



The child as protagonist: working with the child as agents in their own development and learning

A report for the cross-European programme Working for inclusion: the role of the early years workforce in addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion



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Summary

This report is based on a 2009 study visit to the Italian town of San Miniato in Northern Italy. It forms part of the cross-European programme *Working for inclusion: the role of the early years workforce in addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion*.

San Miniato, at the heart of Italy's Tuscan region, is a small Italian town and *comune* (local authority) with a population of just over 26,000. Despite its limited size, it has an expansive view of the child, and of the child's role at the heart of the community.

In San Miniato, the concept of the 'child as protagonist' is integral to the delivery of services for the under-threes. It is a concept that views children as being at the centre of their experiences, and as having complete agency over their own lives and the way they interact with others.

The protagonist concept ensures the primacy of the child. It is a radical approach through which their voice and the voice of their families become more powerful. Crucially, as this report explains, the protagonist concept encompasses not just children but the role of parents, other family members and the community as a whole.

San Miniato was chosen as the study visit destination because its protagonist concept can contribute significantly to international comparisons and dialogue about child policy, and directly to our own learning about what a truly child-centred approach looks like in practice. This can help in addressing poverty and in developing socially inclusive societies.

The San Miniato approach is particularly instructive if we are to understand how services and communities can be reshaped to ensure that children are no longer viewed as being compliant to the wishes and expectations of adults. The lessons we draw

from San Miniato could help in showing us how to bring children's choices, views and experiences from the margins to the centre of learning.

Delegates on the study visit came from four nations: Italy, Norway, Poland and Scotland. They included elected representatives from national and local government, staff members responsible for a wide range of children's services, managers from voluntary organisations, academics, and officials and consultants from many levels of the public sector.

This report aims to bring out the range and mix of study visit participants, and the diversity of their insights and responses to the San Miniato experience.

All delegates on the San Miniato study visit received a copy of *Young children in charge: a small Italian community with big ideas for children*, published by Children in Scotland in 2008.

The book provides a detailed insight into day-to-day practice in San Miniato's early years settings. It explains how San Miniato's strong belief in children as highly competent individuals, and the high value given to family participation, have a striking impact on practice.

This practice is also detailed in *The education of young children as a community project: the experience of San Miniato* by Aldo Fortunati.

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Introduction

The concept of the 'child as protagonist' is a way of viewing children that could have a significant impact on the way adults interact with the very youngest members of our society. It applies not only to those working with children in a professional sense, but to parents, extended family members and the wider community.

'Protagonist' is often understood as the main or central character in a drama or story. In this context, the drama or story is the child's own life. This view places the child at the centre of their experiences, respecting them as valuable, competent and active citizens in their own right. This has important implications in a world where young children are often viewed as passive and awaiting direction from adults.

This report focuses on San Miniato, a town in the heart of Italy's Tuscan region where this view of the child is a central driver in the development and delivery of its local early years services. For over 25 years the view of the 'child as protagonist' has influenced every aspect of service delivery – the way in which the town's *educatori* interact with children and facilitate learning, their relationship with the children's families and the design and use of the physical space in *nidi* (nurseries).

San Miniato has been selected as a key focus in *Working for inclusion*, a cross-European programme to examine how improving the qualifications and skills of those working with our youngest children can help reduce poverty and improve social inclusion (see Appendix 1 for full programme details).

With services in San Miniato available for some 45 per cent of children under the age of three, we wanted to understand how and why the local authority has committed itself over a long period to developing such significant levels of care for the youngest children in the

pre-school age group. We wanted to explore with those involved in planning, supporting and working in these services the benefits of their approach, which focuses on young children – all young children – as highly competent actors in their own learning and relationships. We wanted to find out more about the emphasis they place on cooperation with parents and community. And we wanted to do this on a basis where we could all learn from the perspectives and insights offered by individuals from a variety of nations and occupations.

The study visit took place in May 2009 (view a full list of delegates in Appendix 2). It was the first of four study visits to services across Italy, Scotland, Norway and Poland, each focusing on a key theme in relation to the *Working for inclusion* programme.



Pinocchio Early Childhood Education and Care Service

Understanding the concept of the 'child as protagonist' in San Miniato

Our construction of the child – who we think the child is – plays a fundamental role in shaping how we approach education, care and all aspects of early childhood services. Yet, sadly, the critical question 'What is our image of the child?' is ignored in most national and many local policy documents.

This is not the case in San Miniato, a small town and *comune* in the heart of Italy's Tuscan region. San Miniato is unlike many local government administrations across Europe, which take a minimal interest in services for the youngest children. Whereas they assume families and/or the market will provide or that state services for children over the age of three are sufficient, San Miniato prides itself on its proactive responsibility for this age group and their families.

For more than 25 years, the *comune* has invested heavily in services for children under three, based around a set of powerful core values. A key value, which underpins every aspect of service development and delivery, is an optimistic vision of the child as a rich and competent human being – the child as protagonist.

It is a view that is deeply influenced by the pioneering work of the late Loris Malaguzzi (1920 – 1994) in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

Malaguzzi's starting point was always 'What is your image of the child?' and his answer was always clear:

'Our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and other children' (Malaguzzi, 1993)

This image or construction contrasts with a view of the child as lacking, passive, acted upon, and following a predetermined path set out by adults and/or innate development.

These are images of which Malaguzzi termed the 'poor' child.

Aldo Fortunati, a developmental psychologist and leading figure in the development of San Miniato's services, worked closely with Malaguzzi and agrees that this image of the child as a rich and competent human being is as fundamental in San Miniato as it was, and still is, in Reggio Emilia. The philosophy has been reinforced by growing recognition worldwide of the rights of children as participants in society; increasingly they are viewed as important citizens in their own right *now*, rather than for what they will become.



Delegates observe lunchtime at Mastrociligia Early Childhood Education and Care Service

Understanding the concept of the 'child as protagonist' in San Miniato

The following poem, written by Fortunati and translated from Italian into English, encompasses key elements in this image of the child:

Towards an Idea of a Child

Towards an idea of a rich child,
At the crossroads of possible worlds
That lie in the present
And transform the present into future

Towards an idea of an active child
Guided in her experience
By an extraordinary curiosity
Full of desire and delight

Towards an idea of a strong child
Who rejects having an identity
Interchangeable with that of the adult
Offering it, instead, to games of
cooperation
Towards an idea of a sociable child
Able to encounter and compare ideas
Together with other children
To construct new points of view and
knowledge

Towards an idea of a competent child
Artisan of his own experience
And his own knowledge
Alongside and together with the adult

Towards an idea of a curious child
Who learns to know and understand
Not because she gives up but because
she never stops
Being open to the sense of wonder and
amazement

Aldo Fortunati (1990)



Delegates enjoy lunch at ... Pinocchio Early Childhood Education and Care Service

How the concept of the 'child as protagonist' influences service delivery in San Miniato

The child is an active agent in its own development and learning

The central guiding concept of the child as a competent and active human being assumes a particular concept of learning.

Aldo Fortunati views all children as 'active learners' seeking the meaning of the world from birth. They are co-creators, alongside those they interact with, of knowledge, identity, culture and values.

The idea that learning is something that is socially constructed with their peers and adults is particularly important because it means that education is not about children being guided along a prescribed route in order to reach pre-determined outcomes. This challenges much of the current dominant discourse in early childhood education.

In contemporary educational contexts young children and learning are often tamed, predicted, supervised, controlled and evaluated according to predetermined standards (Olsson, 2009). Professor Hillevi Lenz Taguchi, from Stockholm University, has said this means we face 'a paradoxical situation'. "The more we seem to know about the complexity of learning ... the more we seek to impose learning strategies and curriculum goals that reduce the complexities and diversities of learning and knowing" (Lenz Taguchi, 2008).

In San Miniato, the image is of the child as an active learner, protagonist, and as someone who is comfortable with the complexity of the learning process. It is fully expected that a young child, who has pre-existing competencies and experience, will bring to any new situation or opportunity something that will influence the outcome. Children are not considered to be in any way predictable. Far from it. Children's behaviour is seen to

reflect their freedom to choose and freedom to express their individuality.

In these circumstances, the concept of learning as a series of pre-ordained steps that follow logically from each other is irrelevant. It does not mean that adults cannot or should not support the children's learning. However, support rather than direction is the key word. Early education in San Miniato is about providing opportunities rather than prescribing outcomes.

A workforce that understands how to create opportunities

Acknowledging that young children are strong, rich and full of potential, never ceasing to amaze, requires a corresponding transformation in the role of those working with them.

The main qualified group working in San Miniato's nurseries are known as *educatori*. The *educatori* developed in the 1970s, underpinned by the principles of pedagogy. They must enter the profession with a degree in any discipline, sit an entrance exam set by San Miniato's own research and training centre *La Bottega di Geppetto*, and if accepted, undergo intense on-the-job training. As part of their contracts, they have at least 40 working hours assigned to training.

Staff are trained to work with young children in a way that puts the children in charge of their learning. There is a very strong understanding that a child who is 'in charge' of their own learning is in no way predictable, and San Miniato's teaching practices in its early years services reflect this by offering children a system of stimulating and open opportunities.

In order for this to be achieved it is extremely important that the *educatori* are viewed in the

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same light as children: as highly competent protagonists. Without this they would not have the confidence to respond to children's actions and interactions in the quick and instinctive way that is required. The adults and children in the nurseries share experiences that are not wholly planned and thus create meaning and knowledge together. The relationship tends to be more symmetrical than in a setting where all activities are planned and directed by adults. The adults and children build relationships based on dialogue and cooperation.

The emphasis is on unstructured play, although more formal activities have a place. The bulk of the space is open-plan, but subdivided into sections for different purposes such as active play, make-believe and art. Small group projects do take place that are, to some extent, directed by the *educatori*. However, these will have arisen out of things in which the children have expressed an interest.

Meal times are a vital part of the day. It is an activity that has a real-world context – an authentic ritual shared between the *educatori* and children. Children and the adults sit at tables of six or so, dishes are 'real' and they drink from genuine glasses, because finding that some things break is a useful learning experience.

Maintaining a written record of observations about a child is an important daily activity for all staff. Their terms and conditions of employment provide at least 70-80 hours per year for this purpose. Each child has its own record. The 'documentation' is descriptive, taking the form of a narrative or story, with some comments on the child's wellbeing or physiological needs. It is typed or written and kept in an A4 folder along with examples of the child's work and also photographs. Particular priority is given to recording a

child's participation within groups, as their interaction with others is viewed as a critically important expression of the child as protagonist. *Educatori* are encouraged to write comments about the materials used, the organisation of the task, the child's level of participation, use of skills, interaction with others and motivation.

The *educatori* discuss the observations recorded in the documentation. This is a process of collaborative evaluation. It enables them to reflect on the children's experiences and on ways of improving practice. The main purpose of the discussions is to develop a series of perceptions of the child that can form the basis of future discussions with parents. The quality of what has been recorded, and the ability to evaluate it, is therefore of critical importance.

Delegates were acutely aware of how important it is in San Miniato for staff to have the skills that enable them to create circumstances in which children can express themselves and provide support in a way that is not overly interventionist.

In a group interview following the study visit, Norwegian delegates talked about the 'qualities' required by staff. They highlighted "a view of the child that focuses on what children know and can do themselves," and an approach which understood that children "have a unique value and a way of expressing themselves that must be respected and nourished".

Many of these qualities can be nurtured with training and a workplace culture that supports the value of the child as protagonist. Andrew Miller, Councillor for Livingston North Ward, and Executive Councillor for Education at West Lothian Council, Scotland, also reflected on the virtues and challenges the protagonist approach presented to staff:

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These members of staff must be adaptable and sufficiently flexible to loosen their grip – based on the hopes, desires and opinions of the children – on the direction that each day's educational journey may take. The challenge of loosening the reigns of control is not one to be dismissed lightly. It takes a brave and confident practitioner to embark upon a journey each day without absolute certainty where it will take them.

For Maggie Lachlan, Consultant in Public Health, NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde, Scotland, ensuring the image of the child as protagonist is put into practice is something that has to be learnt, training is key:

As a mother, grandmother and doctor, my concept of keeping a child safe is perhaps higher up the agenda than it should be. The educator in San Miniato watch but allow children to be free – and it's that freedom, an organised freedom and in a sense a safe freedom, but still a freedom – that allows the children to make their own mistakes. I had thought I understood this concept of a child needing to be curious through my own children and grandchildren but I can see that to get to that stage you need to do an enormous amount of preparation beforehand, particularly when we're looking at the workforce. The workforce has to be exceptionally well trained.

The impact of San Miniato's "child as protagonist" concept on children's experiences, and on their wellbeing, confidence and competence, drew the most comments from delegates. They observed its effect in a variety of different scenarios.

Meal time

I witnessed a mealtime where the children have adult size cutlery, crockery and glasses. One little boy, just under three, was sitting with a small glass in one hand and a jug in the other. He was tipping them both at exactly the same time and you could almost

see his thought processes in action – 'well that's not working, I'll have to try something else'. He fiddled around and finally put the glass on the table, poured the water in from the jug and he got his drink. I thought that was a really good example of getting time to construct his own learning.

(Jane Rough, Early Years and Childcare Manager, City of Edinburgh Council, Scotland)

...pouring water into a glass or serving up is all done by children even if it takes a long time or is imperfectly done. The result is not the goal, the real point is the process itself.
(Michał Wacowski, Managing Director, Comenius Foundation, Poland)

Peer-led support

I was impressed with the communication skills of children as young as two. And I think this may have been at least partly because of the peer-led support. The nurseries only have one intake each year and there is a week where the older children are there before the younger children arrive. The older children prepare to welcome the new children and are encouraged to guide and teach them. It's done a lot with older children but to see it happening with 2 and 3-year-olds was quite extraordinary. In a Norwegian kindergarten that would be the adult's role. The focus is more on adults taking care of children. This gives the children responsibility for taking care of each other. We could give children more opportunities and responsibilities.
(Cecilie Høj Anvik, Researcher, Nordland Research Institute, Norway)

Make-believe play

It was impressive how children between the ages of one and two in particular could determine their own learning. In one example, a group of children set up a barbecue and acted out all the tasks involved, for example sitting an empty drawer on a seat; putting pieces of wood in the drawer; putting a metal grille over the

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drawer; pouring oil over the meat (leather pieces) on the grill; and setting up a table and eating with real knives, forks and plates. Real glasses for water were used and children poured the water from a glass jug and distributed the 'cooked food' and were 'eating it'. One girl wore socks on her hands as gloves and insisted that she would remove the meat with her gloves on, to avoid burning anyone. There was very little intervention by the educator. The educator created the opportunity. Her role was not to instruct but to facilitate and enable.

(Margaret Doran, Executive Director of Children and Families, Glasgow City Council, Scotland)

Outdoor play

The outside play areas are spacious. Children are not followed around these large play areas. They explore the space, which can include bikes, tricycles, barrows, benches, attractive seating areas, wooden huts in the shape of homes, live tortoises in a hutted area, little hillocks, flowers, climbing frames, various construction toys, eating areas, quiet areas, group areas, tubes for crawling through, and skittles. Many of the toys encourage group activities. All children start to follow each other into cars or bicycles and give way to each other to ensure they do not bump into each other – it's collaborative play.

(Margaret Doran, Executive Director of Children and Families, Executive Director of Children and Families, Glasgow City Council, Scotland)

Architecture and design

What I liked most is the focus on children's self-reliance in any situation, and the solutions to problems provided by furnishings. For example, little chairs for children which can also serve as sitting stools for adults – fantastic.

(Malgorzata Dudek, Director of the Education Department, Poland)

They had come up with a clever solution for

how to use water in wash basins – there is a lever on the floor. It's so much easier for small children and also makes it easier to keep the place clean.

The problem of sleeping has been solved in a very simple way: they have low couches which are easily accessible and very different from the beds with rungs in some of our nurseries.

(Teresa Kot, Secretary of the Pulawy County Board and President of the Jastkow Friends Association, Poland)

The architects had one idea of what they thought would be good for children but they were told, 'no, this is how we want it to be'. I have experience from home of architects who think they know the best thing in the world, but they know about architecture, not children's services.

(Andrew Miller, Councillor, West Lothian Council, Scotland)

They seem like very special places. The amount of thought that's been put into the layout and use of space ... things like having mirrors throughout the settings to try to encourage the children to develop a sense of themselves and to focus on all the children, with clothes, possessions and drawings. It encourages that sense of themselves as an individual and as people able to relate to others.

(Kathryn Chisholm, Policy Officer, Positive Futures Division, Scottish Government)

Staff attitudes

There was a discussion with staff in one nido about children's freedom and safety whilst in the outside play environment. The emphasis is on positive approaches to space and freedom to learn. Educatori did not want to restrict the use of space outside, nor did they stop children taking risks when climbing or jumping, either inside or outside the nursery.

It was also difficult to discuss the concepts of 'children in need' or 'children at risk'. The

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educatori focused on positive childhood experiences. If there are concerns about a child, these concerns are shared with the parents in one-to-one meetings. There are also regular meetings of multiple professional agencies. However, staff were reluctant to talk about children at risk as they preferred to think in positive terms and believed in the power of positive thinking with parents.

(Margaret Doran, Executive Director of Children and Families, Glasgow City Council, Scotland)

Working with the family as collaborators

The image of the child as rich and competent extends to families in San Miniato. The primary educational value of families is recognised and promoted, and close collaboration is deemed to be vital.

Likewise, the *nido* and other services are valued as a significant part of family life by many parents. It is natural and desirable for a child to attend a *nido*, which is considered to be a different but complementary environment, not removing responsibility from parents but strengthening them in their role. Activities that involve parents, and often extended family members such as grandparents, are a crucial part of an *educatore's* responsibilities.

How can parents be engaged and involved in their child's learning? This is a live and often controversial issue in many European countries. Methods are often perceived as being unduly intrusive or discriminatory because they are applied only to families that are considered 'at risk'. In San Miniato, Aldo Fortunati believes that services should enhance the role of parents, not detract from it. Parents too are viewed as citizens, bearers of rights, and 'rich' protagonists.

The *educatori* have the opportunity to talk with parents every day and seek to engage them

on a more structured basis in meetings and workshops. There is a mix of one-to-one and group meetings, sometimes themed to cover subjects or issues that have previously arisen. These might take the form of a session on how to develop their child's independence and confidence while maintaining links to the family, or a toy-making workshop, etc.

Discussing documentation (the written record of observations about a child) with parents is also considered important in helping them become more observant and better informed about their own role in supporting the child's development.

Cooperation with, and respect for, families seemed very strong in San Miniato. By empowering the family and sharing the values underpinning the services with them, the child is given the opportunity to be a protagonist not only while at nursery but also in the home/family sphere.

(From group interview with Norwegian delegates, Bodø Kommune)

In Norway the same values are important in family centres and parent guidance. Since our legal regulations concerning the child and his/her rights are quite extensive, we were left with the interesting questions of, 'what do we conceive of as the boundaries for family control and parents' rights?' and, 'when do we as professionals intervene?'

(From group interview with Norwegian delegates, Bodø Kommune)

In San Miniato there is recognition that parenting can be difficult at times. Documentation provides an opportunity to share any concerns and to build the confidence of parents. This is non-patronising. Parents become more observant. They use their reflections the way that staff do. Educatori try to make parenting more positive and an enjoyable experience.

(Margaret Doran, Executive Director of Children and Families, Glasgow City Council, Scotland)

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The child as citizen and bearer of rights

The image of the child as protagonist also has another component – the child as citizen and a subject of rights.

Ensuring that children's rights are enshrined in legislation is only one part of the equation; it can only provide a framework. Ensuring young children can exercise these rights is entirely dependent on those adults they interact with on a daily basis.

Early years services working with young children and their families have a huge responsibility to ensure legislation and policies supporting children's rights are put into practice.

In San Miniato, the long-standing commitment of the local authority to provide quality services for young children and families, and local commitment to ensuring the core values have a direct impact on service delivery, means that children's rights *are* evident in everyday life at the nurseries.

This was a point picked up by delegates from Norway, who compared what they saw in San Miniato to the experience in their country, which has incorporated the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into its legislation.

In Norway, the child as protagonist view is included in the Education Act, where it is stated that children have a right to participate in defining how the provision of services should be. They have a right to be heard in matters of importance to them. So the values and ethics underpinning the services for children are found in national regulations and guidelines.

(From group interview of Norwegian delegates, Bodø Kommune)

'Children's rights' is not a separate, stand-

alone module in the training of San Miniato's *educatori*. Children's rights are an intrinsic part of their responsibilities, most evident in their understanding of the child as protagonist and how this influences the way that they interact with children, and indeed families. Their interactions with children are much less 'top down' and much more cooperative as a result. In itself this gives children more opportunity, and more confidence, to express their needs and wishes.



Bronwen Cohen, Chief Executive of Children in Scotland with Working for Inclusion project partners at the Centre

How the concept of the 'child as protagonist' influences service delivery in San Miniato



Il Paese Dei Balocchi Early Childhood Education and Care Service



Discussions with staff at Mastrociligia Early Childhood Education and Care Service

How working with the child as protagonist can help address poverty and promote social inclusion

The child as protagonist has profound implications, for services themselves and for the workforce who play such a vital role. The implications are particularly relevant in helping to address poverty and promote inclusion.

Early childhood education and care services nurture the physical and mental health of young children, their socio-emotional, cognitive and language abilities. They are therefore particularly important for young children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds, those who have to overcome language barriers, and others with additional support needs. When appropriately organised they play an important role in the education and inclusion of disadvantaged groups.

In addition, services can make a significant contribution to addressing poverty by contributing to achieving labour market goals. Services help families with young children go out to work and, if committed to high quality provision through a highly skilled and well-paid workforce, can help raise the professional profiles of staff, particularly women, working in the sector. Improved conditions of work will contribute greatly to the empowerment of families and to reducing child poverty levels.

San Miniato's approach offers valuable lessons that could contribute to achieving these aspirations.

I believe that the 'child as protagonist' approach offers special, perhaps unique, opportunities for children from disadvantaged areas to experience being in a socially mixed group as a partner. The 'child as protagonist' philosophy puts them on an equal footing. Cooperation with parents, and their participation in daily work in infant / toddler centres seems to be the most valuable of the different elements offered by this experience. **(Malgorzata Zytka, Principal of Early Education Studies, Warsaw University, Poland)**

I think there is a direct relationship between social inclusion, poverty and working with the child as protagonist. San Miniato's formula of not addressing services to special groups helps with the integration of society.

(Michal Wacowski, Managing Director, Comenius Foundation, Poland)

Skilled and professional staff

The staff turnover of *educatori* in San Miniato is very low. One group has remained unchanged since 1980. Earnings amount to approximately 1200 to 1500 euros per month after tax (2008) and although there is little opportunity for career progression because of the relatively flat management structure, low turnover demonstrates that it is a valued profession locally.

There is no doubting the investment that San Miniato as a local authority has committed to developing its early years services. The learning and development of staff is considered integral to those services.

It takes a highly skilled workforce to know how to create learning opportunities but not to intervene as adults do normally in children's space and learning environments.

(Margaret Doran, Executive Director of Children and Families, Glasgow City Council, Scotland)

Delegates were particularly interested in looking at how staff ensure that the concept of the child as protagonist is put into practice, and whether this is something that can be nurtured or taught.

Some delegates noted that one of the key roles of staff should be to see that the rights of children, which are enshrined in legislation, are always translated into practice. This is a vital part of workforce training in San Miniato.

The collection and evaluation of information about children's experience is also a highly

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skilled activity and an important process for ensuring their professional development. Because evaluation is a collaborative and not a solitary process, it is expected that staff will learn from sharing their perceptions and use this to improve their practice.

Empowering the child

Children are strong when they can do something on their own.

(Margaret Doran, Executive Director of Children and Families, Glasgow City Council, Scotland)

References to poverty can be negative and disempowering in the same way that references to children being 'in need' and 'at risk' can be. These terms conjure up an image of the child as weak and vulnerable rather than as a rich and competent citizen. A change to the latter, more positive, view could be achieved if there was a seismic shift in society's attitude towards children – a move towards understanding the child as protagonist. This societal change could have an impact on how every adult interacts with children: those who work with them and also families and communities.

The implications for children who have additional support needs are particularly acute. There can be a tendency to focus on a child's disability, for example, rather than their *ability*. But it also applies to those children living with social deprivation. Aldo Fortunati says it is too easy to view a child as weak and vulnerable simply because of their environment. More challenging, but beneficial for the child, is to focus on the resources they have within them.

The image of the child as weak and needy, of requiring our help, runs counter to what the view of the child as protagonist is trying to achieve.

The child as protagonist approach is central to offering all children equal opportunities. Through working with the child as the central agent in his/her life, the child is empowered. When people are empowered their opportunities for taking charge of their own lives and their opportunities for participating in central processes in society will be enhanced. We think that values related to the child as protagonist approach are essential to promoting participation in society and fighting alienation from the big challenges our societies are facing.

(From group interview of Norwegian delegates, Bodø Kommune)

Empowering families

The image of the child as rich and full of potential extends to parents in San Miniato. This can be very effective in terms of addressing inclusion.

The *educatori* do not take over from parents; they work with them. Above all, they help parents to help themselves. Parents are encouraged to participate and to share experiences among themselves. In this way, they can become more confident and more skilled and, as a result, feel greater fulfillment in their role.

The *educatori* are committed to working with parents with the aim of helping shift their perspective on parenting, by bringing the protagonist ethos into the heart of the nursery experience. They do not take a didactic approach, but instead help parents achieve a more intimate understanding of their child's development. Through documentation, observation, talking to other parents, and the sharing of experiences in the nursery, parents are able to build up a much more complete and vivid picture of their child – and their own role in the child's life.

Educatori talk with parents every day on arrival and departure. They also involve them

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in workshops and meetings. The first meetings are held in May for children who are attending in September. In September, before the term begins there are individual meetings with parents. From October onwards there are meetings of groups of parents to help create a network where they can help and support each other. At the end of the year, a final celebration party is held which combines work with families and the work done with children. Parents might put on a play or puppet show. Sometimes these are put on for the whole community.

(Margaret Doran, Executive Director of Children and Families, Glasgow City Council, Scotland)

How high-quality services can improve children's and families' lives

What San Miniato highlights is the power of high quality services to benefit both children and families. But if these services are only available to the select few who can afford to pay for them, they will do nothing to address poverty or promote inclusion.

San Miniato has managed to achieve some 45 per cent coverage of children aged between birth and three. This is more than double the Italian average and well above the EU 'Barcelona' target of 33 per cent by 2010. Despite this, there is still a waiting list. These services are what parents believe they need and what the local authority views as being – at a local level – their right. San Miniato's youngest citizens are visible to the community and its local authority aspires to a universal service for this age group.

For many of the delegates on the study visit, the strength and long-term commitment to developing support for the youngest of children was what they found most remarkable.

As one Polish delegate commented, it represented the "long-term vision and

commitment of a local authority to developing these services for the smallest children" (Halina Wankowska Marczak, Teacher Trainer, Comenius Academy, Poland). None of the delegates were in any doubt about what this offered all children, particularly, but not only, those in most need of support.

This commitment, and the commitment to involve both parent and child as protagonists, reflect the conclusions of recent international reports on these issues, including *Early Childhood Education and Care: key lessons from research for policy makers* (European Commission, 2009), which stated:

A child rights approach focuses on and organises effort on the experiences of children in the here and now and solicits their participation.

The report also observed:

Parents are collaborators and participants in early years services. As such they have a right to give and receive information and the right to express their views. The ¹decision-making processes should be fully participative, involving parents, all staff, and when possible, children.

Comparisons and contrasts

This was not a group of visitors wearing rose-tinted glasses, however. One criticism centred on what was seen by some of the Norwegians as a failure to make adequate use of the outdoors. A further problem noted by delegates was the division in responsibilities for services under and over the age of three. And concerns were voiced about the continuity of the protagonist concept, questioning how it progressed beyond the nursery experience.

They told us today that the children were so happy because the weather was good and they are outdoors a lot and they love to be outdoors every day but not when it's raining.

How working with the child as protagonist can help address poverty and promote social inclusion

So we said in Norway we say it's not bad weather, it's only bad clothing, and the pedagogue said that that's also what therapists say in Italy. Scandinavians say it's preferable to be outside even if the weather is not sunny.

(Björg Apeland, Coordinator, Family Centre and Parent Advisor, Bodø Kommune, Norway)

The gap I've seen here is that they don't see the child as a complete child, they see the child as something that happens between 0 to 3, 3 to 6 and 6 to 16 and that there are different rules, different people, different thinking in planning from different ages. But I think that the child is a whole from birth and what you learn from zero to three makes you what you are, so I think that this is a fundamental policy weakness.

(Wiveca Wilhelmsen-Holm, Advisor, Department of Childhood and Education, County Governor of Nordland, Norway)

One of the questions that still intrigues me regarding the San Miniato experience is how and if the concept of the child as a protagonist follows on from the 0-3 stage to nursery, primary and secondary or their Italian equivalents. We did learn a little of how teachers were being encouraged to embrace this philosophy through training and with teachers and children coming from school to special sessions in at least one of the 0-3 centres, but we did not have the time or opportunity to observe the nursery or primary experience to see if developments had really filtered beyond the excellent early years centres we saw.

(Andrew Miller, Councillor, West Lothian Council, Scotland)

While Wiveca Wilhelmsen-Holm's comments reflect a legitimate concern, the San Miniato approach did not explicitly suggest that the zero-to-three age group must be prioritised above all others. Instead, it represents a response to the fact that in many countries policy and legislation relating to the early years of life are weak; that the first three

years of life are absolutely the most important in the development of the person; and that an effective prevention policy against social exclusion can only be developed if it is in place from the earliest years of life.

Overall, the visit presented an invaluable opportunity for delegates to draw insightful comparisons between San Miniato and experiences of services in their native countries.

Malgorzata Zytka, of Warsaw University in Poland, was particularly struck by how San Miniato's workplace culture allowed the child to take the lead in learning. Contrastingly, she said that one of the main problems in many settings in Poland is:

limited trust in children's abilities. Some staff don't believe that the initiative should be left with the child. Our teachers are educated in such a way that they feel responsible for arranging and imposing the majority of children's activities. As a result, there is insufficient inter-group cooperation and construction of knowledge in a social context. Very often, in a teacher's opinion, he or she is the only source of information and inspiration.

(Malgorzata Zytka, Director of the Education Department, Warsaw University, Poland)

Other delegates echoed this point, and highlighted further areas of comparison, such as the level of local authority support offered to San Miniato, attitudes to risk, and workforce culture.

[San Miniato] gives the children responsibility for taking care of each other, which is unfamiliar in a Norwegian context because in the Norwegian context they are more concerned about the teachers or the educators' role in helping the children.

(Cecilie Høj Anvik, Researcher, Nordland Research Institute, Norway)

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The most surprising things for me were the systematic approach of the Italians to educating children up to the age of three, with support and financing from the local government and the central budget, the emphasis on documenting children's development, and the extra hours for the educators to prepare such documentation.
(Malgorzata Dudek, Director of the Education Department, Warsaw University Poland)

I do see these [San Miniato's] qualities, values and ethics in early years settings in Scotland, however I think this is in settings where there is the very best practice, not across the board. Many of the nursery staff do not have an understanding of children's rights and tend to be very protective of children. The policies that we have in place often restrict staff from allowing children to explore and experiment in case they get hurt or can't do something. This is not only in the day-to-day practice but also in the broader health and safety legislation and guidance.
(Jane Rough, Early Years and Childcare Manager, City of Edinburgh Council, Scotland)

As with everything in life, there are always choices in how money is spent. It was easy to observe that levels of certain public services were not what we would expect in this country (grass cutting, road maintenance etc), and we did not have the detail about their health, housing and social work services to judge how much public money goes into these. We could build new centres for zero to threes tomorrow if we stopped investing in roads, paths and highways and, whilst this has a great attraction to me as a parent and someone involved in the education world, I know the reality of this approach is somewhat different and the public would probably find large scale diversions of money away from these services unacceptable.
(Andrew Miller, Councillor, West Lothian Council, Scotland)

The visit raised key issues for Scotland – developing the skills and qualifications of the

early years workforce, moving towards the idea of the child as competent, confident and able to assess risk, and the promotion of play-based learning in pre-school and early primary. These are all elements within [the Scottish Government's] Early Years Framework, the overall aim of which is to break cycles of deprivation and give children the best possible start.
(Kathryn Chisholm, Policy Officer, Scottish Government)

The San Miniato experience offered all delegates profound insights into the importance of an approach that sees every child as competent, active and interactive. It raised for some in the group particular questions about how the language of 'exclusion', 'disadvantage' and 'need' in their countries can have the effect of disempowering the very children such phrases seek to help.

Would a more optimistic vision of the child and their families be more empowering? The study visit suggested that all of those seeking ways of addressing child poverty and promoting inclusion have much to learn from this small Italian community's vision of the child as protagonist, and its commitment over more than a quarter of a century to realising this vision.

How working with the child as protagonist can help address poverty and promote social inclusion



Pinocchio Early Childhood Education and Care Service



Aldo Fortunati, President of La Bottega Di Geppetto (far right) with Working for Inclusion project partners at the Centre

Conclusion

What did delegates take away from the experience of visiting San Miniato, and what does its example contribute to our ongoing dialogue about child policy and legislation?

Perhaps the core lesson to be drawn is that, when the right services are in place for children and families, they can and do improve lives.

Delegates found that San Miniato's protagonist concept ensured a model for the delivery of services that is naturally holistic and takes the child and their family as the starting point. The child as citizen is entitled to participate, and their rights are seen as unassailable. The contribution of children is always honoured, but the protagonist approach means that they are never labelled or catalogued as being 'in need', or requiring the assistance of adults. Instead, they are enabled to feel empowered.

Delegates learned that the child as protagonist concept is not just a value, but an integral way of working. This could be seen in the way that *nidi* staff worked with children and families, and it was apparent in attitudes towards the workforce. It ensures that the *educatori* – whose role is grounded in the principles of pedagogy, developed in Italy in the 1970s – are empowered and valued, and that great emphasis is placed on their knowledge and skills. For the *educatori*, viewing children as competent agents of their own learning becomes an instinct rather than a choice. With this understanding in place, the *educatori* can use their skills to involve parents, extended family and the community in learning. The result is that children, staff and the wider community feel involved and empowered – and it is this empowerment that can ultimately have the effect of helping to address poverty and promote social inclusion.

San Miniato may be a small town, but its achievements in addressing poverty and

inclusion deserve and inspire some international comparison. Norway has shown the impact a strong legislative framework that recognises children as citizens with rights has on poverty and social inclusion. Scotland has passed legislation such as the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act, a right-based approach rather than one that highlights disadvantage. However, contrasting the two nations might suggest that, where no comprehensive legislation to address inclusion and children's rights is in place, it is more likely that inequalities will persist.

San Miniato has shown that an aspiration to lower poverty rates and improve inclusion can be made real if these aims are defined in legislation and championed at a local level. Combined with its underpinning philosophical approach to children and the financial commitment and belief of the local authority, this achievement marked San Miniato out as a highly significant international model for all delegates.

Perhaps most of all, it challenged delegates on the study visit to ask what kind of services they really wanted to see for children and families in their home nations. If they are services that are truly child-led, funded directly and shaped by the whole community, then San Miniato may be blazing the trail for others to follow.

Acknowledgements / References

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Appendix 1

This report forms part of *Working for inclusion: the role of the early years workforce in addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion*. It is a European Union-wide programme funded by the European Commission and supported by the Scottish Government.

The programme

Working for inclusion is examining how improving the qualifications and skills of those working with our youngest children is helping to reduce poverty and improve social inclusion.

Taking place from February 2009 - January 2011, the programme will encourage and facilitate discussion and debate over the role of the early years workforce. It will enable greater, more extensive and effective dialogue between local and national governments, education and qualification providers, employers, practitioners and policymakers.

Programme partners

The programme is led by Children in Scotland in partnership with:

La Bottega Di Geppetto, Italy
Nordland Research Institute, Norway
Comenius Foundation for Child Development, Poland

Research

The programme encompasses research, which will produce a clear picture of the qualification and skill levels in early years services and how these relate to levels of poverty and social inclusion. Research will take place simultaneously in Scotland and the UK, Poland, Norway, Italy, Slovenia, France, Denmark, Portugal, Sweden and Hungary and will offer an overview of developments

throughout the EU. Once completed, the data will contribute towards policy development at EU level as well as Scotland and the rest of the UK. The research is led by Professor Peter Moss and Dr John Bennett.

Study visits

Study visits in the four partner countries will address four key themes relating to poverty and social inclusion and the early years workforce. These visits will form the basis of a report on each theme, published by Children in Scotland on the project website (www.childreninscotland.org.uk/wfi), and publicised throughout member states at local and national levels.

Each partner country will provide the context for exploring particular key challenges within the early years workforce:

Working with the child as an active agent in their own learning (Italy)

Working with diversity, in particular ethnicity, language, disability and gender (Scotland)

Inclusive workforce models for rural and remote areas (Norway)

Exploring the role of the pedagogue in working in an inclusive way with children and families, across agencies and age groups (Poland).

Appendix 2

San Miniato study visit delegate list

Delegates from Scotland

Kathryn Chisholm, Policy Officer, Positive Futures Division, Scottish Government

Bronwen Cohen, Chief Executive, Children in Scotland

Margaret Doran, Executive Director of Children and Families, Glasgow City Council

Dr Maggie Lachlan, Consultant in Public Health, NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde

Andrew Miller, Councillor for Livingston North Ward, Executive Councillor for Education, West Lothian Council

Jane Rough, Early Years and Childcare Manager, City of Edinburgh Council

Delegates from Norway

Bjørge Apeland, Coordinator, Family Centre and Parent Advisor, Bodø

Cecilie Høj Anvik, Researcher, Nordland Research Institute

Henny Aune, Upbringing Coordinator, Bodø

Geir Mortensen, Senior Advisor, International Relations, Bodø Kommune

Wiveca Wilhelmsen-Holm, Advisor, Department of Childhood and Education, County Governor of Nordland

Delegates from Poland

Malgorzata Dudek, Director of the Education Department

Teresa Kot, Secretary of the Pulawy County Board and President of the Jastkow Friends Association

Tomaszo Mazowiecki, President of the OWL Educational Association

Teresa Ogrodzinska, President of the Board, Comenius Foundation

Michal Wacowski, Managing Director, Comenius Foundation

Halina Wankowska Marczak, Teacher Trainer, Comenius Academy

Malgorzata Zytka, Principal of Early Education Studies, Warsaw University

Delegates in Italy and hosts:

Aldo Fortunati, President of La Bottega di Gepetto Early Childhood Research and Documentation Centre of the Municipality of San Miniato and Vice-President of the Gruppo Nazionale Nidi-Infanzia (National Infant-toddler/Preschool Group).

Gloria Tognetti, La Bottega Di Gepetto

Barbara Pagni, La Bottega Di Gepetto

Nima Sharmad, University of Firenze, Department of Training Science

Monica Guerra, University of Milano-Bicocca, Department of Training Science

Olmes Bisi, University of Modena e Reggio Emilia, Department of Sciences and Methods of Engineering

