Parental education and teachers training for the role of parental guides in Europe

Educazione alla genitorialità e formazione degli insegnanti per un ruolo come guide parentali in Europa

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ABSTRACT
As teachers, we feel we have a duty toward our students in helping them to become their best version, by providing not what they want, but what they need. And what they need mostly is an interested and informed parent, who doesn't stop learning about the different stages her child goes through in order to support her all the way in becoming an independent and accomplished adult and a good future parent.
We begun this year's project at the kindergarten "Tudor Vladimirescu" regarding parental education using previous data. Along the way, by participating to the conference "Good practices of parenting at European level", we gained information we used in some training sessions. Furthermore, we used the research developed by the Grundtvig project Leadlab to develop tools for parental education and gained more by the teamwork from the study visit "Adult education – validation of former learning and assessing progress and achievement".

Come insegnanti, sentiamo di avere il dovere di supportare i nostri studenti nel realizzare la propria e migliore versione di sé stessi, fornendo non quello che vogliono, ma ciò di cui loro hanno bisogno. E tra questo bisogno si trova la presenza di genitori informati ed interessati ai propri figli, che non smette di imparare a conoscere le diverse fasi della crescita, attraverso le quali il bambino passa fino a diventare un adulto indipendente e un future buon genitore. Durante il corso di quest'anno è stato implementato un progetto di formazione alla genitorialità nel contesto della scuola dell'infanzia "Tudor Vladimirescu", basandosi su esperienze precedent. Lungo il percorso, abbiamo partecipato al convegno "Le buone pratiche della genitorialità a livello europeo", il quale ci ha orientate nello sviluppo di sessione di formazione alla genitorialità. Inoltre, abbiamo usato la ricerca sviluppata all'interno del progetto Grundtvig LEADLAB per sviluppare strumenti per l'educazione dei genitori; nel contesto di questo progetto, le nostre idee sono state rafforzate dalla visita studio e scambio europeo per formatori "Educazione degli adulti – convalida del precedente apprendimento e valutazione dello stato di avanzamento".

KEYWORDS
Parents, intergenerational learning, positive discipline.
Genitori, apprendimento intergenerazionale, disciplina positive.

Introduction

Parenting can be seen both as a science and as an art. It can grow as an experience of positive and negative role-models, as an acquired skill by means of studying and social observing. It can carry a lot of emotional weight, who can, sometimes, cloud judgement in one way or the other. Mixed messages sent to children by parents, grandparents, other members of the extended family have different consequences on the future adult and parent.

The duty of the teacher is not only to keep informed about the latest news and research, but to develop a personal relationship with the parent, in order to guide and counsel for the benefit of the children.

Good practices", "better practices", "best practices"... these words are often used in the field of education and in international jargon when alluding to development projects. But what are we trying to say when we employ such words? Essentially we refer to case studies, which may serve as excellent examples for the selection and development of new projects. The idea of selecting, studying and then circulating these "best practices", contributes to the promotion of creative and sustainable solutions to different social problems such as violence in schools. We can say that these patterns construct a bridge between empirical solutions, research and education.

The following paper comprises a theoretical background, followed by the presentation of the first year of the project "Educated parents make good choices" project I begun to develop with the parents from the class I am leading. The project includes various forms of interaction, from theoretical group sessions, parent-children workshops, personalized counseling sessions, parents' workshops etc. It valorizes my 12 years experience as a teacher, several conferences on the subject, courses ("Educati asa!", a course about applied behavioral analysis), a Grundtvig project (I attended the course realized during the LEADLAB project, "Personalization in adult education: methods, strategies and tools") and conclusions about guiding the attitude toward work of young children obtained in a study visit funded by the European Commision.

1. Stages and implementation of the project

The experimentation group involved 26 families, among whom only 4 were experienced parents (with older children).

Analyzing the ages of the children and the needs of the parents, we came up with an initial schedule for our monthly meetings and for the individualized counseling, which was revised and approved by the principal.

The initial themes for the monthly parent teacher meetings were:

- "Let's know each other!" – round table debate
- "Perfect Kindergarten" – non formal education through drawing
- "Healthy child" – round table debate
- "Eating healthy" – workshop
- "The role of school drama in the development of the child" – school drama
- "The pre-school curricula" – presentation
- "What we did!" – exhibition with the children's works
- "Martisor for my mother" – workshop with the fathers
- "Easter bunny" – auction with children's works
- "Little ecologists" – flower planting

The themes proposed for the weekly personalized counseling sessions comprised subjects varying from the role of different family members in the child's life (mother, father, grandparents, brothers and sisters), self-knowledge, tools for knowing the child, parental styles, responsibilities for parents and children, health, love languages, giving and receiving to free time organization.

After one month of kindergarten, we analyzed the questions of the parents regarding the day their children spent in kindergarten, and the most frequent were:

- Has he cried?
- Has he eaten, slept?

Only 3 families thought to ask "Is he playing with other children?". We concluded that they lacked information about the child's program in the kindergarten and the new focus on education through play.

So we decided to modify the project, and insert a smaller project, called "What we know", which involved parents staying during classes, during one week. The objectives were:

- To inform and involve parents in educational activities;
- To give the opportunity for the parents to see the children's behavior in other environment than the family and play groups
- To move the parent's focus from issues regarding baby age (crying, sleep, food) to issues related to the new stage the children cross into.



Fig. 1 - The class coat of arms, realized by the parents

Because group cohesion wasn't what was supposed to be (the parents did not communicate with the teacher, they skipped some of the meetings, they did not try to know each other), we replaced the Easter Bunny auction with a joint workshop, parent-child, with the purpose of realizing object from recyclable materials (the main reason was to promote parent involvement in education) and we realized, in a parents workshop, a coat of arms for the group.

Also, we tried to involve the children in the parents' education, by asking their help for practical matters, such as organizing the room for meetings.



Fig. 2 - Parent-child workshop

2. Personalisation in parental education

I derived some of the ideas about a personalized approach from the Grundtvig in service training course "Personalization in Adult Education: models, strategies and tools", that I followed in Rome, 11-15 March, 2013, financed by the European Commision, through the Life Learning Programme. The course was one of the result of a Grundtvig multilateral project, LEADLAB.

LEADLAB was a European project funded through Grundtvig – Lifelong Learning Programme, which brought together partners from six European countries: Italy, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Spain.

The goal of the LEADLAB project was to meet the challenge of making adult learning systems more attractive, increasing participation in lifelong learning by developing an innovative adult learning approach, able to foster adult and elderly people to participate in lifelong learning, valorizing their life experience and the informal dimension of knowledge.

The course aimed to spread and improve personalization culture, to show a model of intervention shared at European level and to introduce the guidelines to design and produce learning personalized experiences for adults and elderly people.

The definition of personalization reached through the project implies:

- Involvement of the all dimensions of learner;
- Development of self directed learning process;
- Development of self regulated learning process;
- Co-design of the learning pathway and process;
- Development of self-evaluation process;
- Learning challenges not learning objectives;
- Learning pathway not instructional curriculum or training program;
- Achievable results are not predictable *a priori*.

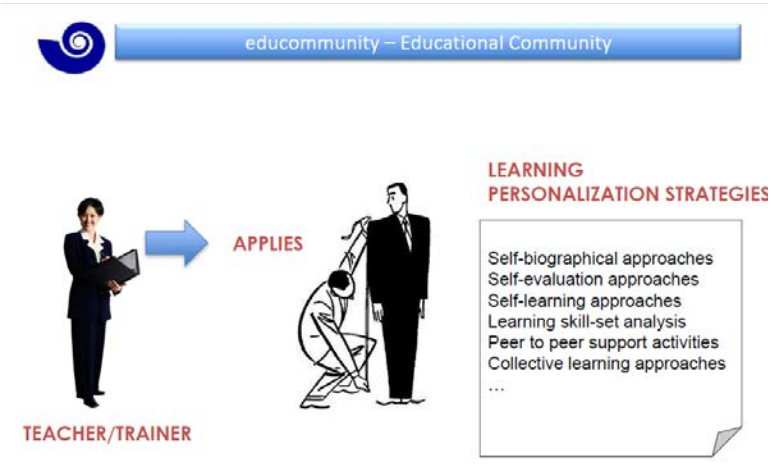


Fig. 3 - Learning personalization strategy, according to LEADLAB

Important points about the biographical approach:

1. to write a biography is not to write a professional curriculum, but is telling about themselves;
2. it is requested to highlight elements of his/hers life relevant with reference to the new learning experience and that have contributed to become what he/she now is;
3. the focus is on the informal and not formal previous learning experience including also personal life;
4. negative experiences are relevant as well positive experiences;

Following these lines, I applied the biographical method, formulated by the LEADLAB project, to my class, and wrote a questionnaire who tried to involve all dimensions of the learner. We suggested to the parents, through the questionnaire, to look upon the skills they have acquired in educating children through psychology and pedagogy studies, parental education courses, the relationship with own parents, raising another child, informal talks with other parents. Also, we asked them to analyze the relationship they have with their own parents, in order to help them understand better their reactions as parents.

1. What was the source of your parental competences?
   a) Psychology and pedagogy studies
      Age group .....
   b) Parental education courses
      Name and duration.....
   c) Relationship with own parents
   d) Raising another child
   e) Informal talks with other parents
2. If you have formal education in the field, name 2 principles / methods/ tools employed in the relationship with the child
3. Write down at least one thing that you value concerning the relationship with your own parents and one you don't appreciate.

4. Exemplify a specific situation in the relationship with your own parents you remember fondly and one you did not like.
5. Do you think that you have the same tastes, the same approach to the world as your parents? Exemplify.
6. How much time do you use weekly to the task of improving your parental skills? How do you improve them?
7. When talking to other parents, do you reflect upon their ideas or do you consider that you know best what your child needs?
8. More often, in relationships with other parents, you discuss things related to:
   a) Physical well being (food, health, sleep)
   b) Cognitive development
   c) Physical development – small muscle motility, big muscle motility (how they move hands, the entire body)

Social development (how they interact with adults, other children)

9. Which of these directions of development you think you should insist on? (including through individual or group research)

Questionnaire
(based on the biographical method applied on parental skills)



Fig. 4 - Questionnaire meeting

In another meeting, we tried a debate about a formative agreement between the teachers and the parents regarding the development of parental skills, for the benefit of the children. We will work on it the following year, along with a job description for good parents.

We use the results in order to personalize the learning of the parents according to their needs and the specific challenges they face in the relationship with their children.

3. Study visits and their role in teacher training

In April 2013 I had the chance of participating to the study visit "Adult education: validation of former learning and assessing progress and achievement ", held in Oslo, Norway, financed by the European Commission through the Transversal Program.

The objectives of this program are:

- Facilitating the information exchange between decisional factors and educational specialists for common goals of the participating countries, in preuniversitary institutions
- Supporting participants to learn about already applied measures in education at European level
- Spreading out last minute information concerning European education
- Offering opportunities for encouraging, initiating and support activities linked to other actions from Longlife Learning Program.
- Encouraging participants to be more self conscious about their role as resource persons and to establish links during the study visit
- Emphasizing themes referring to the Lisbon process.

A learning professional taking part in a study visit will be able to:

- exchange expertise with other learning professionals from across Europe;
- establish important new contacts at European level;
- learn about the latest trends in education and training systems in other European countries; and
- bring back home the insight and knowledge you acquired to disseminate it.

4. Themes featured in the study visit program

Europe 2020 strategy puts strong emphasis on education and training to promote 'smart, sustainable and inclusive growth' (Council of the European Union, 2010d). In the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training after 2010, the Council of the European Union stresses that it is important to develop partnerships between education and training providers and businesses, research institutions, cultural actors and creative industries to promote innovation and increase **employability** and **entrepreneurial potential** of all learners (Council of the European Union, 2009a). Broader learning communities, involving representatives of civil society and other stakeholders, should be promoted to create a climate conducive to creativity and better reconciling professional and social needs, as well as individual wellbeing (Council of the European Union, 2009b).

Also, the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (Council of the European Union, 2009b) after 2010 reiterates the need for high quality teaching through adequate **initial teacher education** and **continuous professional development** and through making teaching an attractive career choice. Flexible training provision and investment must be provided to initial and continuing training for teachers and trainers due to the changing labour markets and working environments (Bruges communiqué, 2010).

The recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council on **key**

competences for lifelong learning (European Parliament; Council of the European Union, 2006a) defined a framework combining knowledge, skills and attitudes which all individuals need for personal fulfillment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment. It is a reference tool to support policy-makers, education and training providers, employers and learners. Key competences become a priority for all age groups.

The strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) (Council of the European Union, 2009b) sets promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship as a strategic priority for Member States until 2020. Education and training systems should aim to ensure that all learners — including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with special needs and migrants — complete their education, through, where appropriate, second-chance education and more personalized learning. By doing this, education and training systems contribute to reducing social inequalities and enable citizens to realize their full potential (Council of the European Union, 2011b).

Reducing the share of **early school leavers** to 10% from the current level of 14.4% in both general education and VET is one of the headline targets of Europe 2020 strategy. The Commission approved in 2011 an action plan that will help Member States to achieve this headline target by the end of the decade (Council of the European Union, 2011a). VET in particular can contribute to reducing the percentage of early school leavers through a combination of both preventive and remedial measures for example, through labour market relevant VET, increased work-based learning and apprenticeships, flexible learning pathways, effective guidance and counselling, and by learning content and methods that acknowledge young people's lifestyles and interests, while maintaining high-level quality standards for VET (Bruges communiqué, 2010).

Access to pre-primary education is essential for a good start in life as it promotes children's sociability and lays the basis for further learning. It is especially important for children from families with low incomes, ethnic minorities and migrants.

Member States have introduced **alternative (more flexible) forms of education and training**, second-chance programmes, mechanisms for informing parents about absences and reduced costs by providing free course materials and transportation. Close cooperation between general education and vocational sectors and 'second-chance' schools for adults is important. For children with special needs, access is increasingly considered as being given the possibility to attend general or special education based on what provides the best learning possibilities for the individual child. At higher education level, free education is key as tuition fees may reduce access.

Making **lifelong learning and mobility** a reality is one of the strategic objectives for European cooperation in education and training after 2010 (Council of the European Union, 2009b). Most countries have made progress in defining unified and overarching lifelong learning strategies. Cooperation should address learning in all contexts – whether formal, non-formal or informal – and at all levels: from early childhood education and schools through to higher education, vocational education and training and adult learning. The Bruges communiqué on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training calls for more actions to ensure maximum access to lifelong learning so that people have opportunities to learn at any stage in life and by making routes into education and training more open and flexible (Bruges communiqué, 2010).

Exchanging information on different policy options can help advance reforms of national education and training systems and, with other common learning ac-

tivities, progress towards the common objectives and benchmarks for lifelong learning. **Coherent and comprehensive lifelong learning strategies** integrating education, higher education, adult learning and VET still need to be implemented. A holistic approach connecting lifelong learning and VET with other policy areas such as macroeconomics, employment, competition, enterprise, research and innovation, and social policies is crucial.

As such, the study visit program has a strong influence not only on the participant, but also on the people he comes into contact, professionally speaking. The participant becomes a resource person, at local, county, national and international level.

5. Training teachers for the role of parental guides

The good practice examples seen on the study visit and the results of the work done were presented at first in the national conference "The European dimension of school" we organized in May 2013 at kindergarten "Tudor Vladimirescu" Craiova. Here, I emphasized one of the conclusions of the study visit, which was that teachers need to prepare children for their life roles. We discussed then that, throughout Europe, children do not want to become skilled workers anymore. They all want to become chiefs and they are encouraged in this thinking by their parent. This leads to a lack of skilled laborers, to dropping out (because the children try to follow studies they are not suited for) and to unemployment. So, we must fight this trend not only by introducing career orientation and entrepreneurial elements at young ages, we also must work with the parents in order to make them see that they must take into account the children's preferences and talents when selecting a future carrier. This is done, in early ages, by encouraging parents to know their own children, to have a healthy relationship with them and to train the children in assisted decision making.

In the workshop about the study visit program I will organize in June, I intend to challenge the teachers to find solutions to involve more the parents in the educational process mediated through European programs implemented by the school.

The mentorship program will begin as dissemination and valorization for the study visit, "Let's learn together!", within the framework of Didactica Nova magazine collaborator, aims to put together experienced and debutant teachers. One of the recommended themes to work on will be about the teacher – parent relationship, because in the formal studies for becoming a teacher, it is a problem usually ignored.

Conclusions

Parents have a very important role in their children's lives. As children are different, educating the parents to cope with their role should be a personalized experience. The involvement of all the dimensions of the parent as a learner can be done through a number of methods, such as the biographical approach, a personalized educative agreement and individual counseling. The teachers' initial training does not usually emphasize the role of the parent in the educational life, and the teachers lack many skills in working with adults. As such, a continuous training with elements of adult learning characteristics should be taken in consideration for every teacher who will inevitably, give parental education.

Disclaimer

The content of this article does not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Responsibility for the information and views expressed therein lies entirely with the author(s).

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