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► To cite this version:

Aldo Fortunati, Arianna Pucci. Research/action projects on childhood education by sharing experiences in the framework of the EU for the development of quality ECEC services. *Petite enfance : socialisation et transitions*, Nov 2015, Villetaneuse, France. hal-01256227

HAL Id: hal-01256227

<https://sorbonne-paris-nord.hal.science/hal-01256227>

Submitted on 14 Jan 2016

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Research/action projects on childhood education by sharing experiences in the framework of the EU for the development of quality ECEC services

Aldo Fortunati and Arianna Pucci

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Good morning everyone, I'm pleased to be here and I'd like to give my thanks to the organizers for the opportunity to present our experience in this group. I'm ALDO FORTUNATI and I'm the Head of the educational department of the Istituto degli Innocenti of Florence. I'm here with ARIANNA PUCCI, who is one of the researchers of my staff. She has worked with me for the last two years on the TALE project.

This presentation will be divided into three parts:

1. the first part will present the principal elements of the so-called Tuscan Approach to children's education;
2. the second part will be about the TALE project;
3. and the third part serves to give you some final considerations about results and perspectives for the future work.

We are pleased to have with us today a complete documentation of the experience that we are going to present: the book "TALE: Tuscan Approach learning for early childhood education and care. Activities, results and perspectives" including a video, recounting the activities we have developed in the last two years. We hope that their dissemination may attract useful comments and observations.

This does not exonerate us, but may help us, with this talk, to present the work we have done and talk of the possible support that this work can give to support similar reflections in other contexts.

Our point of departure is the valuable experience developed over the last thirty years in Tuscany, one of the Italian regions in which policies and experiences involving childhood educational services have been developed in a privileged context. Our first difficulty was that of defining this experience, because when we speak of a positive experience, we tend to embellish and transform it into a model, as if it could be easily packaged and replicated, irrespective of the context where it is produced. We do not intend to commit such a mistake talking about the Tuscan Approach to child education. Moreover, it would mislead us, for the Tuscan approach has always been built upon exchanges of similar experiences and comparisons of diversities. Therefore, diversities are not faults, rather basic elements useful also in dynamising the Tuscan approach itself, and opening it to innovation and change.

It should be clear that pedagogy is not made of abstractions. It relies on guidelines to be put in a context, giving value to resources and potential coming from the communities where the services are in place.

Therefore, the solution was to try to identify key concepts and find a balance between them. The first three words we identified were: politics, pedagogy and experiences.

In this context, the Tuscan Approach to children's education is interesting – we think – because it demonstrates that three of the following elements – which are not always linked – can be well balanced:

- a clear and durable policy commitment in the field of child education;
- updated and accurate pedagogical research;
- an active and constructive involvement of the local resources in developing the experiences.

But the word “approach” was the one we chose to assert an identity not blocked within the bounds of a model. Starting from the beginning, there are five points that we selected to describe the peculiarity of the Tuscan Approach to children's education and they are:

1. Space design
2. Flexible curriculum
3. Participation and family education
4. Staff qualification and training
5. Governance

Space design

When we speak of space design and education, we refer to the importance of space – architecture, furnishings and materials – to support children's experiences and also children's processes of growth, social relationship and learning. The idea of a space constructively supporting the children's experience belongs to the most recent pedagogical reflections, as long as these prove sensitive to offering the child stimuli and opportunities already within the education context and prior to the initiative of the single educator.

Flexible curriculum

The investment in qualifying space helps us build an idea of a flexible curriculum, open and above all oriented towards a shift from attention to contents to attention to the conditions of the experience offered to children. When speaking of child education, we do not need to prepare the contents table, but we need to prepare the table of conditions, the opportunities offered for children to experience. Investing in space as a resource helps us to develop an indirect pedagogical perspective in which the adults are able to make proposals not only through their direct action but also and above all through the potential that the framework of opportunities that they have organised offers for the children to experience.

Participation and family education

Although in the Tuscan Approach the central role is given to the children, at the same time nobody should underestimate the crucial involvement of families in the development of the education project. What we have in mind is the importance of considering families as real, active actors in the development of the educational project for children. Moreover, the involvement of the families in the education service is also enriched by the numerous occasions of spontaneous meetings and exchanges, which can themselves be considered a sort of family-education context.

Staff qualification and training

In relation to the qualification and training of the staff, we think that in this point it is very important to stress the connection between basic and in-service training, understanding that this kind of connection means also to consider training as a research/action process that means intentions, aims but also opportunities to reflect together, in the group of educators, in order to develop innovation and new projects.

Governance

When we talk about governance, we have in mind not only to develop rules and laws to control ECEC services. We are thinking of a way to control the processes for developing quality, working close to the services, in the field, sharing aims, but also reflections, with educators and families.

A children's school needs proximity and not distances, nor high-sounding designs, but to be built around an activism able to valorise resources and potential that are found above all within the communities. The Tuscan experience has certainly represented this too and – as has been pointed out – with the municipalities' extremely important role and the great skill employed in putting public initiatives in synergy and not in contrast with private initiatives.

These are the fundamental elements of the Tuscan Approach, which doesn't correspond to a model – as we said before – but instead to an approach, which means a way to consider and valorise diversities.

We must remind ourselves of the central theme of keeping a balance at this point, because the value of the 5 points I have just listed, lies in the ability to include them in a systemic vision of the project and to keep them together. These elements have thus formed the basis not only for recounting our experience to others, as well as to ourselves, but also for building a dialogue and discussion around them, aimed at building innovative paths of experimentation.

This is what we had in mind when we started thinking of the TALE project, founded by the European Union and involving IDI, UNIFI and some other organizations from Bulgaria, Lithuania and Slovenia.

TALE is an acronym and it means Tuscan Approach Learning for Early childhood education and care. We think that training is an important activity to support professional development, in the process of permanent learning. This calls for integration of work practices and theoretical reflection within a framework of exchange and comparison of different experiences.

The TALE project is precisely this: it puts the traditional research-action approach together with an exchange of experiences, set in a European trans-national context.

In this sense, the Tuscan Approach should not be seen as a model or a good practice to be repeated in other contexts but rather, as an opportunity to reflect on some important “markers” of quality in the early childhood education services, as Aldo Fortunati has already mentioned.

We can divide the project into 3 key steps:

1. workshops;
2. training module in Tuscany;
3. projects for innovation and experimentation.

At first three workshops were organised: in Vratsa, Ljubljana and Vilnius. After selecting an inspiring case study, the Tuscan Approach, a number of opportunities and learning settings are provided where the phenomenon is observed, split into its basic dimensions, proposed for comparative analysis, used as a term of reference to start a process of quality improvement involving individuals, organizations and systems. During the workshops abroad, we presented the contents of the Tuscan Approach, also showing a video that we have made; we dedicated a long time to listen to the presentation of the local educational system and then we visited some local ECEC services. So these occasions were useful for knowing and making known.

After that a training module in Tuscany was organised, where educators, managers and pedagogues from the 3 countries were gathered together. They met with Tuscan experts, professionals and educators and spent some time in several Tuscan ECEC services. The training module took one week. After a general introduction, specific sessions were dedicated to 5 fundamental elements. Governance and training were dealt with in seminars organized by the Istituto degli Innocenti and the University of Florence. The pedagogical issues were addressed with the involvement of some of the most representative Tuscan Municipalities:

- Pistoia raised the issue of space design;
- San Miniato tackled the curriculum;
- Livorno spoke about family education and participation.

It's important to stress that the training module combined the theory with the practice because the 3 country groups spent the larger part of their time visiting Tuscan services and meeting children, parents and educators at work.

After these two steps, each partner country's team was able to discuss its own plan of action for some innovations and experimentation to be undertaken in the following year. Also in this case – as I have already stated – the fact that every team was comprised of different professionals, such as managers, pedagogists and educators has stimulated the group to discuss the various points of view and we believe this is an important aspect of our training experience. These innovation projects were continued during a school year and the country groups presented the first follow-up at an International conference in Florence at the end of the project. The final results are original and different and the future prospects too, but our capacity to reflect on the quality of the experiences is growing and going deeper.

Communication and intense exchange of data sustained the process of analysis and action, with rich documentation following all steps. We also paid particular attention to visual communication, and we created a web site to share videos, photos and other materials... This volume, including the video the Tuscan Approach to children's education, an experience open to dialogue, it is also an important tool of documentation.

In conclusion we think that the documentation of such research/action initiatives may contribute to actively supporting the coordination and development of the ECEC services and policies in Europe, in accordance with the orientation towards mutual exchange.

Reflecting on the prospects that may open up, based on the experience and activities completed in the TALE project, firstly I want to refer to the fact that in the work we have shared together in the past two years, we have tried to speak of child education.

We have put together two expressions – identity and diversity – seeking to understand how these two terms can enter into a dialogue and in this dialogue, how it can be possible to conceive, represent and practice an idea of education that is full of important potential.

I also want to stress that in a Europe that does not represent itself as very capable of holding identity and diversity together – nor of welcoming different identities – I believe it is very interesting and positive to acknowledge that reflecting about child education today may provide a fertile terrain for meeting, exchanging and sharing thoughts to increase our capacity to plan and build the future through this means.

In this case too, because the European community has enormous quantitative and qualitative differences in relation to ECEC services, we should also consider the fact that it is not so easy – nor perhaps useful – to quickly establish general principles that are valid for all.

This does not make us underestimate the importance of the guidelines and reflections on quality that have been produced from the 1990s until the present day in Europe, but it makes us think that it is not easy to create a mechanism for implementing quality based on guidelines coming from above.

We do think that this idea of developing experiences, starting from a dimension where there is a more horizontal discussion, is really very useful and important.

We hope that the TALE experience will also help us to confirm that comparison with the experience of others – for the adults as well as the children – is very important for helping us better understand what we are doing and also what we can do more and better.



For any information and to receive a free copy of the publication *“TALE: Tuscan Approach learning for early childhood education and care. Activities, results and perspectives”*, please contact:

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To download the video included in the book link the following Url:

goo.gl/5CaG6z