

Local Community and Childhood Culture: A Project Proposal

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Abstract The paper starts with a brief introduction on the emerging modes of governance for the processes of social planning, which "devolve" to territorial bodies the responsibility of activating previously negotiated policies that are relevant and in line with local needs and peculiarities. Then it describes the objectives and methodology of a project proposal that may be reasonably applied to a local community in order to appreciate its organisational and management capacities implemented in defence of specific areas of competence. In particular, driven by the analysis of the concept of childhood as a "social category" and a "historical construct", *culturally* susceptible of multiple meanings that are often associated with stereotyped or idealised perceptions of the childhood world, the proposed research project focuses its attention on the need to sensitise local communities to these issues. Furthermore, using the methodological suggestions of action research, it outlines an investigation path oriented towards the identification of resources to be activated and of the most appropriate intervention *settings* to develop participation processes for the de-institutionalisation of childhood services that are functional to the construction of an "educational ecosystem" proactively oriented towards the full recognition of citizenship requirements for the little ones.

Keywords Childhood, Family, Community, Socialisation, Culture, Participation, Action research

1. Introduction

The institutional "transversality" and organisational coordination for the systematic planning of measures aimed at experimenting social actions which are sustainable, realistically effective and, above all, tailored on adequately "thought-out" needs, represent criteria of social planning preliminary to a reliable and innovative upgrade of social services.

Those criteria go beyond the limits of the "categorical" approach to policy planning, facilitate the emergence of new forms of attribution of responsibilities and outline a welfare model which de-institutionalises the self-referentiality of traditional modes of service supply and, instead, offers a wide, complex vision of participation. This vision assigns a leading role in decision-making processes to individuals, families, organised forms of social representation and communities as a whole. In this complex and changing governance scenario, which assigns local territories, above all, the task of implementing management models and systems that are functional to the defence of specific areas of competence, the unanimous and combined commitment of "each" stakeholder in building stable and "virtuous" relations

among services (which are not infrequently different and even redundant in terms of purposes and practices) and between services and users, by means of permanent dialogue and dialectic processes that are sensitive to the dynamism of local peculiarities' typical, distinctive needs. The project proposal, whose objectives and methodology are about to be defined, aims at examining the possibility of reaching these results by limiting the reflection to the childhood world. Through an "exploratory" research plan, necessarily propaedeutic to the planning of local policies which counter adultcentrism with a greater "cultural sensitivity" towards the full recognition of the society- and State-based citizenship requirements for the little ones, the aim is to "problematise" the concept of childhood, a concept which is not infrequently pervaded by penalising rhetorical/ideological arguments concerning its semantic complexity and articulation¹.

In actual fact, arguing that childhood as a "social category" is a *historical* construct, socially constructed and,

¹ The lexical variety used to denote the various stages of childhood development and growth (minority, infancy, puberty, youth, adolescence) is of great importance and is typical of approaches preceding the advent of the interdisciplinary research known as "*anthropology of children*", whose aim is to fully recognise the central role of children in cultural production, not as socialisation "objects" but rather as social agents and "subjects". Furthermore, the use of the term "child" paired with adjectives mainly referring to social care policies for the protection and control of "pathologies" related to the childhood condition (child labour, deviance, institutionalisation, social legislation), development disorders and social order disorders.

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therefore, *contingent* and extremely variable from one community to another [1], leads to a conceptual turning point typical of the sociological interest in the issue, which was actually rather discontinuous and intermittent up to the '70s.

As Qvortrup says: "One of the merits of the new social studies of childhood is the import of childhood as a structural concept. My own understanding of childhood as a social construction is much more straightforward and simple, namely that childhood is constructed by a number of social forces, economic interests, technological determinants, cultural phenomena etc., inclusive of course the discourse about it. It is beyond doubt that if one were to go deeper into an analysis of children's every day life during this longer or shorter period of childhood's construction, one would have detected a role of children as actors; children have been present all the time and they have influenced both their significant and insignificant others as well as the environment they were a part of" [2].

In this perspective, the possibility of countering the tendency towards the "levelling" and standardisation of childhood needs², integrated and supported on a conceptual and operational level by the gradual technical/clinical extension, qualification and "specialisation" of functions and services for the protection and care of minors, implies the development of a *reflective* strategy for the social and cultural transformation and innovation of initiatives and programmes developed on this matter. In particular, during the articulate and complex path of theories oriented towards the connotation of contexts and modes for the development of the primary socialisation process, the afore-mentioned propensity for "normalisation" definitely risks neglecting the genuinely "educational" character of socialisation itself. Specifically, socialisation implies forming an authentic "alliance" among subjects that might somehow: redeem childhood identity from an underlying passivity towards adult identity; restore the public dimension of parental responsibility; increase interaction opportunities among the various local educational agencies and families; favour the development of an "integrated educational system"³ in which families, the school, public and private bodies,

associations and society cooperate towards the joint and shared construction of effective relational networks for the promotion of the well-being and the development of the potential of each individual.

2. The Project Proposal: Objectives and Methodology

The postulated project proposal starts from a general reflection on the improvement potential connected with the idea of culture as an "organising concept"⁴ for social planning. As Gordon and Mundy state: "When culture is understood as the basis of development, the very notion of cultural policy has to be considerably broadened. Any policy for development must be profoundly sensitive to and inspired by culture itself" [5].

However, despite the prodigious yet unstable proliferation of meanings, the "voice" of culture in the context of planning is still, and too often, faint; it is not unusual that decision-makers have difficulty in understanding the need to place measures of intervention, their formulation and implementation process within society and its *cultural specificities* [6]. Among the reasons for this weakness, it might be reasonable to mention a semantic issue related to the opposition between a *normative* acceptance and a *pragmatic* acceptance of the term "culture" [7].

In the first case, the reference to a steadily homogeneous system of values, rules and beliefs which are widely shared and which influence individual choices and motivations for action⁵ leads to a planning model which uncritically postulates the "perfect" correspondence of needs, preferences and the implementation of actions automatically considered to be consistent. In this sense, the normative regulation of behaviours and socialisation practices *calls for* a "static" and predefined social representation of childhood; it provides categories and criteria for the classification and assessment of the child based on the skills corresponding to the various ages; it leads to the "colonisation" of childhood age through reference schemes derived from a typical/ideal representation of adult needs and experiences; finally, it prevents the "production of sense" within intersubjective child-adult relationships, leading to distortion effects which emerge in forms of greater dependence, passivity and alienation of childhood itself. At a closer look, this approach is implicit in centralised and dirigiste planning, typical of traditional decision-making processes, which is inevitably bound to arbitrarily build the *sense* of reality, transcending its complexity and indeterminateness, and to replace criteria

2 There is an implicit reference to the theoretical representations that emphasise the weakness and restriction of predispositions and skills of childhood, which is naturally intended to transit from primary conditions of virtual dependence and immaturity to subsequent stages of acquisition of rationality, which is characteristic of adulthood.

3 In Italy, the enhancement of policies in support of parental and family responsibilities, supported by collaboration with health, social and educational services for babies, is the specific subject of the "Framework act for the development of an integrated system of social measures and services" (no. 328/2000). Art. 16 explicitly states: "The integrated system of social measures and services recognises and supports the special role of families in the education and care of the individual, the promotion of well-being and the pursuit of social cohesion; it supports and values the multiple tasks carried out by families both at critical, hard times and in everyday life; it supports cooperation, mutual aid and forms of association among families; it values the active role of families in the development of proposals and projects aimed at offering and assessing services. In order to improve the quality and efficiency of the measures, operators involve people and families in the organisation of the services, giving them responsibilities".

4 According to the theory of *meaningful learning*, an *organising concept* or *concept map* represents a tool for retrieving and coding information that is useful for: making "latent" meanings explicit within a network of sentences; identifying previous knowledge or any incorrect, incomplete or naive knowledge; defining key ideas; stimulating creativity; planning the necessary actions for the management and execution of a task [3] [4].

5 Suffice it to think of the *ultrasocialised* concept of man and of the functionalist interpretation of social issues.

of policy appropriateness with organisational rituals for the control and check of the intervention measures' efficiency.

In the second case, "culture is identified with ways of acting and action strategies, beyond formally established precepts and any presumption of systematicity. According to this version, culture is a *meaningful social practice*, a form of action, a "doing" that unfolds in everyday life and, as such, is always open to improvisation and, therefore, to potential change" [8]. The transition to "shared" modes of definition of priorities and objectives for policies in the specific field of childhood represents a decisive step in this direction: at last, the child emerges as a "person" to be valued for his/her uniqueness and unrepeatability; the link between family and school is made equal since the personalisation of learning processes can be activated only if the latter is able to establish a relationship of cooperation with the family and the territory; the epistemological foundations of the hierarchical forms of *policy making* are reversed; in the name of *subsidiarity*⁶, an inclusive dialogue approach is promoted towards the "participative" comprehension and construction of the community relational space, in itself irreducible to pre-established lines of action, on pain of the loss of the rich and crucial complexity of everyday "vital worlds" [9].

Indeed, we are aware of the possibility that the level of innovation required by the promotion of activities aimed at enhancing and legitimising childhood requirements may have to deal with a series of non-secondary issues which, if omitted or neglected, might significantly affect its chances of realisation: the existing cultural and normative models; institutionalised operational practices, traditionally reluctant to seek dialogue and exchange with the civil society on anything other than administrative matters; the difficulty of politicians to earn consensus through partnership processes; the linguistic and procedural "lack of homogeneity" among individuals involved in the childhood sector, with different functions and skills, in the same territorial area.

Aware of this and in line with the brief considerations made up to now, the postulated research project aims at testing the *cultural maturity* of territories with respect to childhood themes through a preliminary construction of a "community profile". This tool is functional to a critical, dynamic and participative "interpretation" of the (potential and declared) needs of a population, and is fundamental both for highlighting its distinctive features (in terms of demographic structure, health, lifestyles, social and economic condition, labour market structure, gender relations) and for identifying the emerging criticality and the priorities of policies and territorial planning⁷.

For the purposes of this investigation, the "family" subject, a primary site of parenthood and socialisation, represents one of the crucial points in a local network that is really interested and sufficiently motivated to "rethink" its global quality of life and to carry out a scientific analysis of the organisational and structural modifications necessary to generate a substantial change in ordinary and settled perceptions of the childhood world.

Family is a constituent part of the community itself and, therefore, is among the main interlocutors of integrated policies both in support of everyday life and of situations of hardship. On this matter, the aforementioned community profile offers itself as a "diagnostic" means of accompaniment and reinforcement of the existing system and models for territorial planning, useful for: getting to know childhood-oriented facilities and services present on the territory; creating contacts among the operators of the agencies in charge, either by role or responsibility, of identifying or increasing (by preventing losses, overlaps and duplicates) the available resources for childhood; giving back social independence, responsibility and educational skills to families; "opening" the technical jurisdiction of people operating in the education sector to professional reflexivity and to the undertaking of an active and constructive role in the processes of social and institutional transformation; "deconstructing" the existing situation aiming at the participative planning of local policies for childhood that are appropriate and relevant.

It is thought that the methodological approach of *action research*⁸ might be useful for "causing" an effective *transaction* of information, cognitive processes, reflections and skills.

This choice is motivated by a series of issues that mainly refer to the *exploratory* aim of this project proposal, as well as to the assimilation of the territorial context into a *matrix of meanings*. To adopt Gregory Bateson's methodology description, "the method of exploration involves the use of messages which are characterized by a condensation of communicational modes" [11]. In other words, no local

its specificities. As far as quantitative sources are concerned, it is a question of detecting information traditionally used for territorial planning (e.g. demographic area, offer of services) that may be obtained through the secondary analysis of existing databases or of official reports and evaluations on the results of the actions carried out, prior to the start of the investigation. Instead, as regards qualitative sources, it is a question of getting to know the territory in further depth, retrieving information otherwise "difficult" to obtain (concerning, for instance: social and economic inequalities and access to services; estimate of the social capital, solidarity and sense of belonging to the territory; the population's perception of the level of safety and well-being; enhancement of environmental and relational resources, etc.) by using and providing techniques that are partly structured (e.g. interviews, focus groups, participant observation) to "privileged witnesses" (parents, people in charge of the educational services, teachers, paediatricians and staff operating in health centres, local administrators, nursery and primary school pupils).

⁸ It is common knowledge that the epistemological and procedural framework of action research, pioneeringly introduced by the German social psychologist Kurt Lewin [10], develops mainly in the field of institutional pedagogy as an instrument for the participative interpretation, analysis and assessment of criticality and of the improvements in the educational context.

⁶ According to the logic of *multilevel governance*, the principle of subsidiarity postulates the enhancement of solidarity expressions existing in the fabric of society and implies that a citizen (both as an individual and through social formations representing specific sectors of society) is given the opportunity to cooperate with institutions on the definition of effective measures for the creation and development of social networks "of proximity".

⁷ The community profile draws from quantitative and qualitative informational sources through the definition of articulate sets of basic indicators/descriptors to be applied to the local community of reference in order to understand and assess

policy genesis may actually be understood or explained without considering the network of circumstances and communicational practices in which the policy is created and developed.

Pragmatism, intentionality, the negotiation of meanings, the methodology of doubt, the dissemination and "democratic appropriation" of knowledge are the salient features of *action research*, which is, by no coincidence, considered as a catalyst for innovation [12].

If, as stated by Adelman, "action research gives credence to the development of powers of reflective thought, discussion, decision and action by ordinary people participating in collective research on "private troubles" that they have in common" [13], the implication relation and recursiveness of the encounter among all the subjects involved generates processes of *deutero-learning* [14] able to facilitate rigorous and shared modes of self-assessment and reorganisation of current practices.

3. Results: A Conceivable Analysis

Even though the methodology chosen and the results obtainable through this research have no claim to be generalised, hopefully the analysis and assessment carried out with the stakeholders might lead to the real perception of participation as a fundamental *driving force* for the programme suggestions provided on a normative level⁹ (for the purposes of a greater quality of childhood services both supplied and perceived), as well as to the local community's strong orientation to fully recognise children as "socially competent actors" capable, so to speak, of deliberately combining *agency* and *accountability* in intergenerational relations.

In this sense, for instance, it is plausible that the local community involved in the investigation shares the need to:

- get to a socio-cultural connotation of the school-territory relationship, by activating educational types that transform the informal and after-school environment in a *decentralised educational classroom*;
- enable the school to take on a crucial role in the processes of democratic participation and education of the little ones to civic and social life in the territories;
- promote the development of a critical, problematic and diverging thought for the final recognition of childhood as a "social value" to be promoted and protected;
- enhance the professionalism of educators through training programmes aimed at renewing educational/assessment methodologies and at increasing communicational/relational skills;
- activate assessment programmes for childhood policies inspired by the empowerment of each individual and by the *"responsive constructivist*

evaluation" [15] of alternative and/or supplementary measures of intervention other than institutional ones;

- finally, recognise that education "should devote less effort to storing knowledge and more to mastering methods of acquiring it (learning to learn)...The essential problem is to *combat routine, arouse public interest* and, above all, to have teachers *cooperate* in this undertaking" [16].

4. Conclusions

"They are not mistaken, those fathers and mothers who love a life that is ordered, without variety, without upheavals, without too much exertion, who love peace and quiet, etc. Their tastes, their inclinations can certainly be defended. But the great mistake of educators is wanting young people to like what is liked by the old and middle-aged, wanting the life of youth to be no different from that of maturity, wanting to suppress the difference in tastes, desires, etc., either not wanting to acknowledge it or ignoring it altogether, wanting lessons, commands and the force of necessity to stand in for experience" [17].

The reference to this 19th century aphorism to conclude this paper is not accidental.

As it has been attempted to demonstrate, the cultural connotation of childhood refers to historically-determined social representations and definitions that, over time, "crystallise" its identity, changing it or reshaping it completely.

In addition, if in pedagogic proto-models education has the features of a formal process, intentionally directed towards an "adaptive" assimilation and conformity of "socialisers" to socially shared, dominant values and goals, the choices of "civility" that have followed one another ever since mark, including on a normative level, a theoretical and epistemological turning point that de-institutionalises educational practices, gives back "visibility" to childhood and, gradually, expects society itself to fulfil the duty of "rethinking itself" concretely as an "educating society". In other words, childhood life contexts, ever more wide and informal, induce ever new educational needs that call for a semantic expansion of the concept of socialisation; unlike the "unilinear" acceptance, this refers to a continuous process of "cognitive growth which causes representations of the surrounding world, information on social dynamics, the conception of certain aspects of life in continuous recomposition and reorganisation" [18]. Thus, in view of a sociological knowledge that wants to "commit" to the construction of participative planning paths, hopefully the postulated research project will somehow contribute to trace a cultural and operational path for the "rediscovery" of childhood in order to promote its subjectivity, its rights and an interlocutory value that cannot be left aside when planning local policies.

⁹ On this matter, please refer to footnote 3.

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