized by different stages or steps
- led by a figure of “trainer /facilitator “that supports the entire evaluation process by fostering reflection in the group of participants, encouraging dialogue and discussion and directing participants to the design and implementation of changes for improvement

Each step is negotiated among the participants with the support of the facilitator

1 step	<u>Constitution of the “working group”¹.</u> The trainer presents the approach of the “evaluation as promotion from within” to the participants of the working group. He illustrates the principles and stages of it. He also describes his own role. Then he asks each participant to explicitly state their willingness to adhere to the path declaring their reasons for doing so.
2 step	<u>Decision about the evaluation task.</u> The working group, with the support of the trainer, compare and reflect on the dimensions of the context they aim to assess (eg, spaces, relationships with

¹ Given that one of the most important aims of a “promoting from inside” approach is that of building and/or strengthening the pedagogical identity of a specific educational reality (a childhood service, a group of schools belonging to the same area, and so on), the training intervention is addressed to people belonging to the same institution, community, or culture and working together for a common goal. We call such kind of participants “the working group”.

	parents, etc. in order to reflect on their educational quality in relation to the pedagogical ideas of the participants), going deeper into the reasons and purposes for which they intends to do so. The reflexive comparison is intended to decide the aspects that will be evaluated in explicit and shared views.
3 step	<u>Selection of evaluation instruments to be adopted.</u> The trainer selects and presents to the working group some evaluation tools ² that can meet the evaluation needs of the group. The operators individually analyze in depth the tool/s chosen. The operators discuss the instrument with the support of the trainer, expressing doubts, questions, reflections emerging from individual analysis. With the support of the trainer, the group discusses and criticises in-depth tools, deciding amongst them which one to use. The trainer at this point clarifies the application of the instrument and determines the organizational details of its use (period of application, use of the answer sheet, etc.).
4 step	<u>Evaluation in the strict sense, with the use of the instrument adopted.</u> At this stage the trainer does not participate. The operators individually apply the tool to evaluate aspects of their environment that they decided to consider.
5 step	<u>Elaboration of evaluation data.</u> At this stage the stakeholders involved do not participate. The trainer collects the individual evaluations and organizes them in tables/documents that allow participants to consider the "strengths" and "weakness" of the context, as well as the agreement or disagreement among the participants with respect to the different dimensions evaluated.
6 step	<u>Return of evaluation data to the group.</u> The trainer returns the results of the evaluation process to the group: calls for reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the context according to the dimensions evaluated, invites comparison on the evaluations in disagreement supporting the investigation of reasons for different points of view. The reflection and confrontation are aimed at a planned, negotiated and shared rebuilding/reconstruction of the educational identity of the service, of its "good" and "bad" practices and on educators' beliefs.
7 step	<u>Choice and shared definition of a project for improvement.</u> On the basis of a thus re-built educational identity, the group, with the support of the trainer, compare and reflect on what aspects of the evaluated dimensions it aims to develop an improvement plan (for example, if the evaluation covers space, you can decide for a project that involves "only" spaces for symbolic play, if it involves relationships with families, the project will focus on the communication with parents at the time of children's reception), the comparison is intended to negotiate a shared choice. With the support of the trainer, the group negotiates and precisely defines the best remedial method going deeper into the reasons (the "how" and "why" you want to do better) and the expected effects (if I intervene in this way, then I expect that to happen...). The procedures to verify the effects of the intervention are also defined (i.e. a number of observations of children's and teachers' behaviours and interactions).
8 step	<u>Implementation of the agreed improvement project.</u> In this a stage the trainer does not participate. The operators design a project of intervention together alternating moments of individual work and group work.
9 step	<u>Verification of the improvement intervention adopted.</u> With the support of the trainer, the group confronts and reflects on the data collected for the verification of the intervention. The group considers the correspondence between the data collected and the expected effects, and re-negotiates a co-construction of their significance in view of a possible, additional phase design.
10 step	<u>Evaluation of the evaluation process.</u> The last stage is devoted to evaluating the evaluation process. The trainer reminds to the group the meaning of the whole process and the different steps that have characterized it by asking each participant to freely express their evaluation (an individual questionnaire can be used). Then the participants confront and reflect in group on the whole evaluation process and also give an opinion on the evaluation approach that they have used.

² Among others: Harms, Clifford (1980-1994); Harms, Cryer, Clifford (1990-1992); Darder, Mestres (1994-2000); Bondioli, Ferrari, 2008; Bondioli, 2008; Becchi, Bondioli, Ferrari, 1999; Savio, 2011.

4. The facilitator “who promotes from within”

The success of the evaluation process is linked to the presence of a facilitator who accompanies the working group along the entire route. I'll present the role, functions and style of this figure. Then I will present more particularly the communicative strategies performed by this figure in promoting processes of self-evaluation in groups of educators and teachers.

The role of the facilitator/trainer in the evaluation processes based on the "promotion from within"

- He is a figure outside the educational reality object to evaluation
- He is an expert in school and evaluation
- His perspective is different from everyone else involved
- He does not represent a guarantor of the values, ideas and quality criteria of the tools he invites one to use.
- He is a social actor himself, involved in the dynamics of inter- discussion and negotiation, which has as its primary duty to act as guarantor of the entire reflective and evaluation process.
- One of his tasks is to help the participants to reconstruct a shared image of the reality in which they operate, making it possible to envisage the future, thinking about why you do what you do and how you could improve it.

The facilitator is also a:

guarantor of the whole process, responsible of:

the relationships with the customers

the involvement of “social actors”, their training and knowledge to use tools and evaluation procedures

the collection of the evaluations made by the participants, the content of discussions and decisions taken together

guarantor of the reflective, and formative function of the evaluation:

- presents the collected data, interprets it in the light of the "philosophy" of the proposed instrument

- shows differences and concordance in the evaluation,

- starts the discussion on the critical points,

- invites reflection giving voice to all the social actors involved,

- finally returns the results together with his reflection on the same

guarantor of the participation, dialogic and democratic function of the evaluation:

- ensures that all participants have the opportunity to express their point of view

- urges the comparison between the different points of view

- promotes the process of negotiation and shared decision making

The style of the facilitator/trainer in the evaluation processes based on the "promotion from within": the idea of reciprocal maieutics (Dolci, 1996)

- The trainer neither teaches, nor explains, nor makes suggestions, but behaves like a midwife who helps ideas and meanings emerge (the trainer is working to bring to light what is already potentially present in those who are trained, making them protagonists in the construction of a "knowledge of self").

- He is a servant of the working group: his goal is to orient the participants to the realization of the shared task maintaining the direction and sustaining the involvement
- the “knowledge-power” passes from the trainer’s hands to those who are trained
- the trainer assumes the role of “maieutic coordinator” who guarantees a reciprocal maieutic process among the participants by promoting the expression of the point of view of each participant besides the collective reflection and a shared search for new meanings.

The study of more recent evaluation experiences, conducted using exactly the same approach (Bondioli, Savio, 2009; Bondioli, Savio, 2014; Savio, 2013), has enabled us to focus on the role played within by the figure of “facilitator” with more precision, and to analyze in detail the communicative exchanges between this figure and the participants in the evaluation work.

The above listed strategies have been individuated through the study of various experiences carried out according to the approach of “negotiated quality” (cfr. Bondioli, Savio, 2009). The progress of research work has been recursive in nature. From the model evaluation practices, the model as a guiding principal of targeted practices, development and field testing of such practices, verification of their congruence with the model and the effects produced. A closer examination was carried out by analyzing the transcripts of six audio registered meetings over two different paths of formative assessment with educators from two different nurseries (Bondioli, Savio, 2014 - Research Report PRIN 2009 “Doing quality by evaluation: to try out an approach of formative evaluation in early childhood services”, University of Pavia)

The style of the facilitator/trainer in the evaluation processes based on the "promotion from within": the communication strategies

1. Listening: the trainer presents himself as a careful listener who is eager to understand and ready to accept any point of view.
2. Spurring explicit expression: the trainer spurs the participants' points of view (asking them their opinions and ideas using open questions)
3. Reflecting: the trainer “gives back “to the individuals and to the group thoughts, ideas and feelings they have expressed themselves by simply repeating them, in order to promote decentration and a more detached vision of themselves
4. Summarizing and stressing: by making use of these reflecting forms, the trainer “gives back” in condensed version of the shared meanings which are being built and focuses on the major points so that participants may extend and deepen their ideas.
5. Requesting examples and ideas: the trainer invites the participants to explain the way an idea is put into real daily life examples or, the other way round, to convey daily educational practice as pedagogical ideas
6. Suggesting elaborations: the trainer suggests ideas /examples starting from what has been expressed in the group so as to foster their articulation and deepening
7. Provoking and requesting coherence: by direct questions or requests of coherence, the trainer highlights divergent opinions and/or wrong deductions in order to foster both reflection and deeper comparison.

8. Suggesting connections between different points of view: the trainer shows how different opinions either belong to the same basic assumptions or are articulation of them, so as to foster processes of negotiation

In short:

the facilitator is a servant of the working group: his goal is to orient the participants to the realization of the shared task maintaining the direction and sustaining the involvement

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