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## 10. THE ROLE OF COUNSELLING IN CHILD CARE SERVICES AS AN INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

### INTRODUCTION

As an educational environment, childcare services everyday work on the relationship with families, assuming it as a central means to promote active participation by supporting, collaborating, and being in partnership with parents (Henry, 1996; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2005). Investigations concerning children's services emphasise that these services carry out their interventions paying particular attention to transitional events, especially those requiring the involvement of parents (and sometimes the whole family) in developing shared responsibility during the move from family to a childcare service environment (MacNaughton, 2003; Mantovani, 2007). These practices, which focus on the dialogue between teachers and family, aspire to develop a community pedagogy aimed at empowering parents and developing their ability to feel confident and competent in the daily decisions concerning their child (Dalli, 2008). To support parents' empowerment, teachers develop skills based on different kinds of knowledge, a particular "blend" – made both from personal experience, commonsense, tacit knowledge, lessons learned "by ear", and formal learning – which refers to a set of variously elaborated educational paradigms on early childhood (Urban, 2008; Lindon, 2010). Accordingly, this knowledge may operate both at an explicit and tacit level. The explicit level denotes an objective and rational knowledge that can be expressed in words, sentences, numbers or formulas, and is context free. It includes theoretical approaches, problem solving, manuals and databases (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Formal knowledge is involved in teachers' professional background, this being something they recognise as a fundament of their practice. Explicit knowledge is technical and requires a level of academic knowledge or understanding that is gained through formal education, or structured study (Smith, 2001). In contrast, the tacit level denotes knowledge that one is not focally aware of or consciously attending to in a given situation (Polanyi, 1958, 1966). Tacit knowledge is about knowing more than we can tell, or knowing how to do something without thinking about it. This highly personal, subjective form of knowledge is usually informal and can be inferred from the statements of others (Tsoukas, 2003). Tacit knowledge is technical or cognitive and is made up of mental models, values, beliefs, perceptions, insights and assumptions (Smith, 2001). This level of knowledge develops in a free and open environment where people exchange ideas and practicalities through face-to-face contacts, e.g. casual conversations,

story-telling, and mentoring. Tacit knowledge tends to be local. It is not found in manuals or books and it cannot be taught in formal lessons.

Examining tacit knowledge is especially relevant in order to understand the role of knowledge-guided practice in childcare services, as it helps to identify the reasons behind their professional choices. Recognizing teachers' tacit knowledge allows us to clarify the knowledge blend adopted by teachers in managing their daily practices with children and parents. As an educational tool, this knowledge blend greatly aids teachers' professional practices aimed at promoting children's skills, as well as helping parents increase their ability to support a child's wellbeing and ongoing development. Moreover, the analysis of the blend of explicit and tacit knowledge used by teachers enables them to critically assess activities carried out in childcare, fostering the achievement of a reflective stance towards their professional practices (Moss, 2008; Paige-Smith & Craft, 2007).

To clarify the role of explicit and tacit knowledge in counselling activities between teachers and parents, we carried out research in three childcare services in Northern Italy. Research was based on qualitative methodology, and focused on educational counselling provided by teachers during both individual and group meetings with parents.

Data collection was based on:

- Participant observation of the interaction between teachers, parents and children during meetings and play activities;
- Audio-recorded in-depth interviews with parents and teachers;
- Documentation materials collected from the services.

Data were coded and analysed through the IPA (*Interpretative phenomenological analysis*) method (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith, 2011). According to the IPA methodology, transcribed recordings were recursively analysed by researchers so as to produce codes (first level categories) and memos (personal notes about text and categories). *Atlas-ti*® software was employed to manage the coding activity and the linkage among codes. Researchers subsequently established connections and relationships among codes that proved to be reliable, so developing emergent themes (or second level codes), which provided a higher level of abstraction, even though they still reflected the source material. Finally, emergent themes were selected and then grouped together according to conceptual similarities in order to create categories, which were used to produce the overall interpretation of data.

#### CREATING SPACES FOR SUPPORTING PARENTS

Services for young children play an important role in unfolding educational interventions that are limited not only to the daily care of children, but are also able to positively mediate the communication between parents and children, and to support families in their educational duties. To implement these actions, coordinators

and teachers should review the organisation of services to develop a more inclusive approach to educational activities. This includes a sharing of aims, objectives, and knowledge with respect to the service, in order to redesign and renovate spaces and reception arrangements, so as to tailor educational interventions to the needs of parents and children. In the child care services we investigated, the reception areas have been reorganised to enable parents to stay longer with their children in comfortable spaces, playing with other children and talking with other parents and teachers. This conceived new space in addition offers co-ordinators and teachers the opportunity to carry out individual and group counselling for parents regarding their child's education, supported by direct observation of children at play. In this way, the activities of counselling with parents – previously considered marginal compared to direct work with children – becomes a systematic and integrated part of everyday activities aimed at ensuring parents' inclusion.

Counselling activity is structured in two phases: the phase of legitimacy and role allocation, and the phase of counselling. During the first phase teachers help parents find their own place in an educational environment usually designed for children, not for parents. At this stage we witness a process of role expansion: parents strengthen their position as a reference point for their children, partially assuming care activities normally carried out by teachers. This in turn allows teachers to expand their professional role in the direction of family counselling. The analysis shows that teachers put in place specific educational strategies aimed at creating an educational environment that encourages the active participation of parents. Such strategies focus on four fundamental objectives.

The first objective is to create an inviting and welcoming educational environment through:

- a. The construction of visual space in the entrance areas and corridors that reflects the presence of families in the service (photos, artefacts, images) and creates a strong sense of belonging (“This is our child care”);
- b. The design of comfortable spaces for accommodating parents, both to facilitate teacher-parent conversations and to ease the creation of a network of relationships among parents.

The childcare services we observed assign a central role to parents in developing a positive educational environment, so reinforcing their empowerment. Moreover, they create a sense of confidence through the implementation of mutually respectful and responsive relationships between teachers and parents, so making explicit the long-term commitment needed to improve and maintain a positive educational environment.

The second objective for the services is to develop complex skills teachers need to promote active participation from parents and create an inclusive environment aimed at systematically and consistently improving service-family relationships. This involves developing positive relationships based on trust through:

- a. A constant search for dialogue with parents to understand their opinion about the service and expectations about their parental role;
- b. The creation of a reserved space within team meetings to discuss the participation of parents in the service activities, to assess participation practices, and to spread information to suggest new ideas;
- c. The creation of dynamic programs within the service that support the teachers in establishing effective partnerships with families. These programs are designed to offer teachers the opportunity to collaborate and learn from colleagues and parents, and to practice and transform acquired strategies.

The third objective is to study issues related to early childhood, service-family relationships, and educational co-operation. This activity is fostered through:

- a. Group research on texts and information that may provide useful suggestions to improve service-family relationships;
- b. The promotion of pedagogical practices focused on developing communication skills that enable an active role for parents in child care;
- c. Daily conversations with parents about their child's progress and what this implies in terms of follow-up home activities.

The ultimate goal is to offer a full range of opportunities to promote active participation from parents by engaging them in specific events (workshops, celebrations, trips, networking), and scheduling activities that can meet the needs of parents in line with their working hours.

To strengthen the active role of parents, teachers of the child care services observed elaborated four main strategies. Firstly, they clearly communicate that all parents have an important role in bringing up children, emphasizing this aspect both in written (e.g. in the service leaflet) and verbal (e.g. in individual interviews) communication concerning the development of children and the educational tasks of parents. Secondly, they give specific information about what parents can do to intensify participation in services and listen to the parents' opinion about how participation is managed. The third intervention is focused on giving parents a positive feedback on the impact of their participation. This means clearly expressing that the activities of parents are making a difference in the child's growth. The fourth strategy is to create and support networks of parents and teachers within and beyond the child care service, so creating a supportive environment that helps spread the beneficial effect of counselling. This strategy reflects the concept of 'holding environment' developed by Winnicott (Winnicott, 1964). Creating a supportive environment, as Winnicott says, means maintaining a solid network of loving relationships around children and their parents, providing aid even in situations that do not apparently require it, giving children and parents attention, and fostering trust in their competences without judging them.

All these strategies, within the early childhood services examined, play a crucial role in prompting parents to take an active educational role, and consequently feeling

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entitled and able to further expand upon it. Such strategies are the framework in which counselling activities are developed, as the core consulting work achieved by teachers with parents. During the consultation, in fact, teachers and parents develop a joint analysis of a child's behaviour in order to make visible the constitutive reasons for such behaviour and understand less visible underlying dynamics .

In this way, they contribute to innovative family education, traditionally based on a conventional logic of knowledge transmission, through openly discussing and valuing different educational styles adopted by parents and teachers in order to improve them, so developing a process of mutual empowerment that responds more adequately to the complex needs of children.

#### THE PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE BEHIND THE COUNSELLING WORK

Observing the work of teachers during counselling activities, investigation allowed us to analyse how knowledge is deeply embedded in professional practices with parents. Elaborating upon recent research findings (Miller, Dalli, & Urban, 2012; Vanderbroeck, Urban, & Peeters, 2016) it was possible to identify three types of knowledge that guide teachers' work: knowledge of child development, knowledge of designing and implementing educational activities, and organisational knowledge and networking. Each of these knowledge dimensions plays an important role in determining what an early childhood professional education is and how it should operate within the service. This classification emphasises Urban's observation about how childcare professionals must not only provide assistance that addresses children's essential needs, but also respond to broader educational, social and cultural questions which increasingly emerge from families today.

Teachers' knowledge of child development refers to various, widespread theories on cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional dimensions of early childhood. Such knowledge represents the cornerstone of early childhood professional practices (Morrison, 2004), as they allow teachers to understand how children grow and develop going through different developmental stages: physical, emotional, cognitive, linguistic, and social. Therefore, knowledge of educational theories merges with observations of child behaviour, so enabling teachers to implement effective educational practices with children and their families.

Knowledge of the design and implementation of educational activities refers to the theories influencing the everyday planning of early childhood services. In childcare services, these theories are especially focused on the approach of active pedagogy that sees young children as people who dynamically construct their understanding within a physical and social environment (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). Far from considering the child as a passive recipient of the action of the adult, active learning highlights how children construct new meaning through direct and immediate experiences which implies responding to objects and interacting with people, ideas and events. Accordingly, educational settings need to be organised so as to provide young children with opportunities to be actively involved and proactive

in the learning process. From this perspective, play as a spontaneous exploration is pivotal in the planning of childcare activities, since they should be conceived as a permanent research endeavour.

Organisational knowledge and networking includes theories about the educational environment and pedagogical coordination, with special reference to the way connections are established between teachers and families in order to foster wider participation. An important component of this knowledge is the ecological perspective formulated by Bronfenbrenner (1979) about the four environmental levels (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem) that influence child development. This knowledge enables teachers to extend their educational interventions from the limited, internal system of the service to the complex system linking parents, children, and teachers in the larger environment existing also outside the service. Accordingly, teachers can leverage on the multiple resources represented by children, parents and other stakeholders involved in activities developed not just inside, but also outside of the service. This way, a teacher's role falls within the scope of the action network created with parents, colleagues, and other organisations interested in sustaining an interdisciplinary dialogue.

The classification of knowledge we propose allows us to understand how the three categories contribute to the design and implementation of educational counselling with families. The examination of interaction developed during counselling activities with parents shows that teachers' mediation is characterised by different phases, deeply rooted in the knowledge categories previously identified. The first phase of counselling involves a joint analysis carried out by teachers with parents in order to clarify what the children needs and abilities are and elucidate what factors affect a child's development. At this stage, therefore, teachers aim to provide parents with an image of early childhood as close as possible to reality. In this sense knowledge about child development represents the core foundation of this phase, as it is the main source of information conveyed to the parents in order to help them understand how a child's behaviour changes over time.

Reflections that emerged in the first stage lead to the second phase of counselling. This includes the development of guidelines aimed at supporting parents in developing an educational attitude focused on the reinforcement of a child's well-being. At that stage, knowledge of the design and implementation of educational settings based on active pedagogy theories plays a central role, as it allows teachers to engage parents in supporting children in their active efforts to develop all evolutionary abilities – cognitive, emotional, and social.

Finally, the last phase is focused on strengthening the parents' ability to autonomously interpret a child's behaviour and put into practice the guidelines set up with teachers. Here, organisational knowledge and networking become relevant in order to ensure that parents acquire durable educational competences not just as individuals, but also as active members of a net of distributed knowledge. The goal is to involve "expert" parents in offering advice to novices, so extending the ability

to provide educational support that goes beyond the direct intervention of teachers and other early childhood professionals.

All in all, the three categories of knowledge are closely related to the different stages of planning and conducting counselling work (Figure 1).

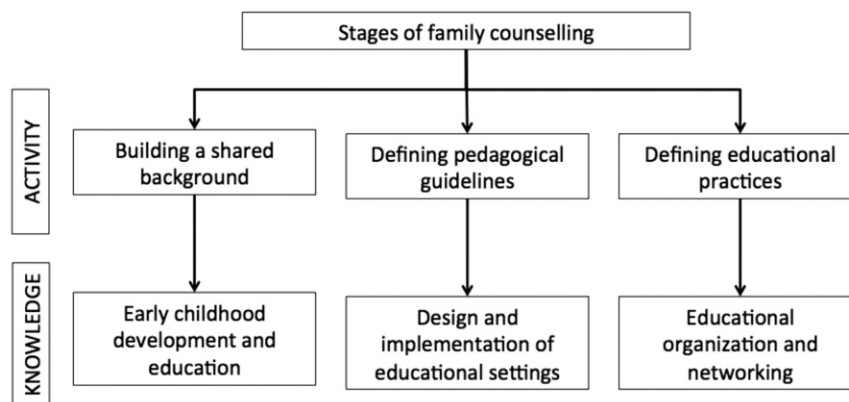


Figure 1. Stages of family counselling activities and knowledge involved

#### HOW THEORIES ORIENT CONVERSATION WITH PARENTS

As shown in the previous section, the design of consulting activities in child care services can be grouped into three phases: (1) provision of basic knowledge about child development; (2) creation of educational guidelines for parents; (3) implementation of pedagogical practices helping parents understand a child's behaviour and put into practice suggested guidelines. The findings from our field research reveal that these stages involve elaborating knowledge both at an explicit and implicit level. More specifically, the first and second phase mostly use explicit interaction levels, while the last phase relating to pedagogical practices is largely based on implicit communication. The effort of conducting a joint analysis with parents regarding their child's behaviour induces teachers to make their opinions and thoughts explicit about child development and education. Data shows that in developing this analysis every teacher makes reference to some theoretical constructs, which are rooted in different research traditions on early childhood development. In using these constructs teachers adopt and adapt scientific knowledge according to the specific situations observed, through a kind of "conceptual bricolage" that crosses and combines various paradigms in an opportunistic way in order to offer parents an explanation of their child's behaviour. In the second phase, the components of this conceptual bricolage are redefined in educational terms and translated into guidelines aimed at helping parents favour psychosocial development of the child. Finally, in the third stage teachers achieve educational practices that implement the guidelines



developed in the second phase of the counselling process. Even though, during this phase, teachers widely use their organisational knowledge and networking ability to support practices, the theoretical underpinning and references remain mostly implicit, as activity is predominantly based on nonverbal communication. Consequently, to identify the various educational paradigms underlying the consulting activities of teachers we needed to carry out a double analytical study: the analysis of the content of conversations between parents and teachers, and the analysis of the educational setting. On the one hand, the content analysis of dialogues between teachers and parents allowed us to recognise the various educational paradigms that contribute towards the creation of the “knowledge blend” employed by teachers when they observe and discuss with parents their children’s behaviour. On the other, the analysis of the educational childcare setting helped clarify that theoretical references are tacitly embedded in the methodological choices teachers adopt in undertaking a specific course of action with children.

Content analysis of conversations teachers usually have with parents about their child’s behaviour emphasises some recurrent topics on counselling activity. These can be grouped into four main thematic areas: (1) educational styles; (2) how playing activities can favour a child’s development; (3) management of aggressive behaviour; (4) management of a child’s tantrums. In counselling parents about topics related to a specific thematic area, every teacher employs a particular knowledge blend deriving from training as well as professional experience. In turn, this personal blend becomes a regular subject for discussion among the group of teachers in order to elaborate and revise the pedagogical guidelines offered to parents, making them a coherent set of indications agreed upon among the childcare staff.

### *Educational Styles*

The first area, educational styles, refers to the issues concerning the parental role, especially maternal and paternal functions, the balance between permissiveness and severity, physical punishments, and parental educational techniques such as induction, love withdrawal, and power assertion. Data analysis shows that paradigms mainly used by teachers during parents’ counselling relating to these topics consists of the following theoretical references:

- Child psychoanalysis: Spock (1946), Bettelheim (1962, 1987), Bion (1961), Juul (2011, 2012);
- Ecological systems theory: Bronfenbrenner (1979);
- Developmental psychology (educational models of parenting techniques and social rules learning): Hoffmann (1977, 1988), Baumrind (1967, 1996), Dunn (1988), Schaffer (1996), Eisenberg and Fabes (1992);
- Intersubjectivity and the layered self: Stern (1985, 1990).

Theories of child psychoanalysis based on Spock, Bettelheim, and Juul studies, are largely used by teachers to support parents in building a view of their child as



a competent and intelligent person, who should be involved in continuous dialogue and reasoning. Teachers also further complement these references with suggestions about educational parenting techniques and the learning of social rules derived from developmental psychology. These studies highlight the connection between the moral development of the child and the use of educational techniques that involve starting conversations with the child and giving him/her explanations. Many teachers make reference to Hoffman's notion of inductive discipline, an educational strategy relying on the ability to provide the child with a cognitive reason to convince him/her to comply with accepted social models. Following Hoffman, teachers criticise the way power (both physical and verbal) is used to force the child to adopt the desired behaviour, as it fosters a moral orientation based on fear of being punished instead of the correct internalisation of moral standards. Control built on explanation, conversely, helps children generalise the rule they have learned, enabling them to apply it in other situations. Teachers also refer to Eisenberg's theory about the value of promoting reasoned discussion with children as a way of teaching them the art of negotiation. Therefore, both Hoffman's and Eisenberg's references are employed by teachers to encourage parents to adopt an educational style based on dialogue with the child.

To facilitate parents' understanding of these conceptions, teachers usually translate theoretical references into practical guidelines. These in turn are based on pedagogical references derived from literature related to active pedagogy. There were essentially two guidelines on educational styles we found in the observed childcare services:

- Children are intelligent people, so they must be respected and treated as such;
- Physical punishment should always be avoided because children need to be educated to verbalise their thoughts.

These guidelines are primarily based on the studies of Goldschmied (2004), who states that teachers as professionals should oppose the use of physical punishments and teach parents how to talk and reason with their children.

The kind of conceptual blend teachers utilise by selecting from different educational paradigms related to parenting styles can be exemplified through the analysis of two short excerpts from interviews with parents.

#### *The Strong Arm*

Mother: "At home we are a bit puzzled as we do not know how to react when she pushes or scratches her friends... When it happens we mildly slap her hands. Is it okay or not?"

Teacher: "We generally try to talk to the child in order to make her understand... Especially because it would be a contradiction to affirm that she should not hit other children by hitting her. Here at childcare, when something like this happens we explain to children

they must express themselves using words. Children are intelligent, you can talk quietly to them and they understand ... They were born to become reasonable human beings ... Sure, it takes a little longer, but it is also the most effective way for them to get it”.

### *Learning to Negotiate*

Mother: “At home we have problems with rules... My husband and I have tried everything... Not even threats work now... How should we act? Should we be stricter or punish him more?”

Teacher: “See, power games never work... They don’t help children... Do you think that if you just punish him, he understands the reason for doing a certain thing? Or he behaves because he is afraid of the consequences?”

Mother: “I think he’s just scared...”

Teacher: “Yes, exactly... If you offer an explanation to help him learn the meaning of the rules, he will accept them more easily... Moreover, an explanation encourages him to negotiate. So, he starts to understand that if he doesn’t want to do something, just saying no is not enough. He must also explain why he doesn’t want to do it”.

### *Play Activities*

The second thematic area refers to the way playing activities can favour a child’s achievements in terms of developing tactile, sensory-motor, cognitive, and verbal skills. Analysis of the childcare settings we observed shows that the educational paradigms on early childhood utilised during counselling with parents relating to these topics are:

- Genetic epistemology and cognitive development: Piaget (1953, 1959)
- Educational psychology (playful learning): Bruner (1990, 1996)
- Developmental psychology:
  - visual development: Fantz (1954);
  - sensory development : Kaye, Fogel (1980);
  - social cognitive learning: Bandura (1986);
  - reciprocal capacity and intentionality: Trevarthen, Hubley (1978), Bretherton (1984);
  - adult and child conversations: Eisenberg and Fabes (1992);
- Attachment theory: Bowlby (1969, 1999), Ainsworth (1978);
- Zone of proximal development theory: Vygotsky (1962, 1978)

The knowledge blend composed by teachers starting from these theories aims to promote parents’ awareness about how play and interactions with adults build favourable environments that help children learn new skills. Drawing from studies

on visual and sensory development, social cognitive learning, and reciprocal capacity and intentionality, teachers try to explain to parents the different stages of play in a child's development, from the initial observation of adults, to the manipulation of objects, to collaboration with other children in shared play. These notions are then integrated by teachers with attachment theories and studies of conversations between adult and child in order to demonstrate that the interaction with caregivers is an important resource for the development of a child's essential skills, especially in the social, cognitive, and linguistic area. Such theoretical references also help teachers provide parents with clarification about the "why" questions posed by children. Starting from Eisenberg's theory, teachers are able to connect this request to the child's need for linking the features of different situations they experience to social meaning. Finally, the zone of proximal development theory is employed by teachers to emphasise the central role of adults in helping children develop their potential skills. Here again, teachers reformulate this theoretical framework in terms of active pedagogy, so as to provide parents with effective guidelines to be applied and adapted according to specific situations. The guidelines emerging from the content analysis of the dialogues held in childcare on this thematic area are as follows:

- Children need play activities that can stimulate a wide range of abilities: sensory, motor, cognitive, and emotive;
- Adults should always be attentive and responsive to the curiosity shown by children. If children express the desire to understand something, adults should provide them with simple and clear explanations;
- Interaction with caregivers is pivotal in the development of language, cognitive, and especially social skills.

These guidelines take inspiration from the educational models theorised by Emmi Pikler (2003), Maria Montessori (1916, 1949), and Elinor Goldschmied (2004). These models share a common concern that education should ensure that a child's development be a complete and rich experience, based on a wide degree of freedom, movement, active discovery and creativity.

The following excerpts from our research reveal how the blend of these theories about play is embedded in teacher – parent conversations during counselling.

#### *The "Why" Question*

Mother: "For a week now every time I do anything she asks "why?" I'm pandering to her because I read that that's the way they learn new words. Have you noticed any change?"

Teacher: "Oh dear... There we are... She really is in the "why" phase... It's a phase that begins with the development of language. At this age the child is able to understand what you say. She begins to speak and be understood quite well. Therefore, she feels the need to use her new skills... So, the "why" questions are a way of exercising

her new abilities. Speaking with adults helps her develop this ability and acquire new words... You're doing a really good job with your daughter. My colleagues and I noticed that she has recently learned many new words. This is really important, as in the future these new words will help her to better express thoughts and emotions".

*Playing Alone, Playing with Others*

Father: "I feel a little frustrated, as I would like more interaction when I play with him"

Teacher: "It's normal that children at this age are not able to really play with others. They are still in the egocentrism stage... There is only their own point of view. The only play device at this age is their own body. So, they like to explore it to find out how it's made and how it can be used to interact with the world outside. They are also interested in their surroundings. They touch objects, bringing them up to their mouth to find out what they are and how to use them. Here at childcare we use the treasure basket. It is a set of common objects that serve to stimulate the five senses of a child and satisfy their need to explore. If you want you can watch this activity this afternoon, so you can propose it to your son when he is at home with you... You'll see, you too will have fun with him".

*Managing Aggressive Behaviour*

The third thematic area identified through the analysis of interviews with parents is related to the management of aggressive behaviour. It covers all concerns that arise in parents when their child manifests aggressive attitudes: biting, scratching and pushing, against adults or towards other children. To address this issue, teachers carry out with parents a joint analysis of the aggressive behaviour of their child, primarily using the following reference paradigms:

- Child psychoanalysis (emotional development): Klein (1932);
- Developmental psychology:
  - the nature and development of aggressive behaviour: Schaffer (1996); de Wit and Hartup, (1974);
  - the understanding of self and others: Selman (1980, 1990);
  - the importance of facial expression: Izard (1994), Shariff, Tracy (2011);
- Genetic Epistemology and cognitive development: Piaget (1953, 1959);
- Learning Theory (frustration-aggression hypothesis): Dollard et al., (1939); Sears, (1953);
- Zone of proximal development theory: Vygotsky (1962, 1978).

These theoretical references are used to alleviate the concerns and anxieties that a child's aggressive behaviour triggers in the minds of parents. Teachers use these educational paradigms to explain that aggressive behaviour in children is a normal phase of child development. Drawing from research about the nature and development of aggressiveness, genetic epistemology, and Selman's studies on interpersonal understanding, teachers identify egocentrism as the main source of aggression. In this phase the child is not able to share an object (e.g. a toy) with a peer. Consequently, the dispute over the object of desire prompts aggressive gestures. Teachers also agree with the hypothesis formulated by Dollard (1939) and Sears (1958) regarding aggressive behaviour as determined by the child's sense of frustration as when, for example, not getting the desired object triggers the child's anger. Moreover, the knowledge blend composed by teachers also includes the interconnection between the models of emotional development, studies of facial expressions and the zone of proximal development theory. The latter is employed by teachers to support parents in countering aggressive behaviour not only with words but also visually, i.e. showing facial expressions that help children understand that their conduct is inappropriate. Finally, teachers also incorporate into the blend Klein's theories on intellectual and emotional development, as it attributes to adults a central role in helping children verbalise emotions.

Interpreted in terms of active pedagogy, such references result in a single pedagogical guideline for parents, especially aimed at fostering the child's emotional wellbeing:

- Children's aggressive behaviour is generated by their emotional distress. Therefore, as adults we must recognise this discomfort and teach children to verbalise their emotions.

These aspects are well illustrated by the following conversation that took place between a mother and a teacher.

*Animal-Like*

Mother: "I am quite worried about my daughter, because watching her playing I noticed that she plays badly with the other children... She pushes, scratches, and especially bites. It seems to me something very animal-like. Is that normal? I don't know how to behave."

Teacher: "First of all, relax and don't worry... It's normal: some children push, others pull hair or bite... That's a phase all children go through, because they are in the egocentrism stage and fail to grasp the point of view of others, to share an object with them... They argue about it, so when one doesn't get the much-desired object, the feeling of frustration and anger unleashes. Then they bite or scratch... When they behave this way, you must only be careful not

to laugh, although they will try to get a smile out of you. You have to show the seriousness of this behaviour and then explain to them that if they want something, they have to verbally ask for it.”

### *Managing Child's Tantrums*

The last area of concern relates to the management of a child's tantrums. It is related to all strategies adopted by children to oppose their parents, and conflicts arising therefrom. Data analysis highlights that this is the most significant issue for parents, probably because such conflicts are often regarded by parents as directly questioning their parental role. To address these issues, teachers refer to the following educational paradigms:

- Genetic epistemology and cognitive development: Piaget (1953, 1959)
- Psychoanalysis: Anna Freud (1966–1980), Bettelheim (1962, 1987), Dolto (1977, 1985), Klein (1932), Winnicott (1964, 1971);
- Developmental psychology: Spitz (1957);
- Attachment theory: Bowlby (1969, 1988), Ainsworth (1978);
- Zone of proximal development theory Vygotsky (1962, 1978);
- Intersubjectivity and the layered self: Stern (1985, 1990).

Childcare teachers use these scientific paradigms to carry out a joint analysis of child tantrums with parents, so as to clarify the reasons underlying this behaviour. Teachers tend to share a common opinion about the constitutive reasons for children's tantrums, in which they generally refer to the different stage-specific developmental needs of the child. In this sense, among different explanations of tantrums teachers privilege egocentrism, as it prevents children from understanding that desires and rights of other people can differ from their own. This situation causes feelings of anger and frustration in children, often resulting in oppositional behaviour crisis.

Another explanation for oppositional crisis offered by teachers is closely linked to the attachment theory. Teachers see tantrums as a means children use to express their need to separate from attachment figures, thus asserting their personal autonomy. This line of thinking is founded in Spitz's research on developmental psychology, which showed that opposition is the most important cognitive result that children achieve during growth. According to this theory, opposition demonstrates a child's ability to affirm their identity as an expression of increased autonomy. Finally, we also found that teachers sometimes refer to the psychoanalytic paradigm, as they explain to parents that tantrums are determined by a child's need to test their own omnipotence and that of their parents, as well as the need to assert their gender identity.

Translated in terms of active pedagogy, these theoretical references led to the formulation of three educational guidelines aimed at fostering children's psychosocial wellbeing through the recognition of their needs, distresses, and emotions. Through

the analysis of counselling interviews focused on this thematic area, we identified three main guidelines:

- Children's tantrums are a display of discomfort, so before taking action it is important to understand the source of this unease;
- Children constantly test the limits of their abilities and power. Adults have the task of providing these limits;
- Oppositional behaviour is a means through which children try to assert their identity and autonomy. Adults must teach and show the child that there are alternative ways to assert individuality and independence.

These aspects are especially evident in the following conversations between teachers and mothers:

#### *The "no" Phase*

Mother 1: "Good heavens! At home he is continuously saying "no", especially to me... Maybe I did something that hurt him... But I don't know what exactly."

Teacher: "You should not take that "no" as a personal affront. Firstly, it's a normal stage of child development. All parents and teachers have to deal with it, sooner or later. Secondly, your child is growing, so this is his way of separating from the attachment figure. Thirdly, he is male. So he says no to you especially because he must oppose the female gender and affirm his identity as a male."

Mother 2: "Well, for three days now my child has been saying no to everything I ask him. He is not doing this just with me, also with my husband. It really is exaggerated behaviour, I don't think it is completely normal".

Teacher: "Oh yes, he is just beginning the no phase too... He's three years old now. So he's going beyond attachment and wants to assert his identity. He also tries to assess the limits of mum and dad... Yes, it is a normal stage of development, even though some children experience it in a more intense way. The stronger his personality, as is the case of your child, the more intensely he lives life ... Moreover, he is also facing the transition from childcare to pre-primary school, it's a major change for him."

#### *Screaming and Crying*

Mother: "Oh my! In this period I can't put up with him anymore. He screams and cries and doesn't want to do anything he's told. Is it normal?"



Teacher: “It is normal... Actually this period is a very important phase for children, it is the necessary step to achieving independence. Therefore, it’s a positive period... Of course, it’s hard to face their challenges, partly because things often end with screams and crying fits. But this is because children don’t know how to express their needs, as they don’t even know how to use words properly, so they (shout/scream/cry?) and then an outburst happens. Bear in mind that children at this age understand that they are a different, separate person from their mother. So they are trying to discover their own personality, their own identity, which is different from that of the mother. The task for the adult is to set limits, because they are a way to guide him in this research.”

#### HOW THEORIES ORIENT COUNSELLING WITH PARENTS

The work of teachers with parents is not limited to these four areas of interest, but aims to generally promote parents’ skills both in analysing their child’s behaviour, and in putting educational guidelines into practice. Regarding to the educational practices of child care services this inclusive approach is based on the active participation of parents in meetings and on the development of a common operative model based on dialogue, listening and containment of children’s emotions. At a methodological level, this translates into the construction of three types of professional intervention: individual, group and workshop.

The individual intervention includes both formal talks that take place regularly between teachers and families, both informal moments in which a teacher and a parent talk about the child during the day. This intervention is based on creating a cooperative atmosphere, where the parents play an active role in building the family counselling process.

In the second type of intervention, group meetings, parents have a chance to talk in small groups and with the facilitation of teachers, about the positive aspects, but also the concerns and fears related to the upbringing of children. The role of teachers is to encourage a shared, reflective discussion among peers within the group, stimulating the growth of empathy and collaboration, and facilitating the development of new ways of expression and communication. Moreover, this activity promotes the building of social networks, both formal and informal, between parents.

The workshop interventions include direct participation of parents during children’s play activities held in childcare. In this case, the role of teachers is to help adults reflect on the meaning of the educational experience, developing their pedagogical skills through play activities. Through observation of play activities, parents have the opportunity to understand how children progressively develop autonomy by exploring the surrounding environment, and how it is possible to help them during this process.

Therefore, all these interventions are grounded on activities fulfilled through a shared process, in which parents become active partners in building educational objectives, developing mutual support and complementary roles with children. During this process, teachers do not assume a traditional directive role, but act as empowering agents, i.e. as professionals systematically helping parents expand their skills and assume a leading role in educating children, so gradually lessening their dependence on teachers' advice. Close examination of these activities we observed allowed us to pinpoint the theoretical references used by teachers in implementing such educational interventions.

The first theoretical reference concerns the non-directive style that teachers, following the Carl Rogers model (1969), usually adopt during interviews. Teachers' conversations are aimed at exploring practices, images, attitudes, and opinions relating to parents about some issues. This exploration is conducted using an indirect training method, in which the traditional roles of the teacher as an expert and parent as a novice are modified in order to foster effective co-construction of knowledge. According to this approach, the best way to support the parents' educational role is not to tell them what to do, but rather help them understand the specific situation and manage their own resources. This aid consists precisely in enabling parents to reactivate and reorganise their cognitive, emotional, strategic resources, on the assumption that people have the potential to elaborate solutions on the basis of their personal resources, once they are made aware of them. We find an example of this non-directive communication technique in the following conversation between a mother and a teacher:

Teacher: "How does your child behave at home?"

Mother: "Well... When we get home, as we are together she wants cuddles and breast feeding... As I still have milk, I decided that I will nurse her as long as it lasts, because I see that this is solace for her. So, in such cases I allow her to feed. Then I noticed that sometimes there is a moment of... I think it's kind of jealousy towards parents. For example, on Saturday I go to work, so she stays at home with her father. When I come back she doesn't come to me like she usually does. It is like she has got a special feeling with her father, so I think she is a bit jealous of her dad... I do not know if it is a normal behaviour."

Teacher: "Is that something she does only with you or also with your husband?"

Mother (after a short reflection): "No, she also does the same with me, when we stay home together in the afternoon. When her father comes back, she doesn't go to him as she usually does."

Teacher: "So you still think she's doing it because she's jealous or to make you feel guilty about leaving her?"

Mother (after a short reflection): “Indeed to make me feel guilty, because she behaves that way both with me and my husband, especially when we meet again after an absence... So maybe it is normal behaviour at this age, I presume...”

Teacher: “Yes, it’s normal, it is part of the attachment phase”.

We can see from the interview that the teacher devotes much time to the thoughts and emotions of the mother. Comments are addressed to help the mother better understand the situation, starting from her own feelings.

Another theoretical reference emerging from the organisation of the various interventions carried out by teachers at childcare, aimed at encouraging the involvement of parents during welcome activities and workshops, refers to the concepts of guided participation and participative appropriation developed by Rogoff (1990, 2003). These constructs describe the educational process as a mutual act, in which the learner, in this case the parent, appropriates knowledge and practices from the expert (the teacher) through participation in activities situated in a context. As a result, the various professional interventions in childcare are structured so as to give parents the opportunity to interact with their own children as well as other children, parents, and teachers. Moreover, these moments of participation allow parents to observe teachers as they interact with children, and consequently to appropriate some of the educational practices employed by teachers. Our research shows that, by observing how teachers deal with disputes with the children, parents were able to acquire conflict management skills based on listening and talking with their children. For example, observing teachers at work many parents learned, when a child’s tantrums result in screams and tears, to leave their children some time to express their anger before inviting them to express their emotions and intervening on the oppositional behaviour. The acquisition of this practice was particularly significant because, as we noted, parents see conflicts with their children as a real threat to their parental role and skills. This aspect clearly emerged during an interview conducted with a group of parents:

Researcher: “Did you learn anything from the teachers that allowed you to feel more confident in your role as a parent?”

Mother 1: “Sure, their calm attitude. I have always been an impulsive and impatient person. When my son started acting up I immediately lost patience, I was hasty in trying to placate his cries, and I told him off. Obviously, this only made the situation worse. He screamed more, he lay down on the ground for a long time, so I felt helpless... Then one day, when I came to childcare to pick him up, he was having a tantrum because he did not want to go home. I saw the teacher taking him aside, she calming him down, and then quietly explaining to him that it was time to go home. He calmed down and did as he was told. I was surprised how the teacher had managed it, because she was talking to

him as if he were an adult. I had never thought that you could do certain things with young children. Since then I have acted like the teacher did... It is a time consuming job, but at least it's not a time full of screams... Now I feel I can control the situation."

Mother 2: "For me it is the same. His tantrums were becoming a real problem at home... I did not feel able to cope and wondered what I was doing wrong. Then they explained to me that tantrums always have a reason. You should try to encourage the child to express in words what he wants. I followed their advice, especially after seeing how they behaved with children. Now I have no problems, I feel more confident as a mother."

Mother 3: "Yeah, me too. Tantrums really put you through the wringer as a parent. Actually it doesn't take much. Sometimes you think that talking to children doesn't solve anything, or that it takes up too much time. But it is not so."

Mother 4: "For me I think the "no" phase was the most difficult to deal with, because you can feel completely stuck. I also saw my husband really in trouble for the first time... Also it causes anxiety in front of others, because you are afraid of being judged as a parent. I also learned to manage conflicts by observing teachers during the reception and farewell time. They talk a lot with children. The first thing they do is to calm them down."

Besides learning how to deal with their child's conflicts through the guided participation process, parents also acquire other relevant educational practices, including how to handle physical playtime with a group of children, how to lead group activities and contain possible tensions that may arise, and how to organise heuristic play activities.

A remarkable aspect of these interventions is the space dedicated to play activities, as a dimension that allows parents to better understand their children. Through play children test not only their ability to act in the environment, but also express their emotions. For example, as noted by Juul (2012), physical play with fathers often creates a dynamic situation of pretend aggression, which helps children to develop motor skills and manage their energy. In turn fathers, through this type of situation, give their children a measured response that helps them become more autonomous in managing physical interaction with others. In addition, the opportunity to participate in heuristics activities within childcare helps parents expand their knowledge of play activities they can offer their children at home. The following comments collected from two mothers observed during our research in one of the services emphasise help clarify this point:

Mother 1: "Look how well he's playing . At home he just goes from one game to the other, messing the whole room up..."

Mother 2: “You’ve said it!! Everything that I propose at home holds his attention for just a few minutes... it’s like this every day. I think that every now and then I will propose this activity [heuristic play], maybe on Saturdays, when my husband is at home.”

Mother 1: “Yes, yes, when he’s not going to childcare I have the same problem... We’ll also try this at home”.

Finally, the last theoretical reference emerges from group interviews teachers held in childcare with small groups of parents, following the psychoanalytical models proposed by Bettelheim (1962, 1987), Winnicott (1964, 1971), and Juul (2011, 2012). These interventions led to the formulation of a new model of family education, which goes beyond the conferences and lectures normally given to parents during traditional parenting courses. In the new model the teacher plays the role of coordinator, assuming a non-directive position within the small group of parents. This way, she helps develop reflections that allow parents to acquire greater awareness of the significance of their educational actions (Moss, 2008). Within these groups, teachers do not provide pre-established solutions. They let them emerge as conversation unfolds, urging parents to discuss and compare their values and educational methods. The purpose of this activity is to provide parents with an educational setting in which they can find the most appropriate solutions for themselves and the goals they want to achieve as a family.

#### DISCUSSION

Recent research trends examining childcare services emphasises the shift from a traditional organisation (day nursery), based on providing children with essential assistance through routines focused on body care and nutrition, to a new educational model, which sees young children as active learners and parents as relevant partners of teachers in fostering a child’s development (Urban, 2008; Musatti, Picchio, & Di Giandomenico, 2012; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2005; Nuttall, Coxon, & Read, 2009). In the services we observed, this transformation from care to education has promoted an expansion of normal activities towards new forms of parental counselling, in which teachers help parents analyse their children’s behaviour through a combination of joint observation of play activities and reflections arising from conversations with mothers and fathers.

To encourage parents’ active participation, teachers of the observed services undertook a double process of reorganisation involving both the childcare setting and the way communication was managed. To create a setting especially apt so as to put parents and children at ease during welcome and farewell activities, some childcare spaces were organised with comfortable furniture suitable for both adults and children, as well as displaying toys, books, and other objects that could invite parents and children to develop joint play activities. Moreover, the usual schedule of the service was modified so as to enable teachers and parents to have more room

for regular meetings, both at the beginning and end of the day, and for individual and group counselling. In turn, communication with parents improved both on an individual and group level, through interviews focused on discussing children’s behaviour that parents perceived as problematic, as well as jointly observing children at play in order to help parents improve their ability to analyse and interpret some challenging situations.

All these counselling activities aim to help parents develop their ability to feel competent in daily decisions concerning their children. It is particularly apparent in these counselling sessions how teachers from the observed services employ professional skills grounded both on explicit and tacit knowledge, through a kind of *bricolage* that blends formal learning, professional practices, and personal beliefs (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). Data shows that the knowledge blend used during counselling with parents generally refers to a composite group of research paradigms on early childhood, which teachers employ to provide an explanation of a particular situation e, by freely aggregating different theoretical models. This way, they create an individual, unique system taken from different theories held together by reference to personal and professional expertise refined through practice. We call these individual systems of theories “conceptual clouds”, as they are an accumulation of ready-to-use knowledge packages, which do not have a rigid structure, but change shape according to the problem posed by a given situation. Therefore, joint observation of children or questions posed by parents “activate” the teacher’s conceptual cloud, who retrieves and combines theoretical and practical information, thus producing a blend that supports educational problem-solving through the proximal analysis of a child’s behaviour (Figure 2).

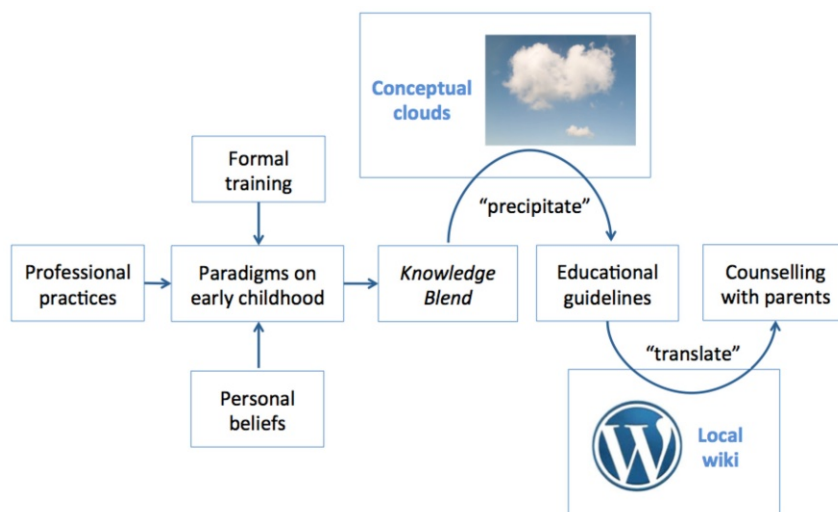


Figure 2. From knowledge to practices

As a personal form of knowledge based on adhocatic explanation tactics, conceptual clouds differ from one teacher to another; two teachers may produce different interpretations of the same situation. This may create the risk of conflicting communication in handling parents counselling. Consequently, the childcare systems observed decided to create guidelines, which provide a common ground for managing conversation with parents. To achieve shared guidance, teachers use individual clouds as boundary objects, i.e. “objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” (Griesemer & Star, 1989: 393). Therefore, teachers exploit the flexible structure of conceptual clouds to combine and then “precipitate” them in the shape of educational guidelines that every professional agrees to comply with when communicating with parents. Consequently, guidelines so produced become an organisational framework that, on the one hand, ensures coherence across teachers’ activities, and on the other builds up a local wiki of knowledge from which teachers draw and exchange information that are employed during parents’ counselling on specific topics such as educational style, the educational role of play, and children’s aggressive behaviour or tantrums. Furthermore, the observed childcare services used their local wiki to undertake a translation of professional guidelines into practical recommendations not conveyed in the form of prescriptions or lectures, but arise from informal training achieved by involving parents in a joint analysis and interpretation of their child’s behaviour.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Today’s childcare services show an increasing interest in promoting the inclusion of parents as active partners in fostering not only children’s wellbeing, but also their social and cognitive skills. Observations from the childcare services we examined confirm this trend towards implementing counselling activities addressed to strengthen parents’ awareness of their child’s abilities through joint observation and discussion. Data show that teachers draw from explicit and tacit knowledge to produce knowledge both on a personal (conceptual clouds) and team level (local wiki) that is translated into counselling practices with parents.

Further research should clarify the way these activities can be connected to the development of a reflective stance on the part of teachers, enabling them to assess and improve the quality of the knowledge blend they use in supporting counselling interventions with parents. Reflexivity is crucial in developing more skilled practices through a critical appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of different knowledge types used in promoting parental empowerment. Therefore, helping teachers become more aware of the special combination of explicit and tacit knowledge they employ during counselling would provide valuable suggestions regarding the improvement of teachers’ professionalism, especially regarding parents’ training as a way of furthering inclusive education in childcare services.



NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> Although the chapter has been jointly conceived and discussed by the two authors, Fabio Dovigo is specifically responsible for the first, third and sixth section, and Francesca Gasparini for the fourth and fifth section. The Conclusion was jointly written.

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## THE ROLE OF COUNSELLING IN CHILD CARE SERVICES AS AN INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

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