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# EDUCATIONAL ENGAGEMENT, CARE, AND INCLUSION: A NARRATIVE ABOUT LA GIOSTRA, A NURSERY SCHOOL IN FLORENCE

FRANCESCA GOBBO

## **Abstract**

*The present study concerns an Italian nursery school (for children between 6 and 36 months of age) located in the periphery of Florence. La Giostra is an interesting and challenging project that originated in desires by educators and the Cospe non-governmental organization to change the local sociocultural context as well as efforts to give voice to immigrant families with very young children. The project succeeded in creating an educational environment characterized by a participatory approach and a willingness to promote and support an intercultural and multi/inter-linguistic institution characterized by communicative practices in which both foreign language speaking and Italian children could participate successfully.*

## **Keywords**

*Nursery school, non-governmental organization, immigrant families, preschool children*

## Introduction

Contemporary attention on early childhood education and care places the rights of the child at the forefront of educational discourse on childhood and recognizes how sociopolitical concerns have shifted from the goal of creating work opportunities for women to the awareness that upholding the rights of the child means engaging in a much broader and more complex endeavor. The change in emphasis and research has its cause in the pressing issues of equality of educational opportunity, social cohesion, and inclusiveness as well as the possibility that these issues can be effectively resolved from different but interrelated perspectives—economic, educational, and social—that see “good-quality early education institutions ... as indispensable for the educational attainment of the children and for the foundations of lifelong learning” (CoRe, 2011, p. 16) as well as for ensuring “that all children have the same access to high-quality provision” (p. 16), since early childhood education and care “can make an important contribution to breaking the cycles of poverty and discrimination” and ensure citizens’ future “employability, social inclusion and personal fulfilment” (p. 15).

In Italy, relevant legislative steps to promote early childhood education were taken between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. The concept and practice of childhood care that had until then characterized the institutions attending to the needs of very young children (and their families) was placed into a critical focus that aimed to develop children’s capacity for learning and independence, valorize both dialogue with families and social contexts, and enhance educators’ commitment to professional development and so contribute to the quality of the educational institutions.<sup>1</sup> Though it has been officially recognized that the provision of education and care for children younger than 3 years of age is unequally distributed in Italy (MIUR, 2011, p. 2),<sup>2</sup> further decisions were taken to respond to the educational needs and rights of these young citizens.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> With regard to the La Giostra nursery school, its educators participate in courses organized by the Florence municipality, while some of them widen their professional competence and interests by attending courses of their choice on such topics as educational coordination and autism.

<sup>2</sup> See [http://archivio.pubblica.istruzione.it/dg\\_ordinamenti/allegati/prot7877\\_11.pdf](http://archivio.pubblica.istruzione.it/dg_ordinamenti/allegati/prot7877_11.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See Moss (2004, p. 8) on the child “as a citizen belonging to a society, entitled to rights that neither descend from his/her parents nor from their position in the labour market. Access to certain services should be considered one of those ‘rights,’ and among such

My contribution to this special issue of *Studia Paedagogica* on childhood concerns an Italian nursery school (for children between 6 and 36 months of age) located in the periphery of Florence. La Giostra<sup>4</sup> is an interesting and challenging project that originated in desires by educators and the Cospe non-governmental organization to change the local sociocultural context as well as efforts to give voice to immigrant families with very young children. The project succeeded in creating an educational environment characterized by a *participatory approach* and a willingness to promote and support an intercultural and multi/interlinguistic institution characterized by communicative practices in which both foreign-language-speaking and Italian children could participate successfully.

Participation and participatory are words that have significant connotations for this educational and intercultural project and were repeatedly mentioned and operationally described (as will be seen) during the long conversation I had with Maria Omodeo (responsible for intercultural projects at Cospe) and Beatrice Falcini (the nursery school's educational coordinator). Participation and participatory were presented and practiced not only in relation to the educational project, but also—no less crucially—as ways to ensure social justice and the civic inclusion of families and children, with particular regard to immigrants. They highlight how a nursery school can be an environment where educators foster and accompany children's development and independence along a holistic educational path and co-construct feelings of belonging and activities of cooperation that positively affect everyone (parents, children, and the educators themselves) involved.

The wider sociopolitical frame within which the La Giostra project was implemented is provided by national legislation and *Linee Guida per i Servizi educativi alla prima infanzia* ("Guidelines for Educational Services for Early Childhood", 2008), elaborated by the Department of Public Education and the Service for Nursery Schools of the Florence municipality. I will describe both of these sources concisely.

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services there is one that I would define as 'institution for early childhood.'" See also the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, <http://www.ohchr.org>. In quoting Moss, I consider it useful to specify that according to the Italian Constitution, juridical capacity ("capacità giuridica") is distinguished from acting capacity – this means that those who, like minors, are not able or yet ready to exercise their rights will have others—such as parents in the case of children—who will do so in their name (Gobbo, 2016, forthcoming, ft. 5; cfr. Ambrosini, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> The author of this article is a scientific consultant for interculture at La Giostra.

*The educational perspective of Italian legislation on early childhood  
education and care*

In 1971, the Italian Parliament enacted Law No. 1044/1971,<sup>5</sup> which reformulated the aims of early childhood education by recognizing children's and families' rights as crucial for constructing and strengthening citizens' civic participation as well as by ascribing due relevance and attention to the rights of children's educators. It was a great social and educational turning point, since until that time children in need of care had been under the charge of *Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia* (ONMI, the National Charity for Maternity and Childhood) a public institution established in 1925 by Mussolini to support the family, promote a growing birth rate, and celebrate the central role of motherhood.<sup>6</sup> Law No. 1044/1971 testified to a new concern about families and children as well as the issue of gender by acknowledging women's right to a job and career opportunities, ensured thanks to nursery schools that would provide temporary custody and care of children "to ensure adequate assistance to families and facilitate women's access to work within the framework of an overall system of social security." At the same time, Law No. 1044/1971 established men's right to choose to work as nursery school educators and thus challenge the prejudice that assimilated childcare into mother's care. The major responsibility for achieving these goals was assigned to municipalities: between 1972 and 1976 the state would assign special funds to the Italian regions,<sup>7</sup> which were in turn to transfer such contributions to municipalities and their local governments to build new nursery schools or renovate existing childcare institutions.<sup>8</sup> It is important to emphasize how, by having responsibility for the establishment, organization, and management of nursery schools assigned to municipalities, local social contexts as well as locally

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<sup>5</sup> See [http://www.edscuola.it/archivio/norme/leggi/11044\\_71.html](http://www.edscuola.it/archivio/norme/leggi/11044_71.html).

<sup>6</sup> Needy and deserted mothers benefited from the services of ONMI nursery schools, which provided children with assistance and health care, while factories with more than 50 female employees organized child care at their work sites (see Catarsi, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> The law further stated that regions had to:

- "establish general criteria for construction, management, and supervision of nursery schools" through their own legislative acts, and see that nursery schools would
- "respond to the needs of families concerning [nursery schools'] location and operations,"
- "be managed with the participation of families and representatives of recognized local social organizations,"
- "have enough qualified personnel, able to guarantee health and socio-educational assistance to children", and finally
- "implement the technical, construction, and organizational requirements needed to ensure the harmonious development of the children."

enacted educational approaches took on primary relevance from the very beginning. The participation and engagement of parents, political groups, and associations in nursery schools' educational life and problems of the so-called social management<sup>9</sup> were interpreted and enacted as effective and positive methods within a bottom-up approach to problems and solutions in a changing Italian society and nation<sup>10</sup> that would soon be defined as multicultural and embedded in the globalization process. About a decade later, a number of university educators (e.g. Bondioli & Mantovani, 1987; Frabboni, 1985) pointed out how the commitment to children's well-being and care would be strengthened by greater attention to the educational potential of both children's and school's contexts. Thus, the emphasis on democratic control, which originally provided the foundation for the educational institution and the turning point in childhood educational discourse, would gain further significance and impact when complemented by research and investment into children's emotional and intellectual capacities and possibilities as well as the pedagogic development of nursery school personnel<sup>11</sup> (cfr. Bondioli & Mantovani, 1987; Mantovani & Calidoni, 2003;

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<sup>8</sup> According to Italian educational researchers (Catarsi, 2008; Catarsi & Fortunati, 2004), at the root of the political decision as well as the educational and social significance of Law No. 1044/1971 were the improved economic conditions of Italian families due to successful post-war industrial recovery and the transformation of family structure from patriarchal to nuclear (as a consequence of massive migration from the south of Italy to the so-called industrial triangle, the last wave of which took place at the beginning of the 1970s after an earthquake in Sicily). In particular, the growth of the urban population in northern cities and towns in turn engendered a growing need for social services together with a demand for educational and social justice that was also supported by the student movement at the end of the 1960s and the women's movement in the following decade.

<sup>9</sup> On this point, see Zaninelli (2010) and Catarsi (2004b), among others.

<sup>10</sup> The 1970s, as Catarsi (2004a) points out, was a decade of great social changes, when the Italian Parliament enacted legislation on divorce (1970), protection of motherhood and paid maternity leave (1971), family rights and equality of spouses (1975), work equality and women's access to jobs until that time reserved for men (1977), and abortion (1978). Three years prior to Law No. 1044/1971, childhood schools for children between 3 and 6 years of age were instituted by the Italian Parliament with Law No. 444/1968.

<sup>11</sup> The push for nursery school personnel's educational development, which was intended to provide them with professional competence and identity, found a resource in the localized character of the institution, as this gave educators the opportunity to take and test educational initiatives, learn about projects carried out in other nursery schools, and share and compare participatory experiences and pedagogy. It must also be remembered that the localized character of the nursery school engendered the *Gruppo Nazionale di Lavoro e Studio Sugli Asili Nido* (National Group for Work and Research in Nursery Schools), founded by Loris Malaguzzi in 1980 in Reggio Emilia (see Cagliari et al., 2016).

Mantovani & Musatti, 1983; Mantovani, Saitta Restuccia, & Bove, 2008). Such choices would support and reinforce the “strong connection ... between childhood education services and the elaboration and dissemination of a thoughtful perspective on children’s competencies and potentials” (Fortunati, 2004, p. 47). In fact, the relationship between the educational institution, the children’s families, and the local context has remained central through today, and it marks the quality of institutional approaches and practices as well as the persisting educational relevance of local contexts and cultures. Relational pedagogy as the “founding element of the [educational] project” (see *Linee Guida*, 2008, p. 16), enacted by nursery school educators, has succeeded in promoting “combined engagement between children and their carers” together with a “mutual exchange between the different contexts in which children grow up” (Fortunati 2004, p. 55).

*Florence’s “Guidelines for Educational Service for Early Childhood”*

*Linee Guida* convincingly emphasize these complex<sup>12</sup> educational goals by noting how “the child, the educators, the family are related through steady and daily interaction. Together they make up a system of complex relationships that determines the quality of the service” (p. 14). From this perspective, we might be particularly interested in (but perhaps not surprised by) the introductory recognition that *Linee Guida*’s educational contents and concepts “are generated by well-honed educational practices in nursery schools and play centers, and a reflective approach to experiences gained over more than 30 years of our [i.e. Florence’s] services” (p. 5). The awareness of the relevance of the completed educational work enhances the complexity of the system engendered by nursery schools and at the same time can be a source of experiential richness. *Linee Guida* are presented as a work in progress that aims to contribute to the understanding of social changes and guarantee the right to education for all children by providing “common reference points ... for the elaboration and re-elaboration of the educational project” (p. 6). In these guidelines, the child is interpreted and to be cared for as a “social actor whose development is deeply affected by the living context and the web of relationships” (p. 6) between children and adults as well as peers. It is a perspective and an official stance that invites the acknowledgement of families’ cultures in their specific and dynamic diversity as they interact

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<sup>12</sup> It must be noticed that the words complex and complexity also characterize the overall vision of the aims of early childhood education as well as the sociocultural contexts in which this is to be achieved.

with educators' professional competence. As flexible indications, Florence's *Linee Guida* intend to answer expected and unexpected future changes, partly by structuring educational work according to specific, interconnected steps (planning, evaluation, observation documentation) thanks to which educators can learn about the children and pursue educational continuity, and partly by creating and supporting centralized educational coordination that, in its connection with local contexts and their social and educational actors, ensures the maintenance of education quality in the face of economic and social changes (among others) in Italian society. Such changes have prompted local governments, in this case that of Florence, to promote diversified ways of establishing and managing the institution of the nursery school. Through the integrated system of services for childhood, public nursery schools have thus been seconded by private institutions and social cooperatives that can employ human resources in more flexible ways to answer citizens' new needs and demands. La Giostra well exemplifies this administrative choice as it is run by the Tangram cooperative, an offshoot of the Florence-based Cospe.

### **La Giostra and its intercultural project**

The project of a nursery school that could implement the educational perspective and goals envisaged by both national legislation and local guidelines in a high-immigration context developed from research carried out by Cospe at the end of the 1990s and is characterized by its participatory planning approach with about 200 families that have immigrated from China. Since all of these families had children between 0 and 36 months of age, none of whom was enrolled in a nursery school, the researched questions concerned whether they were aware of such an institution and whether they would opt to enroll their children there, rather than sending them to live with their grandparents in China, as was the most common choice. The interviewees had made clear that the nursery school would have been by far their preferred option, but that they had been unable to choose it for a number of pressing reasons, the major one being the difficulty to understand and eventually deal with the Italian bureaucratic requirements and procedures that had effectively acted as obstacles to the children's enrolment. One aspect of said difficulty was the considerable cost of public early education as families were unable to indicate their income according to the proper procedure or to find help to complete the required forms to have their fees reduced. Last but not least, the exacting work schedules of immigrant families—and especially those from China—conflicted with the school timetable and made it almost impossible for them to take their children to school and then home at the expected times. Understandably, these families had asked people from Cospe



if a more flexible schedule could be set, but the request was not easy to accommodate due to legislation on childcare and educators' working rights. Through participatory planning, the Chinese families were informed of the regulations regarding nursery schools and also of the minor adjustments that could be made after taking into due account the needs and requests of the remaining families – Italian and non-Italian. After learning the greatest concerns of the non-Italian parents, the next step was to carry out further participatory planning, this time with the nursery educators, through focus groups that involved 28 people. All participants engaged in elaborating an educational project that underwent a number of changes and improvements in response to the care and educational concerns of Italian and non-Italian families before being presented to and gaining the support of the municipal government.

As Beatrice Falcini—the school coordinator—pointed out during our conversation, Chinese parents were also worried about the effects that attending an Italian nursery school could have on their children and family relationships. Would having Italian as the main tool of everyday communication make their children grow monolingual with only the host language? And would the children's fluency in a language other than that spoken at home impair communication with and feelings of closeness to family members? Parents had also expressed a sincere wish that their children be cared for and educated, rather than merely looked after, and therefore hoped that they could find out from the educators what their children had learned during the school day, the kind of activities they had been involved in, and with whom—peers or adults—they had interacted the most. The planning in which families participated together with their children's future educators and school coordinator aimed not only at adapting different or new needs to meet some relevant aspects of the nursery school's culture, but also at finding solutions that could relieve the parents' anxiety about being able to ensure their children's well-being as well as honor their work tasks and schedules while introducing them to the cultural and educational meanings of school rules and expectations. Furthermore, precisely because families stressed their concern for their children's education, educators would point out during their conversations how attending nursery school had very promising effects on future schooling – a prospect of which families appeared to be aware, and so considered enrolment at La Giostra as the first step towards meaningful learning experiences.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> To promote enrolment in nursery school—as La Giostra educators undertook to do at the end of the 1990s—meant not only providing care and education for babies and toddlers but also preventing exclusion at such an early age.

Because establishing such a responsive nursery school was not easy, in 2001 the La Giostra project first opened two play centers – one from 8:00 to 13:00 and the other from 14:30 to 19:00. As the nursery school project was never put completely aside, however, it was possible in 2003 to start serving lunch to the children through a catering service. Since then, La Giostra has succeeded in providing families and 41 children with a half-day nursery school (“nido a tempo corto”) that is open from 8:00 to 14:30 and also enrolling 10 children from the municipal lists (aged 12 to 36 months). There is still a play center from 8:00 to 13:00 for 11 children (aged 18 to 36 months), again from the municipal lists, who stay for a maximum of 4 hours every day. And then there is a pilot (or experimental, as defined by the La Giostra coordinator) project in which 20 children (aged 12 to 36 months) are enrolled (from 10:30 to 18:00), 15 from the nursery school’s own lists and 5 from the municipal ones.

At the beginning, the Tangram cooperative,<sup>14</sup> school coordinator, and educators<sup>15</sup> needed to work hard to tackle their project’s bureaucratic and economic issues. In 2001, when children began enrolling, families were asked to pay the minimum fee that covered food, diapers and cleaning items in addition to education and care. For their part, the educators decided to launch an accompaniment (“accompagnamento”) activity, thanks to which some of them—including the nursery school coordinator—accompanied non-Italian parents to the office for the certification of the families’ economic situation (*Indicatore di Situazione Economica Equivalente*, ISEE, “Equivalent

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<sup>14</sup> La Giostra is run by a cooperative—Tangram—that also manages literacy courses in a different part of the building that hosts the nursery school. These courses were aimed at immigrants who had just arrived, but soon the cooperative spread its activities and projects into the local context promoting exchanges between Italy and China and Italy and Morocco, developing workshops, and additional services for participants. Tangram is responsible for training the nursery school’s personnel as well as initiatives and projects that generated new competences and emphasized the relationship with the context. As a cooperative must compete with other cooperatives in order to gain a 2-year assignment, at the end of the assignment—if its members wish to continue the work they had begun—the cooperative must submit another bid proposal. Cooperatives will often lower the cost of their bid to increase their competitiveness, though the efforts to bring costs down and win the bid can place their operations and educational goals (educational and care continuity) at risk. Fortunately, the Florence municipal government can justly claim to have done good work in the field of childhood education by having developed and supported a joint training process of public and private socioeducational services to support a wider and more inclusive notion of childhood education and care.

<sup>15</sup> At La Giostra, there are five female educators, a number of linguistic-cultural mediators, and a coordinator.

Economic Situation Indicator”)) and assisted them in submitting the form to pay the nursery school fee according to their income. This step required the educators to translate the ISEE form into the languages spoken by the families, acquire and disseminate information about where to go to file the form, and eventually accompany the non-Italian families to an association or professional accountant to process it. “*Those were not easy years,*” recalled Beatrice Falcini, the nursery school’s coordinator, adding:

*Now we only need to update the form once per year. ... Today, we no longer need to accompany parents to process the ISEE form, because it can now be done online. Only if some of them are not able to do so, a La Giostra educator will still help them with it.*

The concept and action of accompaniment are central to La Giostra’s educational and caregiving activity. As its coordinator explained, accompaniment is an in progress process that concerns not only the completion of bureaucratic procedures but also the exploration of educational opportunities after nursery school, since enrolment in childhood schools (for children between 3 and 6 years of age) requires that they (that is, their family) reside in the neighborhood where the school is located. Because this was rarely the case with the children from La Giostra, they had previously been excluded. For this reason, La Giostra’s educators engaged themselves in constructing the conditions for educational continuity between their nursery school and the childhood schools outside the area of the families’ residence. Such a further planning step increased enrolment in childhood schools from just a single child in La Giostra’s first years as a nursery school, to the entire group of 3-year-old children in subsequent years. Finally, accompaniment is also carried out when parents, and mothers in particular, need to be supported when their child is not well and must be taken to hospital for an emergency or specialized medical treatment. “*We do this not only for foreign parents but also for Italian ones. We [educators and the coordinator] become their reference point when they ask for basic information about the context where they live and the services available there,*” explained Beatrice Falcini.

Undoubtedly, accompanying families through these different steps when necessary makes an educator from La Giostra not only a reference/information point, but also a supporting and reliable figure that will not abandon families (and especially foreign ones).<sup>16</sup> In turn, such interventions were so appreciated

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<sup>16</sup> It must be added that the engagement to include children soon included also disabled children.

by the families that some of them have suggested establishing other nursery schools like La Giostra in the neighborhoods where they later moved “*because they said that they felt like strangers in the new place, while they had never experienced such a feeling where they had lived before,*” reported the coordinator. She continued by describing what educators at La Giostra do to prevent both children and non-Italian families from experiencing the feeling of being strangers or outsiders. During the settling-in period (“*ambientamento*”; the time during which children enter the nursery school and progressively become familiar with it; see *Linee Guida*, p. 15), educators and the La Giostra coordinator organize meetings with parents to discuss what the parents expect from the nursery school. When, as happens with some families, the parents have a precise vision and practices for how their child should be educated,<sup>17</sup> La Giostra educators must actively engage in dialogue with the parents and emphasize the nursery school’s goal, namely integrating all children into the educational context and climate.

Because the presence of a substantial Chinese-speaking group during the school’s early years created problems with communication and understanding, it was decided at La Giostra to ask all parents to collaborate in educational projects that would benefit the children and for which parents had to use their own specific competences.<sup>18</sup> The improved social climate generated by working together made parents realize that they all had the same questions, needs, and doubts, in other words that “*both Chinese and Albanian mothers were similarly uncertain and worried about their children’s well-being*” and that in the end “*parents found out they had lots of issues they could discuss together,*” as the coordinator emphasized.

Later on, a different type of workshop was organized focused on emotions, so that everyone could make their feelings explicit. They discussed how each of the participants related to the others—teachers, parents—what their expectations of the nursery school were, and what they had learnt from participating in the workshop. At the beginning, during the settling-in period, Beatrice Falcini noted, the idea of leaving their children at school and seeing them cry is always very painful for parents, though they usually relax when they come to pick the children up and see them smiling and at ease.

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, when parents accord their child total freedom of movement and decision making, or, conversely, when a child expects to be spoon fed because this is what still happens at home.

<sup>18</sup> Over the years, there have been parents who could narrate stories in an interesting way, while others could make good drawings and thus illustrate the stories.

Furthermore, at the end of the school day, parents who come to take their child home are given a card where the child's educator informs them about how the day went – what the child learned and was engaged in. In fact, the coordinator noted, educational experts talk about children's settling-in period but:

*We, the educators and coordinator of this nursery school, know that it is the parents who go through such a hard period when they learn to part from their child. Therefore, our first task is to raise parents' awareness of their feelings and beliefs, and then, during the year, to create opportunities for a specific relational continuity between parents, the nursery school, and the children. They usually meet for special occasions, such as a birthday or the Christmas party, and we invite them to participate and share their competences, such as by creating a book in many languages and reading it, or by working together to make dolls, drawings, or games.*

The educators at La Giostra have invested their energy and vision into considerable cultural and educational work: during the settling-in period every family is asked to present their child in their own words and thus help educators to place the child into perspective. Such meetings are held more than once, and after 4 or 5 months parents are asked again how they see their child and how he or she has developed after months at the nursery school. The introductory question can provoke further questions, all aiming at making both parents and educators understand whether routines and tasks are differently carried out in the nursery school and at home. Then, after the settling-in period and close observation of the children, the educators and coordinator plan the educational options they think are most suitable for the given group of children. Since educators privilege the use of stories, they will start with a book and develop its main theme within the group of children and together with them. If there are no suitable texts from which to begin, educators will make their own and in different languages.<sup>19</sup> Their aim is to evoke the children's emotions and reflections either in relation to the story or by inviting them to observe and narrate what is around them and connect it to their everyday experiences. After the reading session, it is the children's turn to narrate the book they read – an activity that can be repeated more than once during a week. This is also a participatory activity, because—as on previous occasions—parents are invited to collaborate with

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<sup>19</sup> Even if there are always a number of children who do not know the language used to narrate the story, they are nevertheless familiar with the story and can appreciate the different sounds through which it is told.

educators by providing materials and varied competences. The educational projects implemented at La Giostra and their outcomes testify to an idea of childhood that allows parents to see their own child and their own feelings as parents in a wider, more complex perspective. This is confirmed when at the end of the year parents are given a notebook (that they will treasure, as educators are told) that documents, including with photos, the child's learning and socialization experiences and interests at different times of the year together with the educational goal of every activity (from the settling-in period to lunch, to give two relevant examples) and the difficulties experienced by the child (such as a reluctance to sleep in the early afternoon).

From this active and critical perspective, La Giostra educators answer (and try to soothe) parents' anxiety by proposing opportunities that emphasize the parents' shared humanity and the importance of relational and educational continuity. Further positive results have always been attained through the linguistic and cultural mediation service that, in this case, can be—and is—implemented beyond the settling-in period and beyond the municipality's economic support. As the coordinator specified:

*It is not an easily implemented service, because a mediator can participate in educational activities only if she or he has an officially recognized qualification, namely an Italian degree. This is not an easily achieved condition, and so highly qualified foreign educators can only support Italian ones in their educational work.<sup>20</sup>*

Connected with investment into quality linguistic education<sup>21</sup> and cultural support is the crucial importance that these educators assign to maintaining the language of the family – a central tenet of the educator's educational work. The emphasis on the home language is of great linguistic and educational relevance because it refers to not only the language of the families' national origin but also that language actually spoken by family members. The fact that parents use a variety of Mandarin or Arabic is not only accepted by the nursery school educators but is also justified from a human rights point of view. Acceptance of the home language at school tells children that the speakers of that language—namely their parents—are also accepted and respected and that their home language is at home at La Giostra as well.

<sup>20</sup> Not surprisingly, La Giostra educators believe that having qualified foreign personnel would raise the quality of the educational offer.

<sup>21</sup> The language researchers and experts upon whose research language education at La Giostra is built include Wong Fillmore (1979), Arnberg (1991), Baker (1993), Epstein (1995), Frederickson (1995), Cummins (1996), Ada (1998) Ashworth & Wakefield (2004).

In such a multilinguistic and multicultural environment, children soon learn to switch from one language to the other, and—as Maria Omodeo observed—when a group of Chinese-speaking children is approached by Italian speakers, the former immediately and effortlessly start speaking Italian. Furthermore, so-called magic words such as “bie ku” (“don’t cry”) and “manmandi” (“be quiet”) have migrated from the Chinese home to the nursery school and taken up residence there! As Beatrice Falcini reported, these words have been learned and are successfully used by non-Chinese-speaking children to express their close concern for their friends, help them to overcome a moment of sadness, or recommend they be less noisy.<sup>22</sup> When it is not a matter of vocabulary, the linguistic changes children bring to the nursery school concern accents. Remembering the puzzlement of some Italian parents, the coordinator told of how a sentence a child from an Albanian family had used to specify that “*there isn’t any more [of a certain food]*” (“non ce n’è più”) had become widely popular among his peers. Apparently, they liked it because it is a precise and somewhat elegant way of pointing out that a second serving of a dish can no longer be requested because it is all gone. The child had certainly learned it from his parents at home, and he pronounced it with a slight accent that the other children—Italians included—picked up and reported home, making their parents wonder if the children would retain the accent!

Maria Omodeo emphasized how letting children learn different words and sentences from their friends as well as how to switch from one linguistic code to another to make other participants feel at ease promotes a linguistic and sociocultural flexibility that will accompany them into their adult lives. In this nursery school—as noted above—not only is plurilingualism fostered and carried out in a natural way, but this choice goes together with the valorization of the home language and its speakers.<sup>23</sup> During the activities and workshops in which parents participated, both Chinese and Italian are used, depending on communication needs, and non-Italian speaking children soon learn to maintain and cultivate two language channels to switch between according to the communicative intentions or needs of speakers rather than translating from one language to another.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Maria Omodeo, who speaks fluent Mandarin, pointed out that “manmandi” is a variant of the Mandarin “manmand,” a variant which is evidently used at home by a number of Chinese families.

<sup>23</sup> Parents who come to the nursery school for festive occasions know they can use their home language and not have to struggle to speak Italian – a further way to recognise their cultural knowledge and maintain their authority in front of children and educators.

<sup>24</sup> On certain aspects of the issue of multilingualism and interculture, see Omodeo (2003, 2014).

As educators learned, foreign families seem to trust the educational institution more than the Italian families did, even though, as they noticed, such trust can at times be a form of delegation and a defensive attitude, since it allows them to keep their thoughts and feelings to themselves and limit their cooperation with the nursery school's overall project. Therefore, while cooperation between the school and the families is one of the central characteristics of such a project, the reasons for it and the ways in which it is carried out might need to be further explained to parents in order to be accepted. It is precisely this additional participatory engagement that eventually promotes changes in both parents and educators, as often happens with highly engaging educational projects.<sup>25</sup> In fact, during our conversation Beatrice Falcini emphasized how every year she witnesses a process of transformation not only in parents' behavior towards their children but also in the educational personnel (including herself) thanks to the effects of participation in which both parents and educators are involved. The joint assumption of educational responsibility is precisely pursued through and ensured by meetings where problems are discussed and mediation is offered by the nursery school's coordinator, particularly in regard to the social and cultural routines and rules that are implemented and taught with the goal of shaping and sharing a constructive rather than constricting environment.

From this perspective, the changes concern the children, too, as they learn rules and go through routines that are often new to them and their families, but that soon they take home with them, as the coordinator mentioned.<sup>26</sup> For instance, singing a song before going to the bathroom is one of the rules established at La Giostra that children take home, as is brushing their teeth after meals. The habit of singing before getting ready to eat is taught to bring a quiet atmosphere to the school rooms and emphasizes the transition between the end of the morning's playful activities and lunch time. While before this the children are scattered around the room, the little song reminds

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<sup>25</sup> For the documentation and interpretation of teachers' awareness of deep changes following participation in an innovative educational strategy, see Pescarmona, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Children enrolled in the experimental nursery school (open from 10:30 to 18:00) find themselves involved in a tight series of routines (reception, going to the bathroom, lunch, afternoon nap, afternoon snack) that follow one another within a compressed time span (due to the arrival time, related to the parents' requests), so that play and other educational activities can only be carried out in a limited way during the morning, while children are more extensively and intensively engaged in the afternoon.



them that it is time to come together again, walk to the bathroom to wash their hands, and return to sit down at the little tables.<sup>27</sup>

If, however, routines lead children to learn and practice social and cultural rules, abide by them, and bring them home, educators in turn had to learn to wait and respect the child's efforts (or struggles) to implement certain nursery-based rules, such as taking off and putting on their shoes, putting their possessions away in the right slot, and becoming progressively independent. Thus, for both children and educators (and, indirectly, families) the daily experiences at the nursery school are structured by the children's needs and their acquisition of new competences, as well as the institution's educational function and goals that the educators implement through activities and projects.

### Conclusions

In early anthropological research and theorization on education, the cultural continuity between generations was seen as ensured by the transmission to children of a community's cherished and meaningful values, beliefs, and habits. Cultural transmission implied learning by watching, listening, and doing<sup>28</sup> under the supervision of elders or by participating (Rogoff, 2003) in everyday cultural life so as to become able to carry out necessary tasks and achieve recognition from adults. In fact, Rogoff's introductory statement to her *The Cultural Nature of Human Development* is that we "humans are defined in terms of our cultural participation" (p. 3) and that through language, tools,<sup>29</sup> and routines we learn from each other and develop our cultural nature.

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<sup>27</sup> As I observed in a different educational context, rules provide little children with practice and knowledge of social and cultural order. They also promote sociability, by promoting positive and friendly social relationships through the observance of "good manners" at lunch time (see Gobbo, 2015).

<sup>28</sup> A powerful example of children's learning by doing can be found in Fig. 1.2 in Rogoff (2003, p. 6), which shows an 11-month-old Efe baby cutting fruit with a machete. Fig. 1.1 therein (p. 5) shows a 6-year-old Guatemalan girl acting as "skilled caregiver for her baby cousin."

<sup>29</sup> Regarding this point, Italian anthropologist Callari Galli emphasized how education and culture are connected from the beginning, because "the tool, not nature, has allowed some animals to establish new relations with the surrounding world ... giving way to a new system of child raising" (1975, p. 6). More precisely the "stones transformed into tools ... required that one's offspring be taught how to make and use tools. In fact, human creativity and civilization would wither away without the cultural transmission that transfers both cultural meanings and society's relational architecture" (Gobbo, 2012, p. 153).

La Giostra is an educational and cultural environment that is quickly experienced by children as a different kind of home, positively connected to the wider cultural environment and part of a social fabric of which the child is both a member and a (future) contributor. Its educators succeed in achieving those goals through an organization of the school day<sup>30</sup> that fits this particular context but that has also many aspects in common with other nursery schools in Florence and elsewhere in Italy. Timetables, schedules, routines (such as washing up, having lunch, and taking a nap in the afternoon) structure the children's day at school and give them their first idea of a culturally ordered environment wherein they learn to expect and carry out a number of tasks and activities (playing in rooms or outside, drawing, being read to and reading, among others) together with their peers, unless someone wishes to keep quietly to themselves in the corner of a room and affirms their capacity or taste for an initial level of independence.<sup>31</sup> Enrolling

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<sup>30</sup> The nursery school day is organized according to a daily rhythm that does not change, in an effort to answer children's needs and allow them to establish meaningful relationships. Such rhythm is articulated by the reception (8/9:30, but 10:30 for the experimental nursery school) when children are greeted by their educator; morning snack; going to the bathroom; lunch; afternoon nap; afternoon snack; and exit, when educators meet the parents again and inform them about the child's day. Playing, reading, carrying out projects, and going out into the garden are done in between these scheduled events.

<sup>31</sup> The educational project of La Giostra aims to create a safe and stimulating place where children are free to explore and discover, while still feeling protected and cared for. From this perspective, the various corners located in the four rooms of the nursery school provide children with different educational opportunities. The kitchen corner lets children move among familiar objects (a table, chairs, a fridge, pots, pans, dishes, etc.) that allow them to pretend and re-enact home-like situations. The make-up corner is provided with mirrors, clothes, and dolls so that children can play with their own image and reproduce roles and situations from the adult world. In the soft corner, children can find pillows, a carpet, and soft mattresses where they can sit or lie down to talk to each other or an educator, listen to stories, or simply relax between activities. The play corner is where children can move around, jump, crawl, and the like and become acquainted with their own body. The reading corner hosts a library, a carpet, pillows, and small armchairs. In this corner, educators engage in arousing children's interest in and emotions about books and reading, while promoting cognitive and linguistic growth and the cultural habit of listening and imagining. The atelier corner is where children get involved in projects (painting, drawing, collage, patchwork, and assembling such materials as stones, shells, and buttons) that can either be prompted by the educator or started by the children themselves. Finally, the ample garden surrounding the school allows children to safely run, use tricycles, explore the lawn with its trees and flowers, or choose to stay for a while in one of the small cottages.

one's child in a nursery school undoubtedly introduces a form of separation<sup>32</sup> from the family, which is exemplified by the grief felt especially by parents during the settling-in period, but also by the social, cultural, and educational rules the children learn and take home once they have become familiar with the educational environment. Conversely, the different family languages take their residence—they are at home—in school, while the daily interaction with peers and educators whose language of origin is Italian promotes participation in a web of social and cultural relationships and nourishes a complex process of identity construction in both children from immigrant families and native children, providing convincing evidence of “multiculturalism as the normal human experience” (Goodenough, 1976).

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<sup>32</sup> Barbara Rogoff reminds us how “with the rise of industrialization and efforts to systematize human services such as education and medical care, age became a measure of development and a criterion for sorting people” (2003, p. 8). It did not take long to establish “age-graded schools” and “segregate” children from adults’ everyday activities and instead engage them “in specialized child-focused institutions and practice, preparing children for later entry into the community.” She further specifies that such “segregation of children from mature community activities is taken for granted in middle-class settings” (p. 133). Fortunately, the La Giostra project is evidence of successful engagement for educational and social inclusiveness.

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