Foster care in Italy: challenges and perspectives

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Entrusting or Caring? - 1

• Development of interventions for children and adolescents in Italy: a difficult path …

• … however many efforts have been made for providing more human and comprehensive interventions

• Law n. 184 in 1983: foster care regarded as the solution for children in need

• “Foster care” means “trusting and entrusting”
Entrusting or Caring? - 2

• Is however the point of view of children adequately taken into account?

• To meet children’s needs, effective choices and not only rationalizations are required: how effective have been placements planned since the 1983 Law?

• There is a need to:
  – match professional and non-professional capabilities, working in terms of both formal and informal services
  – explore different and new forms of foster care, particularly more flexible and temporary ones
The choices of the last 50 years

• Years 1960-1970: first boost towards “de-institutionalization”
• Years 1971-1980: transition from institutions to the community level, background debate on possible innovations
• Years 1981-1990: responsibilities are mainly attributed to the local community level, professions gain importance
• Years 1991-2000: independent bodies for child protection are developed
• Years 2001-present: institutions for children are closed, and The national Ombudsman for children is established
The figures of a difficult pathway - 1

- Children out of their families were around:
  - 250,000 in 1962
  - 91,000 at the end of the seventies
  - 45,000 at the end of the eighties
  - 32,400 in 2008 (52% in foster care, 48% in residential facilities)
  - 29,300 at the end of 2010, equalling 2.9 per 1,000 residents 0-17 y.o.
The figures of a difficult pathway - 2

• Marked cross-regional differences

• Presence/absence of a professional infrastructure and availability of local services may play an important role
Trajectories and care pathways - 1

- For the 40% of children and adolescents in foster care, this is not the first experience
- On average only 1/3 go back to their birth family
- About half in foster family, half in residential community, but markedly age-dependent pattern
Trajectories and care pathways - 2

- Most of the foster families are at their first foster care experience (78%)
- Approximately one in four families (23%) has more than one foster child, often siblings
- 24% of the foreign foster children are in homocultural foster care, mostly (64%) within their extended families
- An important role is played by the juvenile justice system: almost three quarters of foster care placements (76%) stem from a judicial decree
New issues

- Increase in separations and divorces over last 15 years
- Minors placed with either parent (or both) in 2010:
  65,427 in separations (57% younger than 11 y.o.) and
  23,545 (34% younger than 11 y.o.) in divorces
Poverty is a worsening factor …

• Absolute poverty among children under 18 y.o. is a growing phenomenon: 4.7% of children and adolescents in 2005, 7% in 2011
  – The most affected age group is 4 to 6: poor children amount to 7.8% of child population

• The poverty incidence equals 4% among couples with one child (5.7% if children are under 18 y.o.), 10.4% among those with at least three children (10.9% if the children are under 18 y.o.)
Poverty: same level as 10 years ago

Fonte: Istat
But the risk for poverty is increasing
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Adulto singolo</th>
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<th>Tutte le famiglie con minori</th>
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Fonte: Whiteford e Adema, 2007
... but is it adequately addressed?

- In the face of these challenges, expenditure for transfers and services to children and families in Italy (1.3% of GDP in 2010) is lower than the European average (2.3%)
- Moreover, differences and inequalities among Italian regions are very large: municipal spending for poor children and families in economic difficulty ranges from around 3 to 18 euro per capita (12 euro national average)
- The implementation, not only the definition, of the “essential levels of care” for children and families still seems to be unaccomplished
Poverty and foster care

- Poorer regions, where needs are plausibly greater, may offer less opportunities of foster care provision
Future perspectives

• Is “foster care” genus or species? Specific foster care solutions (moving from genus to species) are necessarily different in terms of context, length, competences, intensity, formalization, … (criteria for classifying)

• Classifying the forms of foster care experienced in Italy and other countries is a necessary step and a source of potential strength. This effort should not be self-referential, it should be rather focused on matching needs and problems, with a better capacity to care and reach effectiveness.

• In this perspective, international experiences can fruitfully contribute to building a common platform to innovative solutions.
Thank you for your attention!

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