

## **Together With Families. The Salerno System through Listening, Co-Planning, Shared Social Responsibilities and the Perspective of Childhood Pole**

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*Together With Families. The Salerno System through Listening, Co-Planning, Shared Social Responsibilities and the Perspective of Childhood Pole<sup>1</sup>*

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**Abstract**

The pandemic has defined a passage of time, requiring a reflection on the disparities regarding territorial guarantees and the opportunities offered to citizens in the different stages of life. Among these, support in the childhood field is one of the strategic guidelines of the Italian challenge to relaunch the country.

The essay, after presenting statistical data and reconstructing the regulatory evolution of the sector, addresses the analysis of 0-3 years old services in the territorial context of the municipality of Salerno, retracing the phases of the pre, during and post lockdown periods, analyzed through three specific research activities.

The aim is to understand over time, which relational dynamics have developed, from the network in the area to meet the needs of children and their parents and what changes have been made to the services. And finally, what assessment has been given to the processes activated and what prospects open up in the light of the innovations introduced. The underlying assumption is that listening, empowerment and participatory processes can be the “conditions of possibility” to increase citizens’ confidence and the effectiveness of services, by initiating co-planning and co-implementation which respond better to the needs of families and, more generally, the challenge of territorial relaunch posed by the post-pandemic phase, which can be achieved only through more shared responsibilities.

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<sup>1</sup> The essay was created jointly by the authors, even if Rossella Trapanese is responsible for paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, Massimo Del Forno is responsible for paragraph 5. The Final consideration are the result of common reflection.

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## 1. The pandemic as an era change

The national territory has complex territorial welfare systems and networks, which vary and perhaps are too different from each other, therefore generating different guarantees for Italian citizens (Bertin, 2012; Trapanese, 2016; Istat, *Interventi e servizi sociali dei comuni*, 2018). The modification of Title V of the Italian Constitution, with the regionalization of welfare, and territorial governance can only partially explain these differences. It is necessary to go in depth to investigate other factors that then determine the territorial peculiarities, which are in territorial social area<sup>1</sup> and not regional. The factors to be analyzed are: the reception of indications at European level and of the “regulatory constellations”, which have repeatedly reformed the welfare systems in Italy in the relationship between the State, the market and civil society (Del Forno, 2020), the financial endowments the definition of legislative instruments on the subject of welfare and the resources made available at regional level, the relationships and collaborations that the institutional welfare bodies and the Third sector with other welfare organizations at international and national level, the political local choices, the ability to access resources and management projects, the comparison between the local and national higher education system, collaboration with entities activated in the territories and the resources used, the role that organized and unstructured civil society has assumed. All this considering only the input plan, network processes, political, organizational and territorial civic choices. Then there is the explicit or unspoken question and the monitored one.

Multidimensional and multilevel complexity, at macro level, international and national, meso, at regional and local levels, can be considered micro, at family and personal levels (Satta et al., 2020), at times creating unsustainable living conditions (Del Forno, 2016).

The pandemic experience (Caporale, Pini, 2020) has made this context even more complicated. These levels and dimensions of complexity can intersect with each other, to then create very different situations of difficulty and differentiated guarantees at territorial level for specific age groups and needs, within the same national indications. Therefore, much depends on local choices and on the organizational capacity of the different territorial welfare

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<sup>1</sup> The territorial social areas (*ambiti sociali*) are aggregates of municipalities that plan, through the development of the Zone Plan, and manage social services. They are foreseen by the law “Framework law for the realization of the integrated system of social interventions and services” n. 328 of 2000.

systems to promote analysis, identify funding, define sustainable projects, coordination, implementations, establish targeted activities and assessments including social impact assessment (SIA).

Beyond the different territorial welfare systems and networks, families continue to respond in a resilient way to any crisis (Bramanti, Carrà, 2021), even the pandemic one (Balenzano, et al., 2020; CREIF, 2020; Di Nicola, Mantovani et al., 2020; Ruspini, 2020; Unicef, 2020), even if the latency of the despair factor should not be underestimated.

The challenge posed to local authorities in the coming years will be to provide coherent responses to the needs of communities, families, citizens, with the awareness that there will be no lack of resources to do so, taking advantage of the historic opportunity that the PNRR will offer, after a serious health crisis, economic and social life, in a period of great changes in lifestyles due to digitalisation processes. The appropriate use of these resources will depend on the ability to listen and involve families (Guerra, Luciano, 2009; Lichene, 2019; Bobbio, Savio, 2019), and to work in synergy with other actors, activating territorial empowerment processes (Martini et al., 2020).

Given these preconditions, in a broad context of multilevel difficulties, one could start from best practices (Morelli, 2019), which some territories have produced, in order to understand what worked, on what levels they operated, what roles have the territorial entities assumed and if having elaborated specific purposes has acted as a guide in defining objectives and carrying out activities. Therefore, this essay has considered what a network that listens, involves and generates services for and with families is proposed: the 0-3 years old network in Salerno. The choice fell on this territorial system as it emerges within a somewhat lacking regional welfare system for the 0-3 years age group, given the last place in the Campania region in Istat data. A fact that not only expresses a lack on an organizational level for the 0-3 area but that is linked to another fact: the improper use of the “spring section” service (Dipartimento per le politiche della famiglia, 2020).

Salerno study case will be presented using the results of three research paths:

- the “The growing city” project, which began in October 2019 and suspended in March 2020;
- monitoring and evaluation of the activities implemented in the period of the national lockdown and the regional lockdown in the municipality of Salerno, from April 2020 to April 2021;
- the analysis of the opinions and requests of families for the redesign of activities for the 2021/22 educational year, promoted in May 2021.

For methodological clarity, it should be noted that while the more general subject of investigation remains, that is, early childhood education services, the

research demand has changed according to the analytical contexts in which it has been applied. Starting with the state of the art of childcare services in Italy, the following were investigated: 1) the prospects of a Childhood Center from the experience of “The growing city”; 2) monitoring and evaluation of the activities by operators regarding the reorganization of the services during lockdown periods; 3) the evaluation of the effectiveness of the services activated by the nurseries in the city of Salerno in the period 2020/21, through the opinions expressed by the parents, in order to redesign for the following years.

The complexity of the research objectives required an analytical-descriptive approach with the use of quantitative and qualitative techniques. The hypothesis to be checked was: the listening processes, the continuing training of parents and the synergy with other local actors can support the improvement of services and ensure educational continuity that has a positive impact on the living conditions of the entire community.

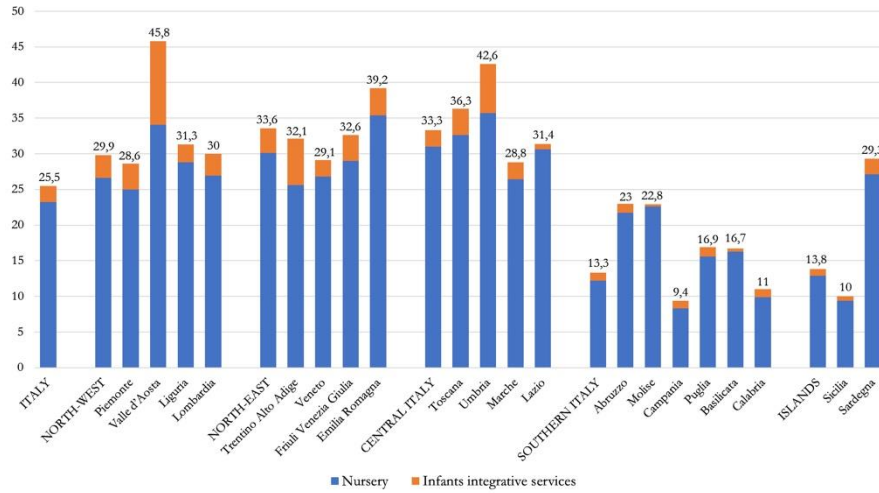
## **2. The 0-3 years old area: context data, evolution and Childhood Centers**

Regarding socio-educational services for early childhood (0-3 years), the data published by Istat on 20 October 2020 with reference to the 2018/2019 educational year provide us with an overview of the different guarantees offered to children and families in different Italian regions.

As can be seen from the numbers, Italy is still far from the 33% parameter set by the EU for services aimed at children in the 0-3 age range. From the data relating to the individual regions it emerges that only the Aosta Valley, Emilia Romagna, Tuscany and Umbria exceed this threshold. In the South, even if the values grow faster, compared to the academic year 2017/2018, that in the regions of Northern Italy, in some regions such as Campania the data is very low and do not even reach 10%, (8.3% and 1.1%, Istat data, 2020). It should also be emphasized that from the work carried out in the Campania region we are aware that some areas do not send updated data to Istat and, therefore, the data is underestimated. It is believed that this is also the case in other regional territories.

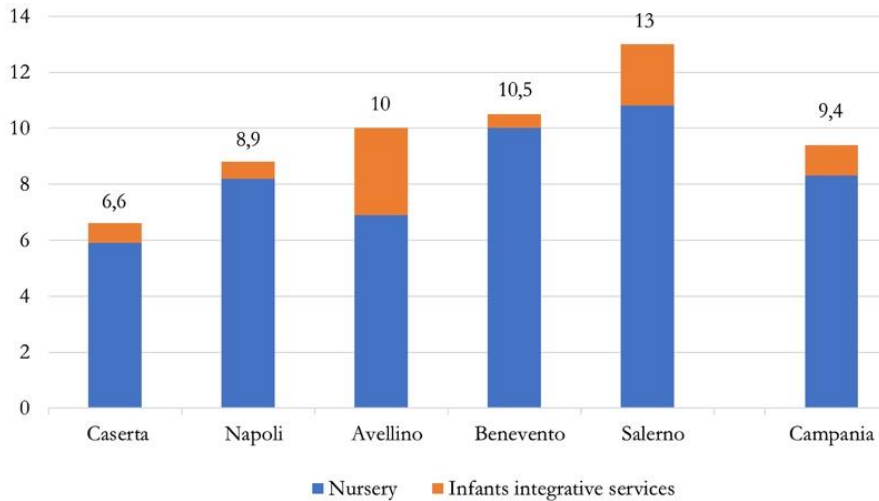
The analysis of national data shows that we are trying to build an integrated 0-6 years old system on the entire national territory, 16 regions especially in the South, where the minimum threshold of 33% coverage per 100 has not even been reached children in the 0-3 age range, set by the Barcelona Council in 2002 and which had to be achieved by 2010. The objective with the Italian PNRR is to reach the goal by 2026.

FIGURE 1. 0-3 years old services in Italian regions (%).



In Campania, the allocation of data by province reveals a difference of a few percentage points for the province of Salerno. This data then becomes very evident when looking at the data relating to the municipality of Salerno.

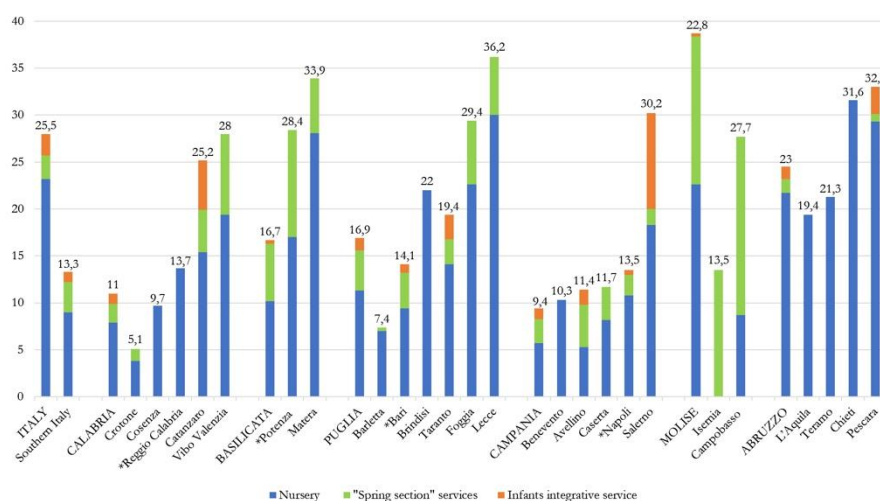
FIGURE 2. 0-3 years old services in provinces of Campania (%).



From the reports of the Department for Family Policies (2020) it emerges that in the provincial capitals the data and therefore the availability of places are

higher than in neighboring municipalities and in smaller ones or in internal areas. Therefore, we carried out an analysis of all the provincial capitals of Southern Italy, which also include three metropolitan areas, to understand the territorial choices and the guarantees then offered to children and families.

FIGURE 3. 0-3 years old services in provincial capitals of Southern Italy (%).



Considering quantitative data, it is appropriate to analyze the Italian strategy that has taken shape in recent years and that opens up a completely new socio-economic and political challenge for the territories.

If we try to carry out a historical reconstruction, we understand that starting from law n. 285 of 1998 up to the decree lg. n. 65 of 2017, much attention was paid to services for children. Nurseries have gradually been considered from welfare services to educational services. Law n. 107 of 2015, the so-called “Good School” law drew attention to the need to integrate the different educational levels, including nurseries in the process, thus activating the process of change from family services to educational services for children. A real cultural change that is strengthened by d. lgs. n. 65 of 2017 proposing to activate the Childhood Poles for the 0-6 year age group (Bondioli et al., 2018), not only by promoting collaboration and continuity between the two systems, nursery school and school childhood, but also involving other stakeholders and communities. Therefore, if on the regulatory level the strategic project is clear, in practice we have offers of services that are very distant from each other, therefore starting conditions that could facilitate or block the social innovation processes (Bovone, Lunghi, 2020; Trapanese, Di Gregorio, 2020) required.



In the municipality of Salerno, the trend changes with the implementation of the nursery service began in 2004, with the request by the administration to collaborate with some local social cooperatives. In 16 years, it goes from 3 municipal structures to 10 actives<sup>2</sup> and managed structures no longer directed by the Municipality but by a consortium of local cooperatives. Therefore, an input that comes from the municipal political system, which incorporates national and international indications, which intercepts and manages funds to support the processes and which manages to structure a local welfare network, in collaboration with the cooperatives that already operate in the area. A local system of social cooperation that knows how to accept the challenge of change and that manages to acquire the trust of citizens in a few years, after having included them in the process, creating new openings or redeveloping municipal structures to face the long waiting lists every year.

On the basis of these findings, in 2019, a research was co-designed in collaboration with the Social Policy Observatory - UNISA, in order to understand if there were the conditions to also create Childhood Poles, in Salerno as required by Legislative Decree lgs. n. 65 of 2017.

### **3. Research *The growing city*: listening, co-planning and co-realization of activities**

The Municipality of Salerno is the board that invests the most in social matters among all the Campania municipalities (172 euros per inhabitant, Istat 2018). Furthermore, in Salerno there is a great dynamism of the Third sector. Many cooperatives operate there, including a consortium of 21 social cooperatives, a Volunteer Service Center (CVS Sodalis) and very active voluntary associations and the financial and strategic collaboration of the first community foundation founded in Southern Italy is significant: the Fondazione comunità salernitana. It is a complex and dynamic system, whose entities are related to each other within the local territorial system, also through the work of the Social Policy Observatory - UNISA, and also interact and collaborate with realities and networks at a national level<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The construction of two company nurseries is also underway, one to support the employees of the judicial citadel and the other to support the employees of the Salerno hospital.

<sup>3</sup> The CSV Sodalis is, for example, in a network with the Ciessevi of Milan for the creation of the University of Volunteering, which it then carries out in the Salerno area, thanks to the collaboration of the UNISA OPS and the Department of Political and Social Studies; the Salerno Community Foundation is a subsidiary of Assifero and in a network with all the community foundations of Southern Italy and has joined the

The attention of the Municipality towards nursery schools started in 1976 but it was only in 2004 that it began to think about the possibility of expanding the offer of services for early childhood. In a few years, thanks to the collaboration with the Consorzio la Rada, in a network with the national CGM Consortium, with the scientific support of the Istituto degli Innocenti and the sharing of the Tuscan approach (Mele, 2018; Fortunati, Pucci, 2019) the cultural perspective changes, as well as the organization with which childcare services are designed and provided in the municipal area.

In a few years, the idea that childcare services are not just a support service to the family, but a strategy to support the child in the acquisition of emotional, social and rational skills, in the phase of life in which is more productive in learning and the core of the personality is formed, improving the quality of life of future adults according to pedagogues and psychologists of the developmental age (Mancini, 2020).

Childcare services become a strategic objective in Salerno, given the budget that is funded annually (about 5.5 million euros). From the documents produced by accredited bodies (Openpolis, 2021), it appears that participation in these services by children could act as a preventive way on educational poverty, if in addition to the child, empowerment processes were also activated with parents and the wider context. Thinking of the work that has been done and financed in recent years for the construction of Educating communities<sup>4</sup> and the fight against educational poverty<sup>5</sup>. From the Department for Family Policy (2020) report, however, it emerges that for the 0-6 year age group, the awareness of families on the role that educational institutions (0-3 years) can have on life opportunities has not yet been consolidated regarding the child and his future. The research work was created in this context of analysis of historical, organizational, economic and relationship with citizenship data, also based on the interviews on trust relationships between families and the nursery institution, carried out in previous years. In fact, for some years now the Social Policy Observatory (OPS - UNISA) has been monitoring the trust that this service has assumed over time, through the analysis of quantitative data,

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promoting committee of the National Network of Common Goods. Furthermore, all these realities together with the La rada Consortium and about 30 other aggregate territorial partners together plan and support the realization of the UNISA territorial welfare master's degree, also through scholarships: <https://corsi.unisa.it/management-of-the-territorial-welfare>.

<sup>4</sup> Call for Educating Communities (year 2021) promoted by Con i bambini.

<sup>5</sup> Call educating together, Call educating in common, etc. of the Department for Family Policies (year 2021).

numbers of requests and waiting lists, and through interviews with parents and kindergarten teachers.

The Action Research project “The growing city”, of which only some results are presented in the essay, is activated in October 2019, even if the idea of the project is elaborated during the national conference, organized by the La Rada consortium and the group CGM cooperative, entitled “The integrated approach 0-6 in children’s education”, which was held on 29 and 30 November 2018 in Salerno and which involved about 300 social workers engaged in the field of socio-educational services on throughout the national territory. The idea becomes a project the following year, when one of the social cooperatives of the La Rada consortium, that is the social cooperative La Città della Luna, responds to the call of the Campania Welfare Foundation<sup>6</sup> and wins it. This project is promoted in collaboration with the OPS - UNISA and with the Laboratory Secondo Welfare, which deals with opening an online focus for 0-6 years<sup>7</sup>.

The project consists in the search for the conditions of possibility for the activation in the territory of the city of Salerno a Childhood Pole, as required by Legislative Decree n. 65 of 2017. It is clarified that in the city of Salerno there are territorial contexts, even very different from each other, both as a geophysical structure and in socio-economic and cultural terms. Therefore, in the project it was decided to analyze the contexts of 4 nursery located in 4 different geographical and socio-cultural areas of the territory. On the map you can see how the nursery (in red) and nursery school (in blue) are distributed throughout the territory of the Municipality of Salerno. The 4 territorial areas under investigation are delimited by circles: 1) hilly area; 2) historic center; 3) district of the central eastern zone and more populous; 4) peripheral popular district in which redevelopment activities have been carried out most over the years, because it is considered an area at risk of degradation and marginalization.

The project is embodied at the beginning of three main actions:

- a listening phase through the organization of 2 focus groups for each territorial area, the first aimed at nursery school educators and preschool teachers and the second aimed at territorial stakeholders and some parents, which involved 18 educators and 4 coordinators, 11 preschool teachers, 13 representatives of other organizations, 12 parents;

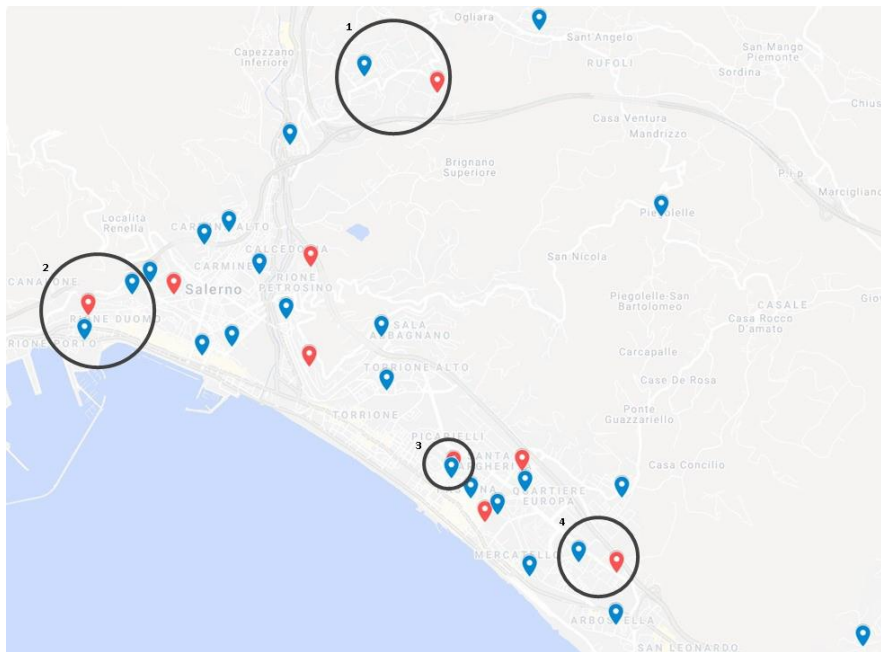
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<sup>6</sup> In the same year, the Campania Welfare Foundation also finances a comparison and training work for educators and local administrators for the 0-6 year area, in order to promote educational opportunities. This work was then published (Silvestri, Calafati, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.secondowelfare.it/focus-zerosei/focus-zerosei.html>.

- a training phase with 6 meetings held by national experts, aimed at educators, teachers, stakeholders and parents, attended by 50 to 80 people per meeting;
- a phase of co-planning of new activities with educators, teachers, stakeholders and parents (a group of about 35 people), carried out in a single territorial area, in which a specific propensity for collaboration had emerged and which opens to a specific pilot project of construction of a children's center.

*FIGURE 4. Nurseries and Nurseries school map in Salerno.*



The meetings were facilitated by the previous work of confrontation with families. The collective territorial awareness and the institutional trust in the nursery matured in the concrete experiences of the parents' experiences confirmed in fact a judgment that had already been positive in the past. The enthusiasm that emerged from the relationship with the experts and the working groups had succeeded in realizing that willingness and desire to take on new roles (co-creation of workshops based on specific skills of the parents, also in relation with the representatives of the intervening bodies), structuring a new system of shared responsibilities that from planning was transformed into the will to co-realize. However, the willingness of the individual teachers of the

Kindergartens to want to collaborate for the creation of the Childhood Poles had to take into account the disparity in terms of the availability of materials and structures designed to create the pedagogical continuity required by the d. lgs n. 65 of 2017.

Basically, the investment in laboratories and ateliers created in the nursery and the opening to collaboration with families was interrupted in the transition to kindergarten. Furthermore, it emerged that the teachers were not offered constant training by the specific administrations which instead the nursery educators followed, even with interest, precisely because the consortium is networked with the CGM group and with specialized institutions, such as the Istituto degli Innocenti. The other territorial entities, cultural and sports associations and parishes, had also declared themselves willing to collaborate, expressing themselves in this sense both during the focus groups and by participating in subsequent planning meetings.

Having concluded this exploratory investigation, it was decided to continue working together on the specific activities of nursery school, asking parents who had not participated in the initial stages of the project if they agreed with the program that emerged in the co-planning table or would like to propose changes. While this fourth phase of the project was being tackled with 38 questionnaires already administered, the first lockdown took place, and the entire Salerno nursery system was reorganized trying to support the families.

#### **4. How to make changes in a crisis phase**

In the phase of the first lockdown, the start-up of the reorganization was preceded by the establishment of a technical board with the Municipality, to define the methods of support for Salerno families whose children were enrolled in crèches or in the municipal play area. The proposal came from the cooperatives that manage the nursery services.

“The main goal that we set for ourselves - says the supervisor of all the Salerno nurseries - was not to leave families alone”. It was thus decided to continue the activities, reorganizing them, and using the web platform of the Municipality to promote communication with parents, to set up a direct number to collect requests and not to lay off any operator of the 9 municipal nurseries and the Children’s play area (165 people) who work for social cooperatives. Furthermore, the Municipality decided to suspend the payment of the installments for the nursery by the families.

The OPS - UNISA working group thus decided to monitor this phase by analyzing the data published on the institutional sites and subsequently to

deepen the work by conducting interviews and focus groups with the coordinators and educators of the nursery schools and the playground.

During the I Lockdown (April - July 2020) 458 families used the services of the remote nursery/ play area, 92% of the members. During the II Lockdown (November 2020 – 5 December 2021) 301 families, 83% of the members, and during III Lockdown (March 2021) 271 families used the services of the nursery / remote play area.

The main actions activated were:

- direct telephone number always active for all parents' needs (mobile phone of one of the coordinators, 281 requests in the period April - July 2020, 35 requests between November 2020 - 5 December 2021 and 22 requests in the period March - 6 April 2021);
- WhatsApp service (with collective chat with parents) for individual classes that children could access to keep track of the times and rituals of the day, as they did at the nursery with good morning, song, mealtime and so on, by their educators even before the (daily) lockdown;
- podcasts of about 4 minutes each, uploaded to the Municipality platform, where children and parents were shown the stages of carrying out chores, just as children were already used to doing in the structure (43 videos in the I Lockdown, 24 videos in the II Lockdown and 20 videos in the III Lockdown)<sup>8</sup>;
- biweekly webinar with the presence of experts on the topics chosen based on the type of requests for information and advice from families (16 two-hour meetings in the I Lockdown and 3 two-hour meetings in II and III Lockdown 2021);
- video messages with the coordinators of the nursery schools (10 videos in the I Lockdown), containing advice in pills, small tips and practical indications to better recognize and cope with the emotions that young and old have found themselves living during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Only in some cases (18 total only in the I Lockdown) did the children need to meet the educators individually, always through the platform.

To understand what the new organization of “remote nursery” activities had generated, the UNISA study group chose to listen to operators through

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<sup>8</sup> In the month of April 2020, 13 Video-tutorials were published in the Let's play section for a total of 4524 views. In the two-month period May / June 2020, 22 Video-tutorials were published in the Let's play section for a total of 5991 views. In July 2020, 8 Video-tutorials were published in the Let's Play section for a total of 226 views. In the month of November 2020, 24 video tutorials were published in the Let's play section for a total of 4841 views and in the month of March 2021, 20 Video tutorials were published in the Let's play section for a total of 6125 views.

interviews with the supervisor and the coordinators of the nursery schools and 4 focus groups with the educators. The areas investigated were: 1) relations with families; 2) the reorganization of activities in the perception of educators; 3) the evolution of the service; 4) budgets and expectations for the future. In total, all the day nursery coordinators (6 people), the supervisor and 12 educators were interviewed.

#### ***4.1 Relationship with families (trust)***

From the interviews with the coordinators and from the focus groups with the educators, it emerged that during the I Lockdown families especially needed to be accompanied to a new organization of life, through support for the management of the child and care times. An educator in the interview reports a phrase said by a mother when talking about her child: “You know him better than I” (educator n.12). This activity has been defined by specialists as compensatory mediation. Another educator mentions: “Families continued to trust us” (educator n. 6) or “We already held workshops with parents and even with grandparents. We met with them every month” (educator n. 4). A coordinator, on the other hand, emphasizes the relationships already in progress, which acted as a bridge during the lockdown period: “We have always had a collaborative relationship with families ... and this also helped us in the lockdown” (coordinator n. 3).

The usefulness for operators is mainly combined with the ability to stay close to families. From the interviews it emerges that they worked more on an emotional level than in carrying out technical-recreational activities: “We have overcome all difficulties together” (coordinator n. 5).

#### ***4.2 The reorganization of activities in the perception of educators***

A coordinator states: “We have followed the evolution of the needs of families” (int. n. 3).

All the educators agreed in declaring that in the phase of the first lockdown it was difficult to redesign the programmed activities and convert them into activities that could be recorded and followed by the children even at a distance, then requesting the collaboration of the parents as mediators. The reorganization of the activities was complex for the educators, but it also generated awareness of being able to manage the new. An excerpt from the interview is reported: “At the beginning we did not feel ready, but the responsibility towards the children led to learning and redefining the planned activities to make them understandable to children even at a distance” (educator n. 7).

At the same time, they expressed satisfaction with the collaboration of parents in the activities and a continuous feedback of appreciation on the processes activated.

They received constant support from the management of the consortium and gradually became more and more familiar with the use of technological means.

It also emerged that the educators helped each other on the basis of their respective individual commitments, even of a family or health matter.

#### ***4.3 The evolution of the service***

In June 2020, after the national lockdown, there were various greetings meetings with parents and children who had completed the cycle of stay in the nursery. The meetings were held mainly outside, in the courtyards of the structures, while the online activities were then concluded at the end of July. In August, the classrooms were reorganized into “bubbles” to make them usable for all functions. In this way, we avoided taking the children to the different workshops, having them move for the lunch break, and so on. The entrances have been differentiated. A triage has been created in each facility. The population of the individual nursery was reduced by 30% for reasons of health safety. “Specific training was given to all staff” says a coordinator (interview n. 2). In September, in order to make the structure familiar to the families of the new members, the coordinators find themselves having to work “on the sense of trust, showing and explaining the new organization”, says one coordinator (interview n.7). “The parents did not express specific needs but a strong need for reassurance” (educator n. 11) or even “They required stable people to follow the processes” (educator n. 3). The supervisor of the nursery adds “We had to communicate: we are open and follow procedures” and another coordinator says “An upstream job was then done with the staff, because above all the older staff had unmotivated fears” (int. n. 4).

A “Pact with Families” was also prepared in which the role of the nursery for the growth and training of children was clear, but also the responsibilities of parents to follow procedures.

The contact maintained with the children over the months was productive because the acclimatization phase was easier. An educator says: “it is as if that red thread has never broken” (educator n. 10). In addition, being less in each section has facilitated relations between the children and between the educator and the children.

In mid-September the structures open to allow parents to get to know the spaces and the new organization. Then the activities in presence start with a user of 65% compared to the previous year for a contraction desired by the



provisions of the law but, also for the choice made by the same user, which leads to a reduction of about 45 children compared to the maximum capacity allowed. Therefore, the waiting lists of previous years are followed by a reduction in demand for the 2020-21 educational year, but given the trend of the following months it seems an important fact of trust in the nursery organization.

#### ***4.4 Budgets and expectations***

From the interviews, a great awareness of the complexity in which one operated, the value assumed for families and the skills acquired emerged:

“We have been a constant presence in the life of families and children” (educator n. 1), and again, “The children adapted more easily, the parents had to learn to manage emotions” (coordinator n.1), “The emotional part was the most difficult to manage” (educator n. 11), and that is why meetings with specialists were also organized.

Certainly, the difficulties were not lacking as emerges from other excerpts from the interview:

“The great work first of the coordinators and then of the educators was to carry on the programming” (supervisor), “There was no non-verbal and getting used to the way of meeting in non-presence” (educator n. 2) and “The greatest difficulties were for those who entrusted the children to their grandparents (especially in the second phase)” (educator n. 7). But even in such a complex period, at the time of the assessment it emerges that “We all understood we have resources” (educator n.12) and “now we have more confidence in managing the new” (educator n. 6).

In concluding the interviews, parents were asked what their expectations were. We have extracted a significant excerpt that summarizes all the positions in the field: “The expectation of educators is that there is a return to a constant presence, while the expectations of parents are a return to normality, educational quality and health safety” (coordinator n. 7).

#### ***4.5 The contribution of research to scientific reflection***

As emerges from many works carried out by scientific and territorial bodies, in the period of the lockdown the complexity that families have found themselves to manage has increased. This crisis has generated new needs for families, to which - in many cases - the local authorities have not been able to provide adequate responses.

According to our analysis, the management of that phase, the effective help that can be provided to families, depends on the ability of the territorial welfare

system to be resilient and on the relationships that had been built before the crisis period, within of the territorial system, with users and families.

In the case of Salerno, leveraging on trust and collaboration relationships already in progress together with the Municipality, it was possible to quickly reorganize the service with the families and it was possible to structure a new reciprocity, through new methods of interaction, and build on the basis of that continuous exchange is a series of services that increasingly meet the needs. Another relevant element is empowerment, a key element for both operators and families and first but more central in the lockdown period, when family responsibilities have increased. Families asked to address issues, promote activities, manage family emotions and relationships, etc. They have co-created workshops, also making proposals.

Including families in the processes, involving them, can be strategic, especially in times of crisis. Trust generates new cooperation, and cooperation is the central element for widespread territorial responsibility.

The considerations that emerged in this phase of the work can be summarized as follows:

- public-private responsibility has provided the opportunity to find answers to the difficulties families faced;
- a constant listening service proved to be functional for organizing multidimensional and differentiated responses to the requests of families;
- the many activities have kept the relationship of trust alive, as well as offering concrete support to families;
- the protection of workers - 165 people - was the central element in providing stability to the nursery and its reorganization;
- attention was also paid to the work life balance of the employees “Everyone gave what he felt and could give in a continuous exchange, even within the organizations” (educator n.4);
- the families were able to use the remote nursery service without paying the tuition. The proximity of a municipal administration that has focused on supporting families;
- a co-participation of the family more attentive to the child's education emerged.

## **5. Giving voice to the families: a survey on the activities of nursery schools**

To assess the effectiveness of services activated by nursery in Salerno during the lockdown, OPS - UNISA group has supported “La Rada”

cooperative to conduct a survey on families, of which only a part is presented in this essay.

The aim was to get some information on the socio-pedagogical activities deployed by educators and on the involvement of parents in the educational process. In addition, the research intends to control the resilience degree of educational organization after sudden break due to the pandemic. We should understand how the nursery organizations have reacted to the pandemic wave to compensate for the emotional and relational deficits in the children and their parents.

The indicators that we have chosen for the evaluation of the project are: 1) The parents' perception of the nursery activities about their involvement in the educational process; 2) sociality during the lockdown; 3) The resilience of operators; 4) the future and the proposal of new services.

In total, 700 families were contacted for research. Parents were invited by e-mail to reply to questionnaire on Microsoft Forms digital platform, with web-link access. The questionnaire has been divided into three sections: 1) personal information and data on frequency; 2) information on involvement, participation, the use of digital tools; 3) the opinions of respondents on the improvement of the service. To facilitate the compilation by the interviewee in the absence of the interviewer, a very simple questionnaire structure with multiple choice questions and scaling techniques (*six-point Likert scale*) was proposed (Johns, 2005; Krosnick et al., 2002). The families interviewed are being divided into two types: families applying for the first time at nursery, in 2021-2021 educational year: the second group ratio for the educational year 2021/22, who were able to answer only a part of the families with children enrolled before 2020.

### ***5.1 The socio-cultural profile of the interviewees***

To establish a standard family profile in this survey, age, qualifications and employment status were taken into account. The level of education of parents was formed by aggregating the data "qualification" of parent 1 and parent 2, transforming it into a typological index. It appears that more than half of the families have a high (30%) or medium-high (23%) level of education. The age of the parents varies mostly between 27 and 47 years, with an average age of 36 years for both parent 1 and parent 2, while the age group up to 26 is rather underrepresented (8%). *Table 1* shows the employment status of families. In 62% of cases both parents work, 25% with regular permanent contracts, 37% with a mix (permanent contract + VAT number or fixed-term contract). The rate of parents that are both unemployed and unoccupied is low. The whole of the data seems to give us a fairly good picture of economic and social stability

for most families, even if the aspects related to mobility and working hours are more problematic.

TABLE 1. Families: employment status.

|                                |                        | Parent 2: employment status |         |            |                     |                    | SINGLE | Total |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|---------|------------|---------------------|--------------------|--------|-------|
|                                |                        | employed or unoccupied      | student | VAT number | fixed-term contract | permanent contract |        |       |
| Parent 1:<br>employment status | employed or unoccupied | 6%                          | 0%      | 5%         | 4%                  | 9%                 | 0%     | 24%   |
|                                | student                | 0%                          | 0%      | 0%         | 0%                  | 1%                 | 0%     | 1%    |
|                                | Vat number             | 3%                          | 0%      | 3%         | 1%                  | 4%                 | 1%     | 11%   |
|                                | fixed-term contract    | 2%                          | 0%      | 5%         | 3%                  | 7%                 | 1%     | 17%   |
|                                | permanent contract     | 5%                          | 1%      | 9%         | 5%                  | 25%                | 2%     | 46%   |
|                                | Total                  | 15%                         | 1%      | 22%        | 13%                 | 45%                | 4%     |       |

## 5.2 Educational path and involvement in the nursery activities. Perception of parents

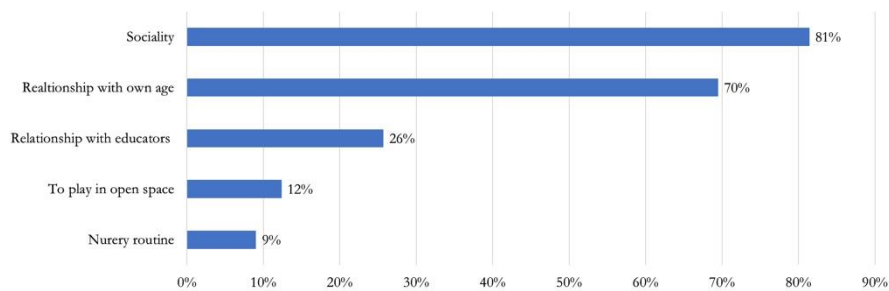
During the lockdown and the closure of the nurseries, the emergency of families for the fostering of children has become an everyday condition. Nonetheless, the parents evaluated the nursery pedagogical very positively, massively assigning the maximum score to the educating staff. This recognition was not taken for granted for the state of discomfort and the criticism that has risen at a national level towards public and private institutions, judged to be non-compliant and unprepared to resolve a situation as complex as the pandemic. This positive judgment, even without going too far into the merits, is well founded on some strategic choices, at the same time socializing, resilient, and innovative, made by nursery.

The figure on the right indicates the parents' perception regarding their involvement in the nursery activities. The data of this study must be read and commented on with some attention. Families who felt “fully involved” represent 64% which is, in our opinion, an excellent result, given the experimentation phase of a new “model” and the sudden onset of the pandemic. “We lacked time” is, however, a response that should be interpreted as an admission of “guilt” on the part of the parents, freeing the nursery from any possible criticism. From the survey remains a residual of discontent that in total is 16%. This is certainly a non-negligible but not worrying number. It must encourage educators to do better for the progress of the project.

### 5.3 Sociality

With the advancement of complex sciences, there have been many multidisciplinary studies that have focused attention on the importance of emotional and relational stimuli for the cognitive and prosocial development of the child. This is supported by parental responses to “the most important thing the child missed during the pandemic”.

FIGURE 5. *What children missed during the pandemic.*



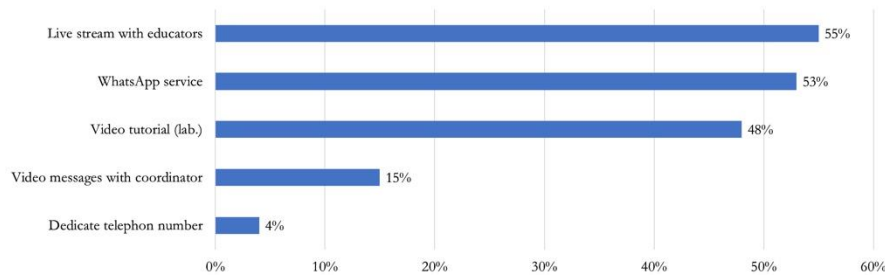
In fig. 5, there is a certain semantic ambiguity that in this case has served to grasp the nuances in the interviewee’s attitudes. We used the “sociability” category to collect and give voice to those who creatively occupied the “other” box to explain to us what being together meant for them, showing a generalized openness to the world and others that would not surprise us to find in their other manifestations. Even the vector “playing in open spaces” shifts attention to the freedom to meet people and enjoy nature, a suggestion that can only have positive effects in the growth process of children. No less important are the indications that come to us from other answers, even if more “conventional”, such as the “relationship with own age” and the “relationship with educators”, mentioned separately as sub-categories of sociality. This information is invaluable in ensuring increasingly effective training and inclusion strategies.

### 5.4 Resilience of operators

The pandemic affair has put a strain on the stability of family and the educational system for children of all ages. However, in the case of the 0-3 age group, the problem has become even more amplified. Parents with such young children struggled to manage everyday life, amidst anxieties, fears, change in schedules and habits risking an impact on the psychophysical health of the child. However, this condition of adversity has been converted into a resilient attitude

that has transformed this tragedy into an opportunity for the growth of bonds and skills.

*FIGURE 6. Families: satisfaction for nursery services.*



In terms of the strategies activated by the nursery, the parents expressed an almost unanimous appreciation of the organization and management of the spaces of the structure both before and after the lockdown. Parents also expressed themselves very favorably compared to the importance of the use of digital technologies that the educating staff used in a resilient and conscious way during the lockdown, both to replace the activities in presence and to compensate for the lack of sociability. Among the services activated by the staff, the most popular were the live meetings with the educators, although good performances were achieved by the “video tutorials” and “video messages with the coordinator”.

Considering the past period and in the groove traced by the PNNR, objective M4C1, the intention would now be to detect the possibility of finding in these tools a condition of possibility to expand the future offer and improve the effectiveness of the path teaching and training in addition to face-to-face activities.

### ***5.5 The future of nurseries: what to do?***

Always with a view to the future improvement, parents were invited to comment on a variety of proposals aimed at both parents and children, to extend the nursery service to other activities and functions beyond the normal opening and closing hours and periods, such as Saturdays, holidays and the summer period. On the other hand, if one wishes to proceed with the involvement of educating communities, the importance of facilitating families to have spaces for recreation, for social commitments for which the presence of children is not recommended, cannot be underestimated. Allowing parents to

have a social life in full autonomy means creating a family harmony that will certainly have a positive impact on the child.

The column “no worker” presents anomalies compared to our expectations even if it is a small number of cases (6%). We imagine that it may be illegal workers but now we have no data to make assessment. Many people like the “Saturday opening” category, even if the data is sensitive to changes in age and the employment situation, recording higher values for couples under 36 (51%) and for couples in which only one works (53%). As many sector studies have indicated, the organization of the family in Italy is rigidly structured on working times. Usually, after the weekly work routine, Saturday is dedicated to shopping, household chores, well-being and body care, to tackle those small problems that working life does not allow you to solve on a daily basis. Conversely, summer opening is more popular with couples with greater job stability, generally later in life. The choice “during the summer months” could also be influenced by the age. Over 36 the choice for 34% of cases compared to 28% of couples under 36. Others such as the “nanny at home”, “opening on holidays”, “early opening and / or closing in the evening” have achieved still high rates in “both worker” families. The intervening factor could be due to the greater economic possibilities and the need to limit the times of care to reconcile them to working hours.

TABLE 2. *Families: requests for services.*

|  | Families: employment status |                           |                              | Total |
|--|-----------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|-------|
|  | No workers<br>(n18 - 6%)    | One worker<br>(n95 - 32%) | Both workers<br>(n184 - 62%) |       |
| Opening on Saturday                      | 55,6%                       | 52,6%                     | 41,9%                        | 46,1% |
| Opening in summer                        | 27,8%                       | 16,8%                     | 40,2%                        | 32,0% |
| Nanny at home                            | 11,1%                       | 22,1%                     | 32,1%                        | 27,6% |
| Opening on holidays                      | 27,8%                       | 18,9%                     | 31,5%                        | 27,3% |
| Opening before et/or after standard time | 22,8%                       | 10,5%                     | 19,6%                        | 16,8% |
| Opening in the evening                   | 5,6%                        | 10,5%                     | 17,4%                        | 14,5% |
| Nursing corner                           | 0,0%                        | 5,3%                      | 8,2%                         | 6,7%  |

Parents were also asked to express themselves on issues of interest regarding training in activities to dedicate one of them from the nursery, favoring those that refer to the solution of everyday problems such as the management of rules (62%), first pediatric rescue (57%), the management of whims and nutrition education (51%). A smaller but still significant percentage had other more theoretical themes. An offer of services for children was also proposed regarding linguistic, emotional and motor enhancement. Parents have

oriented themselves towards the classic areas of training, keeping more secluded from the choice of services such as the STEM, the infant massage and special educational needs.

The availability of additional services must not be interpreted by the simple logic of supply and demand. The project idea, in fact, is aimed at a new subject registered in the social sector whose purpose is to promote an educational cultural change, to generate a serene atmosphere around the child and a network of solicitations in harmony with each other from very early childhood. The inclusion of parents in the pedagogical process is certainly the first step of this program; the second concerns educators and their ability to manage places, organize services, implement pedagogical technologies, adapting to the needs of the family and its transformation: infant-toddler centers and preschools must become safe places for children and families and restore more autonomy and well-being to parents.

## **6. Final considerations**

The future challenge of territorial social policies is not only to continue to generate networks between expert systems of services to people (Cesareo, 2017; Monteduro, 2017), which in many territories would determine a huge step forward, but to increasingly include families in all phases of analysis, planning, implementation / realization and evaluation of services to the person. The debate on the issues of participation has continued for years to focus on the quality of democracy in a participatory sense (Moro, 2015).

The role of families has been underestimated, at least in some contexts, as they are not considered sufficiently prepared on a technical level and capable of assuming a role also in collaboration with institutional welfare. Listening was limited in favor of a standardization of needs. After the experience of the pandemic, scholars and welfare entities have found that needs have been very different based on numerous socio-economic and cultural variables. Therefore, listening becomes the central activity to provide services that are increasingly responsive to real needs.

The care burden of families has always been enormous and there are many services in the territories provided by the public and the Third sector that are not online and are not designed to respond in a synergistic way to the states of discomfort expressed or experienced by families. In many cases they are fragmented services. If we add the problem of social communication that is not always effective, the picture becomes even more complicated. On the one hand, families are pressured by the burden of care and, on the other, the territorial system of personal services is unable to network and understand that families



cannot be just users, otherwise the effectiveness of the services is reduced. We need a change of pace, a change of method. It is an arduous and complex job, but necessary and productive in the medium and long term. Families must be included in all phases.

In the current historical and social contexts, the inconveniences are increasing and the strategies implemented so far are no longer adequate, as the pandemic period has made us discover strongly. New organizational strategies open to the outside should be identified, that is, to the environment, Luhmann would say, to the social system in its entirety, just like the d. lgs n.65 / 2017 asks us to implement. The Childhood Pole thinking of implementation as strategies for territorial growth and innovation: “The Childhood Pole are characterized as permanent laboratories for research, innovation, participation and openness to the territory, also in order to encourage maximum flexibility and diversification for the best use of resources, sharing general services, common spaces and professional resources” (Article 3).

The pandemic crisis has made it clear even more of the need to identify new network strategies, both at a territorial and regional and national level, working on the creation of a promotional welfare, which does not focus on the individual but on the community. The priority objective would thus become to promote together involvement, new skills and new visions of a future in which the individual feels part of a larger system and is motivated to be participatory and responsible, because they have understood its meaning and value for themselves and their life context. Technical skills are not enough, sharing of meaning is needed; the networks to be activated cannot only have an instrumental character. The technicalities have expressed their paucity on several occasions (Saccheri, 2020). Resilience is based on the skills and motivation of the individual to seek necessary solutions, having faith in the possibility of success of the company. It is necessary to work with families not only to know the needs in a specific way and the most appropriate services, based on the life contexts, but also to understand what skills are needed to train to be more resilient. And together with them to realize them in the territories. We think of a competent participation or competent sociality, as Antonio Genovesi would have defined it, what is being carried out on several levels precisely in the Salerno area.

Putting the three analysis paths together, it emerges that a series of opportunities for children and families, operators and communities, have been generated from a networked social cooperation system at a national level and a consolidated public-private relationship at local level, capable of identifying common strategies. In this way, welfare can become a shared project, a social investment, a driving force for the development of the territories, structured on relationships of trust with citizens and families. In this sense, we want to argue

that in order to face the difficulties generated by the pandemic and imagine building Childhood Pole, it is important to implement cooperative actions that involve institutions, Third sector organizations, families and citizenship, according to subsidiarity principle.

We strongly believe in territorial empowerment in which the starting point are the principles and values of welfare, which form the basis and common ground on which to build the different collaborations, triggering those subsidiarity processes required by law 328/00.

The change we are thinking of is mainly cultural with repercussions on a civil, political and organizational level: making processes increasingly inclusive to the point of generating widespread responsibility. It is the entire community that must take care of fragile individuals, not just families, social services or third sector organizations. Therefore, the vision and the strategies to be implemented must aim at an ever wider sharing, not only with those directly involved, for example families, but towards the wider community that must gradually adopt a style of prosocial behavior. The goal becomes the construction of social capital that can serve as a territorial support network. From these processes it will also be possible to implement the Childhood Poles, an excellent legislative proposal which, in many Italian territories, does not yet have sufficient favorable humus to be able to germinate.

It is not only necessary to be resilient, but to promote a transformative resilience, capable of generating, facing difficulties, new and better conditions / opportunities for life and social well-being.

The ever-increasing social complexity requires that competent networks be active in the territories, in which the role of expert systems of training and research are an integral part and can also act as a driving force.

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