

INCLUSIVE TRAINING IN SERVICES 0–6: SHARED READING AS A PRACTICE FOR ALL¹

LA FORMAZIONE INCLUSIVA NEI SERVIZI 0-6: LA LETTURA CONDIVISA COME PRATICA PER TUTTI E PER CIASCUNO

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Abstract

In this paper we want to focus on the centrality of the dimensions of quality and inclusion, whose close link is now internationally recognized, within services dedicated to early childhood education and care (ECEC). Since research evidence shows that the training of staff working within ECEC services is a fundamental tool in the creation of high-quality and inclusive educational contexts, we will consider some competences that can contribute to the implementation of the above-mentioned dimensions under analysis. In particular, we want to emphasize the importance of specific training, for nursery school educators and preschool teachers, on strategies and methods of shared reading, with a focus on quality publishing proposals and INbooks, considered as inclusive tools to facilitate the communicative exchange of all children.

Abstract

Nel presente contributo si vuole mettere a fuoco la centralità delle dimensioni della qualità e dell'inclusione, il cui stretto legame è ormai riconosciuto a livello internazionale, all'interno dei servizi dedicati alla cura e all'educazione dell'infanzia da 0 a 6 anni (Early Childhood Education and Care). Poiché le evidenze di ricerca mostrano che la formazione del personale che opera all'interno dei servizi ECEC costituisce uno strumento fondamentale nella creazione di contesti educativi di alta qualità ed inclusivi, si prenderanno in considerazione alcune competenze che possono concorrere all'implementazione delle suddette dimensioni oggetto di analisi. In particolare si vuole sottolineare l'importanza di una specifica formazione, per educatori di nido ed insegnanti di scuola dell'infanzia, sulle strategie e modalità di lettura condivisa, con un'attenzione mirata alle proposte editoriali di qualità e agli INbook, considerati come strumenti inclusivi atti a favorire lo scambio comunicativo di tutti i bambini.

Key words: inclusion, differences, complex communication needs, childhood, shared reading

Key words: inclusione, differenze, bisogni comunicativi complessi, infanzia, lettura condivisa

1. Introduction

International research on childhood, conducted in the most diverse fields of knowledge, today gives us the image of a competent, curious, intelligent child, who from birth plays an active

1 The contribution is the result of collaborative work. For academic reasons the assignments are as follows: sections 1 and 2 were written by Regina Brandolini; sections 3, 4 were written by Fiorella Paone.

and transformative role in interactions with adults, with peers and more generally with the ecosystem of life. For this child's potential to develop to the maximum degree, he or she must be encouraged and supported within competent educational contexts, which are able to offer, through a holistic approach that integrates care and education, adequate responses to the child's needs and targeted attention to his or her rights.

From this point of view, care and education services dedicated to childhood have been the object of renewed interest, which has led, since 2000, to the publication of various policy documents and recommendations by the European Community (2011, 2014, 2021). These resources can represent a key tool for the development of the potential of all children, especially those who live in disadvantaged situations, as well as for the construction of democratic, fair and inclusive societies. The *Council conclusions on early childhood education and care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow* (European Commission, 2011) make it clear that:

High quality ECEC is beneficial for all children, but particularly for those with a socioeconomically disadvantaged, migrant or Roma background, or with special educational needs, including disabilities. By helping to close the achievement gap and supporting cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional development, it can help to break the cycle of disadvantage and disengagement that often lead to early school leaving and to the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next. (p. 1)

Together with the close interdependence that binds quality and inclusion that “in education cannot be viewed as separate issues” (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012, p. 1), the European documents underline the crucial role assumed by educators and teachers in supporting or inhibiting inclusive dynamics and processes within the educational services dedicated to children (European Commission, 2021), as well as through the exercise of “competences to respond to the individual needs of children from different backgrounds and with special educational needs, including disabilities” (p. 101).

2. Inclusive teacher training: beyond special educational needs

The construction of an inclusive school, as also reiterated by Cottini (2017), is largely based on the quality and training of the staff who work there. Also in the specific context of services for children the workforce is considered as “the major factor in determining children's experience and their outcomes. For this reason how ECEC staff are recruited, trained and treated is critical for the quality of early childhood services and for the inclusion of all children” (European Commission, 2014, p. 30).

In the attempt to outline a possible profile of inclusive teacher who is able to combine the dimensions of values, knowledge and reflexivity (Cottini, 2017) and to respond, on the level of educational and didactic actions to the extreme variety and diversity (Bocci, 2017) that characterizes the human being in general and children who attend educational services

specifically, it is not possible to ignore the processes that characterize it and the epistemology that guides a possible approach to diversity.

With the term “inclusion” we intend here to refer to a perspective that “adopts a radical values-planning-organizational approach, addressed a priori to a heterogeneous group, in which the diversity of each becomes the natural condition of coexistence” (Pavone, 2012, p. 158) and that calls everyone to a strict assumption of responsibility, “under penalty of the authentic existence of individuals and society” (Bruni, 2019, p. 13). That is, it is a process of dynamic and evolutionary nature (Ainscow, 2005), which aims at overcoming the different forms of discrimination and social, institutional and educational exclusion (Medeghini, 2018), and also does so by countering those dangerous processes of homogenization and stereotyping that, together with prejudices related to race, gender, culture of origin, religion and disability, contribute to feed the above processes and to reinforce an adaptive and compensatory approach based on deficit (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Malaguti, 2017).

With the adoption of this systemic perspective, whose view goes beyond the diagnostic categorization of children, considered instead as natural carriers of differences, that is, of personal and original ways of experiencing relationships and learning (Medeghini, 2011), it is also necessary to redesign the figure of the teacher and educator. These individuals, called to operate in increasingly heterogeneous educational contexts, must possess a wide range of skills, including those of reflection, research and experimentation that, alone, allow the teacher to outline the most useful and meaningful didactic paths, methodologies and differentiated strategies (Cottini, 2017; D’Alonzo, 2018). Staff must be able to use the full range of their competences to ensure that all children are valued and included in all activities (E.U, 2021). It should be clarified here that when we talk about competences we do not want to refer to ready-made solutions or particular skills, but rather to the ability to respond to diversity, “in whatever shape or form it surfaces” (Allan, 2011, p. 133). Indeed, as is made clear in the document *Teacher Professional Learning for Inclusion* (European Commission, 2019):

When asking what teachers should know, be or do, a fixed set of knowledge, skills or behaviour is not expected, but rather a responsiveness to change, reflection and adaptation. In essence, competences for diversity are demonstrated by “simultaneously creating opportunities for dialogue and removing barriers for participation”. (p. 40)

On the basis of the aforementioned ethical conception of competences, the document also outlines a profile of inclusive teacher in which four core values are defined that recall the need to value pupil diversity as a resource and a richness, to support all students, to work collaboratively with all and to develop continuous professional development. In addition, every child “is entitled to the promise of a teacher’s enthusiasm, time, and energy. All children are entitled to teachers who will do everything in their power to help them realize their potential every day” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 21).

If we consider inclusion as a responsibility shared by the whole school organization, then it is essential for all teachers, not only the specialized ones, to experience an initial and continuous training that allows them to develop those skills that promote the participation and educational success of each child (Cottini, 2017).

With specific regard to children up to 6 years of age, the most recent document of the European Commission, *Toolkit for Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care* (European Commission, 2021), investigates some central aspects of professionalism in ECEC services in relation to the inclusion dimension and stresses the importance of developing competences in relation to self-reflection, as this supports individuals who wish to think about their own views on inclusion and of “fostering inclusive attitudes, the development of an open minded approach towards parents and children, the ability to adapt to new ideas and situations; supporting self awareness which enables staff to put themselves in the position of the parent/child and have a better understanding of their needs” (p. 68).

As pointed out by Bondioli and Ferrari (2008), child linguistic development is a fundamental competence that allows children to share thoughts, emotions and memories with others, as well as to connect concepts and knowledge. Linguistic competences, in the educational services for children, can be largely fostered through relational and communicative exchanges with the adult “who can make use of a wide range of tools of tradition and culture (books, stories, pictures)” (p. 103), which need to be framed within an explicit project agreed upon by teachers and educators. This is a project that aims to solicit different linguistic functions and that foresees a continuous enrichment of the proposals and specific activities of reading and storytelling.

In this contribution we want to emphasize how, among the skills needed by the inclusive teacher, one competence in particular should be introduced: that of mastering narrative skills and in particular to organize the experience of storytelling so that it can be configured as a cognitive tool for the child and as a relationship with what is other than itself (Bocci & Franceschelli, 2014). This is because, as Rodari reminds us, the fairy tale, through the reading of a competent adult, can play important functions for the child in his or her personal and identity development. The fairy tale serves

To build mental structures, to set up relationships such as “I, others”, “I, things”, “real things, invented things”. It serves him to distance himself in space (“far, near”) and in time (“once upon a time, now”, “before-after”, “yesterday-today-tomorrow”. [...] From this point of view, the fairy tale represents a useful initiation to humanity: to the world of human destinies, as Italo Calvino wrote in the preface to *Fiabe Italiane*; to the world, to history. (Rodari, 1973, pp. 141–142)

Shared reading can therefore, if well oriented, constitute a useful inclusive device, leading to an increase in social and relational skills, concentration and personal deconstruction-reconstruction of reality. Not only that, it can allow children to exercise, even for those with compressed disabilities, the right to have access to appropriate, accessible and meaningful cultural and linguistic texts and the right to interact with others while reading and listening to a text with questions, comments and other communications with significant effects on language development both in comprehension and in the expansion of their vocabulary (Malaguti, 2017).

3. An inclusive pedagogical practice: the opportunities of early shared reading

Consistent with the proposal of Baldacci (2019), we believe that an inclusive idea of care, education and instruction is the prerequisite capable of orienting the micro dimension, related to planning, curriculum and relational and didactic dynamics acted upon daily, and the macro dimension, related to national and international policies on the subject, defining an epistemic space that is the background to the pedagogical culture adopted and the consequent educational and didactic choices.

From this perspective, we are convinced that a pedagogical practice capable of promoting justice, universality and equity from early childhood is part of an approach oriented towards competence building (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999) and the promotion of learning processes that respect the rights of each child and enhance their specific characteristics. The presence of specific disorders or disabilities is, in this sense, only one of the possible aspects of difference and is not, therefore, to be considered exclusively according to a medical and rehabilitative approach, but also cultural, social and pedagogical, capable of eliminating the barriers that reinforce discrimination and marginalization (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

In order to respond to the current educational challenges, it is therefore necessary to identify and activate methods and strategies that support the processes of self-determination and the concrete opportunities for human development for each individual, available in the contexts in which children grow up, taking into consideration the possible interactions and contaminations between the opportunities present in the life environment of each one, in its multidimensionality and complexity, and the factors linked to the state of health, to the intellectual and emotional capacities, the personal traits, the capacities for movement and perception, the experiences and the life history of each one that together constitute the functioning of the person. Therefore, we are moving in the direction of the construction of a learning process in the Deweyan style (1938) which recognizes the importance of jointly cultivating the dimensions of knowing, knowing how to do and knowing how to think, to which is added that of knowing how to be, which implies recognizing and mastering knowledge, procedures, mental habits, relational styles and emotional states. The paradigm of human development insists, therefore, on the creation of personal, social, cultural and material prerequisites that allow each person to intelligently use their internal and external resources, considered in a relationship of circular reciprocity, in relation to a given field of experience.

The participatory and process-oriented nature of an approach oriented to competence building, and therefore to human development, is well matched with a pedagogical approach that, among its practices, proposes in an open and flexible way the use of the illustrated book and shared reading strategies, since these, as we will see shortly, are able to enhance empathy, the recombination of knowledge, creativity, reflexivity, dialogical and critical skills and the constructive and cooperative elaboration of knowledge.

3.1 The benefits of early shared reading of quality books

The most recent studies have highlighted the importance of proposing and cultivating in a stable and continuous way in the proposal of care and education of the nurseries and preschools early shared reading activities, as they constitute an extraordinary opportunity for the cognitive, linguistic, affective and relational growth of children, supporting their full development

(Buttleman et al., 2009; Scierri et al., 2018). More specifically, the benefits concern the plane of emergent literacy (Lonigan, 2004), the plane of “active” and “passive” lexical development (Duursma et al., 2008), the plane of cognitive skills (Mol & Bus, 2011) and the emotional and social plane (Fletcher & Reese, 2005). The latter dimension, in particular, also finds in shared reading a practice ground for joint attention with a social partner, with whom to learn how to coordinate attention in relation to a third object (Vaughan Van Hecke et al., 2007). These advantages related to a systematic reading activity have even greater value if we read them in a perspective of inclusion because, as we shall see, they can support the “blossoming” of everyone’s talents, escaping from a compensatory approach to choose one able to enhance the differences.

In particular, we support the use of illustrated books, defined as books made up of images and text between which there is a strong link, characterized by a relationship of integration and not overlap, which gives depth and complexity to the story, encouraging a multidimensional reading. Books are very suitable from early childhood because readers can draw information and meanings both from the text read by an adult and from images, acquiring skills of orientation that concern both the linguistic and iconic code (Golos et al., 2012).

Illustrated books, understood as a precise space and symbolic container to explore, are an opportunity to build a solid narrative imagination (Nussbaum, 1999), understood as the ability to feel in the shoes of the other person and to understand their point of view, history, desires and emotions, helping the child to develop both skills of self-awareness and skills of relationship, judgment and criticism. They favour, therefore, the possibility of “cultivating that ability to imagine in a sympathetic way that makes it possible to understand the motivations and choices of others, who no longer appear absolutely distant and different, but demonstrate that they share our same problems and potential” (Nussbaum, 1999). They are, therefore, inclusive tools as they allow for the enhancement of the child’s identity and his or her characteristics, supporting the child in recognizing and respecting their own and others’ specificities.

The stories shared with children play a fundamental role in their identity because they recognize the legitimacy and value of their hopes and fears; they help them to ask questions and to open up to the new in a generative perspective; and they influence their hypotheses of explanation of the world, of others and of themselves, helping them to move away from the usual frames of interpretation and to give value to multiple points of view (Sclavi, 2003). Stories are a window on possible universes and allow us to get in touch with all those elements that are not directly perceivable and experienceable. The symbolic framework within which each story moves is configured both as a possibility of free and protected learning, precisely because it takes place in a simulated environment, and as a possibility of deuterio-learning, to use an expression of Bateson, precisely because it offers the opportunity to experience the gap between “inside” and “outside” the narrative, teaching the reader to recognize the different planes of experiencing and feeling. Proposing open and plural representations of reality through illustrated books contributes to educating the construction of one’s own imagination, to providing codes and reading alphabets that we can use in the observation of images and, as a consequence, in the observation of the world around us.

Starting from the capacity for interpretive reproduction that characterizes the culture of the child (Corsaro, 1997), the plots and images of the stories with which they come into contact are creatively reworked and reused in the most diverse situations of everyday life, supporting the search for novel solutions. This has an even stronger and more significant impact where the narratives and representations with which they come into contact are varied, non-stereotypical and able to present the complexity of reality, so as to help discourage the structuring of rigid and one-dimensional models (Fierli et al., 2020).

It is, therefore, important to develop tools and processes that can contribute to an innovation of educational practices of pedagogical culture, in the direction of the enhancement of differences for the construction of inclusive contexts.

3.2 Complex communicative needs and INbook

It has been shown how much illustrated books can foster an important narrative and aesthetic experience (Kiefer, 2011, p. 12), offering the possibility of getting to know oneself and the world more deeply, looking at it with a critical eye and capable of questioning it in a conscious way.

Obviously, the richer and more varied the reading experience and the books offered to each child, the more numerous the possibilities will be, enabling them to find their way around, making sure they learn to choose the direction best suited to them. It is a question of unhinging and deconstructing the stereotype that the illustrated book is “simple”, “useful” and “moralizing” and recognizing, beyond the choice of themes, its nature as a multidimensional device capable of narrating complexity and promoting inclusion, nourishing the narrative imagination.

In order to choose a quality children’s book, in addition to taking into account the different characteristics of the child’s developmental stages, it is important to pay attention to its rhythmic sound quality, the complementary text–image relationship of the proposal, the comprehensibility and refinement of the images, the accuracy and originality of the story and its ability to use narrative modes based on dissonance, displacement, reversals and deconstruction of stereotypes so that cognitive stumbling blocks and dissonances support the child in recognizing and bringing into play his or her point of view, opening up to the unexpected and the new. Moreover, a very significant aspect is linked to the book’s ability to encourage adult–child dialogue and to involve through gestures.

Italian publishers, especially small and project-oriented firms, for some years have been much more careful to approve quality proposals, paying great attention not only to the choice of stories and images but also to the book as a significant object where the cover, title page, format and paper are the object of precise choices by the author, who takes into great consideration both the symbolic and material level of the proposal. Moreover, there has been growing attention from the publishing and educational world towards publishing reading proposals also addressed to children with complex communicative needs, a practice traditionally avoided because it was believed that in the presence of a disability or a specific disorder books could be too complex (Sannipoli & Filomia, 2017). Instead, nowadays there is a type of book “that is not exclusively addressed to the child with difficulties, but that provides for sharing, exchange, contamination between specialty and normality” (p. 84). These are the INbooks,

books in symbols that use tools of alternative augmentative communication for an adaptation and translation of the written text so that, through the continuous reference to the image, the child can be facilitated in understanding what the adult reads. The symbols do not replace but rather enhance natural communication, leveraging all the skills of the person, including vocalizations, residual verbal language, gestures and signs. These books were initially designed for special needs, i.e. for children with complex and communication disabilities and specific disorders, who need such means to correctly understand the sequence of words, but they quickly spread to become a tool for all children (Costantino, 2011).

We can thus consider INbooks as special tools that allow the transformation of barriers into facilitations, encouraging opportunities for communicative exchange suitable for everyone and providing equal opportunities to share stories.

If used consistently and continuously, these books make it possible to overcome the obstacles in the construction and sharing of meanings between the child with complex communicative needs and those with whom he or she comes into contact, favouring interactions and preventing further impoverishment in communication, symbolic, emotional and cognitive terms, which can have a strong impact on behaviour.

The introduction of the book in symbols at the nursery or preschool level should involve the whole group of children, making it immediately perceived as a tool and an opportunity for all and not a resource only for the child with specific needs. The INbook can be proposed by the educator or by the teacher who will use modelling and metacognitive strategies during the shared reading, but it can also be used by the children themselves, in the peer group, in an autonomous way, actively involving, through the reading of the symbols and the facilitation of peers, even the child with complex communication needs.

4. Conclusions

We have seen how much shared reading and books can contribute to transforming services and schools for children into environments that generate capacities for everyone, meeting the needs of each child and enhancing their potential with a view to consolidating their narrative imagination and valuing their differences.

With reference to Brockmeier's (2014) and Bruner's (2002) studies, in fact, it is recalled that sharing stories has a communicative function, as it supports bonds and social sharing. It has a rhetorical function, linked to the ability to clarify and argue one's own ideas and feelings; an empathic and emotional function, understood as the experience of the other's point of view; a linguistic function, since it allows one to experience the rhythm and circularity of discourse, enrich the lexicon and the known linguistic structures, experience the sequentiality and coherence of actions and the chaining of events. In shared reading, it is possible to distance oneself from the immediacy of events and experiences, which opens up a metaphorical space in which experimenting multiple possibilities on a simulated level. It also supports, in parallel with the skills related to oral language, emergent literacy, an expression that refers to the set of skills and attitudes considered precursors of conventional forms of reading and writing.

To do this, it is urgent that educators, teachers and all the people who are part of the child's educational context are specifically trained both on strategies and methods of shared reading and on quality publishing endeavours, with particular attention to INbooks.

With regard to the first point, the adult who reads must be aware that the child to whom the reading is destined is not passive, but experiences language and its phonic and rhythmic potential and has the possibility of constructing his own mental images, becoming the creator of new worlds in a process of interpretative cooperation in which he is an active participant (Eco, 1979). It should also be kept in mind that reading conveys different forms of expression that make it move simultaneously on several levels and that, for purely analytical reasons, we can define as:

- descriptive, i.e. capable of creating in the listener the image that is being read;
- of action, i.e. able to 'go along' with the descriptive images through different voice modulations;
- of atmosphere, thus creating a climate of welcome and emotional support with multiple colours.

Finally, those who play the role of reader will be able to orient themselves among different strategies, choosing the dialogic one as a preferred reading mode, i.e. interaction. In other words, the child and the adult are co-protagonists of the reading: by sitting together they use the book as a stimulus to talk and reflect on themselves and on things in the world. It is very suitable for the single adult-child relationship, but it can be useful to open a discussion and dialogue in the group after a reading that stimulates reactions. The child's attention and responses should be stimulated with questions (who is he, what is he, what does he do, how does he feel, what would he have done), according to the CROWD strategy (Zevenbergen and Whitehurst, 2003).

After reading to the group, the adult facilitates each child's independent approach to the book in response to their need to examine materials and images, physically appropriating the book in order to enjoy it independently. The adult observes attentively and intervenes by emphasising and extending the child's interactions with the book.

With regard to the second point, educators and teachers must be able to orient themselves among the publishing proposals, having clear quality indicators already presented above and at the same time bearing in mind that the process of approaching books and reading follows the natural development of the child. For example, books with lullabies and nursery rhymes, in which rhythm and repetition are key elements, are particularly useful in the first few months, as this repetition increases children's sense of security. In addition, at least until the age of twelve months, the books to be offered are strong, non-toxic, with large pages, the size of a child's hands, so that they can be handled without difficulty. The pictures should be brightly coloured and represent familiar objects or children's figures. In order to be understood, the figures should not be stylised, but as realistic as possible, so that the child is prepared to recognise the world around him. Around the first year, the child is able to recognise and understand a sequence, so the first photo-stories with a beginning and an epilogue can be proposed. It is important that these books contain simple images with objects related to the child's everyday life, familiar people and animals that express activities and games. From the age of two, children like to identify with heroes who overcome trials and stories that make them laugh. Books with stories that repeat and contain words that can be guessed, rhythms and rhymes, books that they can memorise are therefore particularly suitable. From the age of three, young readers love stories of children of their own age about everyday life, friendship, brothers

or sisters, but also fantastic and adventurous books. Thereafter, children are ready for a wide variety of themes and books that propose complex stories and that, for example, propose traditional or modern fairy tales or those that help them learn more about emotions, or scary stories that satisfy their desire to understand their experiences.

Finally, it is essential that educators and teachers are able to propose INbooks as tools for the inclusion and involvement of each and every one. In fact, these books, if well used, can foster children's progressive awareness of the fact that symbols express a stable representational meaning, an awareness that will later constitute a solid basis for its generalisation to the alphabetic text.

In a broader sense, it seems essential that those involved in the care and education of children in the 0-6 age group have a thorough knowledge of children's literature, of the importance of conveying plural and multimodal proposals and of the pedagogical implications of reading to support educational practices aimed at promoting children's well-being and psychophysical development.

This would allow for the engagement collegially and in different capacities in shared reading paths inclusive of all pupils, creating widespread support and avoiding the delegation of a single, specific reference figure expert in such practices and tools (D'Alonzo, 2018).

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