

“Were You a Monster Today?” Making Assessments with Families: Thoughts and Practices

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Abstract

Assessing family care work is an extremely complex task, full of risks (because it concerns people's life). It requires sensitivity, great self-awareness and awareness of one's own prejudices and of one's own idea of family. In order to make an assessment professionals must have a curious attitude, capable of constantly seeking connections between interacting subjects, and these subjects include the observer him/herself, his/her thoughts and epistemology. This paper presents the reflections emerging from a high level inservice training course aimed at care and education professionals, based on narrative and reflective methodologies.

Il lavoro socioeducativo di valutazione delle famiglie è un compito estremamente complesso, pieno di rischi (poiché ha a che fare con la vita delle persone). Questo compito richiede sensibilità, conoscenza di sé e consapevolezza dei propri pregiudizi e della propria idea di famiglia. Per poter effettuare una valutazione i professionisti devono avere un'attitudine curiosa, capace di cercare costantemente connessioni tra i soggetti coinvolti – e tra questi soggetti è incluso l'osservatore stesso – i pensieri, l'epistemologia. Questo articolo presenta le riflessioni emerse da un corso di formazione rivolto a professionisti dell'educazione, basato su metodologie narrative e riflessive.

Keywords: Child and Youth Care; Social Pedagogy; Complexity and Curiosity in Relational Child Care; Risks of Assessment; Evaluation Ethics.

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The purpose of the article is to explore the fundamental cross competences for the pedagogical glance (Premoli, 2012) considering all kind of services and interventions aimed at supporting children and families (early childhood education and care, child and family welfare, child protection).

It is a widespread belief that the terms assessment and evaluation can be used interchangeably (Budd, 2005, p. 430). We use assessment/assessing 'safe in the knowledge' that is an evaluative action.

The meaning of the term "assessment" changes partially depending on the field of application, as well as the subject/object of the assessment process changes: the child, the parents, the whole family, the relationships between its members.

For example, in child and family welfare and child protection services,

«comprehensive family assessment has been defined as the process of identifying, gathering and weighing information to understand the significant factors affecting a child's safety, permanency, and well-being, parental protective capacities, and the family's ability to assure the safety of their children» (Johnson et al., 2008, p.59).

In early childhood education and care «we apply assessment when discussing an examination focusing on the individual, group or activity level» (Alasuutari, Markström, Vallberg-Roth, 2014, p. 3). In addition,

«the ECEC personnel is expected to systematically and consciously observe and document the children's development and learning and take account of their observations in planning the activities. This continuous process is called pedagogical documentation. The knowledge and skills already acquired by the children as well as their interests and needs are made visible through pedagogical documentation» (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018).

Assessing children and families requires a complex set of skills and competences, like observation, sensemaking, value assignment, evaluation and decision making, strictly connected with individual and family planning.

In summary, we can say that the assessment has to do with the processes of building knowledge construction through the perception and interpretation of experience.

1. Observing and Assessing: Not Seeing Eye to Eye?

"Everything said is said by an observer"
– (H. Maturana, 1988, p.27)

Bianca's mother tells me about the problems she's had dealing with her little girl when at home, because she believes "something is wrong". The mother is a preschool teacher. She uses various examples to describe to me how Bianca behaves: bouts of anger and not listening that I almost have a hard time believing. I tell her about how the girl behaves at nursery school, bringing up certain behaviors similar to those at home, but far milder. Over the following days I ask my colleagues for help, but even with them it seems difficult to share the same view of Bianca. Since we agree on the fact that there are some minor difficulties, we decide as a group to call in an external observer (the psychomotor therapist who works with the nursery school) so she can give us a hand in understanding the situation and helping the child. The psychomotor therapist agrees that Bianca has slight problems relating with other children, but problems that are different from those the mother described. We teachers think the mother is exaggerating and seeing things. The psychomotor therapist, on the other hand, believes that at home the girl acts the way her mother wants to see her. During the following meetings with the mother, I try describing episodes and ways in which the child relates with others to give her the chance to "see" Bianca as we see her at nursery school. The mother, instead, tries to have Bianca seen as she sees her at home. We just weren't on the same page. Maybe we missed out on an opportunity.

What is brought to mind by this account offered to the group by a participant in the training course "With Families... We Assess" [*Con le famiglie... si valuta*]? The mother proposes a view of her little girl. The teachers offer a conflicting view. The psychomotor therapist adds a third view. Their views don't fit together. From how the teacher described it, they were clearly not seeing eye to eye.

We might ask ourselves: what is the truth? Or: which one is "the real" Bianca? Who's right? And also: what is it the various observers aren't seeing? What would it be useful to do in this situation? Why does Bianca's mother talk to the teacher about her problems with her daughter? Why does she sense that "something is wrong"? Is there perhaps a question that has no answer, or even one that is not acknowledged, heeded, welcomed? What thoughts are guiding the teacher's actions? What implicit and explicit judgements can be glimpsed in the various observations?

These are just some of the questions we feel it is useful to ask oneself in the attempt to understand a situation like the one the teacher described. We're also sure that many might see similarities with situations they have experienced at work—different opinions on the same relational and observational experience, very different opinions among colleagues, among professionals and families. On so many occasions we have found ourselves making different considerations about what we are seeing, thinking and professionally assessing. In addition, on many occasions, when faced with certain differences in assessments—especially among colleagues—various strategies are used to cover up the differences, such as making reflections, assessments that combine all the points of view—a sort of "average" or "mediation", which is often more useful in bringing together colleagues and their viewpoints than in honoring the experience and the people we are talking about. Other times it leads to "confused conversations" that have the function of dissipating the conflict among the points of view. Yet other times role and power hierarchies are what determine the view of what has been observed and, therefore, the assessment to propose and work with. But if rather than resorting to these understandable "strategies" we tried to go back and understand the original structural complexity of making an assessment we may access a different reflective framework which, in our opinion, could be helpful in honoring this complexity, in making it useful and precious rather than trivializing it or considering it a hindrance.

Returning to the account of the teacher and Bianca's mother, we could say that rather than being a missed opportunity between the professional and the family, if anything it is an authentic, generative opportunity for fruitful relational work and care.

2. Lack of Clarity in Making Assessments

"The alternative perspective is one that celebrates the complexity of interaction and invites a polyphonic orientation to the description and explanation of interaction. If we adopt this frame of frames, we abandon trying to determine whether explanations are true or false. Instead, an evolving process of inventing multiple punctuations of a behavior, interpretation, event, relationship, and so on, helps build a more systemic view"
 – (G. Cecchin, 1987, p.406)

"Everyone sees what he knows"
 – (Bruno Munari)

Over the years, the topic of assessment in education and social care contexts has become a question of growing importance and recurrence (Kealey, 2010; Volpini, 2011, Serbati & Milani, 2013). It is precisely because of its importance that one of the courses in the training program With Families...Yes! [*Con le famiglie... Sì!*] was devoted to this topic. All the professionals who took part in the course (20 professionals practicing various services in the territory, predominantly nursery school teachers, social pedagogues and pedagogical consultants) described and affirmed how the topic of making assessments in their contexts and assignments was pervasive and also highly complex. The words used during the training to describe this "complication" in assessing included "ambiguous", "unclear", "dangerous", "difficult" and "necessary". The aim in the first of the course's three sessions was specifically to connect with each other, to explore and share this view of assessment as being "necessarily complex" and "necessarily unclear". We then tried to experience this complexity, to relive it and gain knowledge of

it by watching videos and proposing stimuli that put the group in a situation in which they exchanged different points of view, perceptions and, therefore, evaluations.

3. Subjectivity and meaning construction

Explaining how making assessments—and even more so assessments of a family—is a difficult, “unclear” action, very different from experiencing this complexity during education and training. We felt that having the opportunity to “live” this complexity might be a way to more authentically delve into the topic proposed, putting everyone in a position that is more uncertain yet at the same time is also focused on generative research.

We believe that assessing is first of all an action useful and at the same time “unclear”—unclear in the sense that it involves aspects of great complexity, where many contextual levels and many operative questions recurrently interconnect and are often confused. We refer particularly to the inevitable “subjectivity” involved in assessing; this aspect is now established and accepted, yet it constantly forces us to deal with the “objectifying temptation” which we all in some manner are familiar with and experience on a daily basis. It is, in fact, difficult for anyone (and we also saw this during the training) to set aside a certain epistemological positioning which believes that reality—what we observe and evaluate—is outside ourselves or in front of us. Our thinking habits are deeply fed by objectivist belief, “that is, by the common persuasion that our images of what we see are a faithful copy of the objects of our attention” (Manghi, 2004, p. 27).

Yet beyond this aspect, when we speak of “precious lack of clarity” we are also referring to the complex aspects of the meaning and sense of assessment in education and care, of its significance and purpose. In addition to asking ourselves “Through what lenses is the practitioner looking?” to us it seems useful to ask ourselves “In what context is this assessment being made?”, “Who needs it?”, “How and by whom is the assessment used?”, “How much and in what manner did the family take part in the assessment process?”, “Was it a useful experience?”, “Useful for whom?”, “When was it useful?”, “When wasn’t it?”.

To understand this precious complexity, just think of the attention social care practitioners must pay in handling certain recurring opinions, such as preparing internal service reports: how and when should a report be read by the family observed? What language should be used? How should certain specialized terminology and concepts be translated when reading it to the family? Who should the assessment report be read to? To the adults? The children? Everyone? Should other colleagues and professionals be present? Which ones? How and when should the family be involved in the assessment process? In addition: how and when should the criteria by which they are judged be explained? What relationship do I represent between the written report and the family? Should their opinion be included in the report?

4. Assessing as essentially relational practice

We think these are only some of the aspects to be dealt with, the ones that most often arise during training and supervisions dedicated to this topic. They are constitutive questions behind the act of assessing; they define and realize it. For us, the most interesting complexity/lack of clarity is the “relational” one, and it has to do with the fact that assessment is also and always connected to the professional’s practice in assessing a family. Assessing and evaluating a family means meeting with it, it means concretely interacting within its contexts, and it means never forgetting that we use our view of family and our personal family experience (each and every one of us has necessarily undergone this experience, and for many years): how was the idea of family formed in me? How did I “learn” the family? (Formenti, 2012). Assessment means making operative choices, asking certain questions rather than others, it means using our body and words to work toward a direction that is more or less clear—to us and/or the family. Ultimately, it means “doing things with the family”, developing conversations, establishing working rules; at times it means clashing and handling differences. If we set aside a simplistic, “trivial” view of human relationships, this is exactly what happens when we have people relate and, even more, it happens when

these people want to or need to reflect on other people and on themselves, and perhaps also on what they see and do together, evaluating it.

5. “What we observe is not nature herself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning”

One decisive aspect that defines professionals as such is their ability to realize that in order to fully do their work, they always—be it consciously or not—use a certain theory of observation, and therefore also a particular epistemology which comes about in their relational dealings (Formenti, 2013). And “every act of assessment, just like every cognitive act, requires attention to the recognition of the implicit epistemology that supports it” (Telfner & Casadio, 2003, p. 541). Otherwise one runs the dangerous risk of assessing without realizing it, or of evaluating without knowing how they are doing so, of conducting an assessment thinking they are “above” it, of making operative decisions without realizing they are making them.

Substantially one of the risks of assessment translates into asking questions without knowing the sense of those questions. In some way, and to summarize the implicative/operative aspect of assessment work with families (though perhaps it is true for all evaluation processes in general), it is necessary to be conscious that “what we observe is not nature herself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning” (Heisenberg, 2000, p. 25).

The proposal is therefore to recognize and adopt the concrete, recurrent and circular process that brings together the professional and the family. Following this perspective, what we see we are continually seeking and building. This continual relational evolution in assessment cannot be avoided or trivialized—quite the opposite; it demands to be honored in its complexity so as to transform, in our opinion, assessment into a possible form of caring for the relationship itself. It is with regard to these premises that during the course we continually maintained the usefulness of an open, curious view. If we don’t have a foregone conclusion about the family, in order to understand it one must put oneself in the perspective of searching, of not knowing, of *losing oneself*.

6. Observing with curiosity

One of the concepts we most often use to explain and practice this positioning in the relationship is that of “curiosity” (Cecchin, 1997, 1992, 2003, 2004). Curiosity is a fine, interesting word starting from its etymology, deriving from the Latin *curiosus*, the root word being “care/cure”, referring to he or she who cares for something (Telfner & Casadio, 2003, p. 253). In this sense, assessment and curiosity are correlated, interacting concepts. In order to make an assessment one must have a curious attitude capable of constantly seeking connections between events, and these events include the observer himself, with what he/she thinks and what he/she does (his/her epistemology). Therefore, for example, this also includes the possibility of making observations “beginning with one’s mistakes rather than certainties” (Telfner & Casadio, 2003, p. 544), because everything happens continually and it is from this happening that the observable experience arises.

As regards this observable experience (and no longer the object observed) that is constantly emerging, under construction and situated, we know it is no longer epistemologically coherent to make do with the conclusions (or should we say “assessments”?) we have reached; the intention is not to reach conclusions but, if anything, to celebrate the complexity of the interactions and correlations among people, what they think of each other and what they do together. We therefore believe it is necessary to “train ourselves” to move from the idea of assessment as photography to the idea of assessment as an intervention that mobilizes everyone involved. It is because of this that we find it logical to connect assessment and curiosity; adopting a curious attitude actually means constantly asking ourselves about the circularity between action (what I do) and what we are seeing (what I see, think and evaluate). What I am seeing is always connected to what I am doing and to how and where I am doing it. What I am doing is connected to what I am seeing. In this sense, curious professionals no longer place themselves “above” the family or outside of it. The object of the assessment is no longer the family; if anything, what can be

evaluated is what we are doing or what we have done together, given what could be done and understood together up until that point within the limits of one's frames of reference, one's relational practices and the context.

7. Fostering opportunities for change

Assessment therefore entails aspects that are different from objectifying observation in that the consequences of such operative epistemology will be a certain "uncertainty and frailty" in what we are observing. It is an evaluation that can essentially propose hypotheses (from the Ancient Greek ὑπόθεσις, what underlies a proposition, a position, therefore a supposition) and that is characterized by a position of constant modesty and impermanence.

According to Antonia Chiara Scardicchio (2012, p. 106), the impossibility, as a physical observer, "to remain above the world that one belongs to and therefore abandoning every presumption of understanding (understanding intended as knowing so as to order, control, define... possess) does not lead to nihilism or relativism. The pedagogical result of such acquisitions has two ancient names: humility and humor". In this sense one of the recommendations we most frequently make in defining the assessment processes is to act not in order to define the family but to "regulate" what we are doing in a direction that is educationally useful for the persons involved. The aim of an assessment is therefore not to define things and make them known, but, if anything, to bring about hypotheses useful for redefining one's work with the family in directions that are generative for the transformative process (see Mertens, 2008). What this effectively means is asking oneself, each time: what do I observe in the meeting with this family? How do I observe it? When? How do I contribute with my ideas and my physical presence to build this situation that I am assessing?

Assessment (and evaluation too) therefore can never be represented as something *ex-post* to the practice—though this representation is still very widespread in educational and learning contexts—but rather as a rigorously integral part of it. Consequently, there is a divide between professional-operative practice and evaluative-research practice. Also in the training course, we turned the professionals' attention to this aspect, which is so relevant and precious, to make them appreciate the fact that this divide—theoretical and practical—is still very widespread while the continual evaluative function that professionals put into play and employ (often tacitly or unconsciously) during their everyday professional practice is, instead, neglected.

On the basis of what has been stated so far, during the entire training process we continually sought to examine/evaluate this lack of clarity in observation/assessment within the premise that this complexity is not at all a limitation but, if anything, an opportunity for research and care for both the professional and—as we will see later—the family. From this point of view, assessment is a fundamental aspect for anyone interested in fostering critical reflection on their own social action and, in general, on the complex relationship between professionals and families. From this perspective, it is a matter of returning to and celebrating the original sense of the word "evaluate" (from the Latin *valere*), i.e., to "give value" to the other by constantly recognizing the complexity of what we are doing together.

8. (Counter)Points of View

"Getting into muddles makes a sort of sense. If we didn't get into muddles, our talks would be like playing rummy without first shuffling the cards"
 – (G. Bateson, 1976, p.16)

Preschool. End of the day. Lorenzo's mother walks in. I go over to her before the boy arrives, expecting her to ask about how her son behaved over the course of the morning. This is because in recent days he has been acting aggressively toward the other children. During the interview held last week, the situation was presented to the mother as gently as possible; there is little dialogue with the mother and she tends to become closed when we discuss her son. In addition, the mother always seems to belittle her son, using language that is often critical and scornful. When Lorenzo walks up, she—while looking at me—asks him, "Were

you a monster today?!" I intervene by saying, "No, no, things went well this morning," in the attempt to counterbalance her typical "belittling" manner. At the same time, the little boy answers his mother with an amused and explicit: "Monster no." At some point it occurs to me that this is probably a little game between the mother and son, a game of complicity between two people who want to see eye to eye. I therefore realize that I've often acted on the basis of my completely useless "evaluation", and that my theory that the mother "is belittling" led me to act (not only to understand/interpret the situation) in a determined manner. To "supervise" me was the child, who might have understood everything and showed me just how well he was getting along with his mother.

Care practices stir up judgments. Making a trenchant evaluation of someone (e.g., "she's belittling") often means putting an almost indelible label on them. An act of this kind is an obstacle to any educational intervention aimed at accompanying a positive transformation because it "traps" a person instead of freeing them, it locks the person inside a rigid image and prevents them from being thought of differently and from thinking of themselves differently, and thus prevents the fostering of transformation and change.

How can we find relational modes to contain the judgment which there inevitably is, and which at times the context explicitly requires of us?

In this account, the teacher succeeds in a complex operation: reinterpreting her own prejudice on the basis of what happened and transforming her view of the mother. Often it is not so easy to manage something of this kind all alone. At times we cannot even access this possibility for reflection. Working in and assessing care practices for children, dealing with parenthood and family means encountering topics and questions that, more than others, trigger "powerful" emotions and theories. Also for this reason, one does not always have the awareness and strength to reflect on this level all alone. In any case, this is a continual task, as each assessment is characterized, as we said, by inevitable subjectivity.

"But how can you look at something while setting aside your own ego? Whose eyes are doing the looking? You usually think of the ego as someone who looks out through their eyes as though out a window and sees the world stretched out before them in all its vastness. And so, there is a window that looks out onto the world. On that side is the world. And on this one? Again, the world" (Calvino, 1983).

On the other hand, subjectivity is inevitable not only because assessment is a human action, but also because the field in which it takes place is specifically socio-educational. It is therefore useful to maintain an awareness of one's appointed task, which we believe is realized in certain specific practices: reception, recognition and *accompaniment* to relational wellbeing. An educational professional therefore always strives to care for their relationship with the other, together with the other. We therefore believe it becomes inappropriate to consider assessment that does not promote the educational process itself, one whose ultimate goal is not the potential to open new possibilities (not close them or limit them, as instead many assessments risk doing) so that everyone is "a little better". Assessment within a social pedagogical framework is therefore a form of care, and to us promoting a process of care means generating new ideas and possibilities in order to continue—for everyone's greater wellbeing—the educational and care work that is being done together.

Assessment is therefore necessarily intended as a process which, while they are being conducted, are transformative and circular: assess in order to change, change in order to assess. If I feel and think that a parent making use of an educational service is acting in a manner that is not useful or is counterproductive for the child or the context, I cannot help but do two things in my mind: think that what I observe and evaluate is "only" what I personally can observe and evaluate, as a contextual subject and with a "partial" view; and that in order to honor this unclear view it would be interesting to involve the parent, asking her/him for help/advice about what I am observing and how I am observing it.

With this operation it is as if I laid forth the subjective and partial aspect of my view as the possibility to relate and communicate. We may summarize this operative positioning with two basic questions: "I saw—I evaluated—this thing, which in my opinion is very critical. Do you see it too? Do you think the same thing I do?" Regardless of the reply we might receive—"Yes", "No", "Tell me more", "What are

you talking about?!", "Go to hell!"—in our experience this kind of operation may allow for a redefinition of the relationship in that it promotes a circularity of the assessment that can turn a "limitation" and a critical moment into an occasion for communication and exchange. In some ways this creates a relational opportunity that can "stir up the relationship" and make it open to change. In some ways this also means, to quote Bateson (1976, p.16), "getting into muddles" because it means making room for communication and exchange that is brand new and uncertain, breaking with certain working procedures, strategies and expectancies.

It is therefore a practice for which unless there is an awareness of this *relationality* one risks betraying its educational intent of "giving value" to turn it into a practice of judgment, contrast and at times even mere social control. The importance of this awareness lies most of all in the fact that, though it is often a tacit, implicit process—in the sense that professionals reflect neither on the methods nor on the parameters at the basis of their evaluations—one is constantly making evaluations. As was stated earlier, this may be done without realizing it, but it is done constantly.

Working within these premises means in some way "complicating things a bit", it means adopting a logic of "relational evolution" more than the static definition of roles. It also means moving from "an understanding intended as 'having something' to one intended as 'becoming something'" (Scardicchio, 2012, p. 112). The change in attitude and stance that follows isn't a simple transformation for educational and care contexts, which often brings about the temptation, in order to manage the complexities encountered, to create protocol and standardized practices in managing the other and, most importantly, in managing critical moments in the relationship with the other. This change of view, which was also covered during the training course, requires a change of perspective of the meanings involved—a transformation which, we are aware, might make things difficult for the professional, who is asked to acquire specific professional skills and aptitudes:

- willingness to develop a sufficient level of reflectivity and critical reflection (Fook, 1996) to question their own professional practices and representations, and therefore alter them;
- capacity to decentralize a determined and acquired professional culture to continually gain new, temporary points of view;
- willingness to face a portrayal of their professionalism which arises from such an alternative idea of assessment and which questions the professional's competence and responsibility (Premoli, 2012; 2016).

This different disposition, as we said, may make things difficult for the professional, as it means thinking of the cognitive process differently from what working contexts and processes generally require us to do and propose. In this case, knowing "means changing, not stabilizing; mobilizing, not anchoring" (Scardicchio, 2012, p. 20).

Scardicchio continues (id., p.112):

"However, this distress is courage and loving what is real. This distress is not powerlessness nor disenchantment or nihilism, as it has within it a strange, alchemic characteristic: one doesn't die if one accepts it, but attains a new form, like during birth. And then, the certainty of not having understood everything forces us to listen as well as search, to grasp the cosmic in the comical and the comical in the cosmic."

9. Evaluate and Engage

The hardest part was understanding what a social worker actually was. Again, until last year, for me when it came to social workers I would be like "Begone, foul creature!" You imagine something completely different. I'm not a very outgoing person. I'm quick to keep people away—very quick. [...] That's how I was at first. Later, things move on and you form an opinion of someone, you get to know someone. Because you're studying me, but I'm studying you. [...] Yeah, okay, it's your job [...] you're paid to do that stuff. But you can tell if

someone's doing it because of something inside them or just for the paycheck. When I would go out every morning to work as a welder—I've been doing it for thirty years, I love being a welder—you can tell who loves their job and who just does it for the money. You see, there were a lot of things... if I made a mistake, if I did something with total commitment, from the heart... (Antonio, family social services user)

At the 4th International Welfare Quality Meeting: The Child (Riva del Garda, November 2012), a group of social workers from Piove di Sacco (Biolo, Rauli, Zambolin, 2012) presented a video containing interviews with three couples in the care of social services—a rare example in which users are given the opportunity to speak and offer their point of view of the work of the professionals taking care of them. Bravely reflecting on their family story and their encounters with social services, these parents offer a great opportunity for learning and training (Premoli, 2014).

What we hear from Antonio, one of the parents interviewed, strongly corroborates what we are saying and proposing on the topic of assessment. Antonio looks at the social workers, studies them, tries to understand who they are, what they're doing, how they work. Basically, we could say that he too is assessing their manner of working. We believe that what Antonio describes is what normally happens when families and professionals meet though it almost always goes unsaid or is "discarded". The families look at us, think about us and develop interesting theories about us. Therefore families also assess us with competence. Their assessments, even in instances in which they seem "simple" to us, are nevertheless ingredients that help form the encounter and the work process. Like Antonio, families also form their own local theories about how to evaluate a good professional (Formenti, 2013; Premoli, 2016). And so even empirical indicators of quality arise: passion, dedication to one's work regardless of salary. These are theories that arise from personal and autobiographical experiences and reflections; in this case, for instance, the definition of the indicators for the assessment of a good professional comes from Antonio's professional experience as a welder.

"In the world of real families, there's no psychology (or attachment theories!), sociology, pedagogy, anthropology and so on, but relationships, the exchange of information and communication, objects, bodies..." (Formenti, 2012, p. XVII). The family's point of view is therefore unavoidable, in that it exists. It might be good, bad, complex, trivial, angry or rigid, but it exists, and even simply because of this their point of view becomes precious to those who wish to or need to develop a relationship with the family. It is, indeed, the professional's task to include the family's point of view within the work process, as the professional is the one who has been called in to take care of the relationship.

In order to do so, either one has the good luck of meeting an Antonio who clearly expresses what he sees and evaluates, or—more often—these ingredients remain in the background, unheard and/or unused by the professional. Instead, the perspective we are outlining requires "giving voice" to these aspects, seeking them out, considering them, becoming curious about them. In our opinion, it is shocking to discover, for example, how many reflections are exchanged among families regarding the world of professionals. Just imagine how many interesting conversations take place in playgrounds across the street from schools and nursery schools based on the experiences parents are having in their relationships with their children's educational services. Hours of interesting conversations that are kept outside of the main scene ("outside the gates" and "behind the doors" of the services). We have often found ourselves thinking that if we only gave voice to them, went to listen to their conversations, we could avoid certain training seminars and supervisions because of their pragmatism, because of how focused and centered they are.

Appreciating this vertex in the relationship means giving value to what families think about us professionals—about how we work, about how we are working with them, about how we assess. Indeed, "creating contexts of transformative evaluation means making families protagonists in the construction of the meanings throughout the intervention's evaluation process, from the definition of the problems (assessment) to the development of solutions (planning), to their implementation and monitoring (intervention) to the final evaluation of what has been done and the changes that have been made" (Serbati & Milani, 2013, p. 105).

Effectively, also in this case it is appropriate to adopt certain questions—questions that are useful in defining one's own positioning within the reflective process, which it would be useful to be able to explain to and think through with the family. For example, we could ask families what they think of

our manner of structuring communication with them. Just think of the fact that when families visit the nursery school they often talk to the coordinator and not to their children's teachers! In this case, it is a question not only of hearing their preferences, as these kinds of dialogues and requests are very often resolved; instead, it is a question of understanding them and bringing them into our reflections about our organizational and communicational processes, of bearing in mind how much the families think and see. To open new conversations, to formulate more articulate hypotheses, but also to bring about transformations in our organizational, communicational and evaluation premises.

If we therefore agree on the premise that each evaluative act—just like each cognitive act—requires attention to the recognition of the implicit epistemology that supports it (Formenti, 2012), being able to involve the participants in the assessment process in this search is a choice that could often change the working styles used with families and entire organizational structures, making way for transparency, authentic collaboration and discussion, and thus building a specific perspective of educational evaluation (Altieri, 2009; Cucchiara, Vanin, van Aalst, 2011).

10. Conclusions: The Madman and the Wise Man

One of the participants in the training course reformulated one of the learnings experienced in this manner: "I used to think *If you don't know, ask*, but then I crossed out the 'if' and began to think like this: *You don't know; ask*". She then added a regional proverb that explains the epistemology of this repositioning: "A madman in his own home knows more than a wise man in the home of others". Abandoning a positioning centered on the conviction that the family I am working with "is like this" and acquiring a new orientation—being aware that in my observation I am "inventing" this reality with the family and that the family always has an interesting notion of what we are doing with them—is no doubt a difficult and demanding change, especially as regards the thinking habits in which we have been "trained".

Usually when one makes an evaluation they tend to try to understand and know something for what it is, in front of them. Here, instead, we propose an evaluation that is always research and is always a work-in-progress, an invention and (re)creation in that what we observe does not present itself as the objective but as the product of our practices. Any observer of the family brings his/her story and epistemology into the process of inquiry. Practitioners became researchers not only by observing and collecting stories and other data, but in discussing how stories are co-constructed and related to other stories" (Formenti, 2013; Premoli, 2015).

We (*family professionals*)—who by interacting, by adopting certain behaviors and attitudes in the relationship, by initiating certain types of conversation—are the ones who construct the families' world, which we then observe and evaluate (Formenti 2012). From this perspective it means that the assessment are constantly emerging from the relationship between the professional and the family/parent. In some way it means "turning upside-down" the question of the assessment of parenting skills as it is normally intended and depicted by instead evaluating whether the skills of the professionals involved are adequate to initiate and sustain a process of change that allows for the recovery of the parenting skills. (Can these professionals do it?! Are they competent enough to work with this family?). To many practitioners, daily deep in traditional social care approaches, this represents a perspective transformation requiring changes in personal worldview, in beliefs and in behaviors (Mezirow, 2000).

Adopting this perspective is a concrete and pervasive operative decision, not a strategy nor even an applicable method. Many reading these pages will have discovered the systemic premises of this kind of positioning and thought—premises often known and agreed upon.

Laura Formenti states: "We're all a little systemic. [...] But what does it actually mean to live by systemic ideas, to practice them? [...] Being systemic doesn't require simple adherence to concepts but forces us to take on a different way of looking at, of sensing, of conceiving relationships—a way of fitting into the relationship with families, which requires practice, becoming a style of thought, if not a style of life" (Formenti 2012, p. XVII).

The divide between agreeing with the premises and the possibility of consistently practicing them within contexts remains a constant challenge, even for a professional with great expertise and training.

During the training course it was interesting to move from reflections on a theoretical level (the first day) to the practical level (all of the following days). While on a cognitive level the entire group seemed to agree with and understand certain "systemic" premises, it was interesting to then "work back" from the practices to the theories supporting them, often noticing the divide between the theories underlying the assessment/evaluative actions described and the theory proposed on day one.

Just as difficult—and perhaps unusual for many professionals and contexts—is the proposal to appreciate the value of (we would like to say "celebrate") the family's presence inside the assessment process. Recognizing its abilities and skills is an intention that we all more or less agree with theoretically, but then during the actual work it is not always adopted and proposed. What prevails more often is perhaps a sort of "distrust" of what family systems might say and know about themselves, and most importantly what they are understanding and experiencing in the work with professionals, especially for those who work with troubled, fragile and vulnerable families (which are those who most often ask for help—or, oppositely, never ask for it!) and who, for this very reason, require more "faith".

How can we care for a parent and a family if we don't have faith in them? By assessing parenting as vulnerable, we run the risk of making it vulnerable by assessing it. The dimension of assessment/evaluation when it is focused not so much on the course of the interventions or its outcomes as it is on the families with whom we are working results in a variety of activities initiated by various professionals, which always have a very strong impact on people's lives. For example, just think of the constraints that a family in the care of social services needs to include in their lives. But even more simply, think of the possible effects of meeting with nursery school teachers. Although from different points of view and with different tools, settings and time frames at their disposal, more and more often parents become the object of the "powerful" and frequently "overconfident" view of professionals, making the parent and family fragile and vulnerable.

Having faith (which does not mean simply being optimistic), seeing meaning in what is going on, letting people's voices be heard, involving them in the assessment/evaluation process and making it transparent, asking families to help us make the evaluation clear and understandable to them—these are some of the actions focused on during the training course that we could perfect in order to nurture meetings and evaluations with families. These small considerations might seem to be simple or to go without saying, yet they require training. They are considerations and practices that are useful not to change families; changing families in pre-established directions—this is not the educational objective we set for ourselves, but a higher and more difficult objective: understanding what might 'make everyone a little better' or 'make everyone a little happier' (Formenti, 2012), also and most importantly within an assessment. I make an assessment not to take a photograph but to bring forth new actions and ideas that are useful for the participants' situation. To make our work even better and more interesting.

"We social scientists would do well to hold back our eagerness to control that world which we so imperfectly understand. The fact of our imperfect understanding should not be allowed to feed our anxiety and so increase the need to control. Rather, our studies could be inspired by a more ancient, but today less honored, motive: a curiosity about the world of which we are part. The rewards of such work are not power but beauty."

– (G. Bateson 1976, p. 315)

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