

5<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years  
January 22<sup>th</sup> - 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015  
Malahide, County Dublin, Ireland

# Beyond 'transition' from home to early childhood services. The Italian approach of *ambientamento*

Prof. Lucia Balduzzi

Department of Education - University of Bologna

## **Structure of the presentation**

The presentation will focus on the Italian approach of transition from home to early childhood services called *ambientamento*. In particular, the presentation will focus on how educators and pedagogical coordinators took up the challenge to answer the changing social needs expressed by children and families entering ECEC services for the first time by developing and implementing a welcoming approach to the first entrance of children in 0-3 services through the rethinking of traditional educational practices.

From the methodological point of view, the practice of transition from home to services will be analyzed as an example of the centrality of the child in the Italian pedagogical approach to early childhood education. Such analysis will be carried out in a historical perspective to illustrate how such practice evolved over time – from *inserimento* to *ambientamento* – in order to be responsive to the changing needs of children and families within society, by focusing specifically on those families who are at risk of social exclusion.

Therefore this presentation will highlight how the practices that sustain children's transitions from home to the services took shape over time starting from a pedagogical perspective that considers the 'child at the centre of society' within a systemic vision

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this sense, the image of a ‘competent child’ – whose development is nurtured by meaningful relationship with adults, peers and the surrounding world – was the key to give a pedagogical answer for sustaining all families, and in particular to those families with less economic resources and at risk of being marginalised.

## **Background information**

First, let me remind you some brief information about the Italian ECEC system. In Italy, early childhood education is provided within a split system. The Ministry of Welfare<sup>1</sup> is responsible for early childhood services attended by children below three years of age (*nidi d’infanzia*), while the Ministry of Education<sup>2</sup> is responsible for pre-schools attended by children aged from three to six (*scuola dell’infanzia*). Despite the responsibilities of the services for children aged from 0 to 3 falls under the Ministry of Welfare, these services, in Italy have been characterized since the 80s, for being a catalyzer of a ‘culture of early childhood education’ (Mantovani, 2007) attentive to children and family’s wellbeing.

In this sense, it is noteworthy that the attention to *transitions from home to the nido*, along with the research on *documentation practices*, characterized the qualitative development of a ‘culture of childhood’ which represented a sort of *fil rouge* of the educational research in ECEC services.

### **1- Starting from the beginning: the INSERIMENTO**

In Italy, 0-3 services were established in 1971 with a main function of social assistance to working mothers (*asilo nido*). In that period, the child adaptation to the *asilo nido* was recognized by educators as a problematic path. The main problem was that the parents – mostly the mothers – who decided to entrust their children to early childhood institutions, were viewed with prejudice. At that time in fact there was a strong social consensus that a good mother did not have to work in order to take care of her children

---

<sup>1</sup> Specifically the government bodies responsible for zero to three ECE services are the *Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali* and the *Dipartimento per le politiche della famiglia*.

<sup>2</sup> The Ministry of Education (*Ministero dell’Istruzione Università e Ricerca*) is also responsible for Compulsory Education at primary and secondary level (*scuola primaria e secondaria*) as well as for University and Research.

at home, as this was considered to be better for children's development in the early years. Those children who attended the *asilo nido* because their families were in need to, were admitted to the service all simultaneously at the beginning of the educational year (in September). At the beginning of the day, children were often dropped in the care of the educator within an open space (the hall of the service) where children from all groups were gathered in order to wait for the beginning of everyday activities. This choice was related to the connotation of 'care services' – which characterised *asili nidi* at its beginning – and to the overall organization of such services which was more based upon an institutional logic than focused on the wellbeing of children and families. Therefore two main areas for improvement were identified. First it was necessary to convince families to trust the services and secondly it was necessary to professionalize early childhood educators in order to enhance the quality of their practices for promoting children's wellbeing. Therefore in this period, the main pedagogical focus of *inserimento* was children's wellbeing and the main aim of pedagogical research in this area was to develop new practices in order to move away from the welfare models of 'looking after little children' to move toward an educational and emancipatory perspective. It became increasingly important to get a deeper insight of what 'caring for children' meant – starting from children's point of view – and, at the same time, to find a specific way to gain the trust of families by considering parents – especially mothers – as capable and competent partners in the relation with their children (Balduzzi, 2006).

Two were the mainstream ideas that guided the *inserimento* practices. First, *inserimento* was considered as a symbolic 'ritual of passage', in which children's transition from one life context – the one of the family – to another – the one of the institution' is represented and played out by the different actors involved. The *inserimento* started to be conceived as a small but important ceremony that follows the first real separation of the child from the family to enter in a social enlarged dimension. In order to build and develop this ritual it is necessary that the educational staff design and implement practices of connection and communication strategies along with a flexible organisation of the educational environment. But, above all, it is necessary that the ECEC service is able to make understandable – for all families and for all children – its welcoming practices and their meaning. The process followed by educators and

pedagogical coordinators in order to give answer to such need of creating shared values and common understandings between parents and professionals brought Italian *nidi* to undertake complementary actions across two interconnected levels: the social and the pedagogical.

On one hand, policy and actions were directed to connect *nidi* in a network which also encompassed social and educational services operating on the local territory. In this way, *nidi* became a landmark in the community and in particular for families. The instrument used for this purpose was to share information, to create openness toward the dialogue and participation of families, especially those who needed to be supported in difficult situations.

On the other hand, educators, pedagogical coordinators and researchers studied how to welcome parents – especially mothers – and their child in order to reduce the possible parental anxiety arising out of this transition. In this second case, the tools identified were intended to make visible and readable for parents organizational policies of the *nido* and its pedagogical project.

Now the main characteristics of *inserimento* (we can try to translate this word with adaptation) will be briefly explained. *Inserimento* can be defined as a set of connection practices between the family and the *nido*, which range from parent's meetings before children's enrolment, to shared moments between educators and parents – individually or in groups – during the period of children's initial attendance to the service. In fact during the initial attendance of each child the presence/absence of his/her parent – or another familiar figure – is gradually modulated until the point in which the complete take-over by educators is realised once the child feels completely at ease (Mantovani, 2000).

In this perspective, the *inserimento* is focalized on the first period of the educational year (September and October). This first approach to transition – called *inserimento* – focused therefore on the elicitation of the different vision of 'child' and 'education' that families and educators brought together into the services. This enhanced a culture of sharing and participation of all the families, most of which were belonging to middle and lower social classes.

Instead in the late '80s and '90s the families that demanded ECEC services were no longer just those who *were in need for it* (eg. working mothers and disadvantaged families) but in general those who *believed in the educational value* of such services. Hence, it could be said that *asilo nido* developed a new culture of caring, especially in the Italian regions that were more sensitive to the quantitative expansion of ECEC services and to their qualitative development.

At the beginning of the '90s one of the main social emergency in Italy was connected to the increased presence of migrant children in ECEC services and to the necessity to elaborate new educational practices for promoting their inclusion. In this sense, the intercultural perspective gave an important contribution to the reflection about *inserimento*, by connecting the educational-psychological perspective with the perspective of cultural-anthropology. In particular, this implied an increased focus on practices aimed to:

- a) *to know in order understand*. Educators started to use personal interviews with parents in order to overcome more bureaucratic procedures – such as filling out forms – and carried out observation of the relational practices enacted by mothers ('how does the mother do it?') in order to connect the mother gestures to the educators' gesture and the family life context to the services life context. (such as changing nappies, hugging him/her, falling he/she asleep, ..., reflecting on the quality of gesture not at psychological level but also at a socio cultural one – are these gestures 'natural' or 'cultural'? how gestures are expression of differences in education...).
- b) *What does it mean to be a group of parents*. How to be a group could support parenthood as well as social inclusion and social cohesion.
- c) *Educators professionalism* – the training of the educators was mainly oriented to know and understand other cultures but also to reflect on one's own culture in terms of values and principles (on children, education, aims of services and schools, family roles and rules, ...)

## 2- From '*inserimento*' to '*ambientamento*': an evolving perspective

The intercultural issues – but also the psychological studies on the triadic relationship (educators, parent and child) and the representations related to it – convey important

changes in the way *inserimento* was theorised and realised (Fruggeri, 2002). It is precisely in this context that the shift of perspective from *inserimento* to *ambientamento* takes place. At a deeper level, '*ambientamento*' refers to the emotional and psychological process of gradual acclimatization, exploration, knowledge, emotional investment, representations and ambivalences, solutions and connections that all the actors involved (children, parents, educators) play out during transitions (Mantovani, 2000).

We can try to translate the word *ambientamento* with *acclimatisation*. *Ambiente* in Italian means *environment*, so the *ambientamento* refers to a process through which the children and parents slowly and gradually 'become to the same temperature' of the environment that welcome them. The temperature of the environment in this sense is considered from a cognitive, social and emotive point of view. It is no longer a 'practice', or a group of practices, that takes place only at the beginning of the educational year. Rather, it refers to a transversal style, made of actions and relations, which become concrete in the services' everyday life. It refers to the importance – shared and recognized by parents and educators – that the cognitive and emotional environment in which children are welcomed favours a gradual approach to the life of the services. In this sense, the moments of everyday separation and reunification are critical in nurturing parent's and children's feeling of belonging to the *nido*.

This means to welcome each child and each family starting from recognizing and accepting their peculiar characteristics (single-parents families, reconstituted families, homosexuals families, ...) and their specific communicational styles as well as their different feeling of trust toward the service. In this perspective, the role of educators is to co-construct – together with families – practices that welcome the child in the community of the '*nido d'infanzia*'. Hence, educators' openness toward listening to parents and their constant dialogue with families became crucial aspects of the *ambientamento* approach. Equally important became the use of documentation practices that report to families children's everyday experiences in *nido*, their relationships with other children (as individuals and within the group) and the evolution processes that accompany his/her development.

In this perspective, we can conceptualize *ambientamento* as a developing path, whose constitutive features are:

a) *Documentation*: documentation become expression of a constant communication between educators and parents, which is realised through the display of activity diaries, posters with photos and written materials, as well as the work of children, etc. The use of documentation allow parents to be involved in their children's learning and socialising experiences that take place in *nido's* everyday life.

b) *Parental support*: that allow a shift in the way parents live their togetherness in the service, moving from 'being a group' into 'be a community'. Parents are provided with the opportunities to meet with other parents and exchange experiences as well as with the opportunity to develop projects related to children's activities in the *nido*.

c) *In-service training of educators*: where increased attention is placed on the issues of communication, relationship, observation and documentation practices.

### **And what about today? Some ideas to open a discussion.**

In my presentation, I tried to underline how *ambientamento* theorisation and practices developed over time by reflecting on its pedagogical and social function. The long path that brought to *ambientamento* starting from *inserimento*, produced a consolidated and diffuse culture which allowed ECEC services to improve their practices over time by placing at the centre the well-being of children and parents. Such process contributed to generate an increase awareness of the importance of welcoming parents as well as children in ECEC services, and of the importance of co-constructing educational practices together with parents and children who are view as competent interlocutors.

However, it is precisely the consolidation of such practices that pose the success of *ambientamento* under threat. As Chiara Bove (2012) underlines, the *ambientamento* could become a 'traditional practice', something that 'works' if done as 'it must be done', practices that educators consider as taken for granted in the best interest of the child. And if some parent do not agree with this ritual and it sense, that is because he or she has not really understood the real meaning of it. In this sense, the risk is that the more consolidated this practice become, the more difficult is to re-negotiate it and discuss it. For example, some parents are struggling to understand the *nido's* progressive

approach rituals that require their daily progressive decreasing presence for some weeks. This request in fact is sometimes not reconcilable with their working time – or, in other cases – could be read by parents as a limitation to the autonomy of the child. But I think that the most important challenge of *ambientamento* arise from the social and economic changes that took place over the last years.

The economic crisis in Italy has caused a drop by 5% in the enrolment and attendance rates of *nidi* (ISTAT, 2012): waiting lists do not longer exist in many areas and some services have been forced to cut their provision because the demand is insufficient.

The cause is related to the cost of attendance fees that, as indexed to income, are nonetheless challenging, especially for those families where only one parent works, but also in the case of both working parents but with low income. At the same time, the economic crisis gave origin to new kind of working arrangements characterized by the flexibility of contracts, time, place and working condition.

The practices of *ambientamento* and *documentation* are now in many Italian regions at the highest level, and similarly educators' professionalism has grown stronger. In the culture of the population, the educational function of *nidi* is then firmly asserted.

However, without public policies for economic support to families, *nido* services risk to become accessible mostly to children of middle and upper social classes' parents. Excluding *de facto* the children of low-income families or the children of 'flexible' workers, the Italian *nidi* system could lose their social value, that has always distinguished them.

In that perspective, also the pedagogical roots that gave life to the ideal vision which supported the quality of Italian ECEC services – based on children's right to education and participation since the early years of life – risk to become only an empty world.



## References

- Balduzzi, L. (2006). *Nella rete dei servizi per l'infanzia. Tra nidi e nuove tipologie: ricordando Simonetta Andreoli*. Bologna: Clueb.
- Benedetti, S. (2001). L'ambientamento al nido: gli spunto teorici a cui far riferimento. In *Entrare al nido a piccoli passi. Strategie per l'ambientamento*. Bergamo:Junior.
- Bove, C. (2012). Accogliere i bambini e le famiglie nei servizi per l'infanzia: le 'culture' dell'inserimento/ambientamento oggi. *Rivista Italiana di Educazione Familiare*, 1, pp.5-17.
- Fruggeri, L. (2002). Genitorialità e funzione educativa in contesti triadici. In F.Emiliani (a cura di), *Bambini nella vita quotidiana* (pp. 109-131). Roma:Carocci.
- Galardini, A.L. (2003). *Crescere al nido. Gli spazi, i tempi, le attività, le relazioni*. Roma:Carocci.
- ISTAT (Italian National Institute of Statistics). 2010. L'offerta comunale di asili nido e altri servizi socio-educativi per la prima infanzia. Anno scolastico 2008/2009. Retrieved from: [http://www.istat.it/salastampa/comunicati/non\\_calendario/20100614\\_00](http://www.istat.it/salastampa/comunicati/non_calendario/20100614_00)
- Mantovani, S. (2000). L'inserimento del bambino al nido fra storia, ricerca e dibattiti. In S. Mantovani, L.R. Saitta, C. Bove. *Attaccamento e inserimento. Stili e storie delle relazioni*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Mantovani, S., Saitta, L.R., Bove C. (2000). *Attaccamento e inserimento. Stili e storie delle relazioni*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Mantovani, S. 2007. Early Childhood Education in Italy. In *Early Childhood Education. An International Encyclopedia*, ed. R.S. New and M. Cochran, 1110-1115. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Molina, P. (1994). L'inserimento. 1^ parte. *Bambini*, 6, pp.20-23.
- Molina, P. (1994). L'inserimento. 2^ parte. *Bambini*, 7, pp.24-28.
- Motta, M. (2001). I protagonisti e le fasi dell'ambientamento. In *Entrare al nido a piccoli passi. Strategie per l'ambientamento*. Bergamo:Junior.
- Restuccia Saitta, L. (2003). Accogliere un bambino. In Galardini, A.L. (2003). *Crescere al nido. Gli spazi, i tempi, le attività, le relazioni*. Roma:Carocci.
- Roda, A.M. (2001). La funzione del nido nel processo di costruzione dei legami. In *Entrare al nido a piccoli passi. Strategie per l'ambientamento*. Bergamo:Junior.

