Children, Libraries and Multimedia Resources in Italy: A Fact or a Possible Future?

Research proposal

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❑ *1.0 Establishing the context of the research.*

It's a common opinion (and I'm agree about this) that you can't clearly know what you should find at the beginning

Last June I identified a topic area of my dissertation: three-five years old children and multimedia. I have been interested (and actually I'm) in this topic, but little by little I clarified by myself some issues That hadn't been well clear in my mind.

According to Prof. Pickard, I should have studied children's behaviour in a kinder-garden classroom and I should have interviewed teachers, parents and other caregivers and, of course, children.

First of all, I should define what multimedia are: IST [1]defines multimedia resources as following:

"The use of computers and/or digital functions to present various forms of visual and audio media in a meaningful context. Incorporating: animation, audio elements, CD-ROM, computer entertainment, convergence media, data compression, DVD, graphics and graphics interfaces, hypermedia, text, video, videoconferencing, virtual reality, ... and an ever expanding list of technologies targeting this growth area. "

I chose to study only CD-ROM, software and the Internet used by pre-school children, because I'm aware that in next years there will be different forms of multimedia used by little children, but now they are the most common ones.

Then, I began to spread off my previous literary review, that was about reading and reading-promotion: I started my new literary review without any problem: against all expectations, it was easy to find articles, books and websites about quite a lot of projects made by kinder-gardens' teachers.

Actually, encouraging children's use of computers is one of the aims of Program of Ministry of Education to develop knowledge of new technologies and to promote children's development. Reading articles or books such as Rasetti's *Il computer nella scuola dell'infanzia: esperienze didattiche nella scuola dell'infanzia*, I was amazed by the lack of reference to library or librarians. If you read the first chapter of Rasetti's book, the latest and widest Italian essay on this topic, you'll find an analysis on the teacher's and family's role, and about what happened among teachers after the introduction of the computers in classrooms, but <u>nothing</u> about a library or a librarian, -even as a support.

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[1] Information Society technologies Program By European Union. Further information available at URL: http://www.cordis.lu/ist [26/04/2003]

Furthermore, what puzzled me were:

> ➢ a different language (based on educational theory)

> ➢ a different perspective from mine as a librarian: a large part of literature is about educational plans.

Another event made me feel uneasy: after the reading of an article by Rosaria Cassarino (Cassarino 2002) who worked with five-years old children in a nearby town, I got in touch with her and I contacted the colleague of the local public library: my call surprised him, because he didn't know anything about the project made by the local public kinder-garden.

❑ *2.0 Awareness of an issue and a possible solution*

The first step of my research highlighted:

> ➢ an interesting and expanding research area: the use of multimedia resources in kinder-gardens

> ➢ the absence of the library.

So I had to tackle a problem: was I on the right way? Was it possible for me to find a research field where libraries had to play a role? Or was I running a risk of focusing to an educational area without any link with libraries?

Thinking back on my research project, I realised that the absence of libraries, or better the un-development of computer technology in children's services is a relevant datum by itself, more of all in an European context where the Report from the European Commission's Task Force on Educational Software and Multimedia[2] includes a recommendation that told all public libraries should offer free access to multimedia resources. Moreover, one of European Commission's Projects was CHILIAS[3] (1996-1998), which "developed a new concept for future European children's libraries, providing a stimulating environment for innovative learning and creative use of multimedia and networked technology with links to

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[2] *EMTF. Educational Multimedia Task Force*. URL : http://www.ecotec.com/mes/index.html [04/05/2003]. The Report of the Task Force on Educational Software and Multimedia (working document) is available at: URL : http://www.ecotec.com/mes/en/report796-toc.html.

[3] *CHILIAS : the Virtual European Children's Library of the Future*. URL : http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla64/043-113e.htm [4/05/2003]

traditional library services. The project aimed to enhance the competence of children using interactive multimedia and networked information and communication systems, and to improve their information seeking skills in new learning environments".

There can be little doubt of the fact that Italian Children's libraries have limited experience of integrating computer technology into their services. Although some public libraries do provide some kind of access to IT in their children's services, there is an enormous variety in the resources offered, the extent of the service and level of its funding support. The provision of IT services to children is generally seen as important but not high priority, but as Ormes underlined (Ormes 1998), there are three main reasons why this is crucial:

"1. The need to support literacy

2. The need to provide access to suitable material in whatever format it is

3. The need to provide services which are relevant to the child's life and expectations."

In professional journals about children's literature there are periodical columns on multimedia resources, but the literature, which I found, mainly concerned sources or services for children of 6/14 years.

In addition, another aspect is to be underpinned: the electronic books that can represent a significant new medium, offering "added value to the printed book through its potential for including other media in addition to text on its pages, for example, animation, sound, hypertext and quick searching facilities" (Maynard and McKnight, 2001). E-books seem not very widespread in Italian public libraries, especially in children's libraries.

The real presence and the impact of the introduction of electronic resources into Italian libraries, therefore, can be a worthwhile subject of investigation[4]: it is clear to everyone that the integration of networked services into children's service is of crucial importance, but from my point of view there are still very few examples of services already in place, most of all in the biggest children's libraries. Indeed, it's a common opinion that electronic material can bring people, particularly children, into the library (e.g. Malgaroli, 2000; Agnoli, 2003).

The literature which was found mainly concerned CD-Roms, website and Internet services to young users (usually, in the age range of 8-14): a gap in the literature was observed with regard to the role and opinions of library staff on presence and use of electronic resources in children's libraries. Two research fields could be identified:

1. to analyse and to evaluate how the professional literature deals with electronic services and resources to children;

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[4] Agnoli (Agnoli 2003) underlines the lack of studies on Italian children's libraries.

2. to explore the resources offered by children's libraries and the extent of the service and level of its funding support.

An aspect you don't have to forget is ergonomics: if we, as librarians, know the importance of encouraging children to use computers (Guidelines for children's services), it's important to remember that most workstations are built with adults in mind and that, for a child to use the computer in a comfortable way, adjustments need to be made.

In addition, it would be interesting to make a survey of Italian web sites for children: to identify who their developers are and how and how many times libraries are quoted.

2.1 Study of professional reviews

The first part of dissertation will be a survey about the most popular Italian reviews of children' literature (and their on-line version). I'd prefer to exclude reviews as LEGGO LEGGO, a newsletter of PIEMME Publisher. The most important and common reviews of children's literature are:

SFOGLIALIBRO (supplement of Biblioteche oggi):

ANDERSEN. Il mondo dell'Infanzia

LG argomenti, published by International Children's Library "Edmondo de Amicis" in Genua

LIBER, edited by IDEST in co-operation with Children's Library "GIANNI RODARI" in Campi Bisenzio

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The investigation will concern all the articles about new electronic services and resources, beginning from the first appearance; the chosen articles will be considered from various points of view: length, frequency, subject and the authors.

Indeed, these journals are a reliable source for all children's librarians: the analysis of how they discuss on electronic resources and which of these is the most quoted or reviewed seems to me a good starting point to collect some data in order to gauge current views on the chosen topic.

Besides, the survey will allow me to highlight some aspects of the production and markets of electronic resources in Italy, investigating the presence (or absence) of educational multimedia production.

❑ *2.2 Study of the electronic resources in library services for children: adopted methodology.*

The second part of dissertation will be an analysis of data collected with a questionnaire. The most appropriate participant population for a study on electronic resources within libraries can be identified as being staff of the most important Italian children's public libraries.

It wouldn't be feasible to send the questionnaire to each public library in Italy, as there are more than 1154 only in Lombardia Region.; many public libraries really have children's sections, but I'd prefer to carry out the survey only about children's libraries with its own space and staff, one for every region (whenever it's possible). Moreover, the biggest children's libraries play a leading role as forerunners.

A brief questionnaire will be designed as a means to gather a structured information and a short covering letter will be written to introduce myself and to explain the aims of questionnaire.

An e-mail survey should be carried out, since the addressed population is widely dispersed, and therefore difficult to reach in any other way; besides it's a cheap mean. I suppose I'll call some colleagues to ask for an explanation or to request to fill in the questionnaire.

Pertinent topics to be included in the questionnaire will be determined through the investigation of the relevant literature and a consideration of the found issues.

To identify which and what the most significant issues are (that are ultimately to be included in the questionnaire) is a critical stage: it's essential that the questionnaire should be complete but not too long, easy to understand, without any inconsistencies or discrepancies.

I think it's better to send the questionnaire to a few number of the potential respondents as a pilot study: some changes will be made according to the comments of the pilot participants.

The following issues can be included in the questionnaire:

1. Existing services

   Number of PC stations for children;

   web-pages for children in library's home page

   stocks of CD-ROM or DVDrom;

   E-books

2. How long the library has been supplying IT services

3. Where PC stations and multimedia tools are placed;

4. Whether workstation have the necessary ergonomic adjustments -to the chair, to the desk and to terminal screen-

5. Whether CD-ROM and other multimedia tools are stocked for reference or for loan;

6. Level of funding support

7. charging policies

8. the popularity of multimedia products

9. the selection and collection development of electronic products;

10. security measures (as anti-pornography filter);

11. whether the library organises courses to develop computer literacy for children

12. leaflet on how to use electronic resources

13. the effect on staff

14. general views on the viability, value and attitudes towards multimedia resources.

3.0 Constraints /issues in data collection and possible solutions

The lack of an official list of children's libraries makes more difficult to clearly identify all the potential respondents, but Andersen's Yearbook can be a good starting point.

Whenever it's possible, collected data will be crossed by a professional reviews' study: if a review on a children's library is found, it will be compared with data of questionnaire.

I think it's advisable to check web pages for children to gather further information on attitudes towards multimedia resources.

Moreover, I'm afraid of a low return rate, because lack of time and growing overload of forms to fill in are possible constraints in a research process. A possible solution can be an interview with one or two key witnesses to whom I'll show the data and my considerations: their remarks and suggestions can be integrated in my research outputs.

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5.0 Conjectural outputs

I suppose my research will explore some of the issues connected to the development of multimedia resources in Italian public children's libraries and it will be the starting point to uncover different attitudes of librarians towards including electronic resources as part of children's service.

Though all librarians are aware that electronic services should be regarded more as an integral part of the public library service, (receiving the same attention with regard to such issues as selection, promotion, and stock management as it is given to book stock), I feel that in Italy few libraries have used ICT to support their literature-based services.

As Camminito underlines (Camminito 1998), the library is "the place where citizens define and experience [new] media": so in the new communication system the role of libraries have to be deeply studied, not only involving the library, but also library's workers and I think that this is even more true in children's library, that has the duty to meet children's need and desire for information in a range of media as well as books. It should provide information in appropriate media and formats and also whatever technology is needed to deliver them.

The role –and the attitudes of librarian- can be crucial in a context where many public libraries have a lack of staff, only one of them responsible for children's service. The experiences and the choice of main libraries are traditionally imitated or reworked by other ones: to understand where the main children's libraries have been aimed, it is essential to foresee some next changes that will involve all public libraries with children's service.

As Walter (1997) underlines, "as librarians with a tradition of intellectual freedom, [we] would seek an open and unguarded relationship between children and computers but one built on mutual trust and respect". I think that children's library was born paradoxically as hybrid library (with books, toys, play-books): a good children's library can help to "grow up" a good user of the future's library, hybrid or digital one whatever it is.

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