

Fa.C.E. – Farsi Comunità Educanti: integrazione nei servizi educativi e di cura per l’infanzia

Fa.C.E. – Farsi Comunità Educanti: lesson learned for integration in Early Childhood Education and Care services

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ABSTRACT

Fa.C.E., a 3-years project has as core objective creating “the conditions to build an educating community which would lead to a redefinition of educational policies in the areas involved” (FRC, 2017). This article will analyze some of its innovative strategies also in the light of the Successful Educational Actions for inclusion and social cohesion (Flecha 2014), social capital theory (Putnam, 2000; Hollis, 1998; Uhlaner, 1989) and Reggio Emilia Approach (Dahlberg et al., 2007, Rinaldi, 2006).

ABSTRACT

Fa.C.E., progetto triennale, aveva come obiettivo creare “le condizioni per costruire una comunità educante che porti alla ridefinizione delle politiche educative nelle aree coinvolte” (FRC, 2017). Questo articolo analizzerà alcune delle sue strategie innovative anche alla luce delle Successful Educational Actions per inclusione e coesione sociale (Flecha 2014), la teoria del capitale sociale (Putnam, 2000; Hollis, 1998; Uhlaner, 1989) e il Reggio Emilia Approach (Dahlberg et al., 2007, Rinaldi, 2006).

KEYWORDS / PAROLE CHIAVE

ECEC; Reggio Emilia Approach; Social Capital; Social Inclusion; Relational Goods

INTRODUCTION

This article analyses Fa.C.E., a 3 year-project, led by Reggio Children Foundation (FRC) and financed by social enterprise Con I Bambini, to determine whether its innovative approach, grounded in the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA) and its philosophy of listening, can be effective in promoting social inclusion, educational gain, and social capital creation especially for disadvantaged families.

Fondazione Reggio Children (FRC), part of the REA system, 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 (FRC, 2021). At the core of this vision is an ecological approach which involves working together with all stakeholders to reshape educational patterns. (Rinaldi, 2006; Malaguzzi in Edwards et al., 1998), that sees 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).

This vision, clearly referring to the socio-constructivist movement, sees civil society as the place where social interactions involving state, market, associations, social movements, families, and individuals, can take place. Due to diversity and complexity confrontation between different opinions is common. For dialogue, understanding and mediation among different points of view to take place, there is a need for special virtual and physical places. 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 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). Not a majority deciding for all, but the co-construction of a common understanding. This approach does not have to be confined to schools, but it can be applied to all «spaces» (from now on «forums») that share with schools a key characteristic: the coming together of people sharing a strong investment and interest on a common good. These «forums» are places potentially rich in strong horizontal connections and therefore in relational goods and social capital (Putnam, 2000).

Relational goods are constructs emerging from social interactions that have communication and caring at their core. Their characteristics are:

1. Identity – Only interactions involving people who recognize each other can display caring and affectivity.
2. Simultaneity – Relational goods are produced and consumed at the same time, as they emerge from the quality of the interactions itself.
3. Reciprocity – Only if the interaction is reciprocal can value emerge from it, otherwise it is not interaction at all. When the two parties have different motives and emotional connection, relational goods will not emerge.
4. Motivations - all parties involved in the social interaction must view the relation as a good itself, and not use it as a mean to other ends. (Uhlener, 1989)

Only when interactions with these characteristics take place repeatedly in a specific context, can they trigger generalized reciprocity, true and stable base for social cooperation in line with liberal theories. The opposite idea that cooperation toward a common goal could generate in a vacuum, based on the altruism of certain individuals, has very little rational grounds (Hollis, 1998). The accumulation of relational goods generates what has been defined as social capital (Hannifan, 1916). Hannifan used social capital to convey the idea of accumulation. Before any collective action could take place, people had to interact with each other in social occasion, “form an habit of coming together” (1916, p.131). More recently Putnam defines social capital as “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (2000, p. 19).

Meeting places become «forums», places where social capital can be accumulated, when they bear some of the burdens and work necessary to build relations (CS embeddedness). They voucher for participants and members, offer non-competitive meeting opportunities, foster sharing of information and knowledge among members. All these actions are

functional to building relations strong although compartmentalized to the specific forum. (Small, 2009).

International research helps in identifying «forums» characteristics. Especially relevant to the role of educational institutions in promoting social cohesion and cooperation is the research-based approach of *INCLUD-ED: Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education* (a 2006–2011 project financed by the European Commission).

The project identifies 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, p.3). It defines 5 ways in which a community can participate to schools. Among them it identifies the ‘educative’ style and the ‘decisive’ style as the most effective in promoting social cohesion and school success. Those are the ones that emerge from the *Fa.C.E.* approach, it is therefore important to analyze what they imply.

In institutions that show an ‘educative’ style, community members are involved to different degrees in students’ learning activities, both as co-educators and co-learners. Institution with ‘educative’ style see their educational mission as spreading outside classroom walls. They therefore offer educational programs that respond to adults’ needs and interests, applying an egalitarian and dialogical approach to adult learning. Some design courses and activities to which children and parents can attend together. These activities foster a comprehensive vision of learning and increase intergenerational cohesion. This approach promotes interactions and learning, improving multicultural coexistence and enhancing human resources in the community. (Flecha, 2014; Bartee, George, 2019)

The ‘decisive’ style implies that stakeholders take part in decision-making processes. This style leads to greater democracy within each institution by granting that all voices can be heard for the definition and management of educational activities. The dialogic confrontation on issues and the need for common decisions help overcome prejudice and improve relationships within the community (Flecha, 2014; Bartee, George, 2019).

Another lesson learned from *INCLUD-ED* is the value of 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, p.10). It is a process aiming at collective meaning-making and giving space to all contributing voices.

This idea is central to *REA* research and is implemented both in pre-schools daily work and in all external projects (Edwards et al., 1998; Rinaldi, 2006). It is embodied in the reflexive and dialogic processes, that are the backbones of every activity design. It is enhanced by specific tools such as pedagogical documentation, the constant collection of observations «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, p.107). The process involves both collecting evidence in a visible form and discussing them in a group. Giving meaning to learning processes implies making choices. Only doing it within a collective meaning-making framework can protect from arbitrary manipulation, grant deeper understanding, and foster generative questions that will help the learning process moving forward (Rinaldi, 2006).

These processes are supported by the role of facilitators, experts who sustain participants in deepening their understanding, broadening their ideas, and substantiating their judgments. They do not take decisions, but are active partners in an open dialogue, respectful of participants point of view, a necessary ingredient to come to shared and meaningful common actions (Dahlberg et al., 2007).

FARSI COMUNITA' EDUCANTI - Fa.C.E

REA pedagogical, organizational, philosophical approach has proven effective in Reggio Emilia for 50 years in fostering social capital creation and social inclusion. The question is whether it could be sustainable and effective in new territories and within a shorter time span. This article analyzes Fa.C.E. to understand whether REA characteristics, consistent with the social capital and SEA framework, applied during a 3-year project in organizations with different pedagogical culture can still be affective in the creation of ECEC services that can turn into true social capital, especially for disadvantaged families (Bartee, George, 2019; Flecha, 2014).

To implement Fa.C.E. FRC built and coordinated a team of 20 local and national partners in 4 urban areas: Reggio Emilia (Regina Pacis); Teramo (city center); Napoli (Ponticelli); Palermo (Sperone-Brancaccio). These are geographically confined neighborhoods within larger cities, where great potentials and educational efforts experience difficulties in overcoming educational poverties. Reasons for educational poverty vary from economic distress, and criminality, to disruption of the social tissue due to an earthquake to cultural diversity. They are also neighborhoods where many families with no access to ECEC services reside. (FRC, 2017, 2021a)

The idea of educational institutions as public forums and a participatory approach to ECEC services informed the whole Fa.C.E. project. For instance, in each area the project involved in the dialogue at least one school, local administration, formal and informal associations, individuals, and families, all on the base of reciprocity and respect. This analysis focuses on two specific aspects: the role of specific partners in fostering ECEC services integration and the co-designing process.

ECEC services integration: the role of wise facilitators

Key project concern was the harmonization of health, educational and social services. These services often work separately. This problem emerged also in the target territories during the preparatory research (FRC, 2021a). Yet, good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, safety and security, opportunities for early learning, are the five key components of the early childhood nurturing care framework (<https://nurturing-care.org>). These goals cannot be reached by a single entity, but only by the joint effort of social, health and educational services working together in the same territory to grant a more effective use of resources and a wider reach. While the need for this integration is widely accepted the examples of it are scares.

FRC involved a series of national partners since the initial stage of the projects, to support this specific overarching aspect, among them:

- Amref, a non-profit international organization in the field of health promotion, contributed to the project with field research on best practices of services integration and a nationwide network that created local venues for dialogue among partners, instrumental to reaching fragile families and involving them in all services, granting a comprehensive approach to children's and families' wellbeing.
- GNNI, the coordinating network for toddler centers and pre-schools, provided the expertise to sustain development of quality ECE services in the territories involved, encouraging networks building to exchange educational experiences.
- Reggio Children srl designed and supported training actions, based on *REA*, tailored to local needs. Specific training bringing together teachers and educators, administrators and social workers, pediatricians, and health department officials, has been a precious venue for dialogue among services involved in the same territory (FRC, 2017).

They facilitated the connection and involvement of families with no access to services, the collective dialogue and mutual learning among potential stakeholders and partners, the creation of a wide and multidimensional network, base for an educating community.

The co-designing process

The year-long codesigning phase is specific to Fa.C.E. and unusual among similar projects that typically come to the territories with a preconceived formula. The codesigning started from mapping local needs and resources. All areas shared the need to build connections among groups working with childhood.

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. (Landi, Yarza Maylinch, 2020)

The co-designing process started with a national meeting, where partners established a collective reflexive dialogue in a safe space where new and generative ideas could take form (Rinaldi, 2006). They shared similar and yet different problems, together could brainstorm, starting from different cues, practical activities, territorial characteristics. The process fostered collective meaning-making, and allowed to sketch actions that shared aims, but respecting local identities (Rinaldi, 2006). Here national partners role was sustaining, encouraging, improving ideas without twisting original meanings. This task went on throughout the project, based on weekly collected pedagogical documentation.

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. Yet every local reality had also special requirements for the emerging educating community to gain strength. Action 1 and 2 stemmed from these needs.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Through these specific actions «intense horizontal interaction» emerged. This, in turn, has fostered, both among partners and stakeholders, the growth of social capital as «features of social organizations, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit» (Putnam in Dahlberg et al., 2007, 79).

According to partners the 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. «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, Napoli (FRC, 2021b). This ingredient sustained project implementation even during the Covid19 pandemic.

Through the project 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 in Action 1 and 2. Given the scope of this article we will present Action 1 and 2 briefly to focus then on overarching results. In Action 1 parents and children shared 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» (FRC, 2021a). While each territory designed this educational interaction in a different way, the core principles stayed the same (FRC, 2021a) and are coherent with the ‘educative’ style institution (Flecha, 2014). It also confirmed INCLU-ED results, as this action increased parents’ awareness on the need for ECEC services and became an opportunity to create a multicultural learning environment (Flecha, 2014).

Participating families have changed their perspective. They give greater importance to family participation in educational activities 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. Those families have increased participation to groups and association (Fondazione Collegio Carlo Alberto in FRC, 2021b).

Action 2 had no common theme; it was shaped by local needs. In Reggio Emilia it became Cucina di Quartiere, a collective Sunday branch, prepared and consumed together and paced by rituals that help creating conviviality and the emergence of relational goods (Sacco and Zamagni, 2006; Landi, 2021). In Palermo Orientamenti a safe and common space where parents could meet early childhood experts. This common reflexive space had a positive effect on parental involvement, and on connecting vulnerable families with ECEC and with a larger parental community (Del Boca et al., 2020). 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. In Napoli it provided spaces and tools needed to engage children in educational activities.

Building a Network

National partners had the same role in the project that have ‘wise facilitators’ in REA (Dahlberg et al., 2007). They embodied this idea both with specific human resources (atelierista, pedagoga, pediatrica), but also with an overarching structure aimed to facilitate the negotiation of common solutions. Amref role both nationally and locally, has been central to grant new channels through which health, social and educational services could work together. 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. GNNI and Reggio Children srl were key to build a shared idea of educational services and educating community and to provide the tools to put it into practice. They introduced to the territories the idea of «forums» (Dahlberg et al., 2007), through collective reflections and actions.

From May 2018 (Fa.C.E.’s 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 encounters, activity-oriented gathering, workshop aimed at triggering a common reflection through non-competitive, collective actions. This approach allowed new ideas to emerge together with a sense of agency (Flecha, 2014). All the gatherings were key for social capital accumulation (Hannifan, 1916). It also granted the widening of the partnership, from 20 local and national partners to 60 participating entities and ensured that the idea of «forums» became part of local culture.

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 project (Anna Amato, Remida, Napoli in FRC, 2021b)

The project’s co-design and involvement in Action 1 and 2, provided participants with a new sense of agency. Participants recognized this, e.g., a mother involved in Action 1 stated: «We have the chance to learn together with our children. » (FRC, 2021a), and Matilde Montanari, a team member «These people come back because they feel welcomed. [...] they can actively take part in designing this project. » from Cucina di Quartiere (Landi, Yarza Maylinch, 2020). This new sense of agency confirmed the results that emerged from the INCLUD-ED project (Flecha, 2014).

FRC actively fostered this sense of agency also among local partners, through continuous proposal for activation and direct involvement, even online. During the final national coordination meeting partners from all areas were actively engaged, in the design a virtual bike, representing Fa.C.E.. This activity effectively sustaining the collective creation of visual metaphors, powerfully representing their experience of the project as a train, where people move together, and as a harmonic chaos, where things get done unexpectedly and

stylishly. This metaphoric process deepened collective understanding of the project (Landi, 2021).

This new sense of agency became evident during the meeting designed to pave the way to project's actions prosecution after July 2021 i.e., the date of Fa.C.E. completion. In every area, in different way, partners showed not only the desire to continue both Actions, but also the means to do so. Interactions among them, collaborative planning, collective evaluation of opportunities had already taken place without waiting for the national coordination, proving active involvement and new awareness (FRC, 2021a).

CONCLUSIONS

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. (FRC, 2021b)

During the 3 years of *Fa.C.E.* implementation partners both at a local and national level moved from being separate entities with common goals to a network of educating communities providing integrated health, social and educational services to families. National partners as facilitators, the building of public forum through active codesigning and implementation, putting into action different SEA to enhance social cohesion and inclusion, proved key to the process. Actions have been implemented in 4 Italian urban areas with different characteristics, thus proving to be duplicable and effective in very different social context.

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