Blending Knowledge: The Role Of Tacit And Explicit Expertise Of Day Nursery Teachers In Empowering Parents

KEYWORDS
Teachers Professional Development, Tacit/Explicit Knowledge, Reflexivity, Day Nurseries, Parental Empowerment

THE THEME OF RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
The research investigates the role of tacit and explicit knowledge as a means to promote parental empowerment in day nurseries. The aims of research are:

- Analyzing the educational environment of day nurseries, especially the communication between parents and teachers;
- Examining the different types of learning (formal or informal) and knowledge (explicit or tacit) teachers use in counseling parents;
- Understanding how this store of knowledge can help teachers to develop a reflective stance as a way of improving their ability in promoting parents’ empowerment.

Helping parents to develop the ability to feel competent in the daily decisions concerning the child is a crucial task for day nurseries teachers (Urban, 2008). To support parents’ empowerment, teachers develop skills based on different kinds of knowledge, a particular “blend” – consisting of formal learning and personal experience, commonsense or lessons learned “in the field” - which refers to a set of variously elaborated educational paradigms on early childhood (Bove, 2011; Lindon, 2010). Analyzing this combination of knowledge allows them to identify the "epistemological compass" adopted by teachers in supporting parents, and to evaluate it as a contribution to the development of reflective professional practices (Macintyre, 2007; Paige-Smith, Craft, 2007).

This range of 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 essentially context free. It includes theoretical approaches, problem solving, manuals and databases (Nonaka, Takeuchi, 1995; Huntly, 2008). So, in terms of professional background, explicit knowledge refers to the kind of resources a teacher is consciously aware of utilizing to inform the everyday practice in day nursery. This systematic knowledge is readily communicated and shared through print, electronic methods and other formal means. Explicit knowledge requires a level of academic knowledge or understanding that is gained through formal education or structured study (Smith 2001).

In contrast, tacit knowledge refers to the level which one is not focally aware of or consciously attending to in a given situation (Polanyi, 1958, 1967). 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 or behaviors of others (Collins, 2010). Tacit knowledge is made up of mental models, values, beliefs, perceptions, insights and assumptions implicitly shared by the team of teachers (Smith 2001). This level of knowledge tends to be local and context-linked and is more easily unfolded in a free and open environment, where people exchange ideas and practicalities face-to-face such as casual conversations, storytelling and mentoring.

Analyzing the explicit and tacit knowledge of teachers is critical as it allows identifying the way they blend formal and informal sources of information and “precipitate” them into professional practices with children and parents (Hargreaves, 1998; Elliot, Stemler, 2008). Learning by doing has a recognized place as a relevant approach to build teachers expertise, but the success of such a strategy is strictly connected to the development of a reflexive stance on the part of teachers, enabling them to recognize how explicit and tacit knowledge is intertwined during everyday interaction with children and parents, concurring to create a situated expertise (Kim, 2011; Postholm, 2008). Thus, reflexivity is crucial in developing more skilled practices through a critical appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of different knowledge types in promoting parental empowerment. Therefore, a detailed analysis of the links between explicit and tacit knowledge would provide valuable suggestions about the improvement of teachers’ professionalism, especially regarding family education.

METHODS/METHODOLOGY
The research was focused on the educational strategies used by teachers to welcome children and their parents to three childcare services in Northern Italy. We chose the three day nurseries on the basis of
their special involvement in projects aiming at offering parents’ counseling as a systematic and fully integrated part of the daily activity.

Each service was comprised of:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day Nurseries</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N. teachers</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. children</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. day care personnel</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data collection, carried out through qualitative methodology, lasted nine months and was based on:

- Participant observation of the interaction between teachers, parents and children during the welcome activities;
- Audio-recorded in-depth interviews with parents and teachers;
- Analysis of documentation collected from the services.

Collected data were fully transcribed and coded by two independent researchers. Subsequently, data were analyzed through the IPA (Interpretative phenomenological analysis), a bottom-up approach which allows us to explore in detail how participants are understanding their personal and social world through a phenomenological analysis of verbal and nonverbal communication. Also, Atlas-ti software was used to manage the coding activity and the linkage among codes in order to create cloud views. This way, we identified conceptual categories, which in turn led to the overall interpretation of data.

The research was carried out with the permission of all people attending the early childcare services involved: coordinators, teachers, and parents. The data collected during the research were treated on a confidential basis and in accordance with the communication needs of day nurseries. The anonymity of participants has been protected throughout the research process and thereafter in any future published work.

**EXPECTED OUTCOME/RESULTS**

Expanding the role toward family counseling required the educators to make explicit their views about child development and education. This allowed in turn the researchers to identify and analyze the “epistemological constellation” each educator uses as a reference for giving advice to parents. This
blend of formal and informal knowledge refers to a set of various educational paradigms on early childhood employed by teachers during their work with parents. Below we summarize the main paradigms which emerged from the study:

- Psychoanalysis;
- Genetic Epistemology and Cognitive Development;
- Attachment Theory;
- Zone of Proximal Development;
- Ecological Perspective;
- Intersubjectivity and Mother-Child Bonding;
- Guided Participation.

Even though teachers rarely mention them in an explicit manner, these theoretical references proved to be deeply embedded in the knowledge used during everyday interactions with parents. Moreover, far from being assumed and applied in a “canonical” way, the constructs referring to different scientific traditions are often adopted and adapted by teachers to the specific situation at stake through a work of conceptual *bricolage* which crosses and merges the various paradigms. Furthermore, these references are typically combined with other constructs which are non scientific (as related to the common sense) or quasi-scientific (as related to the teacher’s experience). Thus, investigation allowed drawing a map of the different combinations of explicit and tacit knowledge the teachers use to create the blend employed during the meetings with parents. The same map has proved to be a useful tool for helping teachers to develop a reflective stance as professionals. Discussing the map with teachers enabled them to increase the awareness of the conceptual frameworks adopted during the counseling. Moreover, it allowed the team to come to an agreement about a more consistent style of communication with families, which in turn improved the efficacy of the interventions.

**References**


