

Working towards respect for individuality and differences in gender. Strategies for family education in Infant Services within the Comune of Florence

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The regulations

Among its objectives, the European Parliament has set out the struggle against gender stereotyping, aiming to create a culture, that is respectful of human dignity and personal integrity.

The schedule for equal opportunities between men and women, issued by the European Union, to be put into effect from 2006-2010, has, as one of its objectives and prioritised operations, the elimination of gender stereotyping in the areas of schooling, education and culture. Article 117 of the Italian Constitution states: «regional laws remove all obstacles that prevent full equality between men and women in social, cultural and economic spheres [...]».

For years, the Region of Tuscany has brought forward policies that respect equal opportunities. In 2009, Regional Law 16 sanctioned the right to equal opportunity between women and men and recognised the right to gender citizenship in all regional politics. Among the principle objectives of the law is to implement actions to curb gender stereotyping.

The context

When we talk about gender differences, we have to take into account the cultural stereotypes that condition our existence, our behaviour and

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the way in which we relate to others; we just need to simply to reflect on our habits and our use of everyday language to realise that the stereotype is an integral part of our existence. The representation of the male and female are linked to the creation of sexual identity from the very first years of life. According to common sense, these account for the objective references that are immediately perceivable in the biological differences. In reality, gender identification refers in particular to the different ruling concepts and the diverse political and cultural fabrics, which, over the various eras have permeated the organisation of social life, determining for centuries the unequal distribution of power, control and access to both material and symbolic resources. Each individual tends to apply the learned model in their interpersonal relations, the model that comes from the family and the society in which he/she lives, which is often too rigid and limits the creation of his/her own identity.

The assumption of social roles is conditioned by the cultural paradigms orientated by gender differences: symbols, words, concepts and images that crystallize in the truth in no time at all, are universally shared and reflect a binary vision of the world, based on the opposition of male and female: strength/weakness, society/family, work/home etc. The *natural*, biological idea of these opposing characteristics is a powerful stereotype that has contributed and continues to contribute to the lack of respect for the individual.

So how do we overcome the rigid models that fail to consider men and women in an equal light? How do we use language in a way that is not stereotypical? How do we manage an educational context that will trigger off the process of deconstructing the stereotype? How do we relate to families in order to make them more sensitive to the subject? How do we relate to children while respecting their individuality?

Gender stereotyping conditions children from a very early age, depending on the forms of *training* for the role attributed to their own gender, and contributes significantly to the formation of their identity. Everyday gestures and language used by care-giving adults become very significant for children and indicative of all that is male and all that is female. For this reason, it is important that the educational context offers experiential occasions of equal opportunity and reconciliation of care-provision; in this light it would be fundamental for more men to work in Infant Services. Today, this educational sector is managed almost exclusively by women, thus reinforcing the ever-strong cultural stereotype in our society that highlights the female role in care-provision and education of small children.

Education that respects gender identification from an early age is an important step towards building a more welcoming and free society. It is necessary therefore to deal with a matter of such great relevance, not only in the compulsory schooling system, but also in the educational setting for children in their first years of life. Teachers, at times, hesitate to deal with the subject because it involves elements that have a strong emotional/cultural impact, such as sexuality, the relationship between men and women in the family and in society, as well as evaluating oneself with one's own stereotypes and cultural conditioning. Scientific research on such themes that is specific for infancy is scarce and even more so, it's disclosure.

For a teacher, working on respect for gender identification, means in the first place, working on him/herself and with colleagues, and querying his/her own gender stereotypes and habits. It also signifies creating opportunities to make families more aware and having the knowledge to build an educational setting for the children that is as free as possible from stereotypes, dealing with them when they arise, teachers and parents alike, as *they* are responsible for the education of future generations.

Working with adults however is not an easy task because they are often restricted by a very rigid cultural model.

It becomes therefore, fundamentally important to support teachers and educators in finding the instruments required to implement effective and contextualised educational projects. This being the case, training has a central role.

The Local Authority for Education in the Comune of Florence has aimed at creating a formative course to expand among staff the professional attributes necessary for planning educational initiatives that have as their core objective, respect for identity from the first years in life.

Training projects

From October 2007, the European Year for Equal Opportunities, the Local Authority for Public Education in the Comune of Florence has used European funding for the training of educators in Infant Crèches and teachers in Infant Schools, with the objective of:

- promoting an educational initiative aimed at the younger citizens, aged from 0-6 years;
- developing critical senses and providing teaching staff with the theoretical and operational instruments to deal with the subject of respect for diverse individuality together with the children;

- eliminating inequality in the educational setting while pursuing a coherent education with the family.

Year 2007-2008

Education for the management and contrast of stereotypes

The start of the experiment

The project was carried out by the Local Authority for Public Education in the Comune of Florence, Infant Crèche Services and Auxiliary Services, Infant School Services and the Time and Space Offices in collaboration with the Tuscan Women Network Association in the framework of *Project Equal Phase 2 Time: District and Mainstreaming for Equal Opportunities Code IT-G2-TOS-060-Tema H Measure 4*.

A specific intervention aimed at the training of educators/teachers of the Infant Education Services in the Comune of Florence.

Year 2009-2010

Beyond Stereotypes

Working towards respect for individuality and differences in gender

The training project was devised by the Local Authority for Public Education, Infant Crèche Services and Auxiliary Services, Infant School Services and the Time and Space Offices of the Comune of Florence, in the framework of Project F.S.E. Ob.2 2007-2013 Multi Axis Resources Notice.

A specific intervention aimed at the training of educators/teachers of public and private Infant Education Services within the Comune and Province of Florence.

The training courses have provided several instruments for:

- supporting the teachers/educators in gaining knowledge of the cultural significance of stereotypes and how to trigger off the processes of deconstruction;
- supporting the teachers/educators in gaining knowledge of their own cultural conditioning and moving towards the conscious awareness of their own potential in relation to dealing with gender stereotyping;
- expanding the teachers' and educators' skills in relation to planning educational initiatives aimed at the creation of an identity that corresponds as closely as possible to individual characteristics and potential;
- expanding the teachers' and educators' skills in relation to carrying out projects geared towards the families and the deconstruction of gender stereotyping;

- Helping the teachers/educators to produce open and interactive documentation of the projects carried out with the aim of stimulating in the reader a process of relativization of their own thoughts, bringing to the fore their own points of view on the subject.

The strategy for family education

The Methodological Approach

Today, we live in a reality whereby we can no longer talk about the unique family model, the family, but instead family typologies; therefore it becomes increasingly important to learn how to listen and welcome the identity and cultural values of each family unit, avoiding judgement and prejudice, but also making use of methodological instruments to allow the parents space to express their own doubts, worries, convictions, ideas and cultural models.

The role of the School and Infant Services is to create opportunities for comparison and an exchange of experiences, so that everyone can come to know other ways of thinking and behaving; it's essential to organise stimulating experiences in which parents have the opportunity to ask questions, reflect on their own ideas and convictions, starting from the knowledge that a stereotype must never be opposed, but relativized, otherwise the opposite effect is gained; it becomes even more rigid.

To welcome families and to foster cultural growth, it is not enough to simply have a physical space at their disposition that is inviting and meets their various needs; it must also be emotionally and mentally appealing. In this respect, the preparation of the staff in Infant Services plays a determining role. While dealing with subjects relating to the respect of gender identity, it is impossible to take into account all the socio-cultural complexities in which we live, therefore it's fundamental that each service carries out projects that are relevant to the needs of their users, while respecting all family identities.

The subject of gender differences does not concern only the educational planning aspect of a service, but the service as a whole. It is one of those subjects that we can define as *transversal* and one that we must take into consideration when planning the various aspects of education. Making families more aware of these subjects means creating effective educational projects that are capable of putting into action *indirect family education initiatives*, and that are active across the board in the

context of Infant Educational Services – such as the organisation of an education space, using game experiences, activities geared towards the children, behaviour and use of language (verbal and non-verbal) of the staff on duty in the service – and *direct family education initiatives*, that involve as the main protagonists, the family members.

Indirect family education initiatives

The indirect family education strategies are fundamental for the *atmosphere* of the service and for the creation of an educational setting where the educators use, in an informed manner, their own language and their own educational strategies, starting with the organisation of space. Building a more welcoming educational environment of equal opportunity means creating spaces and presenting games in which the children have the opportunity to undergo experiences that are not coded according to gender and where the adults use adapted relational methods that respect the variety of individualities.

- Self-observation and observation activities between the different components of the work group;
- organisation of the Infant Services spaces;
- proposed game activities for children in Infant Services.

Direct family education initiatives

Involving parents in the implementation of the educational project is very important for providing continuity and coherence to the educational proposals geared towards the children. For years, Infant Services in the Comune of Florence have worked on projects that are participative in nature. With regards to the subject of gender stereotyping in Florentine services, we have worked, involving the families in different ways, on contextualised initiatives:

- Crèche/section meetings where the educational project of the service is presented and references are also made towards the desire to deal with the theme of respect for gender identity, asking the families to participate in specific activities.
- Involvement of the parents in the preparation of the space dedicated to symbolic play respecting the identity of each individual child.

- Involvement of the parents in reading children's books with their children and the subsequent compilation by the family of a table where the parent is asked to highlight whether the story told reflected a cultural model in which the gender stereotype is strong.
- Themed meetings with mothers only and fathers only to talk about family education, male and female identities, equal opportunities and the sharing of care-provision.
- *Individual Documentation Photograph Albums* of the activities experiences by the children within the service. These albums document the experiences of each individual child and have a blank space where the mother and father can comment on the experience with their own point of view.
- *Documentation Notebooks* implemented according to Letizia Lambertini's methodology. This involves notebooks that are:
 - *open*, so that they can be accessible to different readers: teachers, educators, parents, citizens;
 - *interactive*, so that they can give the reader the opportunity to express his/her point of view on the activity experience;
 - *reflective*; so that they can allow every reader to confront both the point of view of person who initiated the documentation and those readers who subsequently left their own contribution in the notebook;
 - *continuous transformation*; so that they can be continually updated over time.

These notebooks were presented to the families during the end of school year party and on that occasion the parents were asked to interact by leaving on the notebook a record of their own thoughts.