

MEDIA RELEASE

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Young children in charge: a small Italian community with big ideas for children

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A new publication from Children in Scotland has been written to help and inspire local authorities as they take on a more assertive role in developing local early years services.

Young children in charge: a small Italian community with big ideas for children is based on a recent study visit to San Miniato in north Italy, where early years services for children under three is showing the fruits of 25 years of local authority commitment and financial investment.

The services are not only high quality but have achieved a level of coverage which far exceeds the Barcelona targets set by the European Union's Council of Ministers in 2002, that 33 per cent of children under the age of three should, by 2010, be attending a service. San Miniato has already achieved 40 per cent and aspires to provide a universal service.

As a result of the Scottish concordat, an agreement between local and national government made in 2007, local authorities now have more control over both policy-making at local level and decisions on where to spend funding.

San Miniato invests two of its 18 million euro budget in services for children under the age of three. Funding from regional and national government, and parental contributions cover the remainder of costs.

However, it is not just the local authority's commitment that has attracted international attention. It is also the powerful values, which underpin service development that really set San Miniato apart.

The central concept guiding all service development in San Miniato is that of the child as a competent and active human being.

Co-author, Keir Bloomer, former director of Clackmannanshire Council, said: "The central purpose is to encourage children to develop in a culture in which they are seen as citizens and protagonists, or central agents of their own learning. This view contrasts sharply with the prevailing ethos in the UK where the focus is on supporting working families and even more on protecting the child perceived as being in need or even at risk. San Miniato's concept is not merely child-centred but highly optimistic. The vision of childhood is a positive one concerned with empowering the individual and encouraging growth."

San Miniato's view of childhood has a significant impact on the way that professionals interact with children. For example, educators trust children to be in charge of their own learning, which means they have to live with an element of unpredictability. They never know quite where the child's

actions will lead. Their focus therefore is on creating opportunities for children to learn, rather than guiding them towards pre-set outcomes by following a sequence laid down in advance in some form of curriculum. The imagination and enterprise of the educator are crucial to the success of the system.

Keir Bloomer added: “San Miniato is offering, in the current jargon, a personalised service, not in the sense of seeing the individual as the critical focus, but because planning, programming and objectives are seen as subordinate to developing from the child’s experience. Young children are seen as literally ‘in charge’ of their learning and social development. Such an approach calls into question the very idea of curriculum – an idea that remains the indispensable mechanism for educational policy-making in this country.”

John Bennett, manager of the OECD Starting Strong reviews, who wrote the foreword, said: “Young children are not brought to [San Miniato’s] nurseries to be passively directed by adults. Experienced staff are available there to support each child’s innate drive to learn rather than to teach prescribed behaviour or outcomes. One is struck by the contrast with the target-driven nature of education in other societies where educators are often required to tick boxes on ‘one-size-fits-all’ developmental or academic scales.”

Crucially, San Miniato’s positive outlook also embraces parents and staff. Parents are encouraged to participate and to share experiences among themselves so that they can become more skilled and confident as a result, and staff are trusted to respond to children’s often unpredictable learning needs as they arise rather than spending time with excessive planning and programming.

Co-author Bronwen Cohen, chief executive of Children in Scotland, said: “The powerful values that drive service development in San Miniato, and the local authority’s unwavering commitment over the past 25 years, is a shining example that other local authorities across Europe can learn from. A remarkable feature of many strong early childhood education and care systems across Europe has been their ability to learn from and with other countries.”

Notes for editors

- ***Young children in charge: a small Italian community with big ideas for children*** is published on September 9 and is available from www.childreninscotland.org.uk/publications
- Authors Bronwen Cohen and Keir Bloomer are available for interview. Please contact Nicola Pay on 0131 2222448 or Chris Small on 0131 2222419
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