

## Parent participation(s): a glance at the Belgian reality in relation to the Italian one

*Nima Sharmahd*

*Wherever friendly paths intersect  
the whole world looks like home for a time*  
Hermann Hesse

### *Introduction and methodology*

This article is based on a personal experience of living in Belgium for a few months, aimed at studying the meaning that the concept of parent participation can play in different European contexts (Italy and Belgium). Our daily use of common concepts is coloured by different meanings which stem from each society's socio-political evolution. For this reason, education can never really be detached from policy and its implications. Here then is the choice to try to decline the title of this article in the plural, because participation is never just one, but changes meaning depending on the contexts in which it is practiced. Moreover, it assumes different meanings in the personal lives of those who experience it, be they parents, children, or educators. By its very nature, participation demands that childcare initiatives devise multiple forms of collaboration so as to enable all stakeholders to be involved in their own way. Thus, the simple question "what is participation?" is the *leitmotiv* that accompanies my reflection process within the Belgian context, in order to understand the Belgian reality in relation with the Italian one.

The methodology adopted included an *in loco* literature review, meetings with governmental and NGO bodies working in the field, and 20 semi-structured interviews with parents, teachers, educators and those responsible for 0-6 years old initiatives in the Flemish and French-speaking communities<sup>1</sup>. The interviews proved to be very interesting for the

---

<sup>1</sup> More specifically, some services of the French and Flemish-speaking Communities (0-6 years), particularly in Ghent, Brussels, Liège and Louvain La Neuve, were involved

purposes of understanding how the services were organized and actors' perception of them, although it was sometimes difficult to get an in depth insight due to the languages used (English in the Flemish Community and French in the French-speaking Community). These languages were not the mother tongue of the interviewer and sometimes not even of the interviewee(s)<sup>2</sup>.

### *Early childcare initiatives in Belgium*

Belgium itself can be considered a plurality of contexts. Geographically-speaking, it is indeed quite a small country (30.513 km<sup>2</sup> with roughly 10 million inhabitants); however, it is complex and varied in its composition. More specifically, Belgium is a federal state consisting of three regions (the Flemish Region, the Walloon Region, and the Brussels Capital Region) with three language communities (Flemish, French and German-speaking). The federal state, the regions and the communities assume responsibilities in different sectors, with a variety of powers reserved to the country's 589 municipalities. The education sector is under the responsibility of the Communities. In this strong decentralization there is much autonomy but also a big differentiation within a socio-political balance both fascinating and fragile, characterized by a complex way of living together in diversity. With regard to early childhood, albeit with obvious differences, in a certain sense the Italian situation is in somewhat similar,

---

in this process. In addition, I could have the invaluable assistance, in alphabetical order, of: the Association *La Bobine* in Liège (*Centre de communication et de développement*), the Center *VBJK* of Ghent (Vormings Centrum voor Begeleiding de van het Jonge Kind – Resource and Research Centre for Early Childhood Care and Education), the Department of Social Studies of the University of Ghent, the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Liège, the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Mons-Hainaut, the Municipality of Charleroi, the *ONE* of the French-speaking Community (Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance), the *PBD* (Pedagogische Begeleidingsdienst - Department of Education of the City of Ghent), the *RIEPP* (Reseau des Initiatives Enfants-Parents- Professionnels). To all of them I extend my most heartfelt thanks. We must also say that this article does not wish to generalize its conclusions. The interviews are limited, and some realities that I encountered (such as the city of Ghent, and the specific work that the *VBJK* is doing there) are too specific to be able to be generalized.

<sup>2</sup> Parts of the interviews referred to in this article have been translated by the author. I would like to thank Elizabeth Guerin for helping me with the translation of the whole article.

by having (with the law n. 1044/1971) regional responsibility in the regulation of services, and municipal responsibility in their management. This approach implies important consequences when determining a greater local relevance in policy choices, but also a significant distance in the quality of the services offered by different regions. In the Belgian context, Brussels is perhaps emblematic of this complexity, with its bilingual and multicultural identity made up of people of various origins who give rise to a *multi-cultural* society characterized by differences that touch each other, sometimes interacting in an *inter-cultural* way. Considered capital of the European Union, geographically surrounded by Flemish territory, but with an 80% French-speaking population, Brussels is one of the elements that guarantees the unity of Belgium.

Thus, “diversity” (and the associated concept of “similarity”) is an important concept in Belgium, if only for the history and the socio-political composition of a country which is continuously focused on finding a balance between the *resources* of diversity and the *fragmentation* that diversity may bring. The education sector is quite decisive in articulating this dynamic aspect, and the ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) initiatives are, therefore, an important voice for the expression of that reality. Indeed, the three Belgian Communities run the education sector quite independently, without strongly interacting with each other, and reflection on socio-pedagogical issues is lively and productive in many places.

From an organizational point of view, the Flemish-speaking community divides the primary and secondary childcare sector into children aged between 0-2.5 years, and between 2.5-6 years of age. The latter is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, while 0-2.5 initiatives is under the Ministry of Welfare, Family and Equal Opportunities which delegates responsibility to a government agency called *Kind en Gezin* (Child and Family). As far as the socio-pedagogic management of the sector is concerned, the latter relies on the collaboration of the *VBJK* (Vormings Begeleiding Centrum voor de van het Jonge Kind – Resource and Research Centre for Early Childhood Care and Education). It is not by chance that *VBJK* is based in Ghent, a city that is investing many resources in the socio-pedagogical sector, with specific attention given to strategies of inclusion and valorisation of diversity. The services offered by the territory can be private – either profit or non-profit (often inspired by Catholic beliefs) – municipal or community-led.

The French-speaking “counterpart” of *Kind en Gezin* is *ONE* (*Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance*). *ONE* has the responsibility of controlling and supporting (*accompagnamento*) all the 0-12 aged group initiatives.

So as in the Flemish-speaking community, even in the French-speaking community school and early childhood initiatives are not under the responsibility of the same Ministry, and it still exists, just as in Italy, the traditional division between *education* and *care*. This means that the professional qualifications required of the staff in both sectors are quite different, with the obvious side-effects as far as the quality of early childhood services is concerned. As Belgian researchers write (Vandenbroeck, Pirard, Peeters, 2009, 414): «[...] the growing attention towards the social functions of childcare in Flanders and towards its pedagogical functions in the French-speaking community raises questions of professionalization of the childcare workforce. [...] There are two main problems with this professionalization that are common to both communities: the low qualifications for nursery nurses (or childcare staff), and the fact that training for the management of childcare centers is hardly preparing them for this field. In addition and specific for the Flemish community, a third and growing concern is the increasing number of unskilled workforce in childcare. [...] Childcare workers in Belgium receive training at secondary vocational level. This initial training is embedded in a long history of hygienic and technical professionalism and is adapted to the considerations about the pedagogical and social missions of childcare [...]. In addition, Belgium is one of the only European countries where no bachelor degree in early childhood education exists»<sup>3</sup>.

*What does “participation” mean?: in balance between social and educational needs*

The quality of the offer and its evaluation is becoming a central issue in Belgium, as it is in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, where the discussion is heated and reflects different points of view. The relationship between practitioners and families is widely seen as one of the indicators of the quality of a service, although the underlying meaning behind this concept differs frequently from context to context. Even in this case, it is difficult to talk about a single “Belgium”, given that many differences exist

---

<sup>3</sup> ONE tries to support local initiatives through its Quality Code. The main aim of this Code is to determine basic common principles for “quality childcare”, to cope with the very large diversity of childcare provision, and to improve, at the same time, continuity in a split system.

between the Communities and between particular initiatives. The active reflection on these themes is not always able to impact the educational practices. In the French-speaking part, *ONE* does its best to find a more pedagogical orientation which needs to establish itself within a social-health policy tradition that is difficult to eradicate<sup>4</sup>. Within the framework of this kind of renewal, *CERIS* (*Centre de Recherche et d'Innovation en Sociopédagogie familiale et scolaire*) from the University of Mons-Hainaut, is playing an important role. This centre has been carrying out action-researches on parental participation in the French-speaking area for more than thirty years, using an ecological perspective based on Bronfenbrenner's philosophy. Currently, a longitudinal action-research project (*Eduquons ensemble. Parents Partenaires de l'Education*) is underway in all Charleroi kindergarten schools (2.5-6 year age-group). The objective is to promote the language development of children through close collaboration between school, family and society. The different actions envisaged aim at creating a partnership model which can stimulate the awareness of the role of co-education in the Community. This is the result of a strong exchange project between the City of Charleroi, the University of Mons-Hainaut, the French community, schools and families.

There is also ongoing reflection among the Flemish-speaking community even though it focuses on a different objective. At the risk of being labeled as too general and perhaps even extreme, we could say that, in Belgium, and more specifically in Flanders, reflection on these themes seems to hinge on social issues, whereas, in Italy, it is more centered on the pedagogical aspects related to the role of *asilo nido*. However, we should ask what is meant by the term "social". Belgian experts write: «[...] child care should combine three main functions in society. Obviously child care has an economic function, that since long prevails, enabling both men and women to reconcile their parental responsibilities with activities on the labour market. Since the last decades there is more attention for a second function: the pedagogical function [...]. Last, the social function of child care looks at issues of social justice, equal opportunities and therefore also at issues of accessibility, desirability and parental involvement» (Vandenbroeck, Pirard, Peeters, 2009, 409-410).

---

<sup>4</sup> Specifically, for instance, *ONE* is currently working on developing a *Référentiel à la parentalité* in collaboration with a group of practitioners, in order to discuss the meaning of parenthood today. The intention is to produce a final document that can support all initiatives.

Thus, the social function is here linked, primarily, to the ability to provide equal access to services for everybody, with specific attention to the most disadvantaged social groups and to ethnic-linguistic minority groups. The *VBJK* Center, in collaboration with the Flemish Community has been pursuing, for instance, for some years, an action-research in this perspective in Brussels. The objective is to guarantee all parents a more equal access to services<sup>5</sup> in most Belgian cities the day care centre enrolment criterion is based on a “first comes first served” logic, so enrolment follows the order in which families have applied for registration. In other words, diversely to what happens in Italy, in Belgium, more often than not, no specific local authority office exists where families can apply for enrolment. Research (Vandenbroeck, De Visscher, Van Nuffel, Ferla, 2008; Peeters, Vandenbroeck, 2010) has highlighted that such an approach creates disparities between “native” middle-class socially advantaged families on the one hand, and “newcomers” or families with greater socio-economical difficulties on the other hand. The former, by having greater access to information about enrolment procedures and by being more a part of the system, manage to complete the paperwork more quickly than those recently-arrived immigrants or those with less access to information circuits. When interviewed, a “native Belgian” mother stated: «I found out how to enroll my daughter in day-care through friends. When you are pregnant friends begin to advise you to look for a daycare centre because the waiting lists are very long». A mother from Ghana who has been living in Ghent for three years instead stated: «when I arrived I was pregnant and I did not know that I had to apply for the daycare centre when I was pregnant. So when I arrived, I took a one-month language course and then the baby was born and I did not have a day care». As a result of this kind of tale, the action-research carried out in Brussels by *VBJK* sets out to reserve some places in early childhood services for the children of “newcomers” who are following a language course, or children of people in training or seeking employment. One of the aims is to facilitate the “acclimatization” of new immigrants into society, but there is also an incentive to increase the workforce and to ensure the participation, within the services, of people from different socio-cultural backgrounds, in order to promote intercultural exchanges while offering *all* children stimulating

---

<sup>5</sup> The project was originally called *Kinderopvang voor Nieuwkomers* (Early childhood education for “newcomers”). Over time the name was changed to *Functie van Kinderopvang Sociale* (Social initiatives for early childhood).

opportunities for growth. Initially, on the basis of the results from this action-research, the Flemish government has obliged all public or financially-supported early childhood services to reserve 20% of places for the so-called “vulnerable families” (low-income families, or those seeking employment or in training etc.)<sup>6</sup>. It is through this type of action that the same mother from Ghana interviewed in Ghent states: «indeed, it was the language-course assistant who got me this daycare place. The reason I got the place was to enable me to attend the course and learn Dutch, so that I could then find a job». The same project also tries to promote the presence of multi-ethnic staff within the services, with the two-fold purpose of, on the one hand, stimulating “newcomers” participation from both a social and labour viewpoint, and, on the other, offering to families a space within which they can recognize their identity, through the use of practitioners who share their own cultural origins. Similarly, some projects try to promote the presence of male staff in daycare centers and schools, as well as to focus on the involvement of fathers in school life. The latter, however, still requires a lot of work in this direction, and the situation in Italy is even worse<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, on one hand, attention to diversity becomes the focus of initiatives that reflect on the circular relationship between demand and supply, and, on the other, also on the knowledge that, although offering services stimulates families’ demand (Istituto degli Innocenti, 2006), it is also true that the supply of a service is not in itself sufficient to stimulate the demand from *everybody*. In other words, we need different strategies to reach different segments of the population, if we really want the services to be availed of by *all* those people who are living in our society. This seems to be an interesting aspect on which we can also reflect in our Italian context, where some valuable education experiences related to early childhood exist, but they reflect less on the real impact that these experiences could have in a society that is changing, which is made up, more and more, of different families. Indeed, some of these families are not always represented within the services because they are more difficult to reach if only using the procedures with which we are familiar.

---

<sup>6</sup> In the French-speaking Community, legislation envisages that 10% of places in childcare services must be allocated to those in urgent need.

<sup>7</sup> In this regard, the project *Ecce Ama!* (European Equal Project) led by VBJK in Flanders, has developed strategies for the inclusion of the “vulnerable” population in daycares’ staff, promoting training and paying at the same time special attention to ensure the presence of man in the working group (Peeters, 2008).

*What does "participation" mean?: a balancing-act between collective and individual dimensions*

Attention to diversity often seems to go hand in hand with attention to individuality. In this sense, we must specify that the concept of difference is here seen in its broader meaning, not as the meeting/clash amongst different cultures, but, as the meeting/clash amongst *people* who are culturally different, which means amongst us all (Rossi, 2004).

Again with the risk of being charged with generalization, we can perhaps say that (with different ways of managing services) a service is considered to be "of quality" in Belgium when the focus is on the individual relationship with the child and the parent, and tries to meet the specific needs of each one. «We work a lot on diversity. – explains an educator – There are not many common habits, there are individual needs. There are children who will only go to sleep if you rock them, so, at first, we do it here too. [...] If a parent says "I want my child to sleep in this way" then I do as told, without making any judgment. For example, if we have a child who is used to sleep in his/her parents' bedroom at home, then we cannot put him/her immediately into the sleeping room; we have to put him/her in a quiet place in the daycare centre, so the child knows that there are other people in the room and (s)he feels more at ease. [...] We try to give to the parent the feeling that whatever (s)he does is fine». A focus on individual needs emerges here together with the awareness of the importance of restoring parents' confidence in their own competences. «Here – says the director of a service – we are flexible, we don't have an entry or exit timetable because we want to respond to individual needs. This means that a parent can bring along the child even at half past eleven or twelve, even while some children are eating, and if (s)he wants (s)he can stay here for two or three hours with him/her, or as long as (s)he wants. The service is open to families and our main task is to meet their specific needs». When I ask if this kind of flexibility can lead to some "problems" in the organization, the answer is: «No, there are no problems. For us it is important that each child's rhythms are respected. [...] For the practitioners it can be difficult to follow everything, parents and children, but they know how it works. [...] I have to say that the fact that parents can come into the class makes them realize how things work here, so sometimes they help, they realize how things are. It is not that we do not have structures, but that these structures are flexible and parents are aware and involved». Individual needs are therefore given in depth consideration and parents show that they appreciate this kind of



attention very much. «At first I did not know what it would be like for my child – explains a mother who was interviewed – and I was a bit worried because he would have had to change his habits, but they got me to come three times with my child so that they could see how I fed him, how I put him to sleep, and how I changed his diapers. This calmed me down». «Sometimes – says another mother – my daughter goes to sleep late and then she wakes up late in the morning and so we arrive late at the day-care centre. But that is not a problem, here you can come anytime, in the day-care centre I used to take him to, this was not allowed».

“Coming in at half-past eleven or twelve, or perhaps during lunch” is rarely allowed in the Italian daycare centers, because childcare initiatives are seen, on the one hand, as places that need to meet the individual needs, but, on the other, these needs are nonetheless circumscribed within a collective context. In this way even mealtime at the daycare centre takes on an added-value that goes way beyond the simple “eating of food”. “We do not sit at the table to eat but to eat together”, Plutarch used to say. That is to say, eating (especially with children who are more than one year old) takes on its fullest meaning in the “eating together”, in creating a time-space when we “reciprocally nourish our relationships”, in which we create the group, we get to know each other by sharing not only food, but parts of ourselves. In other words, the Italian day-care centre is now defined by many as a “meeting space”, a social microcosm in which the group becomes more than the sum of its parts, and creates a support network for the individual growth of adults and children. We try to respond to the growing loneliness of children (often only children) and families by offering meeting space and time, opportunities to be together, to exchange experiences, to meet and create a feeling of “belongingness” (Catarsi, 2005). Hence, the value assigned to the small group, seen as the dimension of mutual recognition and support in experiences which are, at one and the same time, common and diverse. An educator interviewed within the context of a research undertaken a few years ago (Sharmahd, 2007), explained the approach as follows: «We organize the environment in small groups of three or four infants at a time, because we believe that both infants and parents can find the support that they need within the group». The small group is the main working strategy in the Italian childcare services, both with children and with parents. The space in each daycare centre is organized keeping in mind this need, so we have “corners” with a specific identity (a symbolic corner, a soft corner, a reading corner etc.), in order to let the children divide themselves up spontaneously into small groups and in-

teract in the most autonomous way, with few interventions by the adults. In this sense, we look at the adult as a “movie director” (regista) who offers the children a thought time-space so that they can organize their activities, rather than wanting to propose activities for them. In other words, the educator has to “support” more than to “stimulate”, considering that children are already capable and competent people. Even when the educator “proposes” specific activities (painting, drawing etc.) the small group is always the preferred strategy. That is why educators must have methodological competences in order to program, to observe, to evaluate and to document what they have been observing. Being a bit “behind the scene” by offering a space that can be “read” and managed by the children themselves, gives educators the opportunity to have time to observe and to reflect on what the children do. As Annalia Galardini writes (2003, 95, trans.): «[...] the small group constitutes the privileged context for relationships amongst children, and encourages the development of experiences which link them together and create bonds. By small groups we mean groups formed of between three and eight children. For infants who are less than a year old, the opportunity to interact with others is found in the attention given by the adult to create opportunities for play on the rug [...], whereas during routine activities a more individual relationship should be preferred. [...] For older children, occasions such as mealtimes, changing-times, and bedtimes can become moments of conviviality and social exchanges to be shared with others, just as play activities. [...] Often adults prefer to be all together [...]. For an adult, the daily act of becoming part of a small group is not easy. One has to have solved beforehand a whole series of organizational problems, as well as professional ones which demand commitment and precision».

From the Italian perspective, the small group is considered one of the best ways of working even with parents. Childcare initiatives envisage individual meetings with parents (such as a meeting with each parent *pre-ambientamento* into the environment and *post-ambientamento* into the environment). The reason for this is to build-up the relationship with the educator, but there are also small-group meetings, in order to discuss matters related to the development of the children. Sometimes day-care centers organize some meetings called *Percorsi di sostegno alla genitorialità*, where a small group of parents discuss specific themes chosen by them (aggression, sleeping etc.). The aim is to offer parents a place where they can meet and discuss, seeing, in this strategy, a way to auto-support themselves. The meetings are coordinated by a “communication facilitator” who works without giving universal answers, but by letting

the parents themselves discover their own answers, through the use of communication strategy often influenced by the techniques of verbal encouragement that Carl Rogers has been studying.

For the same reasons, even the first period that a child passes in a day-care centre (*ambientamento*) is organized most of the time in small groups. «We organize the *ambientamento* in small groups, three or four children and parents together – says an educator interviewed for the research conducted a few years ago on parental involvement in the day-care centers in Tuscany (Sharmahd, 2007) – because we think that in the small group both children and parents can find the support they are looking for. In this way, those three or four children and parents who arrive at the same time create a relationship among themselves. These parents talk to each other and reassure each other about their worries». The small group becomes, in reality, a sort of “ideal size” in support of parenthood in an empowering way, as well as a privileged way of working with children with the space divided into corners/areas that stimulates the spontaneous aggregation of children in groups capable of reciprocal interaction, cooperation, conflict and conflict-resolution strategies.

The “Belgian” *ambientamenti* (in what are considered “high-quality” day-care centers) are organized mostly individually, with a strong emphasis on the individual and the specific relationship that is created between practitioner, parent and child. «In small groups? – says an educator interviewed in Belgium – No, no. Here we use individual strategies, because each individual has his/her own rhythm». The more or less common idea seems to be that the decision to focus on the collective dimension surely takes away value from the individual one and *vice versa*.

The different choices made by these two countries are linked to the socio-political evolution of these societies and to the socio-democratic or liberal tradition that goes with them, reminding us once again that education without politics does not exist and that the meanings of the words we use in education always need a strong contextualization in time and space. It was by looking into its own history that “Spazio Insieme” (“Shared Spaces”) in Rome, “Tempo per le famiglie” (“Time for families”) in Milan (Mantovani, 1997), “Aree Bambini” (“Children Area”) in Pistoia, and all kinds of complementary services, emerged in Italy. These are initiatives that base their identity on meeting and listening to the needs of parents to have exchange times and places thus valuing the resources of the group (Musatti, Picchio, 2006). In Belgium, the individualization of intervention means that opportunities of this kind are only slightly developed, even if, specifically as a result of the col-

laboration with Italian experts, some Belgian contexts are trying to offer similar pioneering experiences. In these kinds of contexts parents can meet each other and spend some time together drinking tea or coffee and talking, whilst the children play in the presence of an educator. So the aim of these initiatives is to offer families a “meeting place” where they can share their parental experiences, and give each other support, in order to feel less lonely in a society where parents are often alone, not just from a practical point of view, but also from an emotional one. The complexity of modern society and the changes which it has undergone in the last decade have made the very family institution itself change (Cambi, 2003). It has been called on to follow diverse and uncertain paths which make it almost impossible, today, to define a single model of “the family”. Becoming a parent is a choice which one makes later and later in life due to a series of economically-based reasons, to young people desire to realize personal ambitions, to the desire to prolong the life of the couple, together with the greater awareness of the responsibility associated with being a parent. The widespread phenomenon of the one-and-only child – which contributes to the re-defining of relationships within the family – is the direct result of all of the afore-mentioned; this further constitutes, at one and the same time, the real and symbolic explanation of the solitary condition which more and more families are experiencing nowadays. Single parents try to take care of children who are just as alone as they are and who rarely have the opportunity to enjoy a real space in which they can compare themselves to others in a similar condition. Hence, for an ever growing number of families, childcare initiatives become the first real meeting-place, the first exchange context in which different types of parenting come together. In the last few years, these initiatives have inevitably changed in the effort to meet the social and educational needs of their “users” (better “partners”), as well as their support and comparative needs. The Roman “Spazio Insieme”, developed along the lines of the Milanese “Tempo per le famiglie”, which became a reality in Rome thanks to a four-year (1998-2002) project, try to answer such needs. Thus, the objective is to provide support for the “everyday-life” of the parenting experience which, within such contexts, can find a “testing-ground” to experiment new forms of one’s role, so as to highlight the mediation role that such initiatives play not only extrinsically between the public and private dimensions, but also intrinsically within the very loops of private relationships. Such experiences, which take place in the context of childcare centers thanks to the commitment of internal personnel, have enabled families to experiment with new ways

of “taking-care-of” oneself and of one’s offspring; they have enabled children to open up to new experiences, and educators to see themselves as actors in a different role which focuses more on the relational aspects of care-giving as well as on the activity of observation which renders one capable of sharing but also of stepping-back, as needed, so as to leave space for the real voices of both parents and children. In Belgium, the individualization of the initiatives means that this type of perspective is less strong, even though, through collaboration with Italian experts, some contexts are now trying to introduce similar experiences into Belgium<sup>8</sup>. The reflection in this direction reminds us that if education is seen as a shared social responsibility, then society must take care of it, perhaps by focusing on an idea of welfare which is capable of creating an integrated system of services 0-6 years that offers spaces of “belonging” in which families and children can identify themselves. Thus, the identity path of each of us is bound to the group (or groups) to which we feel we belong, and the bond of belongingness creates that “desire to participate” that Jean-Pierre Pourtois sees as a “good contagious virus”, capable of bringing lifeblood to our transformative capacity. Group and individual, far from erasing each other’s meaning are, rather, enriched by their mutual interaction which feeds their growth process.

Participation, belongingness, group, individuality, identity, all become concepts that are then bound together, giving value to each other, in order to “feed” that relationship between *freedom* and *responsibility* that is a fundamental part of democracy.

### *Participation and documentation*

And democracy cannot develop without the voice of every single individual. Therefore documentation, which gives voice to the voices, becomes a tool to spread democracy itself. ECEC initiatives are powerful and bring with them responsibility in this field, because through the documentation of their experiences they can influence political choices and raise awareness.

---

<sup>8</sup> In Brussels the NGO *Opvoeden in Brussels* (Educating in Bruxelles), with the collaboration of experts and researchers in the sector, is for instance developing a project that wants to create a “Spazio Insieme” called “Baboes”, on the model of the Roman initiatives.

The documentation is in fact addressed to several types of stakeholders: besides parents, who partake in the lives of their children in the day-care centre or school, it is addressed to children who are living the experience and in this way can recognize and identify it; to the educators themselves who are thus able to rework what they are doing and to reflect on it critically; to the wider community and political system which are thus made aware of the socio-pedagogical value of the services. In other words, to document means to explain, first of all to ourselves and then to others, the meaning of what is being done and what has been done, and this is vital if we want to stimulate the *sharing* and not the imposition of the educational choices that we intend to make.

Documentation favours the development of a real intersubjectivity amongst a working group. It facilitates communication amongst these actors and with colleagues from other contexts. Indeed, it is obvious that the production of documentation can be seen as both an individual and a group knowledge-building process which enables those involved to substitute intellectual ego-centricity which can, sometimes, even negatively condition the work of good educators within the educational services. Indeed, documenting encourages the reflexive examination of one's own way of working and this can also stimulate the development of self-critical behavior. It is obvious that this competence must be acquired by the educator, who must know why experiences are being collected and must be in a position to collect them using flexible tools, which do not impinge on his/her work time. It is clear that, if it were not so, the risk would be that educators might consider the documentation as a formal requirement; hence, they would not avail of it as a privileged opportunity to reflect on their own activity. The complexity of documentation is such that it cannot be left to the sole discretion of the educator and its development must, therefore, be envisaged within the work time and negotiated those who are responsible within the organization. In other words, a number of hours to dedicate to this activity need to be timetabled by limiting the workload in other aspects.

In the Italian context, some realities have built up – over the years – a real wealth of shared knowledge and practices around the subject of documentation, which highlights the in depth link between the skill of documenting and observing. «The exercise of observation and documentation – writes Annalia Galardini (2003, 143-144) – more than a matter of available resources, is a mental *habitus*; it is a tendency that must be addressed in education and that can be achieved even with very simple tools which are available to all: paper, pen, camera, recorder [...] So that

these observations are effective, they need to be prepared, put in order [...]. The same goes for pictures and slides that need to be reviewed and selected in flexible and meaningful sequences, keeping in mind what was the agreed purpose. Through shared reflection and discussion amongst colleagues, as well as in the common discussion, the most constructive aspect of documentation becomes a reality. Through these reflections, which impact professional growth, we are delighted to understand and learn together, how to work in order to create a community aimed at the construction of knowledge». Welcome, then, to the panels that let the walls of the day-care centers “speak” and that accompany in a logical and meaningful way the path of adults and children within the service, by enabling the space to be readable and so reveal its identities through pictures and thoughts. And, welcome, even, to the weekly reports that stimulate the value of everyday life of the day-care centre. The reports can be read by the parents who can, thus, “enter” the day-care centre and share what their children have done during the day. The personal diary is also extremely important; it is written by the educators about each child with the aim of giving him/her the experience that (s)he has in the day-care centre and giving the family this little piece of their child’s life. Other strategies which we can document with include double-entry notebooks for educators and parents (they can both write in order to share experiences about each child), video, pictures. All of this is accompanied by a common thread that binds the individual to the collective dimension on the basis of a shared meaning.

Documentation thus helps to restore meaning to participation. And as participation cannot be just “one type”, but needs to deploy different forms, so everyone can recognize his or her own way of “being there”, so too the documentation requires many forms and instruments which give everyone a voice in making documentation.

When compared to the Italian context, Belgium has begun working more recently in this direction, and is trying to introduce this kind of approach in some places. Belgium has begun the innovation, even if it is not always easy to accompany change and the introduction of new instruments, and manage the organizational consequences that result, by starting with the investment in “non-frontal” hours, or with the introduction of methodological competences amongst those competences that practitioners should have. In this respect, the work that the VBJK Center is doing in some day-care centers in Ghent is very interesting. The VBJK is trying to encourage reflection amongst practitioners through documentation, thanks also to the fruitful exchange that the Center has built

over time with Pistoia. As regards the French-speaking Community, we must underline the documentation-work carried out by ONE, which, in recent years, has been greatly involved in creating books, brochures, booklets which provide information for educators, teachers, parents and children. Some of these documents, accompanied by text and images, address topics related to everyday education, with careful attention to the type of language used in relation to the recipients.

### *Conclusion*

*Sometimes we need a new way of thinking  
to solve problems caused by the old way of thinking*  
Albert Einstein

It is not easy to speak about “Italy” or “Belgium” in a unified way. With all due internal differences, we can, nonetheless, say that the socio-political evolution of these two countries has led them to give different nuances to certain terms which, as far as the relationship with families is concerned, seem to us to be particularly focused on individual relationships on the one hand, and on group-resources on the other hand. The little and big consequences of this choice are many, and affect not only day-care, but, even more generally, the school and the society as a whole. It then becomes important to reflect on these different and similar perspectives, even if it is just to more critically observe our choices, in order to sketch the kind of society that we would like to build together with “our” children. It is equally important that educators themselves reflect on the choices they make daily and on the reasons why they make these particular choices in an effort to keep the connection between educational intents and practices alive. What role do we want individual and communitarian paths to have in our societies? And, what are the risks and the resources that these two dimensions bring with them?

This kind of work will hardly take shape if left simply to the ability of individual practitioners. Instead, it will be necessary to “inscribe” staff competences within a context which enables their explanation in a synergic manner. Thus, initial and *in itinere* training is very important, but even the role of the Pedagogical Coordination (which in Italy is Municipal) becomes fundamental. It must develop in a deliberate and clearly shared macro-project that accompanies the groups and guides them along a coherent path. This issue will become even stronger when



we consider contexts dominated by private service-initiatives which risk (perhaps even more than public ones) being self-reference models excluded from the comparison which enriches the reflection by offering a context in which to take shape.

### References

- Blanc M.-C., Bonnabesse M.-L. (2008): *Parents et professionnels dans les structures d'accueil de jeunes enfants. Enjeux, interest et limites des interactions*. Rueil-Malmaison Cedex: ASH editions.
- Cambi F. (2003): Genitori e figli nell'età contemporanea, in Cambi F., Catarsi E. (a cura di), *Genitori e figli nell'età contemporanea: relazione in rapida trasformazione*, Istituto degli Innocenti, Firenze.
- Catarsi E. (2005): I genitori nell'asilo nido, in Catarsi E., Fortunati A., *Educare al nido. Metodi di lavoro nei servizi per l'infanzia*. Roma: Carocci.
- Galardini A.L. (a cura di) (2003): *Crescere al nido. Gli spazi, i tempi, le attività e le relazioni*. Roma: Carocci.
- Istituto degli Innocenti (2006): *I nidi e gli altri servizi educativi integrativi per la prima infanzia. Rassegna coordinata dei dati e delle normative nazionali e regionali al 31/12/2005*, Quaderno 36, Firenze.
- Mantovani S. (1997): Oltre il nido: il tempo per le famiglie, in Bondioli A., Mantovani S. (a cura di), *Manuale critico dell'asilo nido*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Musatti T. e Picchio M. (2006), *Un luogo per bambini e genitori nella città. Trasformazioni sociali e innovazione nei servizi per l'infanzia e le famiglie*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- One (2007): *Rapport annuel de l'Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance*. Charleroi.
- Peeters J. (2008): *The construction of a new profession. A European perspective on professionalism in Early Childhood Education and Care*. Amsterdam: SWP.
- Peeters J. e Vandenbroeck M. (2010): *Caring and learning together. Case study on Ghent (Flanders)*. Paris: Unesco.
- Pourtois J.P., Desmet H. (2006): *L'educazione postmoderna*. Tirrenia (PI): Edizioni del Cerro.
- Rossi B. (2004). *L'educazione dei sentimenti. Prendersi cura di sé, prendersi cura degli altri*. Milano: Unicopli.
- Sharmahd N. (2007). *La relazione tra educatrici e genitori al nido: aspettative e percezioni reciproche*. Tirrenia (PI): Edizioni del Cerro.
- Vandenbroeck M., De Visscher S., Van Nuffel K., Ferla J. (2008): Mothers' search for infant child care: the dynamic relationship between availability and desirability in a continental European welfare state. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, n. 23, pp. 245-258.
- Vandenbroeck M., Pirard F., Peeters J. (2009): New developments in Belgian Child Care Policy and Practice. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, vol. 17, n. 3, pp. 407-416.