

Farsi Comunità Educanti (Fa.C.E.). A Case Study for Inclusion, Participation and Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Services

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ABSTRACT: *Fa.C.E. Farsi Comunità Educanti (from here on Fa.C.E.), a 3-years project (2018–21) lead by Reggio Children Foundation and financed by social enterprise Con I Bambini, has «increasing access to ECEC services, especially for disadvantaged families» as core objective. Innovative to this project is not the goal, but the approach: doing it through the creation of educating communities, both on a local and national level. This article will analyse the project strategies also in the light of the Successful Educational Actions for inclusion and social cohesion. (Flecha, 2014). In a year long process, built on dialogic approach, national (AMREF, Gruppo Nazionale Nidi Infanzia) and local (Palermo, Naples, Teramo, Reggio Emilia) project partners co-designed the pilot actions. Through a collective reflexive dialogue, they investigated the reasons for lack of access to quality educational services, mapped local realities, sketched actions combining both. (Malaguzzi in Cagliari et al., 2016) This community has become a safe space where new and generative ideas could take form. (Rinaldi, 2006). This structure allows the project to proceed, through the stops and goes due to covid19 emergency. Taking the lead from this ecological approach, stakeholders were involved in actions design, gaining ownership of them. Everywhere parents, with or without access to ECEC, widely expressed the desire to spend quality time with their children engaging in educational activities. This is action 1: children and parents learning, playing, and understanding together, within a community. This common reflexive space for families has a positive effect on parental involvement, and on connecting vulnerable families with ECEC and with a larger parental community. (Del Boca, 2020) Action 2 varies. In Palermo it takes the form of conversations on parenthood between experts (educators, doctors) and parents. In Teramo it has involved school, municipality, and associations in opening a new toddler center, granting quality educational service to families in the middle of the pandemic. Preliminary results of the project, emerging from impact evaluation and qualitative analysis, include: the creation of local and national networks providing integrated health, social and educational services to families, through different tools, including an online space; the sharing of strategies and visions among actors of different areas of the country highlighting new areas of common efforts; growing understanding among the families involved of the role of ECEC services and the opportunities they provide for children; a national conference to foster results dissemination.*

KEYWORDS: *Quality and Integrated ECEC Services, Accessibility, Co-design, Stakeholders' Involvement, Disadvantaged Families*

Introduction

The social enterprise *Con I Bambini* is a non-profit organization whose core purpose is funding programs to contrast Educational Poverty in Children and Youth. Fondazione Reggio Children (FRC) «promotes quality education for the wellbeing of communities»¹. FRC sees promoting children's rights and quality education as part of a more comprehensive process toward improving the life of the communities where these children live. Children are often the weaker part of society, sustaining their growth automatically implies improving the life of their communities. It also involves working together with all stakeholders to change educational patterns. This systemic, ecological view of children growth and needs (Rinaldi, 2006; Malaguzzi in Edwards *et al.*, 1998) reflects on the approach of every FRC's projects. It also informed the 2017 application to Con I Bambini grant, and the Fa.C.E. projects completion. In light of it, FRC coordinated a team of 20 local and national partners in 4 urban areas in a year-long dialogic co-designing of all actions.

Final objective, to which all project actions aim, is to create the conditions to build an educating community which would lead to a redefinition of educational policies in the areas involved. Key to foster these conditions are parents' involvement and public commitment on granting quality education to early childhood²

This article will analyse this innovative approach considering its efficacy in promoting inclusion, social cohesion and the structuring of an educating community. It will consider the role of partners and stakeholders in the planning and decision-making path that led to the pilot actions. These are key aspects for the creation and sustainability of educational services that can become educating communities' social capital. (Bartee, 2019; Flecha, 2014)

1. Educational services as forum

Schools and educational institutions are places where children learn. They acquire knowledge and the know-how they will need as adults, together with the soft skills developed by doing it in a social environment. Educational services are also substitute home to help working parents. Educators guide each child in its journey. At the end of each time sequence, the institution assesses the children, and it is, in return, evaluated by parents and the public to determine the quality of its educational offer. This is apparently a natural way of looking at education as a service, to which each family access individually. Yet this

¹ <https://www.frchildren.org/en> (July 1st, 2021)

² Fa.C.E. project presented to *Con I Bambini*.

mind frame has strong consequences. If it is a service provided to families not as a community, but as a sum of individuals, parents and students can easily become consumers. Educational services in turn are seen as quality driven organizations, based on structured and normed practices, available to consumers on an open market. Quality assessment must be scientifically established in order for comparison among institutions to take place. Educational and social interventions can only be grounded in behavioral and social sciences research.

Although sometimes this approach to education is presented as a given, it is not the only possible one. Another paradigm, originated from the socio-constructivist movement, has emerged in the past 30 years. It is the idea of schools as «public forums situated in civil society in which children and adults participate together in projects of social, cultural, political and economic significance» (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007, 73). According to the author civil society is the place where social interactions involving state, market, associations, social movements, families, and individuals, can take place.

Civil society diversity and complexity need special places for interactions to take place. This is the idea of public forum. Here people can interact on the ground of mutual respect and reciprocity. Through this democratic interaction different approaches and point of view can come together in a collective meaning making. (Edwards *et al.*, 1998) They do not need to apply majority ruling but can be venues for collective actions and dialogue «this ideal of pedagogical work presupposes early childhood institutions which are permeated with active participation and a reflective culture, and which are open to, and engaged in dialogue with, the surrounding world» (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007, 76). This idea of school as public forum has been central to Fa.C.E. approach.

Beside the reflexive and dialogic processes, we have mentioned, there are further key ingredients to this approach. «Pedagogical documentation as a tool to assist critical and reflexive thinking and understanding of pedagogical work, by enabling us 'to submit practice to strict, methodological, and rigorous questioning'» (Freire, in Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007, 107). Another important tile is the role of facilitators. These are experts who sustain participants in deepening their understanding, broadening their ideas, and substantiating their judgments. In Fa.C.E. this role was carried out by the national partners (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007).

2. Social cohesion and inclusion

Social cohesion and inclusion and the role of schools in fostering them are a growing concern world-wide. One of the European studies that has tried to tackle the issue through an evidence-based approach is INCLUD-ED: Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from

education (a 2006–2011 project financed by the European Commission). Aim of the project was:

to analyze educational actions that contribute to social cohesion and those that lead to social exclusion in the context of the contemporary European knowledge-based society. INCLUD-ED has striven to clarify successful and unsuccessful strategies in terms of educational success and social inclusion and then use this information to provide key elements and approaches to improve educational and social policy. (Flecha, 2014, 2)

The project did not look for best practices, but for Successful Educational Actions (SEAs), i.e., «actions that can improve school success and contribute to social cohesion in every context where they are implemented» (Flecha, 2014, 3). One of the project 3 clusters focused on the relationship between schools and communities. It defines 5 ways in which a community can participate to schools, highlighting their strengths and limitations. We will focus on the two which are closely connected with Fa.C.E. approach. The 'educative' style implies that community members are involved to different degrees in students' learning activities. These strategies use more effectively community human resources, increase learning venues for children in need and, by reducing learning group size, create more interactive learning experiences for pupils. The 'educative' approach also offers educational programs that respond to adults' needs. This idea in Spain is known as learning communities. It implies an egalitarian, dialogical approach to adult learning. Classes are offered on the base of adults' needs and interests. Sometimes children and parents attend together. This approach is most effective for the promotion of interactions among pupils and with adults, improving multicultural coexistence, enhancing human resources in the community (Flecha, 2014; Bartee, 2019)

The 'decisive' style implies that stakeholders take part in decision-making processes. This style grants that all voices can be heard, not just for consultation, but for the definition and management of educational activities, leading to greater democracy. The dialogic confrontation on issues and the need for common decisions help overcome prejudice and improve relationships within the community (Flecha, 2014; Bartee, 2019).

The project applied a communicative research methodology, a mixed-methods approach that «requires the researcher to create the conditions that enable intersubjective dialogue between participants and researchers and establish clear criteria and consensus to identify emerging categories and contrast interpretations» (Flecha, 2014, 10). Without going into too many details, it is a process aiming at collective meaning-making and giving space to all contributing voices. This idea has been central to REA research approach since the beginning. (Cagliari *et al.*, 2016; Edwards *et al.*, 1998; Rinaldi, 2006).

3. How does Fa.C.E. fit in?

3.1. Civil society

FRC involved a series of national partners since the initial stage of the projects. They were involved on specific overarching aspects due to their long-lasting professional standing in their field. Here the partners' list and their specific tasks:

- AMREF, to involve health and social services for granting a comprehensive approach to children's and families' wellbeing.
- *Fondazione E35*, to support budgeting and sound financial accountability.
- *Gruppo nazionale nidi e infanzia*, to support the creation of quality ECE services.
- *Fondazione Collegio Carlo Alberto*, as the evaluating board.
- Reggio Children srl, to design and support training actions tailored to local needs.

They participated since the beginning in the designing process, together with several local partners in the 4 urban areas involved: Reggio Emilia (Regina Pacis); Teramo (city center); Naples (Ponticelli); Palermo (Sperone-Brancaccio). The areas were chosen for a combination of reasons. They are specific neighborhoods, where great potentials and educational efforts experience difficulties in overcoming educational poverties. Reasons for educational poverty vary. In the Palermo and Naples areas, the issues relate to economic distress, unemployment, and criminality, beside local peculiarities. Teramo was struck by a big earthquake in November 2016. The city center suffered great structural damages, with many people forced out of their own homes and damages to the social tissue. Reggio Emilia, Regina Pacis neighborhood, is an area populated by low-income families, from a variety of Italian and migrant backgrounds. There are almost no popular meeting places for the whole community. The area is crossed by many access roads, and people tend to drive by and not stop. This is also a neighborhood where many families with no access to ECEC services reside. (FRC, 2018-2021)

FRC had data on these areas' strengths and threats due to previous projects, such as Fare Scuola. Yet, the first action was opening a dialogue with all possible stakeholders. A field research mapped all ECEC services and needs, and open interactive meetings brought together known partners and new potential ones (60 associations and institutions have participated to the process from the 20 initial partners). These first steps focused on keeping together the national and local levels, building a dialogue among territories and partners, creating the reflective posture needed to listen to local needs and imagining and designing new ways to fulfill them. In each area, the project involved in the dialogue at least one school, local administration, formal and

informal associations, individuals, and families. The need to trigger and sustain open communication channels among all services needed by families with children, has been one of the silver lining of the project. Socio-health and educational services must work together to grant children wellbeing and development. AMREF role both nationally and locally, has been central. In the 3-years span of the project, this effort has constructed a comprehensive national and local network, with an online space for sharing information and organize activities. These are the key aspects of Fa.C.E.'s idea of civil society, that finds strong backing in the literature (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007).

This involvement has implied collective reflections and actions. From May 2018 (project 2 days long kick-off meeting in Reggio Emilia) to April 2019 (when each area presented its executive plan) there were 2 national meetings, countless local meetings and activities, local visit from national partners, tailored training sessions. These were not just meetings to present preconceived ideas and solutions. They were encounters, activity-oriented gathering, workshop aimed at triggering a common reflection through non-competitive, collective actions. This approach allowed new ideas to emerge and grant the widening of the partnership. (Flecha, 2014). It also widened the number of associations and institutions involved, from 20 local and national partners to 60 participating entities.

I connect some strong words: taking «care» of new ideas, of new experience, of the educating community. We have become conscious of the educating community, after 3 years I start to see it better and to better understand how to develop it. We have seen it through the protagonism of parents and the dialogues among partners, through training, key component of the project³.

3.2. Codesign

The year-long codesigning phase had different aims. First step was understanding strengths and threats of each area by mapping socio-demographic characteristics, ECEC existing services, associations and resources, formal and informal meeting places, and other aspects of community life. All areas shared the need to build new connections among associations, groups, and institutions, that, while actively engaged on specific actions for early childhood, had little connections with each other.

For needs and desires to emerge, the project partners had to engage all possible stakeholders in active dialogue. Health, social and educational services were actively involved in reaching these stakeholders. This helped them establishing or strengthening a network. One of the key questions in this phase was also analyzing specific reasons for lack of access to quality educational services.

³ Anna Amato, Teramo Children, presentation at Fa.C.E. final national online event, May 28th, 2021.

Based on this year-long journey, different actions were designed to meet local needs. Everywhere parents widely expressed the desire to spend quality time with their children engaging in educational activities. This desire became: Time-lapse in Reggio Emilia, Piazze d'incontro in Teramo, Face zone in Naples, Ben-Essere di Comunità in Palermo. Yet every local reality had also special requirements for the emerging educating community to gain strength. Teramo lacked quality educational services for children aged 2 to 3. In Palermo parents needed to have a safe space where to meet expert and start a dialogue, also among themselves. In Naples the available human resources, with great ideas and abilities to engage children in educational activities, needed spaces and tools. In Reggio Emilia, Regina Pacis, but also other areas of town, needed a way to recreate a community. Action 1 and 2 will be presented in greater details in paragraph 4.

Co-designing is a rich, but also complex process. This duality emerges strongly in the words of Mariachiara Spallanzani, president of the Cooperative Comunità Educante, project partner in Reggio Emilia.

Co designing is fascinating, but really hard to manage, because there are many different ideas, and all people involve try, sometimes unknowingly, to work on their objective. Even if there is a common goal, everyone tries to design actions that are closer to his/her sensitivity [...] Yet it is possible to give value to everyone's talents [...] especially in the beginning I think it must have been hard [...] for the coordinators who had to keep the group together [...] after a while I think we were able to work effectively together. [...] There are different voices, opinions that can be accepted or rejected, there are new ideas emerging. So, a real positive, fascinating side, but also real difficulties⁴.

During the 2 years-long implementation 9 educational spaces have been refurbished to become quality learning environments (1.200 m₂) and more than 3000 people involved, 1100 of which were children. According to partners this long co-designing phase together with the time span of the project, gave them a chance to get to know and learn from each other, creating new synergies. It enabled them to move beyond educational poverty starting from the richness that every area has to offer⁵. This was a key ingredient for granting the project implementation even during the spring 2020 country-wide lockdown and through the difficult stop-and-go phases in the project final year. Moreover, it has proven to be a strong base for continuing activities and relations even after the project final completion. In every area both

⁴ Interview, February 2020

⁵ «We built a real educating community. We have brought mutual understanding between parents and children and turned the concept of educational poverty into educational richness, in a community that grows and learns together». Nino Marchesano, Principal IC Marino Santa Rosa, Naples.

public administrations and local partners have expressed the intention and finalized concrete plans to continue with both action 1 and 2.

3.3. Documentation and meaning making.

Documentation is a key component of any project financed by an external agency. Therefore, it will come as no surprise to know that every step of Fa.C.E., mapping of ECEC services, partners' and stakeholders' meetings, co-designing phase, daily activities implementation, has been documented. The quality and thoughts behind this documentation effort are very different. They are not meant as a static picture of a specific point in time, or a trace for future evaluation. They are a crucial step in the process of collective meaning-making.

...meaning making welcomes contextuality, values, subjectivity, uncertainty, and provisionality. The language of meaning making opens up to evaluation as a democratic process of interpretation, a process that involves making practice visible and thus subject to reflection, dialogue and argumentation, leading to a judgement of value, contextualised and provisional because it is always subject to contestation. (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007, IX)

Fa.C.E.'s traces include comments left by parents on sticky notes, children's descriptions of their work, pictures and videos of actions, collaborative workshops where partners shared their ideas. Each document is collected, reviewed by partners and becomes a paragraph of a collective narrative. It helps rethink the activities, change, or confirm patterns, modify the environment. It calls educators into actions in new ways. Sometimes this documentation is a single voice emerging, other times is a collective effort co-constructed by a group, with emerging characteristics. What matters is that it is never abandoned but always becomes part of a common reflective process, often moving beyond each area to involve the national level and the other territories. (Edwards, *et al.*, 1998; Cagliari, *et al.*, 2016)

3.4. Active participation

Fa.C.E. project was built on active participation, both of partners and stakeholders. In the voices of people involved.

- «We have the chance to learn together with our children» – A mother from Face-zones Naples
- «It has been nice to experience food as a universal language.» a father from Reggio Emilia Action 2 *Cucina di Quartiere*
- «These people come back because they feel welcomed. [...] they can actively take part in designing this project.» – Matilde Montanari, chef di Pause – team member for *Cucina di Quartiere*

In the final national coordination meeting, partners from all areas shared their ideas, but also actively engaged in mixed group building a virtual bike, representing Fa.C.E.. «Bicibusturbopubblico» based on the idea of a train, bringing lots of people around, all together. «Carretto dinamico persistente intruppico», where the central idea is harmonic chaos: getting things done in unforeseen ways and with lots of style. This dialogue triggered by active engagement, brought a collective synthesis of deeper meanings.

3.5. The 'wise' facilitators

National partners and FRC have been active co-constructors of the project since the beginning. Their role has not been easy. First, they had to listen to local partners, triggering the emergence of real needs, without imposing their own opinion but helping them move beyond their biases and search for real data. The first tools in this direction have been the national meetings. There partners sharing similar and yet different problems got together and could brainstorm, starting from different cues, practical activities, readings, shared experiences. National partners' local connections (Amref in particular), local visits, and the involvement of social and health services alongside with educational services were also key.

Local communities' potentials and strengths had also to emerge alongside with their needs. Here national partners role was not only listening, but also sustaining strengths with suggestions and training. The process had to encourage, improve, support without twisting original ideas and meanings. Again, not an easy task, that went on throughout the project. National partners led local partners' meaning-making process based on weekly collected documentation.

In REA this is usually the pedagogists' task, and this is what Dahlberg, Moss and Pierce refer to when they speak about the «wise facilitators» as instrumental to a new type of evaluation for educational services. Yet, FRC and the other national partners embodied this idea both with specific human resources (*atelierista*, pedagogist, paediatrician, and so on), but also with an overarching structure aimed to facilitate and not impose solutions.

4. Action 1 and 2

All these aspects we have defined, based on the reflective culture, came into life in this 3-years long journey, embodied in 2 specific actions in each of the 4 territories. Through them educating communities and opportunities for what Putnam (1993) refers as «intense horizontal interaction» emerged. This, in turn, has fostered, both among partners and stakeholders, the increase of social capital as «features of social organizations, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit» (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007, 79).

4.1. Think global act local

Action 1 presents parents and children sharing quality educational activities together. In the words of parents from Teramo: «a special and exclusive moment, only for us, without needing to be concerned of the passing of time» and «finally a bit of peace». To ensure quality, each local group of partners started from the educational richness of the area. In Palermo *Ben-essere di comunità* carried out half of the activities in a farm, this increased connections between families and a wider territory. In Naples Face zone used Remida, the reusing center, as a key partner, fostering the culture of sustainability and ecological awareness in the community. Moreover, schoolteachers were actively involved in structuring and leading the activities, enabling their professional development. In Teramo *Piazze d'incontro* theatre and body expression had a central role thanks to the association *Deposito dei segni*, bringing new awareness of children potentials. In Reggio Emilia, Time-lapse activities combined children's actions with parents' reflections, generating new connections among families and between them and ECEC services.

The evaluation of Action 1 by Fondazione Collegio Carlo Alberto has shown how participating families have changed their perspective. They give greater importance to family participation in educational activities as a way to support children's growth. They also consider educative cultural sights as places to bring quality to people's life. 83% of those who had not enrolled their children in ECE, expressed the intention to do so, especially as an opportunity for children to socialize with others. Those families have proven more aware of the strengths and threats electronic devices pose. They have increased participation to groups and associations⁶.

4.2 Examples of action 2: Teramo and Palermo

In Teramo from the co-designing phase the need for a toddler center, for children 2 to 3 years old, emerged. Many children of this age group could not access educational services due to lack of spaces. The town in general had not yet adopted a comprehensive and integrated approach to 0-6 services. *Gruppo Nazionale Nidi e Infanzia* helped reflecting on the issue and planning effective actions to move in that direction. Opening a toddler center in the same building as one of the state pre-schools, was identified as a possible way to grant vertical continuity. The school, the educators, architects from the municipality, together with FRC, were actively involved in designing the facility and the refurbishing plan. As the structure opened, in the middle of the pandemic, both training and reflective actions on documentation continued. FRC and Reggio Children srl supported educators' professional growth,

⁶ Preliminary results presented at the Fa.C.E. final online national meeting (May 28th, 2021)

reflecting together on documentation, but also providing training for Teramo teachers' community⁷. In Palermo parents needed a time and a place to share doubts, ideas and ask questions to experts who could support parenthood. A recent survey carried out in two state primary schools in Reggio Emilia has confirmed that many families have little support on solving doubts and problems concerning their children. *Oriente-Menti* has been designed as a safe, non-judgmental space where all questions were acceptable, all ideas could be shared. While the experts shed light on specific doubts, parents found also a place to talk to other parents. First mostly mothers took advantage of the opportunity, but latter also fathers came. It triggered the creation of an online communities, bringing cohesion and lowering isolation among families.

Conclusion

Based on the idea of educational services as public forum, this project embodies SEA that enhance social cohesion and inclusion to fight educational poverty. The approach has proven to be duplicable and effective in very different social context. It created a local and national network providing integrated health, social and educational services to families. It provided a venue for sharing strategies and visions among geographically and culturally diverse actors, highlighting new areas of common efforts. Families involved have developed a growing understanding of the role of ECEC services and the opportunities they provide for children. Fa.C.E. has also established new and lasting educational opportunities in the areas involved. This project's lasting contribution on the debate on quality ECEC services is the transposition into praxis of common reflective processes, namely: stakeholders' and partners' involvement in codesigning, the usefulness of long project span, the role of documentation, common active participation. In the words of Carla Rinaldi, FRC president:

Farsi Comunità Educanti - Farsi - to be made into: there is an idea of action, of change, of reflexivity. To do quality education implies a community, and if there is none, it needs to be created, built every day, through a reflexive and reciprocal process. It is demanding, because it is not based on those who know and those who don't, but on the reciprocity of the exchange. Educating communities, in plural, because there are many ways to be a community. The other elements: time, key in any educational process, together with negotiation, and respect⁸.

⁷ Parents survey (February-March 2021 – Ic Pertini 2 Reggio Emilia – Research-training (Ricerca Formazione) of school staff led by Laura Landi.

⁸ President Carla Rinaldi's final remarks at thr Fa.C.E. final online national meeting (May 28th, 2021).

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