Parenting: awareness about the own educative role and citizen competences

Genitorialità: consapevolezza sul proprio ruolo come educatori e competenze per la cittadinanza

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ABSTRACT
It is since a long time that the European Community highlights how parents – fundamental resource for the education of the "tomorrow' citizens" – must be supported in the interpretation of their educative role and in the assumption of their whole responsibility with respect to the related functions. This paper presents the results of an ALICE pilot project dedicated to the training of parents with children aged 0-3 and realized as a laboratory of reflection through creative and informal languages. It comes to a formative proposal relative to empowerment interventions, aimed at sustaining parent competences and its conscious use from an educational point of view. Each meeting was organised in two phases: (a) self-reflection as parent and then as son/daughter; (b) realization of creative activities to enhance the educational quality of the relationship with their children. The participation of parents has been constantly active. The feedback obtained through a satisfaction survey and a questionnaire for self-evaluation to compare pre- and post- training has been very satisfactory.

Da tempo la Commissione Europea sta mettendo in evidenza il fondamentale ruolo che genitori giocano in quanto risorsa per l'educazione cittadini del domani. Si sostiene che i genitori devono essere sostenuti nella comprensione e consapevolezza del proprio ruolo attraverso processi formativi che consentano agli adulti l'appropriazione responsabile di tale ruolo. Questo articolo presenta i risultati di una delle attività pilota svolte all'interno del progetto ALICE dedicati alla formazione dei genitori con bambini di età 0-3 e realizzati come laboratorio di riflessione attraverso linguaggi creativi e informali. Nello specifico, si tratta di una proposta formativa basata su interventi di empowerment volti a sviluppare competenze per la genitorialità, trasferite con successo nello svolgimento consapevole del ruolo di genitore. Ogni incontro è stato organizzato in due fasi: (a) auto-riflessione, come genitore e come figlio / figlia; (b) realizzazione di attività creative per migliorare la qualità educativa del rapporto con i figli. La partecipazione dei genitori è stata costantemente attiva. Il feedback ottenuto attraverso un sondaggio sulla soddisfazione e un questionario di auto-valutazione per confrontare pre e post-formazione ha mostrato positivi risultati.

KEYWORDS
Parenting, Creative Languages, Reflexivity, Informal Education.
Genitorlialità, linguaggi creativi, riflessività, educazione informale.

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Introduction

"Education does not take place only in classrooms, but when the family is seated at the table and its members seek together to make sense of the events of the day" (Bruner 1996). With these words Bruner states the centrality of the educational processes in the family for human training and emphasizes a natural evidence: education occurs not *also*, but *first of all* in the family, and that "first" is both chronological and axiological (Milani, 2008, pp. 13-14). Despite the complexity of the social changes, the family retains the task to help the construction of the identity of the person in development. This identity is the milestone of the future of children, families and social communities, so the goodness of the parent-child relationship is considered – still indisputably – the place *par excellence* of essential personalization, which ensures a quality existential route and "his entry in humanity", as in the words by Pourtois and Desmet (2000). When Bruner, therefore, uses the image of "being gathered around the table", introduces the theme of the family as primary place of affections and relationships. And when he explains that around the table the family members can help each other to find the possible sense of the events, he introduces the concept of family as primary source of values, where parents offer "valuable goals" to their children (according to an inspired expression of Erik Erikson), helping them to find the meaning of everyday life.

For this reason parents – as a fundamental resource for the "tomorrow' citizens" – are to be supported in the interpretation of their educative role and in the assumption of their whole responsibility with respect to the related functions. Also, by giving value to all the knowledge that they possess, often without full consciousness.

The European Community is by long time engaging in this task with appropriate recommendations, guidelines and welfare policies, demonstrating, through its Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) research and action project, how early, intensive child-centred education conducted in designated, adequate facilities, accompanied by a parallel strong involvement on the part of parents who have received appropriate training and preparation, can contribute significantly to the fight against socio-cultural disadvantages by functioning as a preventive measure.

1. Supporting parenting in "normal" conditions

In recent decades, studies on parenting have multiplied to the point that they constitute an extremely rich, diversified area of research. This is why the subject of parenting involves various complex distinctions between the many terms used (parenting, childcare practices, parental roles, parenting styles, etc.) and the related constructs. The definition of parenting is neither simple nor unambiguous, and the term – in different languages – can refer to meanings that sometimes do not overlap. Merriam-Webster's defines "parenting" as "the raising of a child by its parents", but also as "the act or process of becoming a parent" or "the taking care of someone in the manner of a parent". Zaccagnini and Zavattini (2007, p. 199) point out that "parenting" does not correspond to "parenthood" (i.e. the state of being a parent). With regard to "parenting", it is instead essential to grasp – in addition and above all – that it is an act and a creative process and to understand this word not in the static sense of an abstract essence but as an ongoing,

concrete, productive relationship: a dialectical process of becoming "par excellence". Parenting is thus an autonomous, process-based function of being human, which pre-exists at conception and connotes merely an expression of it, albeit fundamental yet not necessary.

In any case, the analysis of parenting experience is absolutely not simple matter, not only because of the sharp differences which are to be found at the base of individual histories and experiences, but also because of the many aspects which determine it and which require an ecological approach for to be understood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which can take account of the influence of the various contexts concerned. Until around a decade ago most studies focused on analysing cases of dysfunction in parent-child relations, such as those involving child mistreatment or abuse, in order to understand the factors which determine normal parenting processes. However, several studies have by now established that so-called "different" family structures do not necessarily imply a potential dysfunctionality; rather, the origin or cause of problems are mainly the dynamics of relations and the quality of the organisational forms of families. Thus, from a perspective not just of research but also of preventive actions it is necessary to learn about the social, cultural and psychological elements which define the quality of being a parent and of performing parental functions in conditions of normality (biological, psychological, social and cultural), or at least in the absence of evident symptoms, as only a positive overall vision makes it possible to better understand what elements of distress can manifest themselves even under "normal" conditions and what dynamics between the various components may cause them, and to recommend appropriate preventive procedures. What is stressed here is that parenting – whether expressed in terms of functions or skills – on one side significantly impacts not only on the child's development but also on his/her personality over the entire course of his/her life, on the other is profoundly influenced by culture and also by political choices, which are often much more impactful than what local interventions – albeit targeted ones – are able to do with individuals.

2. Reflexivity and self-awareness for to be competent parents

Until the 1930s, in his radio conversations Donald Woods Winnicott said that in the "job of bringing up one's children, the important things must be done moment by moment, as the events of daily life unfold", arguing that in order to learn "the job of being a parent there are neither lessons nor specific moments" (Winnicott, 1957). He essentially anticipated the need to focus both on parents' responsibilities and their role of expertise by presenting a pedagogics based on self-awareness and reflexivity regarding one's own experiences and backgrounds.

Winnicott's thinking, which for our purposes comes in rather useful, is that excellent results can be achieved by using what people feel, think or do, and starting from this premise one can build a basis for discussion or for training in order to develop one's knowledge, awareness, abilities. All of this expresses a very important concept, in that it stresses that the only way to learn to be a mother or a father is to be a parent (Formenti, 2008). Being a parent is always linked to knowledge, but if this knowledge is not recognised, it cannot be expressed as competence. Parental competence is not a quality of the individual alone, it is not removed from the context in which it is put into practice and is not discon-

nected from concrete relations with one's partner, with one's family of origin, with the social support network. In most cases the parent is not aware of being a knowledge bearer and thus needs to discover it, to see him/herself in action, and above all needs to relate and tell his/her story to others. This is the best way to support adults and to clarify appropriate parental functions with regard to their children: functions of which they are capable, at least embryonically In this way tacit knowledge can flow, and both narrator and listener can find trust in themselves.

2.1. *It isn't children that make adults competent parents*

There would not be "families" if in order to become parents it were indispensable to achieve maturity, good self-esteem or the ability to listen empathetically. Such qualities are born within relationships of mutual respect, and are engendered by "right", "fair", "honest" actions. Parents act in a "right" way when they take full responsibility for what they doing, thereby offering a model of behavioural integrity to which their child, with regard to his/her thoughts, aspirations and modes of expression may aspire. Such responsibility must be shouldered at the personal level, which entails that one is willing to listen to and take care of oneself, of one's own needs, and at the social level, which entails being willing to acknowledge others and one's ties with others, to cultivate meaningful relationships, to be aware of one's roles and the scripts which we express in various circumstances. From this it follows that the concept of parenting refers to a series of issues such as the representation of being in relation to the inner image of father and mother, the construction of a representation of one's own child, of oneself in the role of parent and of one's own relationship with one's child and has achieved adultness, that is one's own "autobiographical competence", succeeding in managing one's own personal life path and expressing oneself to the best of one's potential and having the concrete aim of leading the other (*i.e.* one's child) to express the same potential (Demetrio, 1998, 2005).

However a feeling of inadequacy is recurring among today's parents. In particular, this sensation appears encouraged by the proliferation of books, TV programmes and training courses on parenting issues, all purporting to teach parents "how to become competent parents". Childcare rules, theories and practices passed off as optimal which for parents often turn out, in everyday experience, unworkable in the educational relationship with their child For those who perform educational work with families, "parental competence" is a concept which merits careful consideration: increasingly expressed in strictly psychological, cognitive and/or affective terms, it seems to have lost its original, typically pedagogical connotation, which implicates the specific role of education in the processes of development, in the knowledge and in the actions that characterise the parent-child relationship. The analysis of parenting competencies and identification of adequate professional responses should instead multiply the gaze on the family, by setting at least a dual objective:

a) on the one hand, to foster a reflective, profound and opened interpretation of the family narrative and elements of competency that it seems to contain;
b) on the other, to show how learning from experience does not always imply "doing things and talking about what one does", or "accounting for what one does", but even more so means bringing out the tacit, implicit knowledge", in other words, those principles, those rules, those criteria on which we base

our decisions and unconsciously develop models, ideas, appraisals, which go to make up the cultural breeding ground inside which our life is immersed.

In this sense, learning from our own actions means also thinking about the thoughts that have accompanied our actions, our experiences, our lived (Mortari, 2003).

3. The ALICE project pilot on reflective parenting

We are sure that parental knowledges are fed with the personal history and experiences, first as a child and then as a parent. We believe that an idiographic (descriptive) and autobiographical (narrative) approach to parenting could be effective, because it allows us to recover in memory styles, attitudes, behaviours, resources and capabilities of our parents on the basis of which have been constructed – in agreement or in opposition – our knowledge and the parenting competences.

In view of these and the previous considerations, in the context of the Grundtvig LLP ALICE Project "Adults Learning for Intergenerational Creative Experiences" (Margiotta, 2012; Raffaghelli, 2012), we developed a pilot project for parents with children aged 0-3, titled "*Parenting: thoughts and creations to explore a new, although ancient, identity. A laboratory to listen themselves, to listen others, to reflect*".

The laboratory has been led by the author with Monica Gazzato (preschool teacher with training in steinerian pedagogy) and developed in collaboration with the Association "Progetto Nascere Meglio" of Mestre – Venice in November/December 2012, during six weekly meetings of two hours each.

3.1. *Conceptual framework*

The conceptual framework inside which the training proposal has been put involves different theorisations that jointly offer possibility of understanding and interpretation of the – more and more composite and flexible – processes through which the parenting identity is built (Zambianchi 2012a):

- the *personalism's construct* originated by the humanistic vision of Maritain, which place at the centre the individual, view as a person (full rights person) in growth, and for which education constitutes the "human awakening" to valorise him/her in his/her anthropologic and axiological integrity;
- the *construct of apprenticeship and practice* that brings to the learning concept as developed by Wenger (1998), starting from the social theory on training developed by Vygotskij and then by Bruner, that allowed to explicit the training as a form of participation to expert practices, taking part to a community;
- the *construct of transformative learning* as developed by Mezirow (1991), derived from the thesis of Bruner (1998), according which the adult, in order to build his/her professional identity, has the need to deconstruct and reconstructs the knowledge – through a reflective approach to him/herself and world knowledge awareness – that the previous state of novice and apprentice allowed him to develop, but not always functionally to the context, neither without distortions;

– the *reflexivity's construct* derived surely by Mezirow, but specially (a) by Mortari (2003), that by taking from Edith Stein contributions, she recognise that the individual learns by experience and acquires consciousness of herself and of the world when he begins to reflect on what happens in order to find a meaning and (b) by Margiotta (2011b,c) that, beginning from the Dewey reflexions, reaffirm the pedagogic significance of the correlation between reflective thinking and educational processes;
– the *enactive construct*, due primarily to Merleau-Ponty (1945) and taken up by Varela et al. (1991), for which knowledge is acquired through the action into the environment and on the environment (embodied cognition), becoming enactive, i.e. generative, (a) of a transformation for the individual and (b) of a contestual co-evolution of the individual-environment system. The importance of this construct is in its ability to explain the educational relationship in terms of "intersubjective process that allows the self-formation" (Margiotta, 2013).

3.2. *Goals, contents, methodology*

In accord with ALICE's guide lines, we think that creative and informal training situations should carry parents to reflect on the own role as educators, and hence, to become early promoters of a lifelong learning strategy. For this reason, we have arranged the educational path "*Parenting: thoughts and creations to explore a new, although ancient, identity. A laboratory to listen themselves, to listen others, to reflect*", integrating the tools of dialog and autobiographic narration, the informal and creative languages, the use of reflective thinking. This educational path tried to offer to parents a simple but essential help through forms of analogical expression in order to reinforce and expand the caregiving competences present or potential, and to strengthening the practices of reflection critics on the educative tools owned but about which there is not consciousness or is questioned the existence. This pilot project is a formative proposal relative to empowerment interventions (Zambianchi, 2012b), aimed at sustaining parent competences and its conscious use from an educational point of view. The training has been structured as a creative workshop with a general invitation to speak about themselves by playing, writing, painting and modelling, in search of forms and words to externalise the personal experiences – in an intergenerational perspective – and to realize how much everyone learns and has learned by the ones (cfr. Pasini, 2010).

Each meeting was organised in two phases:

a) the first as a self-reflection as parent and then as son/daughter;
b) the second as a realization of creative activities to enhance the educational quality of the relationship with their children.

Among the techniques used: self-description, narration, group discussion, emotional resonance, role playing, use of evocative material, expressive forms for individual and/or collective creations, including the realization of a tactile book dedicated to own child, so to generate a texture of emotions and thoughts, or to express "what had not been told". Every occasion was been functional to reflect on some crucial questions: tales of birth, self-exploration as a child, models and preconceptions about parents in action, becoming a parent between stories,

memories and generations, educational relationship. In support to reflexivity has also been adopted a "reflective diary" (Mortari, 2006), devoted to the tracking of thoughts on themes around "generating a good life", and "accompanying towards a good life", believing that writing of the life of own mind could be an effective approach in order to keep alive the process of evolving of our thoughts and allow – by attributing a sense to the object of the thinking – to establish a reflectively critic relation with themselves, characterising this as tool with significant educational capability (Mortari, 2002).

From the methodological point of view we have adopted a perspective based on "doing", that is operating through workshop-based activities centred around the practice of storytelling, of autobiographic narration, of dialogue and listening, of production. The method tied to "doing" is of practical use to the aims of the ALICE project for various educational/learning priorities that we got to experience objectively (see the results) in our work with parents as it:

a) more than any other method it meets the goal of involving all parents, especially those who need the strength of social support networks as a means for improving social cohesion;
b) it also allows parents to be brought together more easily, so that they can benefit from dialogue with others in order to reflect by activating and involving the various dimensions of their becoming (affective, cognitive, social and ideological) and by focusing – through the narrative experience – for a re-examination of their own inner representations, with a transition from investment in themselves to investment in the child;
c) it enacts informal learning processes which can strengthen and develop key competencies for lifelong learning. Specifically:
   – it encourages learning to learn, through shared critical reflexivity, thinking about one's thoughts and sharing with a community of parents (KC5);
   – it fosters civic and social skills: through the practice of critical thinking parents can become aware of differences between experiences and be active citizens through the concrete expression of empathy and solidarity (KC6);
   – it encourages a sense of initiative and enterprise, since the decision and willingness to put themselves to the test stimulate impulses towards concrete action in parents, that is to say, enabling them to translate thoughts into actions immediately, to foster their understanding of the risks of parenting, and to further their ability to anticipate possible events in the educational relationship (KC7);
   – it elicits awareness of one's own culture and encourages its expression, through the sharing of the personal reflections which each parent brings to the dialogue and to other people's observations, arguments and judgments (KC8).

3.3. *Results*

Synthetic reports of activities carried in the pilot project devoted to first parenting can be found at the ALICE Blog http://www.alice-llp.eu/blog/?p=214 and from here to the next page, click on next. Instead in figure 1 we report a few pictures to document some laboratorial activities.



Fig. 1 – The ALICE Pilot project "Parenting: a laboratory to listen ourselves, listen, reflect"; some activities brought forward in the meetings with parents and children: some laboratorial activities.

The participation of parents to every laboratory proposal has been constantly active and we can affirm that the educational proposal has gained a more than satisfying response. The diagram in figure 2 reports the appreciation judgment expressed by parents in a scale from 0 to 10, relatively to the relevance and satisfaction for some indicators, here aggregated in wider categories. The questionnaire has not been given by the formers.

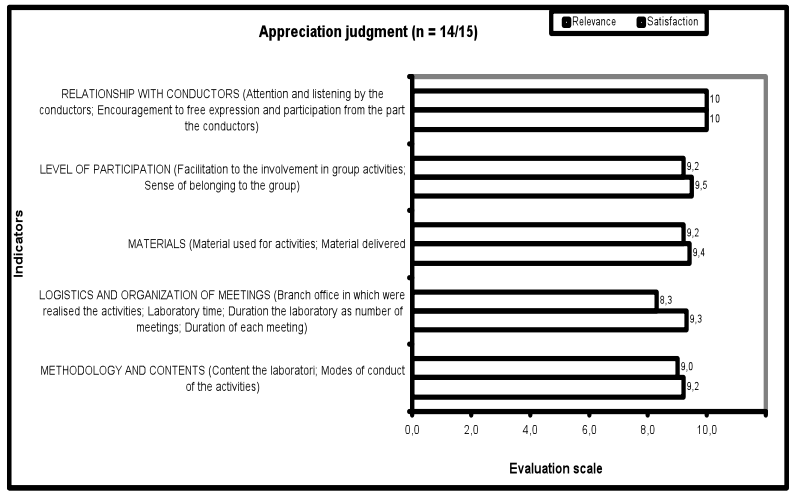


Fig. 2 – Level of appreciation expressed by parents on relevance and satisfaction of the indicator specified.

The critical point reported by parents concerns the satisfaction for the duration of the laboratory (M=6.9), i.e. the number of encounters (5 plus one with children), considered too limited in order to reelaborate emerged awarenesses or to examine knowledge in profundity. The parents have suggested that the ideal number of encounters, given the age of children (0-3) and of their necessities, is around 7/8.

We remember that the final goal of the experimentation was the one of sustaining a reflective parenting, by offering to parents the opportunity to review themselves through the critic exploration of their experience and of their personal life-lived in an exercise of comparison of themselves as sons and as parents, by contributing in this way to the explicitation and to the transformation of their implicit knowledges, that frequently became sudden awarenesses.

We think that the use of the "reflective diary" – where to collect the reflections regarding the own thoughts on concepts of "good quality of life" "having care of the life", "good parenting", "nourishment for a good parenting" (cfr. Mortari, 2006) – has had precisely this "maieutic function". Here there are two narrations taken from the "reflective diaries" (whose phenomenological analysis was reported in the PhD thesis of the second author):

> *Yesterday it was nicer then usual, … this night I had the brain agitated … I woke up at 3 am for the baby and from then I had a "mental pensive diary" until the 7 am … crazy, it was long time in my life that did not occurred … and I understood at what all this serves...!!! Writing is for us!!! To learn to feel the mind … And I reached the goal!! Thanks … but I now am really tired!!! (Si.)*

> *… In my life I reminisced only some tales of my infancy and to only 2-3 persons. And later I asked to myself: "but who do you want that interest your story?" or "there is lot of worse!". Not counting the guilt feelings and the hidden shame … and I searched for a sense … For a lots lots of time I thought, rethought, reviewed and studied my experiences, but I never did it in a group. I felt naked, but it is good so … really I am living a big moment of growth … today I am the person that I am also thanks to what has been, and I will be a mum much "pensive" … And if my path, my experience could be in some way helpful to others I will be really happy. Thanks!!! (Na.)*

The following graphics report the pre- and post- self evaluation on the parenting training about the perception of change for some indicators related respectively to the role and parental function (fig. 3) and some personal implications (fig. 4). The questionnaire has not been given by the formers. As can be observed, the participants have globally valued a positive change with respect to every indicator analysed and, in some cases, the difference between averages pre- and post-intervention compared with the t Test (.l) results statistically relevant. Specifically, the parents believe that has been significantly improved:

- the capacity to face and dissolve the personal emotional/evolutive blocks;
- the trust in the personal action capacities;
- the awareness with respect to the relevance of the own role as educator in society;
- the knowledge and awareness of themselves;

– the capacity to take care of themselves, supporting the hypothesis behind the present educational proposal according to which the more effective support to parenting is obtained not much on "empowerment of the role" (*what* should know to do an adult to become a parent) but instead on the awareness of him/herself (*who* should be an adult in order to act also an adequate parenting function).

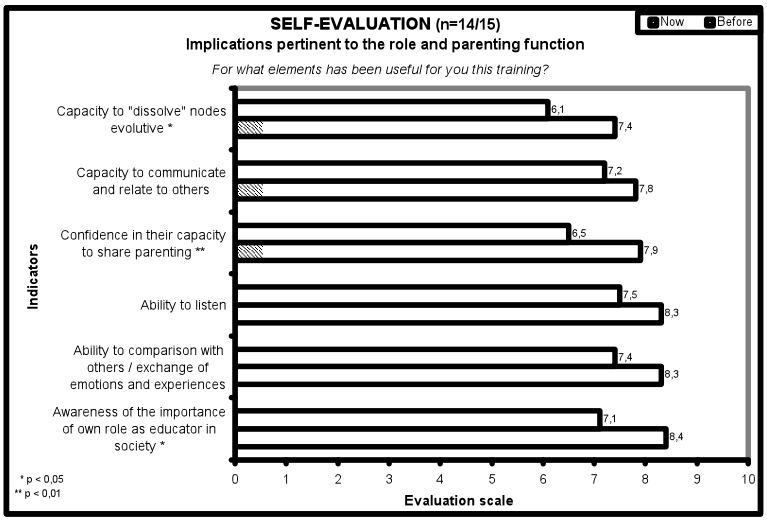


Fig. 3 – Self-evaluation pre- and post- training with regard to the perception of change for some indicators related to role and parenting function.

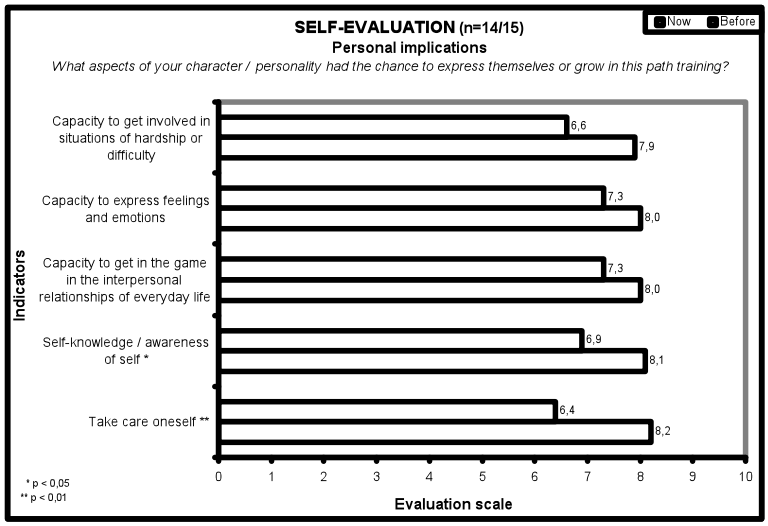


Fig. 4 – Self-evaluation pre- and post- training with regard to the perception of change for some indicators related to personal implications.

Finally, in accordance with the intentions of the ALICE project, we wanted to understand the possible strategic impact of this formative proposal on the development of key competences in the parents. Therefore, during the last meeting a semi-structured interview was conducted, in order to test the eventual modification, enhancement, awareness about the possession of a few key competences provided by the pilot project. The graphs in Figure 5 to 8 show part of the results obtained from the answers to the questions by which have been explored the key skills, that we combined into macro- categories.

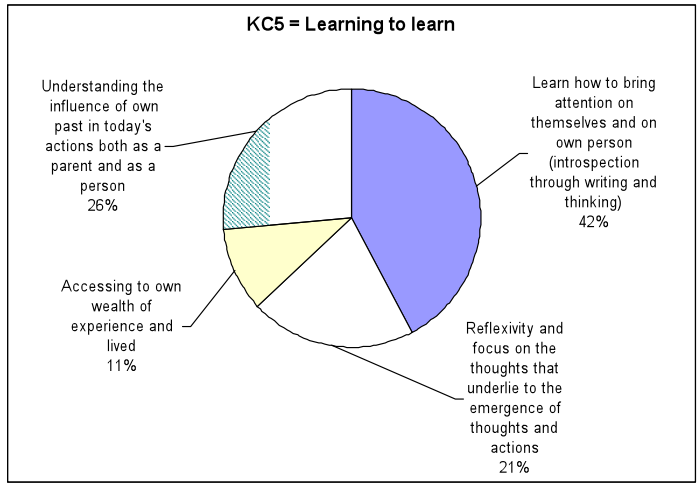


Fig. 5 – Learning to learn (KC5): Dear parent, according to your opinion, the training path has changed in some way the manner you reflect on the events, on your life moments, on your feelings? Have you changed the attention that you generally put in the creation of your thoughts?

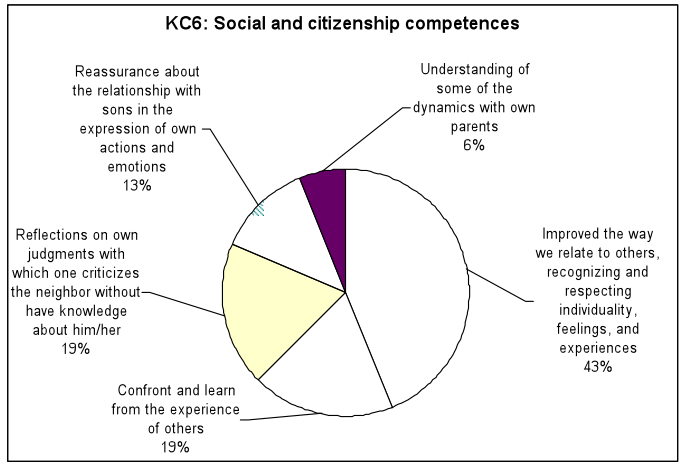


Fig. 6 – Social and citizenship competences (KC6): Dear parent, according to your opinion, the training path has in some way changed the criteria through which you relate to the others, or you consider the diverse other modalities to act, express sentiments, life moments, to adopt different value metrics? If the answer is yes, how?

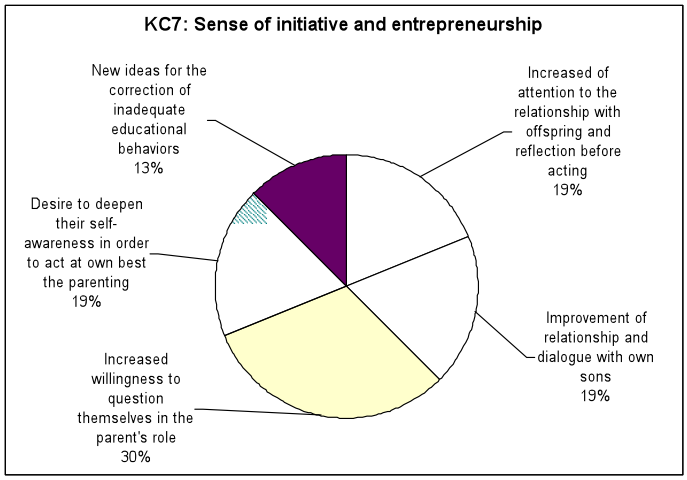


Fig. 7 – Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship (KC7): Dear parent, according to your opinion, the training path has in some way changed your habitual willingness and decisions regarding to your "to be" as parent, for instance through changes in the relational and educative practices with your son/daughter, by considering the "possibilities" and the "risks" of parenting, in understanding your effective capacity to know to anticipate events in the educative relation? If the answer is yes, in which way?

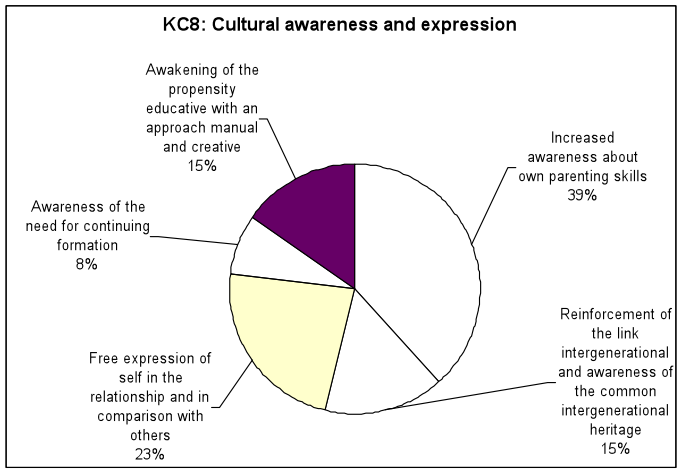


Fig. 8 – Cultural awareness and expression (KC8): Dear parent, in your opinion the training path has reinforced or increased in you the awareness of your knowledges, practices, capacities in action that you own, and you have been favoured in expressing it? If the answer is yes, in which way?

The correspondences appear to us in the expected direction, as parents have perceived an increase in:

– their ability to learn to learn (KC5), thanks to the activity of critical reflection and collegial to think his own thoughts;
– their civic and social skills (KC6), thanks to the exchanges of thought in a community dimension informal free from judgments, able to foster an awareness

of the differences in the experiences and personal ways of acting, as well as the authentic expression of feelings of empathy and solidarity;
– their sense of initiative and resourcefulness (KC7), in that the decision and the desire to get involved encouraged them in the operativity, promoting their understanding of the risks of the actions, but also their ability to anticipate events in the educational relationship with their children and to translate thought into action immediately;
– the awareness about their own culture and the ability to express it freely (KC8), thanks to the sharing of personal reflections that each is able to offer in comparison to others in terms of comments, arguments, evaluations.

Conclusions

The general goal of this experimentation has been the one to stimulate in young parents a reflective practice in a intergenerational view, through the critic exploration of their experiences and their life moments as son and as parents, by contributing to the explicitation – and sometimes also to the transformation – of their knowledge in order to help them to recognize, reinforce and enhance the parenting resources already present in them and to develop new educational strategies in the relationship with their children (see Margiotta, Zambianchi, 2013). The parenting support proposal was based on an essentially preventive, promotional approach, removed from care provision of the psychological kind, so that parents' needs regarding education can be better met. The underlying logic has been the one of caring for families, by reinforcing the competences and coping abilities of their members and by leveraging existing resources, the strengthening of latent potential and the motivation to acquire new relational competencies and tools for interpreting reality. In other words, the ultimate aim has been to support reflective parenting, by contributing to the elicitation, development and transformation of parenting skills, placing value on the resources of the family unit and providing parents with the chance to reflect upon their choices through critical reflection (*reflexivity*) on their own experiences and backgrounds, in order to set out on the path towards a genuine *adultness* (Demetrio, 2005).

The use of narration and autobiographical practices and of artistic/creative languages as a means for reflecting upon and acquiring awareness of one's own experiences and interrelations, has created the "transitional space" – so named by Winnicott – which has helped to contact and to express feelings, to transform them, generating new knowledge. In fact, we believe that in order to favour for parents in possibility to tell their story and express themselves it is essential that the space proposed be of quality such as, for example, the one which is co-constructed when people converses with peers, lives informal moments, plays together, shares a reading or speaks about himself through different languages such as writing and symbolic, artistic and expressive activities. Those activities enable a mutual trust and a common willingness to take risks, to put oneself to the test collectively so that an individual's problem or capacity becomes everyone's problem or capacity.

The conversation with himself/herself and with others has promoted and strengthened the "reflective posture", favoured not only attraverso experiential work in a small group – very fruitful in the paths of parent training, since the comparison with peers encourages the introspection – but also with the adoption of the "reflective diary", devoted to the "care of own mind" for jotting down

their thoughts generative of own thoughts, ideas and beliefs about the meaning of "generating a good life" and "accompanying to good life".

An analysis and understanding of the ways in which parenting knowledge and skills are built, developed and evolved cannot do without the support of a structured, multidisciplinary theoretical background which combines and integrates different and pluralistic views in order to read and interpret, in the most complete manner possible, the composite and complex ground from which the parental identity takes shape. Parenting is certainly constructed through experience and the dialogue that takes place by participating in social practices; nevertheless, we should not ignore the fact that it has its roots in the "apprenticeship" in the family of origin, in the experience of having been sons and daughters. In parenting support work, therefore, it is also important to critically explore educational models implicitly passed down from generation to generation, at least for two complementary reasons: on the one hand because "through reflective tools it is possible to deconstruct and construct parental identity, by transforming implicit, unconscious skills into critical, validated skills" (Fabbri, 2008), and on the other because "becoming aware of the underlying pedagogical model is the first step towards the weakening its binding power" (Gigli, 2007).

The active response and positive of parents to every proposal of the laboratory make us to believe that the educational paths in support to parenting are as more relevant as more they are enactive, i.e. generative of knowledge, as intended by Maturana and Varela (1987; see also Varela, Thompson, Rosch, 1991).

Margiotta (2011a,b,c; see also Olivieri, 2011, pp. 78-90) interprets the enaction/generativity as that process able to "make emerging of significance" and to "give shape" to the human action systems, believing that the main device able to produce it lies in *reflexivity* (Margiotta, 2012b). On the view of this vision and the results of the experimentation, we think that typologies of support to the parenting based on an approach both reflective and creative could contribute to make the parents conscious of the "enactive weft" of their relational capabilities and to reinforce their role as educators.

Indeed, by believing that the more effective support to parenting is based on the awareness of their own self ("who" try to be in order to act also an adequate parenting function) we tried to understand if the awareness from the part of parents of the power enactive/generative of the educative relation could contribute to modify (in a improving sense) the conception that they have as themselves as educators. We believe to be able to state that in a short time (about 12 hours) this educational typology has provided to parents (a) a stimulus to critic reflexivity on the educative tools already owned but still not owned with full awareness and (b) a concrete support to reinforce and increase the competences of caregiving possessed or potential, by making clear the possibility for a better use of them.

In our opinion a such result has been reached thanks to the integration of several educational tools: from the autobiographic approach (narration and writing), to the creative stimulation with picture and plastic tools, until dialogue and comparison in the community, that jointly have favoured the exercise of a reflective competence firstly on themselves as person and then on themselves as parents. Indeed, it is well known that the narrative device is particularly effective in the clarification and understanding of events, experiences, human situations characterized by strong intentionality and in focus of the units of analysis also very complex, where human subjects, their stories, the options of culture, of ethics, of values, but also their intentions, motivations, choices and interpersonal relationships that weave both on a cognitive / emotional level, on a cultural / relational, play a central role (see Bruner, 1986).

If we believe that the parenting knowledge is fed by each parent's personal history and by his/her experiences firstly as a child and then as a parent, than an approach to parenting of autobiographical kind – whatever level it is applied at – seems to be wholly convincing as it makes it possible for people to recall the styles, attitudes, behaviours, resources and capacities of their own parents (or those acting on their behalf) on the basis of which people construct – whether on a shared or opposing basis – their own. Inevitably this process of acquisition is based on reflective competence, which can be developed by practising it and which serves not only to critically recover the past but also and above all to reflect on the present and, specifically on parenting practices. In the reflective approach, self-knowledge and self-care (Mortari, 2009) go together, as instruments for adult education, for reconsidering experience, for re-comprehension of it. The baggage of experience which each of us bears may thus become a resource for change (see Formenti, 2001). Parenting behaviours, in fact, are inspired by more or less implicit theories, doctrines and knowledge systems, which merit bringing to full awareness. This maieutic and educative operation is certainly encouraged by conversation with oneself and with others, and it is precisely for this reason that small-group work is resulted particularly appropriate, as it interactive dialogue has stimulated the introspective labor.

Thus parents have the opportunity to better understand what they have learned from others – first and foremost from their own parents and original cultural background – what comes from their personal background, what they have developed thanks to interaction with their partner and with their children and what still remains to be explored in order to enrich their knowledge base (Fabbri, 2004, 2008).

Similarly, the acquisition of reflective competence is facilitated by the autobiographical approach, which constitutes a significant process of individual training nourished by revaluation and valorisation of the individual's personal history. Therefore, early measures with actions to promote parenting – for example in the context of services dedicated to very early childhood (post-natal care, nursery) and also including pre-natal services for expecting couples (preparation for the birth) – are inserted in an educational perspective of prevention that, starting from the potential of the families and their resources, tempt to support them in the overcoming of their momentaneous difficulties.

To conclude, we believe that the interventions in support to parenting, acted in the general perspective to accompany to reflexivity through informal and creative tools, allow parents to:

- finding the possibility to express themselves and increase the awareness through the exploration of the inner self by analysing the own action modalities;
- finding a welcome/care space in their own "being a person" even before being parent;
- renew the own modalities for the analysis of problems and search of solutions;
- go through diversified educative strategies, mainly thanks to the exchange of practical experiences in the context of a "practice community";
- reinforce and enrich the own positive educative inclinations;
- identify tools to improve the communication inside the own family group.

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