Current challenges of family and child participation in child prevention and protection services Proposal of a practical-theoretical framework°

Carl Lacharité, Paola Milani*

Abstract

This article is dedicated to the description of the "Framework for a Participatory Approach in Child Protection Services" (Lacharité et al., 2022), as contextualized within the Program of Intervention For the Prevention of Institutionalization – P.I.P.P.I., conceived by the Laboratory of Research and Intervention in Family Education – LabRIEF – of the University of Padua, made its own by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy since 2011. The implementation of P.I.P.P.I. is indeed inscribed in this participatory perspective, and it finds its figure in putting at the centre the right to participation not only of children, but also of their parental figures and the communities in which they live. By this is meant the consideration of the child in his or her world of ties and relationships, in an ecosystemic and multidimensional paradigm that looks at the wholeness of the human person and his or her potential for emancipation. The presentation to the Italian audience of this Framework, considered in the context of recent national and international literature, is aimed at helping to overcome the gap between intentions, theoretical representations and participatory practices, and to highlight its potential and limitations, in the context of P.I.P.P.I. implementation in Italian social services.

Keywords: e*cosystem paradigm; Intervention Programme to Prevent Institutionalisation; vulnerability; Children's Rights.*

1. What is P.I.P.P.I.

The P.I.P.P.I. Program is a broad public equity and social justice action aimed at ensuring that every child has the opportunity to break out of the circle of social disadvantage as early as possible (REC (2013)112/EU),

° The article is the result of fully shared work between the two authors, but it is still possible to attribute paragraph 6 to Carl Lacharité and paragraphs 1, 2,3,4,5 and 7 to Paola Milani.

* Carl Lacharité, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières (Canada); Paola Milani, Università degli di Padova (Italy).

Civitas educationis, a. XIV, n. 1, gennaio 2025 • Mimesis Edizioni, Milano-Udine
Web: universitypress.unisob.na.it/ojs/index.php/civitaseducationis • ISSN (online): 2281-9568
• ISBN: 9791222325507 • DOI: 10.7413/2281-9568122
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through the strengthening of their cognitive, affective and social capacities (primary goal), the capacities of their parents (secondary goal), and the capacities of social services to ensure a project of precision 'taking care' of each family (tertiary goal). The community and institutional services of the welfare system bring themselves close to families, creating and supporting networks of proximity in order to break social isolation and introduce widespread parenting support throughout the country.

The Program proposes that families and children in a situation of vulnerability participate in all stages of the project that affects them through the method of participatory and transformative evaluation (Serbati & Milani, 2013), which entails their agreement on goals and actions and the support of the simultaneous activation of intervention procedures and multidisciplinary teams consisting of families and professionals from different services (Milani, 2022a).

This approach takes concrete form:

1. In using the multidimensional model, *The World of the Child*, built on the British *Assessment Framework,* to facilitate a holistic understanding of the needs and potential of each child and family.
2. In sharing customized designs aimed at meeting those needs or consolidating resources.
3. In promoting multidisciplinary (EM) teams with children and parents at their core.
4. In the activation of four intervention procedures, i.e., the set of interventions procedures made available to families, which are integrated with each other and oriented toward accompanying families through intensive interventions (the home and community-based educational service, parent-child groups, the nests and school-family-service partnership, and supportive proximity).
5. In documenting information and observations, thanks in part to the RPMonline digital platform, built by Laboratory in charge of the Program, LabRIEF, in collaboration with the University of Padua's Information Technology Services Area and now active in version 2.0, for joint data collection. Today, this platform is in the process of interoperability with the Unified National Social Services Information System (SIUSS).

2. The Target

Families in a situation of vulnerability include parents with cohabiting or non-cohabiting children, aged 0-17 years, with particular focus on the 0-6 age group, who are still holders of parental responsibility, even limited, who experience weak capacity in building and/or maintaining the set of conditions (internal and external) that allows for the positive and autonomous exercise of parental functions. Vulnerability is, in fact, a socially determined situation from which parental neglect or neglect can emerge, of

varying form and intensity, which indicates the lack of capacity of parental figures to respond to the developmental needs of their children (Lacharité, Éthier & Nolin, 2006).

The adversities that these parents experience most frequently and that make it necessary to introduce assessment and accompaniment devices for parental function into their life context include the following:

- Educational poverty (lack of access to educational resources and services for children and parents).
- Cultural poverty (missed or weak schooling, including non-achievement of compulsory education, functional illiteracy and/or language difficulties of both children and parental figures, etc.).
- Material poverty (low socioeconomic status, lack of or weak access to employment and/or loss of employment, with relative absence or weakness and instability of wages, precarious and/or unhealthy housing, particularly in disadvantaged areas).
- Social poverty (lack of access to formal and informal social support networks, particularly for households from migration).
- Health poverty (enduring conditions of physical or mental illness and/or addiction and/or disability of children, parental figures and/or other household members, with the resulting caregiving burdens and aggravation of caregiving tasks) (Milani, 2022c).

These types of poverty can add up to generate multidimensional, and sometimes transgenerational forms of poverty that may have caused adversity of varying nature and intensity, such as trauma in the childhood of parental figures. All this can result in complex situations of single parenthood, couple crises, domestic violence and possible transitions due to particularly conflictual separations and divorces, adoption failures, unregulated use of alcohol and psychoactive substances, etc.

P.I.P.P.I. therefore is implemented within the social services of the *Ambiti Territoriali Sociali – ATS* (Social and Territorial Entities) – and often of the Protection and Guardianship services, given the goal of fostering both the strengthening of their preventive capacity and the qualification of the protection and guardianship functions themselves, thanks to the possibility provided in the Program to include up to 20 percent of the total number of families of children already affected by a removal order (Milani, 2022a).

3. The Steps

The Program implementation took place in 3 phases:

1. The first of experimentation, from 2011 to 2013, with 10 Italian cities reserved under L.285/1997 joining, in which 89 families, 122 children, and 160 operators participated.
2. The second, of extension to the regions and consolidation, from 2014 to 2021, through the entry of 65 ATSs on average per year and

the involvement of 4890 families in total (from P.I.P.P.I. 2 to P.I.P.P.I. 10), 5360 children, and 13216 operators.

3. The third phase, of universalization, from 2022 to 2026: there continues the entry of more than 65 ATSs on average per year, but, in addition, the approval in 2021 of the *EU Next Generation Plan* – referred to as the *National Recovery and Resilience Plan* (PNRR) in Italy, provides funding for 400 additional ATSs. This was made possible because, in July 2021, the *National Plan of Social Interventions and Services* recognized P.I.P.P.I. as one of the first 6 Italian Essential Levels of Social Benefits (ELSB). Recognition formalized with the Budget Law 2022, of those interventions, services, and from the integrated services that the Republic ensures, based on the provisions of Article 117 (second paragraph, letter m) of the Constitution and in accordance with the principles and criteria set forth in Articles 1 and 2 of Law No. 328/2000, with a character of universality throughout the national territory to ensure quality of life, equal opportunities, non-discrimination, prevention, elimination or reduction of conditions of disadvantage and vulnerability. Therefore, in the three-year period 2022-2024, there are a total of 7902 families, 6689 children, and 13441 operators involved. The total number of families taken into care in the three phases (from 2011 to the present) is 12881[3].

4. The Method

The proposed method concerns the testing of a research-action-training approach. This approach is relevant to the characteristics and needs of the participating families and takes on the challenge of reinforcing parents' resources and communities' competencies. It is aimed at ensuring support for parents, not so much to limit removals, but to limit the *sine qua non* of removals, which is the impact of vulnerability on children's development. In addition, P.I.P.P.I. intends, when necessary, to improve appropriateness in the management of removals themselves and subsequent out-of-home placements of children.

This proposal is based on:

1. Participation of parents and children, fostered through conscious empathy and serene, non-collusive proximity rather than professional distance: it is a matter of blowing on the small flame of initial parental openness to gradually build engagement (engagement stands for mutual commitment, not unidirectional hooking) of both services and multidisciplinary teams (MT) and families. This is a condition for achieving not just formal and reductive adherence, but also authentic and substantive participation (Roose, 2013) of

3 These data are taken from the Annual Reports on individual Program implementations, which can be found at this link: https://pippi.unipd.it/documenti/

children and parents through "rapt and unabashed listening" (Lawrence, 2003).

2. An integrated system among the services and actors in charge of the practices of prevention, protection and safeguarding of children, first and foremost, the system of social, health, educational and justice services. It is represented, at a micro level, by MTs who develop a single project with each child, avoiding one-dimensional responses, according to a holistic approach, which is the best social response to the problem of neglect (Dufour & Chamberland, 2003), and analytical at the same time: each child is seen and understood in his uniqueness. An MT is built around him or her, that is, a kind of council made up of actors, both professionals and non-professionals, with different skills that ensure tailoring and 'precision' intervention through the method of participatory and transformative evaluation.
3. A landmark view of the phenomenon of child neglect and sociofamilial vulnerability, based on the ecology of human development, thus on the unity of the growth needs of each child included in their world of relationships rather than on the inadequacies of parental figures (Lacharité, 2014; Ruiz-Casares *et al.*, 2020).
4. A unified and coherent model of children's needs analysis, *The World of the Child* (MdB), which demands the work of a MT that is, for this reason, considered a major resource of the program.

This model, in turn, requires, as shown by the data collected through the Program's already concluded experiments, a strong system action so that the various entities and services involved (primarily social and educational services of municipalities, services of health companies and consortia, schools, nurseries and early childhood services, third sector entities) work to find the operational mechanisms, the strategies, of such integration, as indicated by Law 328/2000, by the vision of integrated welfare supported by the nascent system of new ELSB. This systemic action is supported by the definition of a support system, which finds a keystone in the establishment of the Territorial Group, a group of stakeholders called the Territorial Reference Group (GT) that concert and bears overall responsibility for the activities carried out within the Program. The GT performs a political-strategic function that ensures continuity of investment, the presence of all stakeholders (particularly those from municipalities, ASLs, early childhood services, schools, private social services, and employment centres), and the possibility of real spillovers in the territory. The Territorial Group's task is to organize, choose, and support the specific activities of planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the state of implementation of the Program as a whole (Milani, 2022b: 75).

5. The Concept of Participation

The participation of children and parents in the promotion, prevention, and protection of children, although widely recognized as a value and a principle, encounters obstacles in the process of translation in the daily practice of professionals in the field, as well as in the experience of the families of children 'taken care of' in the services of the 'children and families' area of the welfare system (Jackson *et al.*, 2017; Seim & Slettebø, 2017; Serbati, 2017). Before going into detail, it is therefore appropriate to pause quickly to explicate how this word, and the conceptual notion related to it, are understood in this framework and in the P.I.P.P.I. experience. It is indeed a word of great semantic power, but connected to stammering and embryonic intervention practices, in our country, is still underdeveloped in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

The normative references of participation in the area of *Child Protection* are the right to grow up in a family environment that provides security and protection (Art. 1, Law 149/2001; Art. 3 *Convention on the Rights of the Child* – CRC, UN, 1989) and the right to participation recognized in Art. 12 of the same CRC, which states:

> State Parties shall guarantee the child who is capable of discernment the right to express their views freely on any matter affecting them, the views of the child being duly taken into account taking into account their age and degree of maturity. To this end, the child shall, in particular, be allowed to be heard in any judicial or administrative proceedings concerning them, either directly or through an appropriate representative or body, in a manner compatible with the rules of procedure of national law.

These inalienable rights of children are complemented by the right of parents to exercise parental responsibility (Art. 4, CRC) and the right to parental support provided in Art. 31 of the Italian Constitution, Art. 3 of Law 149/2001 and Art. 18 of the CRC.

Therefore, as mentioned above, the figure and uniqueness of P.I.P.P.I.'s theoretical and methodological proposal related to the theme of participation is to hold together these 3 dimensions of participation: the participation of children and adolescents, parental figures, and communities. Indeed, the participation of children supports and nurtures that of their parents, and that of parents supports and nurtures that of the various social, institutional and community actors who play a role around families. Participation is thus not only a matter of method but is the drop point where the method intersects the content. In fact, at that point, the substance of the matter emerges: through the possibility of participating in dialogue, in the co-construction of one's own project, each family can gain concrete experience of its ability to listen, dialogue, understand, manifest its needs and resources, understand, becoming aware and thus being able to form those social skills, which are essential to the parental function. The family is recognized in these skills and in its own identity: through the positive experience of accompaniment offered by the service, it is

recognized in its dignity, gains confidence in the possibility of setting in motion the dynamics of change. And this is how a sense of belonging to a social community begins to form, which can move her away from the feeling and reality of being excluded. Hence, participation is a relational dynamic with transformative power, acting as a mirror of one's dignity: the person sees in the practitioner a gaze capable of bringing out this dignity and, thus glimpsing the possibility of a turning point for his or her existence, is prompted to take the first steps in the direction of co-constructing his or her project.

6. A framework to support the implementation of a participatory approach in Child Protection services

The challenges related to developing and implementing participatory practices in child protection affect the system's ability to fulfill its mandate—not only to protect the child but to do so within their relational world and reference ecosystem (Milani, 2018). In addition, the system as a whole, and especially the way in which the governance of organizational, educational and technical-professional processes is acted upon, impacts the feasibility of participatory practices. These repercussions should therefore not be considered marginal or secondary. It is for this reason that Lacharité, Balsells, Milani, Ius, Boutanquoi and Chamberlandet (2022) developed the framework presented below, which enables the child protection service organizations to assess the path that should be taken with regard to family participation in their institutional practices and processes and, consequently, to map out an action plan for the road ahead.

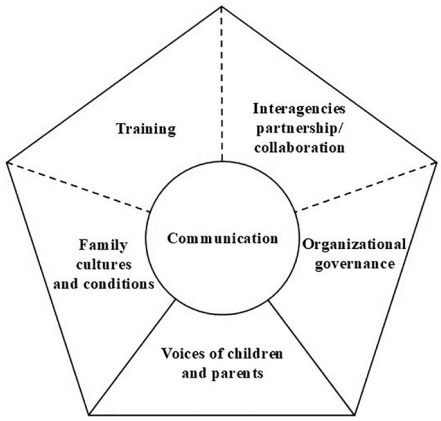


Figure 1: Framework for a participatory approach in child protection
(Source: Lacharité *et al.*, 2022)

Figure 1 illustrates the six axes of this framework: communication, the voice of children and parents, family cultures and circumstances, organizational governance, professional training, and cross-sector partnership. The diagram presents a pentagon-shaped structure with a central core represented by communication. One of the sides, the one related to children's and parents' voices, is placed at the bottom, symbolizing the base of this structure, that is, the element that forms its foundation. The other four sides should be regarded as the cornerstones that ensure the overall balance of this framework.

6.1. Communication: The Core of a Participatory Approach

Obviously, communication refers to the exchange of information. When a child's situation becomes a concern, speed and effectiveness in the transmission of information is a key aspect that should not be overlooked. Indeed, a significant part of the legal and administrative architecture of child protection systems in Western countries focuses on establishing procedures to facilitate the circulation of information needed to report risk situations and assess them appropriately.

This function of exchange and circulation of information, although essential, is not in itself what makes communication the core condition for the participation of families within the institutional space of services in the 'minors and families' domain, and specifically in those of child protection, defined in Italy as 'protection and tutelage of minors'. Moreover, it is important to note that, in these organizations, as well as in many other service organizations (health, educational, etc.), information is strongly influenced by institutional and professional perspectives (Boutanquoi *et al.*, 2019).

In this context, customary practices are based on the centralization of objective data regarding the situation of the child and his or her family, from which conclusions are drawn unilaterally. The resulting information is not constructed in a participatory manner with the child and his or her parents, who have a marginal role in the communication that directly affects them (Smithson & Gibson, 2017).

It is therefore crucial to consider that the concept of communication highlights an essential aspect of human experience: the ability of people with different experiences to enter into relationships in order to construct together the social reality they share (Ingold, 2018). Communication, then, means generating common ground (or co-constructing) between individuals occupying different positions in social space. In the context of a child welfare and protection, what is at stake is the process through which caregivers (and the child himself) manage to create common ground. This occurs not only through the exchange of information, but primarily through an openness to the other, the ability to consider the views of others, and the use of critical reflexivity (Dewey, 2019[1933]), creativity and imagination. This shared space makes it possible to make collective sense of the child's life, to mobilize resources and to act in a coordinated way in order to pro-

vide him or her with the best conditions for safety and development in the circumstances in which he or she finds himself or herself.

Participation emerges from this broad and inclusive understanding of communication in the lives of families and institutional processes. It arises from the engagement of people who, in the here and now, work to build common ground on the meaning of being a child (and being a parent) within a given society.

For this reason, it is crucial to view communication and participation as interconnected forms of work, requiring an investment of personal and collective time, energy, and resources. This effort is often described through the concept of the communication 'skills' of the people involved and the 'conditions' that influence their communication.

Consequently, building common ground depends closely on the individual communication skills that people have learned and developed over time, their ability to coordinate these skills with those of others, and the actual opportunities to communicate at any given time. When individual communication skills are limited or underdeveloped, as is often the case in children and some adults in their environment, additional effort and resources become necessary to ensure effective communication and appropriate coordination among those involved.

6.2. The Voice of Children and Parents: Foundation of a Participatory Approach

If communication is the core of a participatory approach in child protection, it is clear that such an approach cannot exist without the belief that the child's voice is its foundation (Chaïeb *et al.*, 2015). However, numerous studies have highlighted the complexity of putting this principle into practice in the context of child protection (Balsells *et al.*, 2017; Grace *et al.*, 2019; van Bijleveld *et al.*, 2014).

To address these difficulties, several initiatives have been developed to create conditions conducive to participation by facilitating the integration of the views of children and their parents into the processes of analyzing maltreatment situations, decisions made, actions taken, and evaluation of the effects of these decisions and interventions.

One of the most widely used models to facilitate dialogue with families about child development and well-being is the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* – FACNF (Grey, 2001). First and foremost, this model provides a common language that can be used with all children, at all stages of their development and in different service settings. This approach allows all the actors involved building together a shared understanding of the situation of the child and his or her family. In Italy it was introduced into service practices through P.I.P.P.I., which adapted it to the Italian context in the Multidimensional Model of *Il Mondo del Bambino* (Serbati & Milani, 2013). Second, FACNF encourages considering the child's developmental needs, parental capacities in

responding to those needs, and environmental factors that influence both needs and responses, as closely interconnected elements. Consequently, in dialogue and analysis of a child's specific situation, it is crucial to take into account the interactions among these three aspects.

In other words, it is necessary to avoid producing three separate assessments (child development; parenting skills; environmental factors), which, subsequently, should be integrated to build an overall picture of the situation of the child and his or her family. This is because although efforts have been made to involve the child and his or her parents in each of these assessments, they often do not participate (or participate marginally) in the process of integrating the information.

Finally, FACNF, by serving as a tool for dialogue among all the people involved in supporting the child's needs, makes it possible to make visible the actions taken by each actor in the child's life, to highlight some process data, such as the level of coordination of these interventions, and to construct outcome data produced through these interventions, not to diagnose, but to also use any diagnoses on individual sub-dimensions, to design and then transform, through goal setting, critical issues into changes to be co-constructed between families and providers.

6.3 Cornerstones of a Participatory Approach

The architecture of a participatory approach in child protection would be incomplete without the presence of cornerstones whose function is to provide a solid basis for the forms of action, reflection and construction of subjectivity that promote the well-being of children whose safety and development are at risk. At the same time, these axes support the principle of shared responsibility among the adults in their lives. The framework for a participatory approach is based on four cornerstones, which ensure an overall balance and help consolidate its effectiveness.

Family Cultures and Family Life Circumstances

If one considers child abuse and neglect not only as an individual drama but also as a social problem, it becomes evident that these situations generate an encounter – and sometimes a clash – of cultures that convey different mental and social representations of childhood, parenting and co-parenting. These cultures belong to families, local communities and professional organizations.

In the case of children's participation, the traditions and customs of family groups exert a central role, as they may facilitate or, conversely, hinder the expression of their opinions and consideration by the relevant adults. With regard to parental participation, differing conceptions and experiences regarding the help received from the professional environment or the local community may also facilitate or limit support for their educational and parental role.

The encounter between a family and a service provider is never only interpersonal, but also represents a confrontation between the culture of that family and that of the organization to which the professional belongs. Lacharité (2015) has described a phenomenon of institutional capture, which intervenes in this encounter and leads the experience of families to be systematically translated and interpreted through professional language. This process generates, for parents and children, feelings of foreignness and confusion as their lives are represented by others who use language and codes that are often distant from their daily lives.

In this context, a participatory approach requires that frontline workers and managers pay special attention to acts of resistance enacted by children and parents who seek to resist this institutional capture of their way of life. Through such acts, in fact, they make visible the codes of their culture, which may conflict with the professional or institutional organization's culture.

A participatory approach also requires the building of solid alliances between parents and professionals, based on a shared understanding of child well-being and development. It is through authentic dialogue and mutual involvement that it becomes possible to develop concerted action plans capable of integrating the interests and perspectives of the child, his or her parents and the professionals involved.

Governance of the Services

This axis encompasses the public policies and modes of organizational governance that define the principles and objectives of public action in child protection services. These principles, in turn, determine the roles, relationships and responsibilities directly related to the participation of children and parents. Several aspects of governance can contribute directly to fostering child and parent participation, including:

- direct participation within services, creation of regulatory, administrative and professional organizational conditions that foster communication with children and parents, ensuring that their views are considered in the analysis of their situation, in the establishment of action plans and in the evaluation of the effects of measures taken;
- institutional participation: active involvement of children and parents in assessing the quality of institutional processes and their continuous improvement;
- rearrangement of the various organizational domains: integration of the perspective of children and parents into decision-making and operational processes in key areas such as professional development, risk management, clinical audit, practice effectiveness, transparency of improvement initiatives, and research and development, with a priority emphasis on the developmental needs of the child;
- implementation of individual or collective accountability structures: development of monitoring mechanisms based on quality indicators

that measure the effective participation of children and families in child protection processes.

Cross-sectoral Collaboration and Partnership

On the one hand, a participatory approach is based on collaboration and partnership among different organizations involved in the protection of children's rights, welfare and development, and support for parenting. On the other hand, it is also based on the ability of organizations to effectively coordinate their actions in situations of maltreatment or risk of maltreatment (Kellett, 2011). There are at least three aspects to be taken into consideration in this area.

The first aspect concerns the importance each organization places on building shared values. This implies the need to agree on some fundamental questions, such as: What exactly is meant by 'participation of children and their parents'? What is the shared definition of a child's 'development' and 'needs'? What common position is taken regarding the role of parents in their children's lives? On what principles should a 'collective' responsibility for the child and his/her parents be based? How can consistency be ensured in the inter-organizational response to the needs of children and families?

The second aspect concerns the possibility of concretely integrating children and parents in actions involving multiple service organizations. To this end, it is essential to create spaces for cross-sectoral dialogue that directly include children, mothers and fathers, ensuring that they play an active role in decision-making and operational processes. In addition, this approach requires professionals from different disciplines and sectors to explore new ways of working, opening up to practices that lie at the margins of their own field of expertise and in close proximity to other professional areas. This openness implies the recognition that cross-sectoral actions often take place in complex contexts, where there are no predefined or standardized solutions. Such a perspective calls for a concrete reality-oriented praxis that goes beyond regulatory prescriptions and procedural rigidities, promoting a flexible and adaptive approach. This means approaching the real experiences of families, understanding the strategies they themselves implement in their daily lives, and developing interventions that truly respond to their needs, rather than adhering exclusively to preconstituted protocols.

The third aspect to consider concerns the use of methods that provide effective tools for cross-sector partners to strengthen collaboration and ensure a participatory approach. Specifically, these methods should provide: 1) a common framework and language for understanding the child: his or her interests, rights, needs, and development, as well as parental responsibilities (in the case of P.I.P.P.I., this is a tool named *The World of the Child*); 2) tools to support dialogue and joint analysis by all stakeholders; and 3) concrete indicators to assess participatory performance in terms of the ability to integrate children's and parents' perspectives.

Professional Training

Within this framework, professional training is conceived as an essential activity to bridge the gap between the theory of participation and its practice. How are people prepared and supported participating together in learning a new practice? What transformative experiences do they have the opportunity to have to initiate, consolidate or deepen a participatory practice? In this case, the concept of education must move away from a "banking" logic (Freire, 2003[1970]) that sees education primarily in terms of transmitting formalized knowledge to people who do not possess it. This banking logic is still very active in academic circles, which provide initial training to professionals in health care, social services, education and law. It is equally active within service organizations that provide continuing education to their employees. Moreover, this logic echoes professional practices with families that confine them to the role of passive recipients of professionals' knowledge, decisions and actions.

Rather, it is toward a logic of transformative pedagogy (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Milani, 2018) that it is preferable to move toward designing training methods consistent with the other axes of the framework of the participatory approach. Specifically, training methods should be based on four principles:

- the principle of isomorphism between the type of professional support for families and the type of professional training; this implies opportunities for participation in the form of listening experiences and respect for their dignity, knowledge and skills by the people who train, coach or supervise them;
- the principle of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which is not based primarily on the relationship between the person delivering the training and those being trained, but rather on what the latter can learn from each other in the context of communities of practice and professional co-development activities;
- the principle of the unavoidable presence of children and parents as agents involved, in various capacities, in training activities;
- the principle of interdisciplinarity, which recognizes the role of interdisciplinary skills, in addition to those specific to each professional field, necessary for the implementation of 'co-practice' in child protection.

7. Conclusions

Child abuse and neglect is a social, developmental, and ecosystemic problem that deprives children and their parents of the necessary levers to ensure optimal development and safety for the children themselves. The institutional response to this social problem must therefore be thought of by placing itself from the perspective of children and their parents. To this end, the framework presented emphasizes building the organizational, cul-

tural conditions necessary for the implementation of a participatory approach in multidisciplinary teams to the promotion, prevention and protection of the rights of girls and boys. Indeed, it is not enough to engage in the microsystemic level of the relationship between individual teams and individual families to make participatory work effective, viable and durable. It should also be remembered that efforts to conceptualize and operationalize a participatory approach are part of a fundamental trend emerging from several empirical findings – based on scientific research as well as public policy analysis – that reveal the shortcomings of child protection systems in many parts of the world and affirm the need to operationalize the principle of participation of children and their parents into innovative and effective practices.

The presentation of the ELSB P.I.P.P.I. and the framework for a participatory approach in child protection pursued the goal of contributing to overcoming the gap between intentions, theoretical concepts and practices. In the articles that constitute this *Symposium*, we account for how this framework has inspired some participatory intervention practices, especially in the ELSB P.I.P.P.I. implementation experience in Italy. Far from wanting to use this framework to 'model' practices, we wish to share it in the context of Italian services so that it rather acts as a generator of questions or meanings, helping to highlight its potentialities and limitations and to contextualize what is done with families within services, observing this activity also through the eyes of children and their parents. Indeed, this frame of reference makes it possible to observe and to understand the practice of participation in its complexity, and to acquire a view that transforms the relationships between families and service providers at different levels of the ecosystem and helps them become what they have the potential to become.

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