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Where does Italian society allocate responsibility? The paradox of educational responsibility in contemporary Italian culture

1. *Issue*

It is well known that in the last fifty years Italian society has experienced a significant change in family structure. The traditional family has in fact gradually crumbled into a mixed landscape made up by singles, one-parent families, blended families, same-sex parents, commuters, migrants (Istat 2010, 2011; Solinas 2010). This societal change has been accompanied by paradigm shifts not only in practice and in common understanding, but also in the legal language concerning parenthood. In particular, with the family law reform in 1975 a shift took place from "father's authority" – based on children's obedience to their fathers – to the new concept of "parental authority" and then gradually-through article 2048 of the Italian civil code and again in 2006 through law N°. 54 on shared parenting – to the expression "parental responsibility", which has been used more and more often.

The modification is undoubtedly evidence of the process of female emancipation and of a better public social recognition of women's role in the family and in society. It is also indicative of the gradual shift in attention from children's duties to parents (first of all obedience) towards parent's duties to children, so that these are increasingly considered as requiring care and protection: they are not expected to honour their father and mother any more, but rather to be loved and recognized by their parents and valued as distinct individuals.

However, against the frequent use of the term "responsibility" – and notwithstanding several analyses by legal philosophers of the different semantic fields to which the term refers (Ronfani 2010) – we find a significant lack of sociological or ethnographic studies which aim to understand how parents and educators figure out and put into practice this particular new form of "responsibility", what meanings it assumes in everyday life and what its effects on the growth of the new generations might be. No qualitative analyses have yet been carried out to explain how new generations of parents and educators interpret the change in their social role – from passive objects of devotion to

active care suppliers – in the absence of reference models. Ethnographic studies carried on in Italy on the concept of responsibility focused on LGBT parenting, on separated and recomposed families and on migrant families, taking more into account the – supposed – critical situations concerning assumption of responsibility than routine situations. This approach reveals that the new forms of family represent a more difficult aspect than the wider meaningful contexts in which the everyday management of personal relationships and the transmission of values take place (Saraceno, Barbagli 1998; Ambrosini 2010; Ronfani, Bosisio 2015).

My study investigates the concept of responsibility from two different points of view. First, it tries to identify how educators and parents define educational responsibility and what they do to implement it in practice on a day-to-day basis. Secondly, it addresses the problem of responsibility given to children. Many interesting issues concerning educational responsibility arise, in fact, not so much from analysing the responsibilities adults assume as from scrutinising the responsibilities they give to children.

2. *Research setting and methodology*

The research was carried out from September 2010 until September 2012 in Cremona, a city of about 72 000 inhabitants in northern Italy, on the border between Lombardy and Emilia[1]. Cremona has always placed particular emphasis on educational issues. According to tradition in 1828 Ferrante Aporti founded there the first nursery school in Italy. In 1864 a circular of the prefect, the State representative in the province, records the setting-up of some nursery schools by parish priests and the promotion of their work in the territory[2]. The research focuses on educational responsibility in families with children aged up to 6 years. The decision to focus attention on this age group is the result of a series of assessments. First of all, educators working with young children are readier to reflect critically on the teaching content. Because

of their professional training they are more attentive to a holistic approach to the individual and to good relations with individual parents. It is also easier to contact the parents of young children, given that participation of parents in school life drops significantly in parallel to the increasing age of the children. Moreover, many of them are experiencing parenthood for the first time and are therefore more open to the exchange of ideas and dialogue.

Beyond such reasons of expediency, an important factor in my choice was my belief that for its proper understanding responsibility had to be studied and dealt with from the very beginning. A deferral – that is to say, studying it for instance in families with teenagers –would have meant a loss of important analysis and evaluation factors, because it is precisely in the lapse of time between 0 and 6 that family customs develop, which are very important for the modelling of parental responsibility. Studying parenthood from a child's birth means in fact following the presentation and the implementation of responsibility from the beginning, observing when and how in his or her personal history a parent feels responsible and above all – an issue of especial interest to me-when parents start to hold their child accountable[3].

3. *What is a responsible parent like?*

The question about responsibility challenged our respondents. They proved willing to answer, even talkative, about educational difficulties and about the recent changes in the representation of an educator, but when we introduced the section dedicated to "educational responsibility" educators and parents were plainly ill at ease, as we could see from ironic remarks, sighs, silences, sometimes a sort of resentment, sometimes deep emotion and some tears. We sometimes got the impression that educators were scared by the word responsibility, as if it hinted at an accusation of "irresponsibility"; as for parents, that word reminds a strong social request, the feeling that nothing is enough for one's own child and more and more needs to be done.

A: How would you define the concept of parental responsibility? In your opinion what does it mean that a parent is responsible?
Coordinator of municipal crèche No. 3: responsible for her/his child?
A: mmm
C: this subject is so […] in one word?
A: mmm […] perhaps one sentence
C: a sentence
A: or two (laughing)

C: or two […] mmm (puzzled) a parent is responsible, but in my opinion […] well […] I don't like the idea that some parents may not be responsible parents […] it's very difficult for me to define responsibility in a parent [...] I mean, a parent is always responsible [...] I don't know.
A: Do irresponsible parents exist?
C: Yes […] we read it also in the newspapers, in the crime section, but before labelling a parent as irresponsible I would expect to have very very very reliable documentation […] 'cause I cannot brand a parent irresponsible, on what basis?

Mother, 36 years old, graduated, housewife, married, two children, 4 years old and 3 months old, Catholic
A: How would you define being responsible parents?
Mother: being able to do sacrifices, being attentive […] (long silence). Have you got any suggestions, please? (laughing) (embarrassment) May be I could condense it to loving unconditionally, no matter what we will be faced with.

Mother (38 years old, graduated, clerk) and father (40 years old, diploma-level, trader) married, three children, 8, 5 and 2 years old, practising Catholics
A: How would you define being responsible parents? (silence)
Father (to the mother): Please!
Mother: Nice question [...] (silence)
Father: How would we define […] What does being a responsible parent mean (silence) […] I think I am, but I don't know how to define it (silence)
Mother: But my responsibility as a parent […]
Father: When I put my children before anything else […] a parent is indeed responsible because he/she knows that the main thing […] that first of all he/she has to take care of the child […] you can distinguish a responsible parent also because his/her child is happy for sure.
Mother: mmm
A: So it means putting the child's needs before your own.
Father: Yes, absolutely.
Mother: Yes.

In our interviews, parents and educators share the same concerns and the same objectives. Parental responsibility seems to be strongly linked to three main factors.

The first is the firm belief that "providing experiences and promoting competences" is an educational priority (Ritscher 2011; Benzoni 2013). A responsible parent keeps on proposing activities and consumption of goods, knowledge and also con-

tacts. He/she takes the child here and there, makes every effort to stimulate them and tries in all ways to identify and develop their most hidden potentials. Similarly, the educational programmes of the different nursery schools emphasise the "variety of experiences" and the acquisition of skills and competences. Schools commit themselves to promoting projects and recreation activities, parents contribute to build up this attitude with quality afternoon activities. Competences and learning are regarded as neutral as far as their meanings are concerned: lead-in courses to numbers, reading, English, road safety education and natural sciences are not only considered as equivalent (therefore, during the section meetings they are listed to the parents in a long sequence without any hierarchy of value), but also objectively as the sort of equipment which enriches the children's knowledge. There is no critical reflection on the fact that no language can be neutral, as it is always the product of a system of values, that no learning is natural and necessary, as it is always the result of a prior specific choice and a value judgement. There is in fact a precise language ideology in the decision to teach English to five-year old children, as well as in the decision not to teach reading and writing in the nursery school and in the early approach to multimediality. Moreover, the idea that competences are neutral makes them safe ground in the eyes of the educators, because they can be fostered in any child in the same way, regardless of cultural or religious differences. In fact, however, it is precisely through these apparently objective proposals that social conventions and expectations are strengthened and a vision of the world is transferred to children, to migrant children too, together with a system of values, a self-image and a representation of gender differences and power relations (Duranti 1992). The introduction of some cognitive tools, not only involves acquiring knowledge but also transmits implicitly the values society requires and promotes. In this case, this provision of skills is linked to a strong individualism, striving for performance and mythicization of computer technology.

Mother, 34 years old, graduated, educator, cohabitee, a 3 years old child
A: What is your main educational aim?
Mother: I'd like him to learn a lot, to have a lot of experiences.

The second factor is the almost obsessive concern for children's wellness and happiness, which is to be expected in a social context interpreting the educator's role mainly as a guarantor of the children's needs, supporting the expression of their deep and primitive vocations. This way children's happiness becomes the clear demonstration that their parents have been capable and attentive, in a word they have been "responsible" («you can distinguish a responsible parent also because his/her child is happy for sure» according to a father's statement reported before).

Mother, 39 years old, diploma-level, housewife, married, two children, 3 years old and 6 months old, practising Catholic
A: What does it mean in your opinion to be a responsible parent?
Mother: What does it mean […] making sure that children's safety is always protected; they have to be protected above anything else […] I mean […] in my opinion […] I would even be willing to annihilate myself completely in order to give him a moment or a future, in order to allow them a quiet life, without any problems whatsoever.

Mother, 39 years old, graduated, clerk, married, three children, 15, 12 and 5 years old, practising Catholic
A: How would you define being a responsible parent?
Mother: Any parent loving her/his children and wishing for their happiness [...] that they will be really happy […] wishing them joy.. I don't know […] what can you wish for a child? I don't know, personally I would like them to be really happy.

Mother, 39 years old, diploma-level, clerk, married, a one year old child, Catholic
Mother: A responsible parent is the one who succeeds in raising a serene child; what matters me most is seeing my child serene, that is to say I want to see him smile.

Coordinator of municipal crèche No. 2: In my opinion, exactly raising […] being able to establish a good relationship with the children and helping them grow up serene […] children who are feeling good, who are then able to confront nursery school and later on step by step their life […] their future life, exactly their wellness [...] I mean, seeing serene children who are feeling good […] who had the possibility to experiment anything possible also in terms of creativity.

Coordinator of municipal nursery school No. 6: In my opinion they are different and the fact that their child has actually a serene experience is reflected in the parents themselves and in other aspects of school […] we see parents that, well, leave children from 7.30 a.m. to, for instance in

our schools, 5.30 p.m., therefore they leave us in charge of the children completely the whole day; I think the best thing for them is seeing their children derive serenity from school life, so that these parents can go to work without any worry.

The "children of the project" (Boltanski 2004) get the mandate to fulfil themselves, to do what they like most, to be serene, pleased with themselves, so that they can become the ideal prolongation of their parents' narcissism. No binding social context appears beyond – and underlying – this imperative to fulfilment (yet we are experiencing a serious economic and social crisis), no directive, no request. Parents regard making a wish, setting a course or identifying options as "a violence", "a wrong", "a lack of respect" for the child. As Gustavo Pietropolli Charmet (2012) observes, parents urge their child toward what he/she likes, and not toward what he/she has to do or it is realistic or appropriate to do. Thus the ethical father, who imposes his rules and demands respect, has been replaced by a caring father, who incites his child to fulfil his/her most authentic self.

This request – "I just want you to be happy" –which is apparently so expected and substantial: is there anything more natural and appropriate than wishing for the own children's happiness? – threatens to become paralyzing for the child, above all because it's difficult for parents – because they don't know how or don't want to do it – to outline a sound frame, a sensible picture, within which the child's fulfilment can spread. This request (or better this non-request) occurs in fact in a parental and social context which systematically withdraws as scared or unable to provide educational coordinates and directives. What is striking in all the statements and comments we heard is the total absence of any reference to the social context and (as a condition and a limit of the possibility to be serene) the absence of any reference to any other value-driven picture (which explains how you can be happy). This way the child gets an impossible mission: the search for absolute happiness, for the fulfilment of their authentic self, free from any limitation and almost objective, as if happiness were a neutral, objective, self-evident concept.

The third factor is the fear of giving an opinion, of adopting a position. The search for happiness often coincides with a withdrawal into the family or a restricted circle of friends, into a personal environment, which is perceived as safe and reassuring. Everyday life is described and experienced as if it were an endless present, which does not transmit memories of the past and does not dare look at the future; a present time in which any educational po-

sition is much the same as any other and in which a sort of detachment is perceived as almost necessary for any ethical stance (Magatti 2009; Censis 2011a, 2011 b; Benzoni 2013). This relativism is at the same time cause and effect of individualism because of which everybody thinks for themselves, as they had no valid reason directing their actions in a community and at the same time they have no valid reason because they are too focused on their family and on their children's needs. Since every experience has the same value and every project is as good as the next, when you identify a safe context it is better to cultivate it and to interfere as little as possible in other people's choices, pretending that no problem exists. It is neither meanness nor a couldn't-care-less attitude; it seems rather a sort of resigned respect for the other's position which rapidly becomes the abandonment of any community project. This is good in intention but devastating as far as the implications on the social fabric are concerned. Educators are therefore cautious when intervening in communication with families and parents are almost paralyzed when assessing their children's choices and friends. This also prevents them from bringing up children to choose for themselves and to express reasoned views. In the absence of any guidance, there is such a strong fear of limiting their experiences and of depriving them of something, or perhaps also of making invidious discriminations, that parents are afraid to urge their children toward any kind of reflection, selection, preference or evaluation whatsoever.

Mother, 40 years old, diploma-level, clerk, married, two children, 3 years old and 2 months
A: How would you define the concept of parental responsibility? What is a responsible parent like in your opinion?
Mother: (silence) actually this is subjective […] I mean […] a responsible parent in my opinion is [...] is a parent who follows the children's growth and seeks the best for them […] Now, I don't really know [...] it may also be that one is responsible if he/she gives the child certain rules, makes him eat certain foods, let him go only to certain places, while another one can be responsible in a different way. I mean […] Now […] I don't know […] after all everyone does what they want.

Mother, 42 years old, graduated, teacher, married, two children, 6 and 3 years old, practising Catholic
A: What is the most important educational aim for you as a parent?
Mother: Well, in any case, to feel well with everyone […] I mean, without making any particular difference […] so young they shouldn't have

preferences or being so selective yet, I mean in my opinion they gain experience in any way and with everybody […] and only if they get a lot of inputs they will eventually be able to make their own decisions when they grow up.

Coordinator of municipal nursery school No. 3: No, well, I wouldn't dare say to a parent that "in my opinion this way is wrong", or "be careful you are doing damage" […] absolutely not […] I mean in general […] .I would never allow myself to say to a parent "No, this way of doing is wrong", I […] I […] as I was saying before, I accept other people's views, but then if a parent says to me "I'm used like that, I brought up three other children the same way and they grew up healthy and strong" I say "fine", for goodness' sake, no, no.

A: It is possible to teach parents to be responsible parents?
Coordinator of municipal nursery school No. 8: Who can teach it to them? Who can teach it to them? Can we do it, in your opinion? (resentfully)
A: Isn't it possible, in your opinion?
C: No […] well […] obviously I won't tell a parent "you're an idiot", I won't tell him/her something like that […] I always take the child into consideration, I mean the child's problem, then, when we talk about that, the parents should […] should understand that when their child behaves in a certain way he/she could […] well, they could ease the child's situation, couldn't they? No, you can't […] or listen, your child behaves like this, therefore you shouldn't take him/her out and about from morning to night, to an inn or to a pub […] There were such situations, no, how can you? I cannot tell anything like that, they would answer "Darling, this is my child, I go out in the afternoon, take him to the pub, with the people I like" (angry tone)

4. *What is a responsible child like?*

If, as we have seen, most of the municipal and state educators we interviewed showed perplexity, difficulty or embarrassment in defining "parental responsibility" and they sometimes admit they don't feel prepared on this subject, the difficulties increase when they are asked to define or to identify responsibilities of a child younger than six. In some cases you can also detect a certain annoyance with the question posed, which they seem to consider almost meaningless– judging by their expressions and tones.

Coordinator of municipal crèche No. 3: but actually, I don't understand very well what a child should be held responsible for, poor thing (offended tone)
A: Would you say between 0-3 one cannot be held responsible for anything?
C: But no, I cannot understand for what.
A: I'm asking you, I don't know […] in your opinion?
C: responsible (perplexed)
A: The question is: is there anything a child aged 0-3 years can be held responsible for, in your opinion?
C: responsible […]
A: or responsibility will come afterwards […] between 0-3 […] .a child can do anything.
C: noooo […] He cannot do anything he or she likes […] but at the same time he is not responsible either for the actions he is not supposed to do […] I mean […] not at all!

A: What is a child between 3 and 6 years old responsible for in your opinion?
Coordinator of municipal nursery school No. 4: What is he responsible for? Oh my goodness (bringing his hands to his face)!
A:Is he responsible for anything or not?
C: (silence) I can't think of anything right now, he can be responsible for […] because what do we […] what do we mean with responsibility?

With a certain effort and some guidance coordinators identify a responsibility linked to a task such as the aptitude to perform some tasks set to them, like clearing the table, pouring water into a mate's glasses, using toys properly or putting pencils back into his case. They never mention spontaneously the responsibility of acting respectfully in a context with other people, both children and adults.

Coordinator of municipal nursery school No. 3: In my opinion children are responsible for their tasks, their things, for instance may be you give the last year's children a pencil-box and tell them to be responsible for it and for their felt-tip pens, I don't know, really minimal stuff […] I don't feel like stating other responsibilities.

Educators never talk about children's responsibility to themselves, for instance the responsibility not to hurt themselves. They never mention the fact that a child is responsible for his moving in a space with his body, which has to be managed in relation to other bodies, which in turn are moving in the same social environment with their need to be recognized. There is more to it. As we

read before, children are not held responsible for their actions in a school environment, because they are "too young" and because responsibility "is a big word for a child" and the expectation that a three, four, five or six-year old child is responsible for his or her actions seems to be some what inappropriate and inadmissible. Children's actions are considered neutral learning experiences in a context of well-being. However, the family is not responsible either, because educators do not agree that children's behaviour is deterministically attributable to their families of origin: confronted with a specific question educators answer that they do not hold families responsible for a child's behaviour at school. The prevailing trend is "to leave the family aside" and "to take the family into consideration only when faced with pathological situations". Then we were allowed to think that a coordinator places full responsibility on herself for everything happening in her section, but then, to our surprise, we discovered that was not the case.

A: but then you feel responsible if in your class you see a child pushing or beating another one; is the first thing you think "blast, I'm here, it shouldn't happen"?
Coordinator of municipal nursery school No. 6: no, not in that sense [...] I don't feel responsible because it was not me who passed this way of doing on to him […] in that case my responsibility is presenting him more and more different attitudes in everyday life, thus another lifestyle, so that to smooth a little bit his way […] because at this age above all they are very very imitative.

A: Do you feel responsible in those cases? I mean if something happens which was not supposed to?
Coordinator of municipal nursery school No. 8: if I feel responsible?
A: mmm […] if a child bites another one do you feel responsible in that moment or do you think their parents […]
C: sometimes it is more responsibility to […] I mean, you think […] who knows what those parents will say if their child comes back home and […] No, not responsible, also because particular situations occur, children's conflicts, I have been bitten many times, too […] but sometimes what matters more is fear that a parent says "oh my God, what did that child do?"

Then you inevitably wonder who is actually accountable for what happens at school; who is liable in the case of damage to people or things. We are not talking about civil or criminal liability, simply about responsibility from a social point of view. Where

and to whom does our society allocate responsibility for what happens in a nursery school class?

It seems as if our educational context, as it is implemented every day, favours a dispersal of the concept of responsibility instead of its precise placing. A child is not responsible, educators are not responsible, teachers are not responsible. No matter what the reasons are, it seems that exactly at this point that deferral of responsibility arises, according to which responsibility always lies with someone else, with anybody or with nobody at all, which characterizes so much of contemporary Italian society. And again: why is unspeakable, inconceivable, in stating that a child has to be made aware of his responsibility for his behaviour from birth? What exactly is so shocking for parents and educators in thinking of a "child responsible for his actions" (in proportion to his age)? Why so much indignation or annoyance when faced with this question?

If we then consider the parents' answers, the problem gets more complicated. Almost all the interviewed parents find the question: «What is your child responsible for?» «nonsense». When urged by the interviewer, some parents identify a responsibility to objects or a responsibility concerning tasks, but also in this case, as noticed before with the educators, it is never a relational responsibility.

Mother, 41 years old, diploma-level, clerk, married, two children, 7 and 5 years old, Catholic
A: Are your children already responsible for anything in your opinion? Do you held them responsible for anything?
Mother: In what sense responsible? I don't understand.

Mother, 32 years old, nurse, married, a 3 years old child, Practising Catholic
A: Is your child already responsible for anything in your opinion?
Mother: not really […] I mean, responsible […] I don't know for what (altered tone).
 (silence) Well, responsible for toy's maintenance, for instance (laughing) It could be this (ironically).

Mother, 40 years old, diploma-level, clerk, married, a 6 years old child, practising Catholic
A: Has your child already got any responsibility?
Mother: no, No! Not in the strict sense […]

Mother, 38 years old, diploma-level, nurse, two children, 8 and 6 years old, practising Catholic
A: Is your youngest child already responsible for anything in your opinion? Do you hold them responsible for anything?
Mother: I don't know […] no

A: And your eldest child?
Mother: no, no, for what, then? (almost resentful)
A: Is it too early yet?
Mother: of course […] responsible for […] well (laughing)
A: From what age does a child become responsible in your opinion?
Mother: (sigh) I don't know […] neither from […] may be […] after adolescence (laughing).

What contributes to producing this general framework in which any responsibility is taken away from childhood (and perhaps later on)? Mainly three factors.

First of all the social and economic environment: the presence of an economic and social system based on the continuous consumption of goods, relations and experiences which is necessary for its functioning. As a consequence the principle of responsibility has fallen away. Consuming is in fact the opposite of saving, taking care, allowing time, even to oneself, i.e. the elements on which responsibility is founded (Bauman 2000; Bakan 2011). Moreover, the democratisation of relations (but also of consumption) shrinks the gap and the conflict between generations together with the differences of status and role within the family, between parents and children and, in educational institutions, between teachers and pupils. The consequence is the flattening of the different responsibilities in the "false rhetoric of dialogue" (Recalcati 2011: 100), a kind of dialogue in which all positions are equivalent as expression of subjectivity and of individual will.

Mother, 42 years old, graduated, self-employed, married, three children, 8, 5 and 2 years old
Mother: so, last year my eldest son asked me why he didn't attend […] catechism in the afternoon [...] So, having done [...] an honest thing […] I told him that at school one can learn everything and then in the afternoon one can decide to go into what they like, like playing music, engaging in a sporting activity, studying religion, drawing, studying English, so everyone can choose what subject they would like to deepen […] therefore he could choose if he wanted to attend catechism (laughing), if he wanted to play guitar, if he would rather do physical training; obviously he didn't choose catechism […] had he chosen to attend catechism I don't know, I don't know what I would have done, maybe I would have allowed it […] I mean, I don't want him to be […] well, it is up to every individual to choose […] actually what they prefer [...] I mean, I wouldn't choose it, but maybe he has a different opinion […] I don't know […] my child will [...] if he wants, he'll do

it […] but I'd rather not.

The second factor contributing to the weakening of responsibility is the pedagogical modelling in the last thirty years, which is based on the language of learning, of autonomy and of skills[4]. The pedagogical lexis has gradually shifted into the theme of competences, ending in a complete abandonment of individual and social responsibility. We are sure that the educational objective educators and also some parents we interviewed have in mind is respect for people, things, environment, but they do not figure it as a form of responsibility– i.e. in a value-based framework – but rather as a neutral competence. This deprives the concept of responsibility of its necessary social component and in the end weakens and renders it meaningless. The separation between competences and responsibilities, the rejection of the latter in favour of the former, is clearly expressed – and in a resentful tone – by this mother we interviewed:

Mother, 42 years old, graduated, clerk, separated, three children, 13, 11 and 5 years old, Catholic
A: Would you call your child responsible?
mother: oh my God, actually responsible is a pretty big word, in my opinion […] autonomous […] this could be […] autonomous, rather independent […] he does his own things […] then […] well, can a five years old child be responsible? I'm asking you […] I don't know (resentful tone).
A:This is the question we ask to the parents (brusque).
Mother: I think this is really a heavy statement [...] I don't think a five-year old child can be held responsible, he can be competent, not responsible.

Taken out of educational lexis and practices, the term responsibility evokes such a big abstraction (precisely "too a big word" to be used for a child, "a heavy statement") that it cannot be thought of, defined, given concrete form in small everyday deeds. Otherwise, it identifies a negative semantic field, something which the child has to be protected from. Making someone aware of his or her responsibilities now means giving them a load, a burden; it is almost a synonym for making them feel "guilty", for "punishing" them. It is meant as a lack of respect for their right to play, to "wellbeing", to happiness.

The third interesting factor for our analysis of this process of exemption from responsibility is the uncritical use of developmental psychology by educators and parents, i.e. the idea that there are fixed stages of development which are temporally and hierarchically ordered and mechanically gone

through by a child as he/she grows up. Accordingly a child bites, for example, because he or she is in a particular developmental stage. The child is imagined as if urged on by this stage or driven by an invisible developmental line. Their behaviour seems to be naturally inevitable. Teachers needn't devote themselves to educational interventions requiring the promotion of empathy and the management of aggressiveness and of personal wishes. They needn't teach to recognize, name and answer for them since the child is thought to pass automatically, almost mechanically, from one stage to the next.

Mother, 39 years old, diploma-level, clerk, married, a two years old child, Catholic
A: Which of your child's behaviours do you feel responsible for: if hypothetically you were told he has bitten another child, or pushed a child, would you feel responsible for that?
Mother: no, I don't feel responsible, because it happened at the beginning of the crèche that he bit two children, but the teacher herself told me that is a stage children often go through, that's why I don't feel responsible.
A: So, you didn't hold the teacher responsible either, did you?
Mother: No, absolutely not.
A: He is responsible then, isn't he?
Mother: Of course not!!! At all!

Mother, 42 years old, graduated, teacher, married, two children, 2 and 1 year old, Catholic
A: So it never happened to you that while picking up your child at school you realized he had been bitten and you had to ask for an explanation?
Mother: yes, bitten, of course […] sure there was a biting phase and certainly he bit a lot, because in any case he bit me […] and […] never reasons […] I deal with such situations at school […] I know very well that children bite and are bitten and I know very well how difficult it is for the teachers to explain it, above all to a parent who does not understand this is just physiological.

It seems from the parents' and the educators' stories that the educators' priority is not to set a rule and to give firm reasons for it. Their priority is always to defend an idea of childhood as a period of free expression of the self and at the same time of weakness and frailty, with poor resources in the face of difficulties. The children's serenity is the only matter of importance. If they don't respect the rules of community life, it's better not to disclose it and not to let people know, because a child could feel frustrated or the parents could take it amiss, or others could marginalize him or her.

Moreover, another interesting datum is that just this society, which takes away from children the responsibility for their words and for their actions as children, is ready to involve children in themes which do not pertain to them, and to make them aware of problems which are too big for them. These children are not taught to be responsible for the minimal gestures of everyday life, but they will receive courses on the prevention of smoking or courses of food education – according to the current fashions of health and social education – which feed knowledge and fears children are not able to manage when they are deprived of the experiences they could perfectly manage, if they were given the possibility to do so. Why should children be involved in food or health education (They are not supposed to cook, are they? Or, if their parents smoke what can they do about it?) while they are not taught that biting, hitting and using bad language are wrong and are not made aware immediately of their responsibility for such behaviour (which is perfectly within their capacity)?

5. Conclusions

In this paper I have dealt with a particular form of responsibility, i.e. educational responsibility, which I analysed in the specific context of a northern Italian town with a reputation for child-friendliness. First of all, I sought to understand and then to clarify what an educator means by parents' responsibility and what parents regard as their responsibility. I noticed that, despite first appearances, parents and educators share the same cultural environment: while parents understand responsibility in terms of care and fulfilment of children's needs, and they think their role is doing everything to make them happy, educators mostly define their aim as offering positive experiences and creating a serene and pleasant learning environment. There is absolutely no reference to community, to a shared social project. On the contrary, there is a strong commitment towards performance, well-being, unlimited ability to act.

I then took a further step to identify at what age a person starts to be held responsible in our society, what responsibilities are allocated to a child by their family and the school from their birth to the age of six. Here too we encountered identical views, because both school (even though with a certain embarrassment) and family (with a certain naivety) think that children are too young to be held responsible for their actions and that taking responsibility comes with maturity, but they are uncertain about when this might happen in the fu-

ture. Responsibility seems to be something that will come to children all at once and not as the result of a process of gradual acceptance of responsibility in practical life. It does not refer to the concept of awareness of one's actions and of the consequences, but rather to the idea of a burden, of something to be endured. The handover between generations seems to be somehow blocked. Parents do not expect anything from children anymore and often they don't think they have anything to teach them either. Educators work on the generic promotion of well-being and they don't think they can expect anything from the children. The resulting image of childhood seems to depict a weak child who has to be defended, protected from negative experiences or from hard work, and relieved of any burden or responsibility as well.

An interesting aspect is that the interviewed parents have various levels of education, different professions and live in different organisational cultures (municipal, state and recognized schools); the compositions of the interviewed families are very different, like their geographical origin (see annex); yet, if on one side during the interviews considerable differences emerged in the cultural representations concerning parents' and grandparents' educational role, organization of free time, control over the children, the necessary time to acquire the basic forms of independence and the importance of school as an institution, on the other side no significant difference emerged in the representation and definition of the concept of individual and social responsibility. It seems that the language describing "ability", "a broad range of experiences" and "well-being" which is conveyed by the school is quickly assimilated and widely followed, to the detriment of a critical reflection on the position and the role of children in a community[5]. Notwithstanding the different life-styles and organization of everyday life, both the interviewed families and the educators seem to be incredibly homogeneous in the difficulty of getting a deep insight into the concept of (both parental and children) "responsibility" and the different ways it can be applied to everyday life.

The opinions I recorded refer to a single general frame: the loss of meaning of children's gradual investment with responsibility in relationships, making way for an almost obsessive attention to learning, competences, skills and a variety of experiences. This separation between "competences" and "responsibility" is fed by a social system which is based on several paradoxes: it defines children as special individual entities, "competent social actors", but at the same time it deals with them as if they were vulnerable, frail, perpetual-

ly in danger. When they are "too young" they are relieved from any responsibility in every-day life, while they are made even too responsible through exposure to complex subjects (and to the influence of television), and they are required to exercise certain skills and competences as if they were adults. This system aims at autonomy as the main educational objective, but at the same time it actually precludes any autonomy to children, since it plans and controls thoroughly all activities. The educational system is accessory to this social issue. It neither exposes its ambivalence and antithetical rhetoric nor does it strongly oppose to it the arguments of critical thinking. On the contrary it has been overwhelmed by the logic of productivity, of educational programmes which make schools more and more similar to hypermarkets of information, where heads are stuffed with a bit of everything, and they are stuffed to the top, so that no space for thinking is left.

There is a need to reverse this trend and to concentrate on the transmission of a strong educational message which is people-centred and also centred on children's responsibility *in relation* to the others and to the environment around them (Ritscher 2011). The aim is to realign the language of competences to the language of responsibility, in a relationship of synergic interaction, in order to shape competent and responsible children – young citizens already.

Appendix 1

The data presented and discussed below has been collected in the following contexts:

- detailed interviews of about two hours each with twenty-three coordinators (women) of municipal, state and recognized crèches and nursery schools in Cremona, eight teachers who offered voluntarily their testimonials and to seven preferential witnesses (a cultural mediator, a lawyer, the president of the paediatrician association in Cremona, a social worker of the local advice centre and a municipal social worker, two assistants in a toy shop);
- interviews with 96 families, both Italian and migrant (mothers, fathers, or both) with at least one child aged 0-6 years – selected partly by the schools, or with the help of a cultural mediator;
- about 1200 drawings of 442 "older" children" (5/6 years old) attending the municipal, state and recognized nursery schools, who illustrated and commented on some moments of their family life;
- participation as an observer in a training course for state nursery school teachers (five meetings of two hours each) on home-school communication, based on case studies presented by the teachers.

Table 1. Crèches and nursery schools in Cremona which took part in the research
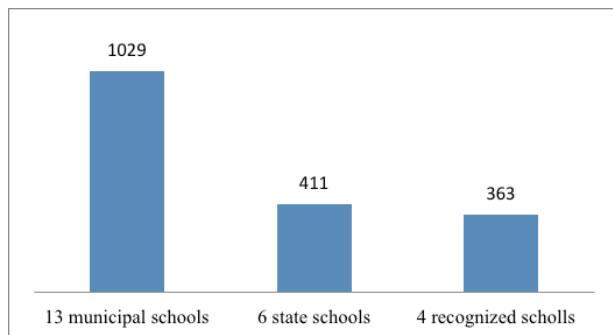

Table 2. Twenty-three (female) coordinators interviewed

Age	
under 40	1
40- 45	6
45-50	3
51-55	8
56-60	3
over 60	2
Years of professional experience	
>10	2
10-20	5
20-30	8
30- 40	8
Educational qualification	
Early childhood education diploma	7
Primary school teaching diploma	11
Shorter first degree	2
Degree	3
Religious orientation	
Practising Catholic	11
Catholic	7
None	5

Table 3. Outline of the interview to the coordinators (about 2 hours)

| 1. Educational project	How has the relationship with the children and their parents changed over the years? What about its organization? Please define a "new parent"/an "old parent", a "new child"/an "old child"/ What in your opinion is the most important educational aim?
2. Educational practices	What issues require your intervention more often? What rule is the more difficult to enforce with the children? And with the parents? Are there any specific characteristics in the educational practices of the migrant families?
3. Educational policies	How has the relationship with the colleagues changed over the years? What about its organization? How do you evaluate the educational policies of the municipality of Cremona?
4. Parental responsibility	How would you define the concept of "parental responsibility"? Do migrant families understand parental responsibility in a particular way? What actions can a 0-6 years old child be responsible for? What child's behaviour are the parents responsible for? What child's behaviour are the teachers responsible for? What behaviour is the child himself responsible for? What collaboration is possible between school and family?

Table 4. Interviewed families/Origin
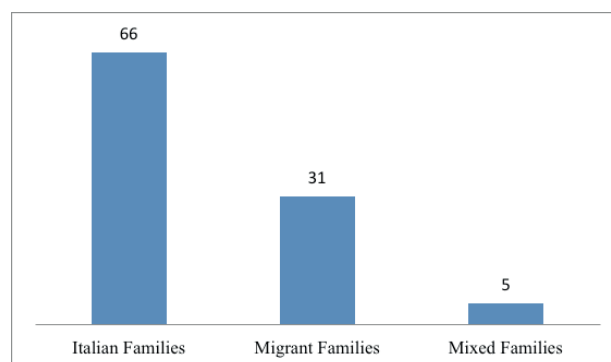
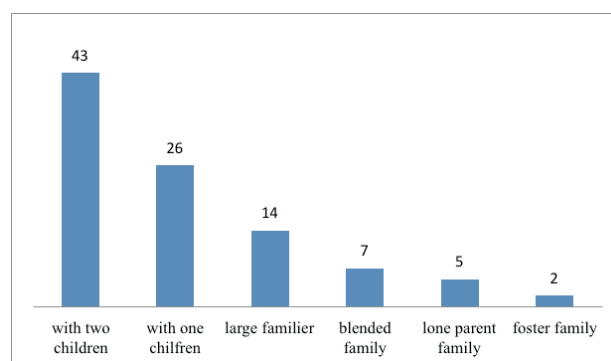Table 5. Interviewed families /household composition

Notes

Table 6. Outline of the interview to the families (mother and/or father) (about one hour)

1. Family plan	Can you tell me briefly how did you meet and decide to become a family? (For migrant families: How did you make up your mind to migrate?)/The pregnancy experience and the prenatal diagnosis /the choice of the child's name/ Willingness to have other children
2. Educational practices	Who takes the children to crèche/school? Who attends school meetings? How do you view the average participation of families in school life? Who decides to call for a paediatrician? Who takes the children to the paediatrician? Who administers medicines? Who decides what toys are suitable for the children? Who buys them? Who plays with the children? Who scolds them? Why? What strategies do you use to make children obey? Who controls children's television viewing? Who decides what you are going to eat for dinner? Who buys food? Who cooks in your family? Does anybody keep an eye on the children's friendships and, if so, who? Who buys the items the children need? Who takes care of their religious education, if any?
3. Educational policies	How did you choose your children's school? What do you think about it? How do you evaluate municipal initiatives for children in Cremona?
4. Parental responsibility	What does the expression "parental responsibility" mean to you? What is your main educational aim? What are your children held responsible for? What is the most important rule you gave your children? What do you do if they do not respect it? Do you think your aims/rules are shared by your social environment? Are you more worried or more optimistic about your children's future? Would you please describe yourself as a parent?/Give yourself a mark out of ten.

[1] For details of the research sample, the interview schedule and the respondents, see Appendix 1. All translation of the responses is mine.

[2] Circular n. 41 of the Prefect's office in the province of Cremona of 24 June 1864 preserved at the Pieve d'Olmi parish Archive.

[3] The method chosen for this research was to analyze cultural representations of responsibility as they emerge in the vision of the social actors and in educational relationships. The research did not deal with the structuring power of the context as opposed to the agency of individuals. The difficulty in giving back to the parents, to the teachers and above all to the headteachers the results of this research has shown how often the theme of perception and assignment of responsibility is the expression of regulatory environments (school environment above all) which set up and control the possibilities to act and to talk of the subjects and strongly limit their agency at the same time. Therefore a deep analysis of the functioning of such environments is called for together with an analysis of the different forms of institutionalized removal of responsibility those environments entail. Such analysis will be complementary to the research and it is being carried out right now.

[4] Starting from the nineties the curricula of the Italian nursery schools and the educational planning (POF) of the primary and secondary school have been written according to the competency-based learning programmes (D.P.R 275/99; D.M. 340/00; C.M 84/2005).

[5] For a specific analysys of migrant families, see A. Biscaldi, "Le responsabilità genitoriali: un confronto tra famiglie italiane e famiglie migranti" [Parental responsibilities: a comparison between Italian families and migrant families], L. I. M.eS (Laboratorio immigrazione multiculturalismo e società) in http://www.sps.unimi.it/ecm/home/aggiornamenti-e-archivi/calendario-eventi/content/seminario-l-i-m-es-le-responsabilita-genitoriali-un-confronto-tra-famiglie-italiane-e-migranti.0000. UNIMIDIRE-3916 (last seen on 20/05/2016).

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