

Professional development and Instructional design in Italian Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of a Training-Research path (T-R) (Magnoler, 2012; Asquini, 2018) conducted in the Italian context with educators and teachers that work in the Early Childhood Education and Care sector.

In Italy, the recent Law (L.D. 65/2017) has set up the “Integrated System of education and instruction from birth to six years”. The new System calls to reflect on how to design the educational curriculum for children and how to properly train the personnel involved in the Early Childhood Services (Tomasi & Ongari, 2012; Domenici, 2018; Sibilio & Aiello, 2018). The main objective of the T-R path was to increase the knowledge and the skills of the teachers that work in Childhood services (0-6 years old), by reflecting with them about the educational, the organizational and the assessment strategies that could be effective to improve the quality of these Services (Bondioli & Savio, 2012; 2018; Mantovani, Silva & Freschi, 2016).

The T-R path involved educators and teachers in a professional development path with a blended modality (distance and face to face activities). During the path it has been asked them to use innovative strategies and tools in the classroom aimed at enhancing the continuity among children of different ages. In the research were collected qualitative-quantitative data through the use of questionnaires, logbooks and checklists.

The main results of the research confirmed that the T-R paths can be effective to qualify the educational practices and the instructional design of educators and teachers that work in Childhood services.

Keywords: Assessment tools; Childhood services; Italian context; Training-Research; Teaching strategies.

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1. Introduction

In Italy the interest in educational services for children of pre-school age is growing. In the last decades, research in the pedagogical field has deepened the organisational, design and methodological aspects, triggering important reflections on the quality of services for early childhood (Peyton et al. 2001; Moss & Dahlberg, 2008; Catarsi, 2010). From the legislative point of view, Legislative Decree 65/2017 established at national level the *Integrated education and schooling system from birth to six years' old*. The main objective is to offer families and children an ongoing educational experience also inside the primary school, promoting the quality of the educational offer. The transformations that derive from the establishment of this *System* have faced the need to reflect on how to design educational courses for children between 0 and 6 and on how to train educators and teachers working in this context. The themes of didactic planning and educational strategies have been extensively investigated by educational research (Bondioli & Savio, 2012; 2018; Mantovani et al., 2016), however the peculiarities of the cognitive and emotional level of children in the 0-6 age band make it necessary today to carry out further investigative work to understand how to articulate educational activities that encourage the balanced growth of children in terms of both learning and interpersonal relationships and respond effectively to educational continuity, which is meant to be followed in the logic of an integrated system (Pen, 2011; Restiglian, 2012; Zaninelli, 2018).

The process of transformation taking place in educational contexts aimed at children has been accompanied over time by the interest in identifying useful strategies to adequately train the staff working in services for children of the 0-6 age group (Tomasi & Ongari, 2012; Domenici, 2018; Sibilio & Aiello, 2018). In this sense, the goal is to investigate which educational initiatives can help to promote continuity in the transition from 0-3 to 0-6. By “initiatives” we refer to an intentional act aimed at changing the state of things in view of the achievement of a given objective. To talk about an “initiative” it is necessary to consider the actors involved in the interactive process, the intentionality, the objectives and the practices to be implemented (Moretti & Giuliani, 2016; Giuliani, 2019). It is therefore interesting to identify educational initiatives that can be co-designed by educators and teachers and introduced in class to promote the development of strategic skills and competences in children in order to better understand the transition from one context to another, as in the case of the shift from the nursery to the infant school.

In this new scenario, supporting the professional development of on-the-job staff is essential in order to consolidate the reflective capacity necessary to accommodate challenges and changes. Specifically, the synergy between the school world and university is strategic to design training courses that can respond to the specific needs of educators and teachers and initiate training courses that have an effective influence on educational practices. Research-Training methodology, in particular, is effective due to the possibility it offers to teachers to acquire knowledge and skills that can be implemented in the field already during the training path (Magnoler, 2012; Moretti et al., 2017; Asquini, 2018). This method favours a reflective,

critical and conscious approach to training activities and to the related repercussions in teaching. The participants are in fact involved in training activities that involve the development of research paths of an empirical-explorative nature. The modalities may also include works in heterogeneous groups that favour the active involvement of the participants and mutual learning in the logic of peer-to-peer exchange.

2. Methods

This paper presents the results of a Research-Training path (R-T) (Magnoler, 2012; Asquini, 2018) conducted in the context of Italy with educators and teachers active in services for infancy. The analysis unit, in particular, is active in the so-called “Spring classes”, which in Italy are comprised of those classes in transition between nursery school and infant school (children from 24 to 36 months).

The main objective of the R-T was to increase the knowledge and skills of the professionals working in services for infancy, sharing and problematising with them educational, organisational and evaluation strategies to qualify the educational offer aimed at children between 0 and 6 years’ old. The R-T involved educators and teachers in a blended professional development path. In the online environment designed for those who participated in the R-T, several dedicated areas have been set up: spaces for communication (chat and forums); theoretical and methodological in-depth materials on the subject of educational planning and evaluation, and laboratory activities.

The phases in which the R-T was implemented are described below.

The first face-to-face meeting started with a plenary session during which the group of experts presented itself to the educators and teachers involved in the path of professional development and subsequently also asked them to introduce themselves. During the first meeting a theoretical introduction on the *Integrated system of services for children* and on the issue of educational continuity was proposed; a fact-finding questionnaire was then delivered aimed at detecting both socio-demographic information and expectations with respect to the R-T course. The questionnaire also contained a section in which to indicate two key words which, in the opinion of the teachers, represented their way of understanding “educational continuity”; the second part of the meeting was dedicated to building a shared conceptual map (CM) (Novak, 1991; Moretti, 2018) consisting of the keywords indicated in the questionnaire. The construction of the CM was interactive, in fact every educator and teacher was invited by the group of experts - who supervised and led the activity - to share the chosen keywords, to propose a semantic path to be developed and to problematise their meaning with colleagues before writing it in final form. The CM was built using the C-Map programme; this was particularly useful as it was possible to flexibly modify the semantic paths elaborated in a shared manner by the teachers in a digital format. The CM was then discussed at the end of the meeting and made available in the online environment of the training course. The main objectives of the shared construct of the CM were: to focus attention on crucial areas that would then be studied in depth during the training course and to share a basic knowledge repertoire about a key theme for Child Services such as educational continuity.

During the R-T the group of experts guaranteed a systematic and continuous supervision to the educators and the teachers through the online environment. This facilitated, already during the second face-to-face meeting, the start of the plenary with follow-up about further reflections on what emerged during the CM. The meeting then continued with the presentation of the first of the educational initiatives that would be expanded upon during the training: peer tutoring. Following the presentation of the theoretical references on the instrument and on the monitoring and evaluation strategies of the activities connected to it, space was left open for discussion. The same method was used in the third and fourth meeting to present the other two initiatives: shared reading aloud (Cardarello, 2004; Moretti, 2017; Morini, 2017) and reality tasking (Comoglio, 2002; Tessaro, 2014; Moretti et al. 2017).

The second meeting was also dedicated to the formation of work groups that would collaborate in shared planning activities until the end of the training course. The groups were constituted in a heterogeneous way so that both educators (nursery) and teachers (infant school) could make their own contribution on the basis of specific professional experience: this aspect was important to design activities that enhance educational continuity in the “Spring classes”, attended by children between 24 and 36 months. Some groups also saw the participation of the pedagogical coordinators of some institutions that participated in the R-T.

The meetings during which the educational initiatives were presented (second, third and fourth meetings) were organised as follows: presentation of the construct and data collection instruments consistent with the objectives of the initiative and planning in small groups of activities to be developed in the classroom. At the beginning of each meeting, space was given to follow up with the teachers about strengths and weaknesses in the use of the initiative in the classroom.

The last meeting envisaged by the R-T was divided into a first part in which the working groups presented a summary of the activities planned and the results which would emerge from the monitoring of the activities conducted with the children and in a second part in which the experts gave feedback on what had been presented. At the end of the R-T the CM was again used to understand with the teachers if and how the modality by which they intended educational continuity had been modified since the beginning.

In the research, qualitative and quantitative data collection tools were used, such as, in particular, questionnaires, logbooks and checklists. The questionnaire was used at the beginning and at the end of the R-T path with the participating instructors, while the logbook and checklists were used by educators and teachers to monitor the activities carried out in the classroom with the children of the “Spring groups”.

3. Main results

The R-T path was followed by 19 teachers, 27.8% of whom work in infant school, 55.6% in the so-called “Spring classes” (transitioning between nursery school and infant school) and 16.6% operating both in the Spring class and infant school sections. The limited number of participating teachers is representative of the all-to-recent attention that in Italy has been focused on the issue of educational continuity; in any case, this element has allowed the

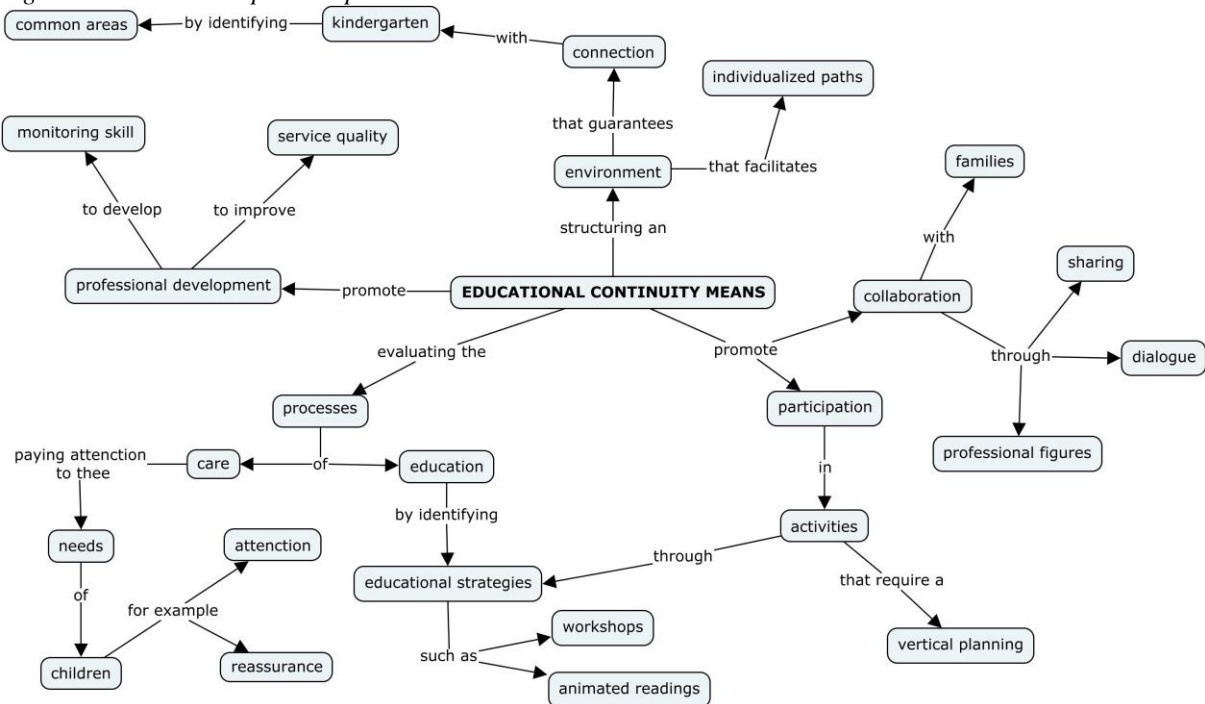
15-17 November, 2019
Rotterdam, Netherlands

participants to work on micro-planning activities in an effective way, favouring careful supervision between teachers and experts.

Of the participants, 44.4% obtained their high school diploma with emphasis on teaching and 55.6% work with a degree as their qualification. As regards years of experience, the majority (33.3%) have more than 15 years of experience, while 27.8% have between 11 and 15 years of experience, 22.2% between 5 and 10 years and 16.7% less than 5 years.

During the first meeting, together with the participants in the training activity, a shared CM was created the focus of which was "Educational continuity means". The choice of this focus was made because the recent legislation on the *Integrated system of services for infancy* has mandated the need to investigate how to promote continuity among children of different age groups 0-6. Fig.1 shows the semantic paths developed in an inclusive way by the teachers participating in the R-T and the group of experts who conducted the activity.

Figure 1: Shared conceptual map



The richness of the semantic paths developed in the CM made it possible to detect the awareness of educators and teachers already in the initial phase of the training process. This constituted a resource for the R-T as the knowledge and experience consolidated over the years of experience have allowed us to deepen the key issues of the training path with a new interpretative code. Although the teachers had already gained experience from some

educational strategies aimed at early childhood, in fact, with the R-T, the interest was to expand and enhance it in the perspective of educational continuity.

As regards the design activities developed by the working groups, the heterogeneity of the members of each group allowed the articulation of the activities in the groups so as to favour the participation of both older and younger children. With the prospect of enhancing educational continuity in the 0-6 age group, in fact, in-depth educational initiatives have allowed the involvement of children of the Spring classes and of infant school children in joint activities.

With regards to peer tutoring, shared reading and reality tasking initiatives, the working groups showed great interest in the planning of activities to be proposed to children and in the construction of tools to monitor and assess the level of participation of the children. In reporting their experiences in relation to each of them, the work groups produced reports answering the following questions: How was the activity organised in the class? What difficulties were encountered? How did the children involved react? What were the strengths and weaknesses in the introduction of the initiative in his/her own institution?

Tab.1 explains part of the design prepared by one of the working groups about the shared reading initiative; the group decided to work with the quality book “*Little blue and little yellow*” (Lionni, 1959). As an example, phases 1 to 3 are reported.

Table 1: Example of instruction design with “Shared reading”

<p>PHASE 1 Explaining the activity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The educator/teacher clarifies/reminds the children of the function of shared reading space. - The educator/teacher brings together all the children and tells them that a new activity will soon start together with the children of the spring/infant school group. - Infant school children, who welcome the spring class, show and explain how the reading corner works.
<p>PHASE 2 Everyone to their own place</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The educator/teacher prepares the environment (moves chairs, tables, etc.) and useful materials to encourage shared reading (e.g. the book, coloured sheets of paper, background music, etc.). - The children get comfortable (chairs, ottomans, cushions, floor mats, etc.) and form couples or threesomes (spring group + infant school) in the space dedicated to shared reading. - The infant school children distribute a small ball of yellow play dough to the Spring class children, while they keep hold of a blue one and make sure the others do not eat it.
<p>PHASE 3 Reading out loud</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The educator/teacher starts reading the story <i>Little blue and little yellow</i>. - The educator/teacher shows the coloured sheets according to the sequence of the story and turns the sound atmospheres of actions that characterise the story on and off (for example, ring-a-ring o’roses, in the park, at home, etc.). - The educator/teacher asks the children to use the two balls of play dough in the hugging scene between little blue and little yellow.

For each initiative, the work groups also had to devote themselves to the formulation of checklists in which to explain the descriptors with which to monitor and evaluate the methods of introducing the initiative in the group and the behaviour demonstrated by the children. Table 2 below shows, by way of example, the indicators identified in relation to Phase 3.

Table 2: Example checklist with “Shared reading”

In phase 3 – Reading out loud				
The educator:	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	RARELY	NEVER
A. The educator/teacher reads while modulating the tone of the voice according to the action.				
B. The educator and the teacher collaborate and coordinate in the fit between reading and sound atmospheres.				
C. The educator and the teacher take turns in reading out loud.				
The group of children:	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	RARELY	NEVER
A. The children listen closely.				
B. The children are interested and approach the book and the materials.				
C. The children are interested in the sound atmospheres.				
D. The children interact amongst themselves (Spring class – nursery school group)				
E. Notes:				

The possibility of designing the methods with which to introduce the initiatives in class and on the construction of data collection tools has been strategic to contribute, with the R-T, to increasing the skills of the professionals working in the services for infancy. From the point of view of educators and teachers, as well, the course “was very useful for studying innovative methodologies that can be applied in class and to learn valid assessment tools for future planning” (G.R., Spring group educator) and “tools that were presented allowed us to work in class and to give a scientific value to the educational practices implemented” (P.G., nursery school teacher). The indicators developed to guide classroom observation practices were found to be effective and easy to understand and use.

Having shared and problematised educational, organisational and evaluation strategies with R-T participants in a dialogue-based and interactive way was useful to increase the knowledge and skills of educators and teachers with respect to how to qualify the educational offer aimed at boys and girls between 0 and 6 years. In fact, from the analysis of the answers given in the final questionnaire, an overall satisfaction of the teachers emerges regarding the effectiveness of the course. Through some questions of the questionnaire the teachers were asked to express their considerations regarding the phases through which each device was introduced. Table 3

shows the average scores on the extent to which the teachers considered the work done in groups on each of the initiatives covered by the R-T to be sustainable (maximum score: 4).

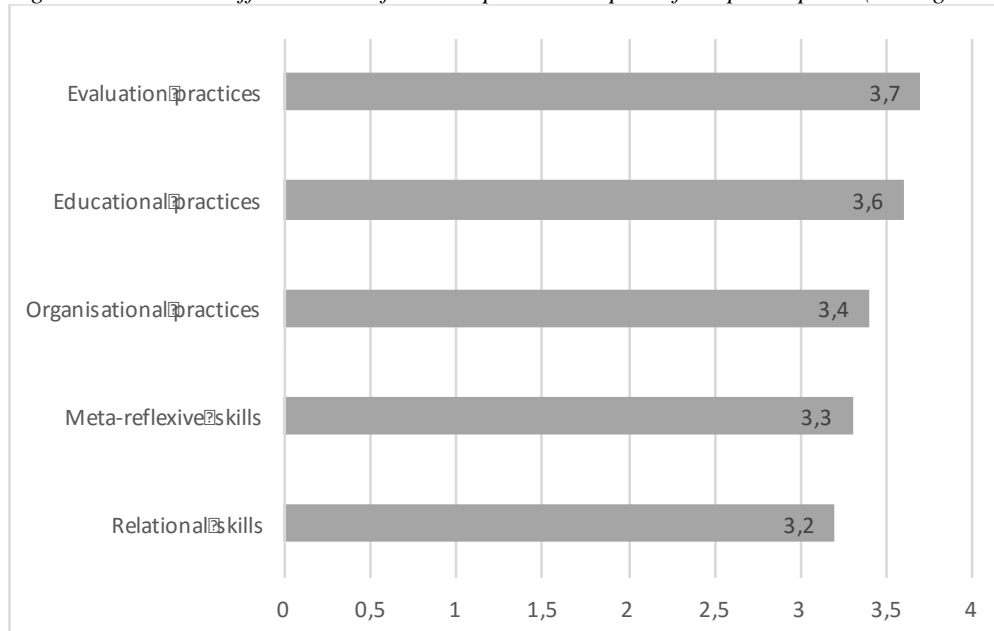
Table 3: Perception about the sustainability of the use of each initiative (average marks)

	Peer tutoring	Shared reading	Reality tasking
Shared planning design with colleagues	3,5	3,8	3,8
Introducing the initiative in the group	3,5	3,7	3,7
Monitoring and observation of the activities	3,7	3,8	3,7
Elaboration and analysis of the collected data	3,4	3,6	3,4
Evaluation and reflections about redesigning	3,4	3,7	3,7

As emerges from the data reported in Tab.3, the teachers' considerations regarding sustainability in the design and use of the initiatives in the classroom have grown progressively better and better (in the R-T area the initiatives have been introduced as indicated in Tab.3: Peer tutoring, shared reading, reality tasking). The peer tutoring initiative is the one that overall achieves lower average values than the other initiatives for each indicator, and this may be connected to the fact that it was the first initiative presented and that for teachers it was the first time they planned activities continuously with colleagues active in educational settings other than their own.

One of the final questions of the questionnaire was aimed at investigating the perception that teachers had regarding how the R-T path had contributed to qualifying the evaluation, educational and organisational practices and the meta-reflexive and relational skills. The answers provided were very positive (averages always above 3.2 out of a maximum of 4). Fig.2 shows the average scores for each of the areas that made up the subject of the investigation.

Figure 2: Perceived effectiveness of the R-T path on the part of the participants (average scores)



The data reported in Fig.2, which shows that the perception of effectiveness is higher in evaluation and educational practices, is in line with the objectives of the R-T path, which was to increase the knowledge and skills of teachers particularly in those specific areas. The average scores recorded in a positive way also in relation to meta-reflexive and relational competences confirm, in any case, the overall effectiveness of the R-T methodology in helping to qualify the professional development of the teachers also active in services for infancy.

The closing phase of the R-T included follow-up with educators and teachers who formed the analysis unit. The comparison was useful both to get feedback on the effectiveness of the training path and to understand if and how the design of the initiatives under scrutiny had been sustainable and effective to promote educational continuity in the 0-6 age range. From the teachers' point of view, the R-T “provided insights for a more assiduous and shared planning process between educators and teachers” (E.F., Spring class educator) and “was very useful because it gave the opportunity to confront other realities by giving the possibility of reflecting on the educational methodologies implemented” (T.A., Spring class and infant

school teacher), so the aspect connected to collaboration seems to have given a strategic value to the training path adopted.

Confirming the achievement of one of the objectives of the R-T, an infant school teacher pointed out that “the path was effective in that new skills were developed, new methods that allow collaboration with the infant school and with the group of teachers” (F.G.).

4. Conclusion

The data revealed confirms that R-T can be an effective strategy to actively involve educators and teachers of childcare services in innovative paths aimed at promoting educational continuity between services that are aimed at children of different ages and contribute in this way to qualify the training offer. In this perspective, the unit of analysis chosen, the Spring classes, has proved to be a central focus point to be referred to in the perspective of integration and continuity in the scholastic and education system from birth to six years in Italy.

Furthermore, the results of the R-T reinforce the idea of the strategic function carried out by the Working Group in 0-6 services with a view to promoting educational continuity, and suggest creating the organisational and planning conditions to configure the Work Group as a privileged space to foster collaboration and confrontation between different professionals, in particular among educators, teachers of the Spring classes and infant school teachers.

A fundamental aspect that emerged from the R-T that deserves to be investigated further with deeper study, is that the prospect of developing educational continuity in education and school services from birth to six years should not only concern boys and girls, with the use of innovative strategies and with the realization of targeted activities, but should also and above all involve operators of 0-6 services, in order to build a shared and integrated design and evaluation approach. The results of the R-T demonstrate sustainability on the part of motivated educators and teachers with more years of service of the commitment required for micro-planning activities that have resulted in the progressive use of innovative teaching strategies such as peer tutoring, shared reading and reality tasking, within the activities carried out with classes and children of different ages.

The positive development of the R-T should also encourage the creation of additional R-T paths that envisage the identification of times and spaces dedicated to sharing organisational solutions and innovative strategies focused on promoting educational continuity, in the initial phase of macro-planning, with a view to involve a greater number of educators and teachers, including those with little motivation to do so or younger staff with fewer years of service.

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15-17 November, 2019

Rotterdam, Netherlands

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15-17 November, 2019

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