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«“Building Communities of Readers”. Reading in Italy in preschool age »

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Abstract

The article describes *Nati per leggere*, a project launched in Italy in 1999 with the aim of sensitising families about the benefits of reading among 0-6 years old children. The theoretical framework is presented through the works of Rita Valentino Merletti and Luigi Paladin and followed by the description of the project functioning and activities. A brief reading-note of the work *Building Communities of Engaged Readers: Reading for Pleasure* by Teresa Cremin, Marilyn Mottram, Fiona M. Collins, Sacha Powell, and Kimberly Safford (London: Routledge, 2014) provides some point of consideration for a possible enrichment of the project.

Keywords

Preschool reading, education to reading, reading practices, reading and empathy

Resumé

L'article décrit le projet *Nati per leggere*, démarré en Italie en 1999 dans le but de sensibiliser les familles sur les avantages de la lecture des enfants de 0 à 6 ans. Le cadre théorique dans lequel s'inscrit le projet est retracé par le biais de deux volumes de Rita Valentino Merletti et Luigi Paladin et suivi par la description du fonctionnement et des activités au sein de *Nati per leggere*. Un bref compte rendu de l'étude *Building Communities of Engaged Readers: Reading for Pleasure* de Teresa Cremin, Marilyn Mottram, Fiona M. Collins, Sacha Powell et Kimberly Safford (London: Routledge, 2014) fournit des pistes de réflexion sur un possible enrichissement du projet.

Mot-clés

Lecture préscolaire, éducation à la lecture, pratiques de lecture, pré-alphabétisation, lecture et empathie

The aim of this article is to reflect on the policies of reading promotion among young citizens in Italy, in particular during the so-called preschool age (0-6). The first part of the title deliberately refers to the recent publication *Building Communities of Engaged Readers: Reading for Pleasure* by Teresa Cremin, Marilyn Mottram, Fiona M. Collins, Sacha Powell, and Kimberly Safford¹. This work presents the results of a project carried out within the UK Literacy Association (UKLA) with the aim of describing, analysing, and fostering reading education in British schools. The main assumption is that “the development of children’s engagement as readers and their pleasure in reading is too often seen as an optional extra”. Moreover, the 2009 report of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) refers to “ongoing deterioration in young people’s enjoyment of reading²”. An alarming portrait, especially if connected with the argument emerging from the same PISA report that being a frequent reader is much more of an advantage than having educated parents, proving reading to be a most effective tool for social change³.

The book provides a detailed account of the project put into practice to take measures against the observed deterioration through the education system. It involved primary school teachers and pupils and was carried out in two different stages, combining surveys and empirical research. In the first phase, the knowledge and the use of children’s literature of 1,200 teachers was surveyed, together with the teachers’ personal reading practices. In a second moment, 43 teachers were involved in a project with the aim of increasing their skills in “building communities of readers” through primary education. First of all they were encouraged to fill a gap resulted from the survey: the limited knowledge of children’s literature besides what they knew from their own childhood. Secondly, they started to reflect on children’s literature not only as a supplementary teaching tool, but as something that young readers could feel relating to their everyday life. They consequently engaged in proposing to their students to read as a free activity to be carried out in comfortable spaces (such as reading corners), that lead to discussion on the texts read, advice, and sharing of reading experience. This proved to sensibly increase children’s motivation to reading.

It is not my aim to give a complete account of the project, rather to underline that the idea on which this project relies is raising awareness among teachers, professionals and the whole society: the phenomenon of reading needs to be analysed in both a theoretical and a practical perspective, in order to build a pedagogy of reading. Furthermore, the book succeeds in sketching paths of reflection on the societal impact of such pedagogy. That is why *Building Communities of Engaged Readers*, aiming at “continuing to influence the reading agenda”, does not only represent a landmark for researchers, but

¹ T. CREMIN, M. MOTTRAM, F. M. COLLINS, S. POWELL, K. SAFFORD, *Building Communities of Engaged Readers: Reading for Pleasure*, London, Routledge, 2014.

² *Ibid.*

³ For a synthesis of PISA 2009 results cf. *Pisa 2009 at a glance*, OECD, 2011, available at <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/programmeforinternationalstudentassessmentpisa/pisa2009ataglance.htm> (last accessed November 6th, 2018).

also a significant tool for policy makers and a suggestion for public engagement.

The systematic research carried out by the British Literacy Association seems to me a useful frame to present an Italian project, partially different in its target, but that relies on similar arguments: *Nati per leggere* [Born to read]⁴. Launched in 1999, it aims at promoting and fostering reading in preschool age: a stage of life often neglected by literacy campaigns. Such purpose relies on the concept of Emergent Literacy, i.e. the early acquisition of fundamental skills for the further development of literacy, and was inspired by the US campaign *Reach out and Read* as well as by the British *Bookstart*⁵. Furthermore, *Nati per leggere* is built upon the Competent Child theory⁶, and includes reading among those activities that shape the baby's interaction with the surrounding world⁷.

Nati per leggere was born as a cooperation project between a Paediatricians association (Associazione Culturale Pediatri, ACP), a non-profit organisation focused on children's health (Centro per la salute del bambino), and the Librarians association (Associazione Italiana Biblioteche, AIB), later involving other associations and services engaged in children's education and care. Paediatricians play an essential role in this project since each family visits them on a regular basis during the early life of their baby. In such situations, the participating paediatricians have the opportunity to raise awareness on the importance of reading during the earlier stages of cognitive development. This helps the project not only to reach families of non-readers, but also to avoid the risk of social exclusion. Furthermore, paediatricians also benefit from an authority that can make their advice easier to follow by parents. Besides sensitising families, paediatricians play another important role: the project provides them with books to be given to their young patients. Unfortunately, depending on the project funding, the number of books is often limited, and medical doctors often participate themselves in expenses. Nonetheless, a more frequent practice, advised by the project as well, is to put up small libraries in surgeries. In this way, a contact between the child and the book is ensured, even in non-readers' families. Unfortunately, only 6.4% of family paediatricians have joined the project, a choice that they make on a voluntary basis.

This shows how, despite being the most relevant project in this direction as far as Italy is concerned, *Nati per leggere* experiences some difficulties in involving its potential target, i.e. parents, educators and, of course, children in the 0-6 age range. Difficulties are mainly due to the limited funding of the project, carried out by non-profit organisations and relying on the activity of volunteers.

⁴ www.natiperleggere.it (last accessed November 6th, 2018).

⁵ <http://www.reachoutandread.org> ; <https://www.euread.com/projects/projects-programmes/baby/bookstart/> (last accessed November 6th, 2018).

⁶ Based on the work of Jerome S. Bruner in J.S. BRUNER, R.R. OLVER, P.M. GREENFIELD *et al.*, *Studies in cognitive growth*, Oxford, Wiley, 1966 and then developed in diverse field of developmental psychology and pedagogy. In Italy, Luigia Camaioni has contributed, at the end of the 20th century, to the popularisation of the competent child, *cf.* L. CAMAIONI, *L'infanzia*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1997.

⁷ I am grateful to Martina Gaia Acquafredda for making me aware of the activities of *Nati per leggere*, that she has analysed in her MA final dissertation, *Nati per leggere. Politiche di promozione della lettura in Italia dal 1999 a oggi*, Università degli Studi di Milano, Facoltà di Studi Umanistici, a.a. 2015-2016. Her work is a major reference for detailed information on the project.

Furthermore, *Nati per leggere* is mainly unknown to the broader audience, outside the circle of adhering librarians, paediatricians and experts in children's literature and literacy education, losing its potential of public engagement. Despite the good practices promoted by the project being positively acknowledged by the Italian publishers' association (Associazione Italiana Editori – AIE)⁸, *Nati per leggere* needs to be implemented further; it can be argued that the work carried out in the United Kingdom and discussed in the abovementioned *Building Communities of Engaged Readers*, with such an evocative title, can represent a useful key for the evaluation of *Nati per leggere*, its strengths and its limits, as well as a source of inspiration for trespassing them.

Awareness is, as already said, one of the main focuses of the UKLA project. What is the theoretical framework for reading in the preschool age? Are adults aware of the benefits implied? In this context, the work of Rita Valentino Merletti and Luigi Paladin, although not specifically relating to the project, emerges both as a scientific framework for *Nati per leggere* and as a commendable popularisation tool. I will deal here with two of their co-authored works: *Libro fammi grande: leggere nell'infanzia*⁹ and *Nati sotto il segno dei libri*¹⁰. Similarly to the less recent *Leggimi forte*¹¹ by Valentino Merletti and Bruno Tognolini, the works address to an audience of parents and educators with the aim of raising awareness on the already-acquired theories regarding the process of reading, ranging from pedagogics to cognitive sciences.

Namely, in *Libro fammi grande: leggere nell'infanzia*, describe the Competent Child theory to a non-expert audience, without skimming on neurocognitive theories, rather giving an account of the results of some significant neuroscientific empirical researches. This represents an appropriate framework for introducing the key concept of Emergent Literacy and raising awareness among parents of the further benefits of an early exposure to reading. Incidentally, the works also contain a description of *Nati per leggere*, its functioning and aims.

Less centred on the benefits of early reading in the future life of the baby, *Nati sotto il segno dei libri*, the more recent of the two works mentioned, insists on how the voice of parents and interaction with visual and tactile stimulation, the two main experiences in the early stage of a baby's life, are intrinsic to reading. The idea is that reading aloud for, and together with, children, can help enrich and vary the different stimuli the baby has to deal with in his very early life. Secondly, the book exposes Stanislas Dehaene's theories on the neuro-cognitive theory of reading¹², crossing it with the achievements in the studies of mirror neurons and empathy. The development of the latter is seen as a further benefit that should persuade parents of the importance for their child of growing up as a

⁸ *Leggere in futuro. Rapporto sull'editoria per ragazzi 2013*, Edizioni AIE, 2013.

⁹ R. VALENTINO MERLETTI, L. PALADIN L., *Libro fammi grande: leggere nell'infanzia*, Campi Bisenzio, Idest, 2012.

¹⁰ R. VALENTINO MERLETTI, L. PALADIN, *Nati sotto il segno dei libri*, Campi Bisenzio, Idest, 2015.

¹¹ R. VALENTINO MERLETTI, B. TOGNOLINI, *Leggimi forte*, Milano, Salani, 2006.

¹² S. DEHAENE, *Reading in the Brain. The New Science of How We Read*, London, Penguin, 2009.

reader.

Both works offer, in a second, more practical part, an account of the different types of books specifically meant for preschool children, insisting on how some particular aspects - such as recognizing emotions, developing spatial cognitions, etc. - are codified steps in the early life of a baby. "Each stage of childhood has its books" seems to be the claim on which the two works by Valentino Merletti and Paladin rely. This includes toy books, that cannot be neglected especially when talking of the very first stages of early childhood. In fact, the so-called pre-books should indeed be toys meant to develop the physical interaction of children with books as objects. Like toys, books represent useful tools to provide children with cognitive inputs and therefore should be offered to children from parents in a playful way, leaving out any form of prescription on what a book is and how it should be used.

The form and style in the two works by Valentino Merletti and Paladin presented are extremely plain and sometimes very near to the language used with children: any reader would definitely understand and interiorize the message. What about non-readers? It is important to stress here that, whereas the UKLA project addresses an already skilled segment of the society, i.e. educators and teachers, books and projects concerning preschool age mainly involve parents. It is very unlikely that parents who are not familiar with reading would be interested in learning how to read with their babies. Therefore the above-mentioned involvement of paediatricians is essential and needs to be fostered.

The already mentioned work *Building Communities of Engaged Readers* also insists on the necessity of training educators in dealing with reading practices. As for the Italian project, it is superfluous to stress that reading to preschool age children can be very demanding. Furthermore, since such an activity more frequently involves families, that also represent the main addressee of the project, the lack of training is a matter of fact. Valentino Merletti and Paladin's publications represent an attempt to advise parents on how to read with children, incentivizing, for instance, the practice among fathers. Moreover, they stress the fact that reading with one's baby has to be an affective moment and not a lesson where the child is not allowed to distract or to ask to re-read the same paragraphs hundreds of times. Incidentally, the insistence of the already mentioned freedom with which the child should be allowed to interact with books in a playful way reminds the non-prescriptive reading environment promoted by teachers enrolled in the UKLA project.

Librarians represent, along with paediatricians, a fundamental component of *Nati per leggere*, and therefore they are object of dedicated training. If compared to paediatricians, they are responsible for a second stage of the project, taking care that preschool reading is pursued both in the library - another place accessible to everyone, even though not necessarily exploited by all families - and at home. In fact, the already-mentioned familiar dimension is at the core of the project, and the different

operators (paediatricians, librarians, other volunteers) are really intended as trainers for parents rather than direct educators. Furthermore, they are following the AIB guidelines for children libraries, in order to set up dedicated reading spaces and monitor participation and its effects.

What kind of books should be read for and with preschool age children? This seems to be the more relevant question that grips parents and librarians, who also play an important role as advisors. In fact, traditional media have started only recently to give information on the offer of books for children, especially in preschool age – of course besides Christmas. Besides the work that librarians carry out on a daily basis, we come here to another meritorious activity by *Nati per leggere*: the compilation of bibliographies of selected titles. In 5 volumes, published in 2001, 2003, 2008, 2012, 2015, the project experts proposed a choice of an average of 120 titles among the most recent publications for a preschool audience. The selection is organised in thematic sections such as, for example, human body, family, rhymes, beddy-bye books, etc. An interesting section, reposing on a subproject called *Mammalingua* [Mum-tongue], aiming at publishing books in the most spoken foreign languages in Lombardy, lists a selection of translated books. The books chosen are the most translated in different languages, in order to create corpus of texts enjoyable by all children.

Who is the target audience of *Nati per leggere's* bibliographies¹³? The lists are deliberately addressed to “parents and future readers”, confirming the idea of offering a tool to families, rather than to educators. As already stressed, besides cognitive benefits, the projects insist on the emotional advantages of reading, not only in view of the baby's future, but also regarding family wellness. The usefulness of such bibliographies stands out clearly when we think of the huge amount of new items published on a daily basis: a disparity in quality is inevitable and increasingly often less accurate books have greater visibility, especially in the great organised distribution. That is why such bibliographies represent a corollary to the guidelines sketched by Valentino Merletti and Paladin in the already-mentioned publications.

This brief analysis of the Italian movement of ideas involving reading in preschool age seems to highlight a controversial aspect: even though there is consciousness about the societal benefits of this practice, all activities seem to be confined to the baby's family and to find in the family their reason of being. Nevertheless, an important actor cannot be neglected when dealing with projects of public engagement, as already shown in the brief reading note to *Building Communities of Engaged Readers*: policymakers. Besides emotional and affective advantages, the societal benefits of fostering the so-called Emerging Literacy and empathy cannot be neglected. How to make policymakers aware of such benefits and of how to engender them? Surveys and enquiries are always a good starting point. A recent survey of the reading habits of Italian families, promoted by AIB and the already mentioned Italian association of publishers (AIE), in cooperation with different web communities of mothers was

¹³ All published but also available at www.natiperleggere.it (last accessed June 24th, 2017).

carried out in 2014¹⁴. In spite of some limits, already underlined by the promoters themselves, the most relevant being the lack of a statistically valid sample (people answered on a voluntary basis to an online questionnaire), such survey represents a useful way to give account of the use of digital books by children from 0 to 14 years. If we think that, in Italy, the surveys on reading carried out by ISTAT, the national institute for statistics, essentially neglect reading practices and the habits of individuals, instead privileging commercial aspects, the merits of this survey are manifold. First of all, the attention paid to the choice between paper- and digital books is interesting. Just an example of the outcomes: traditional paper books are privileged for reading before going to bed (78% vs 28% of parents that declared to read e-books in that occasion). As foreseeable, digital books or apps are preferred when needing to entertain the child without directly dealing with him or her (34,4% vs 12% of answers). This outcome is certainly related to the fact that children's e-books played on tablets, exploiting the interactive possibilities intrinsic to their nature, are often perceived as games more than as books. Although this might result in perplexities on the slight difference between e-books and games, it is important to remember that the use of hands, and especially of fingers, represents a huge part of the earliest readings. Children get into contact with paper books primarily manipulating them, later using their index finger to indicate illustrations and to follow the text; digital books foster the cognitive power of fingers and hands¹⁵.

Secondly, a merit of the survey is the attention devolved to the so-called reading practices, i.e. the uses of the books, that can also be different depending on age and purpose (more aged children usually read digital books alone). Last but not least, the choice of a sample that included children in preschool age is particularly innovative and needs to represent an example.

The COST action E-READ funded by the European Union that - along with the Regional program EnJeux (Enfance et Jeunesse)¹⁶ and the Reading in Europe action, financed by the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche¹⁷- supported the Reading and Gaming workshop giving birth to this publication, includes a working group projecting a pan-European survey of reading practices in the digital age. The implementation of a section dedicated to preschool readers could represent a significant way not only to detect similarities and differences in preschool reading practices across the member countries, but also to raise awareness of policymakers on the already existing projects, their level of sustainability and the potential and fosterable effects on society.

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¹⁴ #Natidigitali survey results, in English, are available at:

https://www.slideshare.net/Natidigitali?utm_campaign=profiletracking&utm_medium=sssite&utm_source=ssslideview
(last accessed June 24th, 2017).

¹⁵ Cf. R. VALENTINO MERLETTI, L. PALADIN, *Nati sotto il segno dei libri*, cit.

¹⁶ EnJeux: <http://enfance-jeunesse.fr> (last accessed November 6th, 2018).

¹⁷ Reading in Europe: <http://eured.univ-lemans.fr> (last accessed November 6th, 2018).

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