BUILDING «RESILIENT» COMMUNITIES FROM THE EARLY YEARS: ECEC CENTRES AS PLACE FOR CONNECTIONS, WELLBEING AND DIALOGUE FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND PRACTITIONERS

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My main message this evening is contained in the title of my keynote-presentation:

"*Building resilient communities from the early years: ECEC centres as places of connection, wellbeing and dialogue for children, families, and practitioners*".

I will explore the potential for ECEC centres to promote social wellbeing by acting as **holistic intercultural "niches"** that make active learning and active participation both possible and pleasant for all children, none excluded.

ECEC's centres as «intercultural-niches»

«Developmental niche» (Harkness, Super, 1994)

(a) the physical and social settings in which the child lives;

(b) the customs of child care and child rearing;

(c) and the psychology of the caretakers.

In early childhood education, these three components are interrelated with **educators' implicit ethno-theories** (Tobin, et. al. 1989).

Resilient communities – two protective factors

- **Children's active play and participation** as active learners, alongside **parent-teacher dialogue,** as key protective factors and crucial contributors to developing resilient communities for all children and families.

Structure of my presentation – three keywords

- Democracy
- Wellbeing
- Intercultural dialogue

I will organize my talk as follows

1. I start by aligning myself **with Dewey's theory of education as democracy**, arguing for the need to provide children with democratic experience and communities from the early years;
2. I then discuss **wellbeing as a primary goal of early education,** arguing for the need to better explore how wellbeing is connected with children's agency, engagement and active play in socially shared learning experiences;
3. I conclude with insights from anthropological research, arguing for the need to equip ECEC practitioners with new competences and skills in **intercultural dialogue and cultural negotiation.**

Aims of my presentation

- I will not dwell this evening on learning outcomes and curricula, although I am aware that these are equally important issues in our discussions on how to promote high quality ECEC today.
- Rather, I will offer some **theoretical considerations**, combined with what I have learned from my research, about promoting learning through dialogical experience of meaning-making and social participation.
- I will **provide you with narrative and visual examples** from my work over the past years

Argument I
Providing children and parents with democratic and community experiences

John Dewey (Democracy and education, 1916)

"Individuals do not become a society by living in physical proximity… Individuals do not even compose a social group because they all work for a common end. The parts of a machine work with a maximum of cooperativeness for a common result, but they do not form a community. If, however, they were all aware of **the common end** and all **interested in** it so that they regulated their specific activity in view of it, **then they would form a community**. But this would involve **communicatio**n. Each would have to know what the other was about and would have to have some way of keeping the other informed as to his own purpose and progress. **Consensus demands communication**"

(Dewey, 1916)

Forming a community, therefore, requires many components:

- Having a **common interest**,
- **Working for it as a group** and regulating one's activity in view of it,
- **Communication**

And communication, we all know, implies **engagement and active participation**.

The very process of living together …

"The very process of living together **educates**. It **enlarges and enlightens experience**; it stimulates and enriches **imagination**; it **creates responsibility** for accuracy and **vividness of statement and thought**"

(Dewey, 1916)

There may not be life – without struggle and conflict

- "There may not be life or human existence **without struggle and conflict**. (..) Denying conflict, we ignore even the most mundane aspects of our vital and social experience. **Trying to escape conflict, we preserve the status quo**".

(Freire, 1921, p.45).

ECEC – talk about education

ECEC's centres, schools, educational communities are places where multiple actors spontaneously "talk about education" and experience **"sharing important ideas, sharing perspectives and resources**, with expectations of continuity and long-term relationships".

(Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 10).

Our goal – trying to widen the power of our intelligence through relationship

- "[Our goal is always] to put everything together**, to try to widen the power of our intelligence through the possibilities of relationship…** Children start to understand when they start to put things into relationship. And the joy of children is to put together things which are apparently far away!… **And the more difficult is the situation**--the more problems the children have put to themselves--then the more relationships they can make, **the more their curiosity will grow, and the more questions they will continue to ask.**

  (Malaguzzi, 1993).

Argument 2: Promoting wellbeing through active learning in the ECEC's centres

Freinet, 1977

"A child who enjoys wellbeing is a child who feels good with him or herself and with others and **who works (plays) intensively, with commitment**. […] children have no innate need to play. **There is only the need to work, to act, to handle, to move, to do and undo**, **including with others**. There is an organic need to exploit the potential for activity that is concurrently individual and social, is purposeful, and offers a wide radius of action. In addition, this work must support one of the most pressing mental imperatives, especially at that age. The sense of **power, the permanent wish to excel**, […] to win victories, small or large" (Freinet, 1977, 189 - my translation).

Engagement, commitment to learning, active participation

- children's **engagement in and commitment** to learning, as the capacity to be proactive in exploring new things and to tend towards ambitious goals despite difficulty;

- children's **active participation**, as the capacity to take an active part in the learning process by making decisions and choices;

Maria Montessori (1940)

- "Experience with our children aged from three to six, and even younger, has shown that not only is **there no fatigue in learning at that age**, but the children actually **become stronger**. […] Not only do they seem indefatigable, but by being intellectually active they acquire strength and health"

(Montessori, 1946, Eng. trans. p 27 Clio Press 1989).

Zygmunt Bauman, "The art of life" (2008)

"the best conditions are the ones that provide children with the possibility to experiment the effort required to pursue ambitious goals – **the impossible goals** – learning to tolerate uncertainness and being able to "choose scope and standards (..) **well beyond what we were able to do or we would be able to do**".

(Zygmunt Bauman, 2008)

So…

- So, learning is a source of **strength.**
- But, what are the conditions are the most ideal for fulfilling this responsibility in super-diverse communities of learning?

Key conditions

- a **facilitating environment**;
- an **educational relationship** that is respectful of each child's individual as unique and diverse;
- an **educator who appreciates the children's vitality, potential, and inner strength** and is able to initiate them into a process of learning "**by trial and error**" (experimental);
- contexts that offer both **possibilities-stimuli and barriers-obstacles** (recourses and barriers using Freinet's words).

A video – *as an example*

THE PLEASURE OF DOING RESEARCH "TOGETHER"

- Adults and children who experience the pleasure of doing research together

Fostering wellbeing through learning as a social process of meaning making

- The message that emerges from the video brings us back to some of the assumptions that I outlined earlier.

- Children enjoy challenges and learning to overcome obstacles, as long as they share these with others and are in a nurturing environment where relationships and connections count. In the video, the teacher observes this enterprise and does not remove 'obstacles', thus fostering wellbeing through learning.

Argument 3. Cultural values and cultural variability in learning and interactions

Barbara Rogoff (1990,2003)

Growing up means developing the capacity to solve:

"**culturally defined problems** with the **tools and artifacts** available in one's context [...] using this data as a starting point to develop new solutions within the process of learning as a social activity"

(Rogoff, 2003, p.5-6)

Human development – a situated cultural process

- Human development is a situated cultural process, and this implies that the goals considered appropriate and desirable at a certain age vary considerably as a function of the cultural context and its traditions (Rogoff, 2004, p.16).

But we are all aware that «cultural variation» can be overwhelming

- We can feel **disoriented and confused**, inhibited, and tempted to impose our own vision of "the child, childhood, learning" …
- Or we can **hide behind stereotyped** positions or value judgments that reduce the scope for mutual understanding;
- Or, **we can also open up and engage in dialogue** with people who hold different cultural and linguistic values.

This means that we occupy three roles

- We are **'recipients' of models** that are handed down to us and that we learn to make our own of in the course of our life experience;
- we are **'observers'** (of our own models and those of others), and
- we are **'interpreters-participants'** (in our own models and those of others) **and therefore agents of change.**

And this is a strenght from an educational point of view

- We actively contribute to the interpretation and re-interpretation of what we consider valuable, important, good for educating our children.

- Cultural practices are not static, but subject to change. Just as we as individuals can and do change.

To do so – suspend judgements of others and engage in «respectful dialogue»

- Effective intercultural dialogue reduces the risk of extreme relativism, and encourages changes in practice.
- But when cultural bias prevails, obstacles and barriers to mutual understanding emerge.

To conclude

- You might well ask at this point, so **what is "dialogue"** and how can it become a key protective factor in our ECEC communities for both children and families?
- Is **dialogue as community engagement and cultural exchange possible in our ECEC contexts today**?
- Are we ready to promote this by engaging parents in dialogue on the means and ends of educating young children?

My reply is that "intercultural dialogue" implies "cultural negotiation"

"[cultural negotiation] carries a sense of politics and power that is not explicitly present in the terms participation, dialogue and communication. If practitioners and parents engage in negotiation, both have to be prepared **to put their beliefs and preferences on the table and to compromise**"

(Tobin, 2016, p.188)

TWO OUT THE MANY POSSIBLE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OUR WORK IN THE FUTURE

- Develop a **«pedagogy of dialogue»** within and among our ECEC communities, to fully promote the participation of children and parents

- Investing in our capacity **to become "researchers"** in our everyday life in ECEC settings - this has implications for us as universities offering in-service training for ECEC staff, and for the government ministries that provide the resources for improving the quality of our educational services.

To sum up and to conclude

- "**caring for words**" (Turckle)
- "caring for **meaningful dialogue and intercultural conversation** as valuable learning experience for both children ad adults

I thank you most sincerely for your attentive and supportive listening today

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