



Summary of the analysis of the local focus groups in Italy

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1. Introduction: some data

In Italy we carried on 5 focus groups: 2 with parents and 3 with teachers, in the 2 ECEC centers involved in the project. The ECEC centers are:

1. Maria Vittoria (in Turin), which is a Childcare Center (0 to 3 years) (Pro.Ges, Torino)
2. Gelsomino (in Parma), which is a Childcare Center (0 to 3 years) and a Kindergarten (3-6 years) (Pro.Ges, Parma).

In total, we have involved 20 teachers (15 teachers of Childcare Center) and 17 parents in the focus groups. 18 teachers were woman, and 2 man; the mean age of teachers' professional service was 9 years; the children's mean age was 29 months for Childcare Center and 52 months for Kindergarten. The parents were 5 fathers and 12 mothers, the parents' mean age was 35 years, all had Italian origins.

All focus groups were coordinated by two people, one facilitator and one assistant, and all participants were arranged in a circle. For introduce the questions concerning the hygienic and toilet/eating/sleeping spaces some pictures were provided in order to facilitate the discussion.

2. Summary of the points of view of parents and teachers

2.1 Favorite place/not favorite place

In the focus groups, both parents and teachers were asked which was their favorite/not favorite place in our school and what was the favorite/not favorite place for children in their opinion.

The table below summarizes the answers that emerged from the discussion with regard to **favorite space**.

TEACHERS	PARENTS	CHILDRENS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "My class" • The sleeping space/a flexible space • The garden (<i>Gelsomino</i>) • The places near the glass windows • The pretend play space: kitchen, care... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The entrance and welcoming space • The garden (<i>Gelsomino</i>) • The glass windows (<i>Maria Vittoria</i>) • The Family space (<i>Maria Vittoria</i>) • The library space for family (<i>Gelsomino</i>) • The soft space: reading space (<i>Maria Vittoria</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The garden • The pretend play space • The soft space: reading space • The den/the peekaboo space • The entrance and welcoming space (<i>Maria Vittoria</i>)

The participants, both teachers and parents, greatly engaged in this question and contributed with different reflections. As can be seen from the table, very different spaces emerge. Some of these spaces are preferred by many participants and therefore seem to be very significant in the teachers', parent' and children's experience within the educational context ("**my class**"; **the garden**; **the place near the glass windows**; **the pretend play**; **the soft space**...).

Concerning **not favorite place**, as can be seen from the table below, the answers are less numerous, in particular, both parents and teachers find it difficult to identify a place that is not pleasant for children.

TEACHERS	PARENTS	CHILDRENS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The garden (in particular <i>Maria Vittoria</i>) • The entrance and welcoming space • The spaces in front of the classes: narrow (<i>Gelsomino</i>) • The toilet space (Maria Vittoria) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The garden (<i>Maria Vittoria</i>) • The glass windows (too warm in summer) (<i>Maria Vittoria</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The entrance and welcoming space (<i>Gelsomino</i>)

In general, from the focus groups, the **garden** emerges as a very popular choice and it is possible to note that different points of view and feelings concerning this space come out between adults and children. In specific, the garden space is greatly appreciated from children, contrarily the parents and mostly the teachers recognize in the outdoor space some critical aspects, particularly in Maria Vittoria Centre.

Another space that emerges frequently in the discussions in the focus groups is the **entrance and welcoming space**, it seems to be a very important and significant space especially for parents. In fact, they report that have many affective and relevant experiences with their children in this place.

The **pretend play space and soft play for reading space** are also considered very significant places both for teachers and for parents.

The motivations that the teachers and the parents reported regarding the choice of the favorite/not favorite place are many varied; the analysis of these motivations allows to highlight very interesting elements about how space is perceived in ECEC centres.

In particular, 5 different **motivations** emerge from the focus groups, that represent different **meanings** of space:

1) Space that **FAVORS LEARNING ACTIVITIES, PLAY ACTIVITIES and EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES**

«I like the peekaboo space because I stay in there with the children and, reading, singing or simply telling stories, we are fine»

«The garden space helps the children to deal with their fears, it helps them to get to know their bodies»

«The laboratory is a space that the children do not recognize and they don't know what to do in it»

2) Space that **FAVORS RELATIONS**

"I like the entrance and welcoming space because it is really an agora, so there are parents who meet ... It's noisy, but there is life, and there are relationships" (favorite place)

«In the den even very agitated children calm down, and here they create significant relationships» (favorite place)

"In the entrance space my baby and I meet after a long day, we hug and tell each other what we have done, important exchanges take place here every day" (favorite place)

"I don't like the entrance space, it's too big, there's too much confusion, it's not intimate, it doesn't favor relationships" (not favorite place)

3) Space that is **DESIGNED and WELL CONCEIVED**

«This year I had the opportunity to make changes in the space and so I feel it much more mine ... I'm fine» (favorite place)

«We dedicated a lot to the pretend play space, so that place was very well thought out and it is a space that all teachers can share» (favorite place)

«The space in front of the bathroom ... we still have to find the right way to use it. We have been thinking about it a lot, but we still haven't reached a solution» (favorite place)

4) Space that **CONNECTS INSIDE/OUTSIDE**

«The glass windows are fantastic, my child likes to look outside: the construction sites, the garden, the arrivals .. a world..» (favorite place)

«The glass windows create a continuous connection between the inside and the outside» (favorite place)

«I like the kitchen because it reminds me of nature, we have a small table made with a piece of a tree trunk, it recalls the forest» (favorite place)

5) Space that has some **PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS**

«The reading corner is very nice with those lights and that small curtain at the entrance, it is really a beautiful place also aesthetically» (favorite place)

«Even the bathrooms are beautiful because they are suitable for children, with a small sink, with low shelves, low chairs, cushions ..» (favorite place)

«The garden isn't a real garden, it's too sunny, it's grassless and very dusty ...» (favorite place)

All these several meanings emerge both in parents' and teachers' discussions, highlighting a multiplicity of **functions attributed to space**.

The space that "favors learning activities, play activities and emotional experiences" is the function that appears most, followed by the space as "physical characteristics". In particular, the teachers' contributions reveal the focus on the concept of "designed and well designed" space, while in the perception of parents emerge a focus on the importance of the "space that connects inside/outside".

2.2 Routine moments

An analysis of the contents that emerged in the focus groups for each of the proposed routines (hygiene and toilet, eating and sleeping spaces) was carried out; three macro-areas were identified: **the description** of that specific place, **the references to education** and learning activities and the **references to care activities** or care moments. This analysis was carried out because the link between **Care/Education** dimensions and space is a central and fundamental aspect of the aims of EDUCAS project.

2.2.1 Hygiene and Toilet Space

PARENTS

DESCRIPTION	EDUCATION/LEARNING	CARE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child-friendly • Coloured • Well furnished • Places to wait your turn: a bench, a little sofa, some books.. • Easy to clean • Visible to the teachers • A pleasant place • A quiet place • A separate space 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieving autonomies • Telling stories ... • Learning to wait • Learning by imitation of peers • Learning to stay alone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is an intimate moment • Respecting each other's intimacy • Taking care of your body • Taking care of others: older children help the younger ones • Knowing your body and that of others • Having the experience of an adult taking care of you • Learning hygiene habits

TEACHERS

DESCRIPTION	EDUCATION/LEARNING	CARE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coloured • Well lit • Quiet • Child-friendly: toilet bowls, toilet paper, wash basins ... • Mirrors hanging over wash basins • Drawers to put each child's change of clothes • Equipped to wait your turn: a bench, a little sofa, some books.. • Easy to clean • Visible to the teachers • A pleasant place • A separate space • Personalized space: child's photographs, child's objects, child's personal symbol 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieving autonomies • Learning to wait • Learning by imitation of other children and teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having the experience of an adult taking care of you • The time for pampering and tenderness • The time for special and individual attention • The time for listening to some children's stories • Respecting each other's intimacy • Knowing your body and that of others • It is an intimate moment for each child

As shown in the tables, the hygiene and toilet space is described in terms that refer to physical characteristics (**coloured, well lit, intimate place...**), to the experience and perception of children and adults (**a pleasant place, a personalized place, child-friendly, a quiet place...**), and to the adults-children relationships (**visible to the teachers**).

Parents and teachers conceive this space as a place in which activities and relationships that concern both the care dimension (**having the experience of an adult taking care of you; the time for special attention, the time for pampering and tenderness; the time for listening to some children's stories**) and the education dimension (**achieving autonomies; learning to wait; learning by imitation of other children and teachers**) take place.

Some teachers say:

- "It is the moment when an adult and a child look each other in the eye".

- "Some children just wait for that moment to get the pampering of the teacher, some children tell each other ... it's time for deep relationships ... "

A parent reports:

- "In the toilet space children learn the ability to take care of others, my child is learning to poop in the potty, she looks very much at her friend, and imitates her. The teacher told me that when she has to go to the bathroom her friend calls her, takes her hand and says: "Come now, it's time!!" and accompanies her to the bathroom".

2.2.2 Eating Space Parents

DESCRIPTION	EDUCATION/LEARNING	CARE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well set table: dishes, glasses, cutlery • quiet • Tidy • The same meal for each child • No plastic dishes and glasses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieving autonomies: eating by yourself, pouring water, clearing the table... • Learning to taste all the food • Learning to know when you are full • Learning to appreciate the food: flavor, smell, appearance • Learning to wait your turn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A moment of sharing: all children eat the same food together • Each child has several tasks: learning to take care of others • The older children help the younger ones

Teachers

DESCRIPTION	EDUCATION/LEARNING	CARE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well set table: dishes, glasses, cutlery No plastic dishes and glasses Well-designed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A moment of sharing stories... Achieving autonomies: eating by yourself, pouring water, clearing the table... Learning to taste all the food Learning to know when you are full Learning to appreciate the food: flavor, smell, appearance Learning to wait your turn Learning food preferences of peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A moment of sharing: all children eat the same food together Each child has several tasks: learning to take care of others The older children help the younger ones Care in preparing the table

Regarding the eating space, the importance of a **well-designed, quiet and tidy place** come out from the discussions; much attention is paid to the "care of the table" (**well set table: dishes, glasses, cutlery**) end to the use of ecological material (**no plastic dishes and glasses**).

The eating place is conceived as a moment of care (**a moment of sharing: all children eat the same food together; each child has several tasks; the older children help the younger ones; care in preparing the table**), but also as a place where learning (**achieving autonomies; learning to taste all the food; learning to know when you are full; learning to appreciate the food: flavour, smell, appearance; learning to wait your turn**).

The Care and Education dimensions are present and intertwined in the parents' and teachers' ideas and representations of the eating space.

A parent says:

"One nice thing is that the children have a dish in common, for example in the morning at the fruit interval they have a dish in common, they take a piece and they know that they have to pass it to others. Even the bread, they take a piece and then pass it to others ... "

A teacher reports:

"It is also a moment of sharing, because it is the time when children often tell us about what they did during the weekend with the families ... So it is a time when we talk a lot".

2.2.3 Sleeping Space

Parents

DESCRIPTION	EDUCATION/LEARNING	CARE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A place that gives security Quiet Comfortable Intimate, not too large Low light Personalized space: child's sheet; child's photographs, child's objects or dolls... Beds on the ground, without bars, close to each other 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The time for pampering and tenderness between teachers and children The time for pampering and tenderness between peers Children search for and receive physical contact

Teachers

DESCRIPTION	EDUCATION/LEARNING	CARE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A place that gives security • Embracing place • Intimate, not too large • Comfortable • Child-friendly • Low light • Music • Possibility for the adult to stay close to children (cushions for adults) • Personalized space: child's sheet; child's photographs, child's objects or dolls... • Beds on the ground, without bars, close to each other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomies in sleeping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers take care of children's emotion • The time for pampering and tenderness between teachers and children • The time for pampering and tenderness between peers • Emotionally-charged place • The children learn to trust ...

The sleeping space is described in detail, particularly by the teachers. It is perceived as a **place that gives security**, and as an **embracing place**. Moreover, the sleeping space appears intimate, comfortable, personalized and child-friendly. Teachers and parents report in the focus groups, some physical characteristics of sleeping space that overall refer to a **climate of tranquillity and intimate relationships**, such as: *low light, music, not too large, cushions for adults, beds on the ground.*

From the ideas that emerged from the focus, this place is mainly characterized as a place where the **care dimension predominates**: *teachers take care of children's emotion; the time for pampering and tenderness between teachers and children; the time for pampering and tenderness between peers; emotionally-charged place; the children learn to trust.*

The teachers and the parents perceive the sleeping place as a place where **deep, intimate and emotionally significant relationships** are being consolidated, both between peers and between children and adults.

A parent says:

"It is the place of physical contact, of the pampering of the teacher but also of the companions"

A teacher says:

"Children recognize their place, everyone has their place.. a personalized and special place..."

2.3 The space for adults

The perception of spaces for adults differs greatly between the two ECEC centers.

In particular, in the MARIA VITTORIA Centre the space for families is perceived very differently by the parents than the teachers.

Some teachers say:

-"There is space for families, but it is a small and narrow space. I find it unpleasant, it should be taken care of. In the entrance area we also have reading space, but nobody likes it, it should be re-designed, to provide a better space for parents".

- "In the space for families it would be necessary to put some light and a bit of documentation.

Recently an armchair has been put in place for mothers who wish to breastfeed, but it should be better furnished ... »

Some parents say:

- "For me the family space, at the entrance is very nice, there we lived the first moments during the welcoming, so it was nice"

- "In the place for the families I chatted with other mothers about separation and small difficulties and even now I am happy to sit there. There is also a collection of documents for parents on different topics that the teachers make available to families. I like it because it is also a time to learn new things "

- "The space for families is a special space for me, here my baby and I have time to say goodbye in the morning and to meet up again in the afternoon"

Parents describe the space dedicated to the families in very positive terms, as a space where two important processes take place: **the reunion between parents and children** and **the transitions between home and school and vice versa**. Instead, the teachers recognize that they do not live daily this space with children; they experience it **less meaningful and less functional**.

In the focus groups of Gelsomino center, the **teachers highlight the lack of an adequate space for them**.

Some teachers say:

- "We need a place for Teachers»

- "In some schools in Sweden I remember seeing the beautiful and comfortable spaces for adults, where they could share but also relax, and wind down.

Moreover, both the teachers and the parents of the Gelsomino Center highlight **some critical aspects regarding the spaces for families**.

Some teachers say:

- "For the parents in front of the class there are two small armchairs and a small table but it is a too narrow, indefinite and chaotic space"

- "We don't have a space inside that allows parents to meet, relate, network ... in fact they stop outside ..."

A parent say:

"Sometimes when I go to get my baby I would like to stop a bit outside the class ... but there is a narrow corridor ... you don't really know where to put things ... then we adapt, but I'd like it to be a little more pleasant..."

2.4 The ideal space

The last question of the focus group was: *What is/are the most important thing/s of your ideal school for children, in relation to space?*

PARENTS	TEACHERS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The light that filters through the large windows • Essential and natural materials, like wood, no plastic • Unstructured space • Unstructured objects that stimulate the imagination • A garden like a forest • Not too many objects • Books • Safe and comfortable space • all the material and furnishings can be used • space that allows the children to move and be free 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Care and attention for the spaces, which are maintained over time • The documentation of the places: the children's photographs while they play and move in the space. • A welcoming place • The space conceptualized as flexible and continuously changing • Child-friendly • A space in which to experiment contact with animals. • A space in which to carry out the activities like at home: washing, cleaning, cooking (the kitchen laboratory) • Intimate space • A place in which the children can experiment their body, their agility, in which they can practice psychomotricity • A space that allows the relations between children of different ages and from different classes

The parents report different specific aspects that refer principally to physical characteristics of the space. An important aspect to emphasize is that for many parents it is very significant that in a school there are natural and unstructured materials to stimulate the imagination.

Some parents say:

"The light that filters through the windows here is fantastic! This makes the spaces really very bright, it gave me a sense of serenity, of peace, so having to spend seven hours a day in a kindergarten I chose this place"

"Our children are continuously surrounded by ready-made and plastic things so the kindergarten should be minimal, with essential materials"

"In my opinion, the nursery school should be a space like a house, but also like a park ... children must be able to make discoveries ..."

The perceptions of ideal space of the teachers is more complex, they refer several aspects concerning different levels. Some of these identify an **approach/attitude towards space** and a way of conceiving it (care and attention for the spaces, which are maintained over time; the space conceptualized as flexible and continuously changing; a welcoming place). Instead, other aspects, referred to by teachers, concern an **educational model and certain educational methodologies** (the documentation of the places: the children's photographs while they play and move in the space; a space that allows the relations between children of different ages and from different classes; a space in which to carry out the activities like at home: washing, cleaning, cooking; a place in which the children can experiment their body, their agility, in which they can practice psychomotricity).

Some teacher say:

-*"In my opinion an essential aspect of the space in a school is the care and attention to materials and spaces, without forgetting them... In this way, we also teach children to take care of things ..."*

-*"In my opinion the most important aspect is to have the space in mind"*

-*"It is important that it is an evolving space ... changing according to the observation of children ... and families ..."*

2.5 Some suggestions to go forward

The topics of the focus groups reveal **different important meanings** of the space within ECEC centers and **different educational functions** of the space: *the space that favors learning activities, play activities and emotional experiences; that favors relations and that connects inside and outside.*

An important aspect that emerges, especially from teachers, is the concept of *"space in mind"*, that is to say the idea of a space **that is designed and well conceived from each of the teachers**. Furthermore, in the perception of teachers, the educational space has been conceived as **flexible and in continuous change**.

From the focus it emerges that even parents have a very **articulated and complex perception of space**, for most situations **consistent** with that proposed by teachers.

However, with reference to some spaces that parents experience more with their children (*welcoming and entrance space*), it is possible to observe a **different perception** between parents and teachers. This is an extremely interesting evidence that emphasizes the importance of **paying attention to parents' points of view**.

Moreover, hygienic and toilet, eating and sleeping spaces emerge **as important places of caring, but also learning**, both in adults-children and in peers relationships.

Finally, some **critical aspect** of the space emerge in each ECEC center involved, such as: the garden and the toilet space in the Maria Vittoria centre and the welcoming space and the teachers space in the Gelsomino centre. The case studies provided for by the EDUCAS project could focus on some of these aspects in order **to observe and design possible changes**.