PRESCHOOLS AND FAMILY'S ALLIANCE: WHICH REFLECTIONS FOR AUTHENTICALLY INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL ACTION?

ALLEANZA TRA SCUOLA DELL'INFANZIA E FAMIGLIA: QUALI RIFLESSIONI PER UN'AZIONE EDUCATIVA AUTENTICAMENTE INCLUSIVA?

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to reflect on some possible interpretative models for building and strengthening the alliance between preschools and families to foster an inclusive educational relationship and to globally improve everyone quality of life, since the earliest years of children's lives.

L'obiettivo di questo contributo è riflettere su alcuni possibili modelli interpretativi per costruire e rafforzare l'alleanza tra scuola dell'infanzia e famiglia per favorire una relazione educativa inclusiva e migliorare globalmente la qualità della vita di tutti, fin dai primi anni di vita dei bambini.

Keywords

School-family alliance; inclusive design; teacher education.
Alleanza scuola-famiglia; progettazione inclusiva; formazione degli insegnanti.

Preschools and family's alliance: which reflections for authentically inclusive educational action?

Interaction with families is internationally and nationally recognized as a fundamental issue in preschools; borrowing the title of a very interesting book by Sherry Turkle, it may be considered as a *reclaiming conversation*.

Therefore, such interaction constitutes an indispensable criterion of quality that should be continually leveraged, as highlighted by several contributions and policy documents, including various studies published by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2011, 2016, 2018, 2022), which place the alliance with families among the strategic dimensions beneficial for promoting social inclusion and democratic participation.

Moreover, over the time, scientific research has shown the value of family participation in preschools *in toto*, fostering its transition from an instrumental medium for children's academic success to an opportunity of learning and growth (Brougère & Ulmann, 2009) for the children, adults and the institutions involved. In this sense, dialogue with families becomes the constitutive basis of an action oriented in the perspective of a solid life project, especially when there are pupils with disabilities or other difficulties.

Participative and inclusive instances that have always distinguished preschools in Italy were strongly challenged during the Covid-19 pandemic because the health, social, political and economic emergencies profoundly changed times, spaces and ways of communicating and relating, both inside and outside educational services and preschools. The "Legami Educativi a Distanza" [Distance Educational Connections] (MI, 2020) have been somehow fundamental in order to be able to cope with the pandemic emergency, but, at the same time, they have highlighted the need to rethink and seriously reflect on functional educational practices.

In fact, the interchange between formal relational practices (meetings, interviews) and informal ones (parties, shows), as well as the dissemination of apparently generic practical indications (identifying an appropriate communication style, overcoming doubt and prejudice, promoting information and, above all, training) might suggest a rhetorical alliance. Actually, the need to operationalize such an alliance fits within a national normative framework full of significant pedagogical suggestions[1]; however there is the risk of "overstepping". Therefore, it is important to "outline the borders" restricting the scope of action to theoretical-conceptual frameworks and to the instruments to be used, above all.

In this regards, it is interesting an international study conducted by Yamauchi, Ponte, Ratliffe & Traynor (2017) whose objective is that of analysing the theoretical-conceptual frameworks used for research on school-family partnerships through a systematic literature review. Almost half of the articles examined do not contemplate the presence of a theoretical and/or conceptual framework of reference. Regarding the other half of the scientific papers considered, four theories are the most widely used for the treatment of the topic: the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); the Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lareau, 1987); the Overlapping Spheres of Influence Model (Epstein, 1987, 1995, 2011); and the Funds of Knowledge Approach (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992). Furthermore, it is also frequent the application of two conceptual frameworks: the Types of Family Involvement (Epstein, 1987, 1995; Epstein & Sanders, 2000) and the Model of the Parent Involvement Process (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

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[1] The reference is to the Italian Constitution, Delegated Decrees and laws concerning the evolution of preschool (D.L.gt 24 maggio 1945, n. 549. *Programmi per le scuole elementari materne*; D.P.R. 11 giugno 1958, n. 584. *Orientamenti dell'attività educativa della scuola materna*; Legge 18 marzo 1968, n. 444. *Ordinamento della scuola materna statale*; D.P.R. 10 settembre 1969, n. 647. *Orientamenti per l'attività educativa nella scuola materna statale*).

Of particular relevance to the principles and values of the inclusion paradigm is Epstein's position. Being more specific for the Overlapping Spheres of Influence Model, in continuity with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecosystemic approach, that considers child development linked to a network of mutually influencing systems that shape the ecosystem where the child grows up, it is based on the idea that both school and family environment may be represented by a geometrical plan through separate "spheres" characterized by more or less deep degrees of overlap [Fig. 1]. These "overlaps" are conceptualized as joint activities that may show through specific ways of involvement. The degree of overlap between the spheres depends on the forces in the field that move toward either separation or overlap; these forces include perspectives, perceptions, representations and past experiences that act as hindering or facilitating factors for involvement activities: the more is the overlap, the greater is the school and family network (Epstein, 2011).
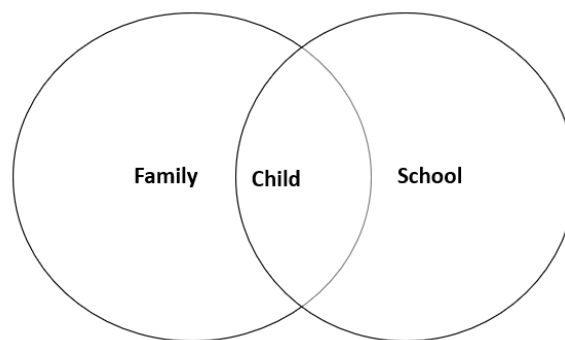

Fig. 1: *Overlapping Spheres of Influence Model* (Epstein, 1987, 1995)

Six are Epstein's (2011) "steps" to foster school-family collaboration:

Parenting: the challenge for school is to provide all families with practical guidance and empirical advice to support such activities.

Communicating: related to the responsibilities of parents and teachers toward the configuration of two-way communication channels that demonstrate to be efficient and temporally stable.

Volunteering: this kind of activities refer to the commitment during activities that are usually managed by figures belonging to the school organization.

Learning at home: participation of parents within educational activities accomplished at home.

Decision making: involvement of families in the organization's decision-making processes concerning school practices and policies.

Collaborating with the community: this last category refers to activities aimed at coordinating resources and services offered to families, students and the entire community.

With this last form of engagement, the Overlapping Spheres of Influence Model is expanded with the addition of the community as the third pole of the model [Fig. 2].
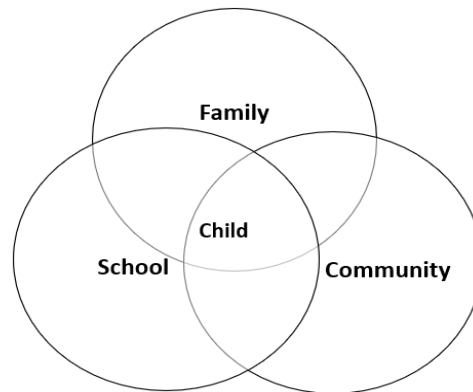
Fig. 2: The development of *Overlapping Spheres of Influence Model* (Epstein, 2011)

This model presents itself as a very useful tool in interpreting the complexity of the relationship between teachers and families (Patte, 2011) because of its simplicity, both on the theoretical-conceptual level and the practical-operational one.

There emerges the need to design the school-family relationship starting from a frame of reference that acts as a progressive and organized framework, and that is configured as a possible direction to foster an effective dialogue aimed at a truly inclusive educational action (Sibilio & Aiello, 2018).

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