

ITALY – A split system under revision

ECEC provision is composed by two sectors according to children's age, 0-3 and 3-6. In 2015 a national act (Law 107/2015) established that such a split system was to be overcome by instituting an "integrated system of education and instruction from birth to six years", which is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and is grounded on children's right to education from birth. The following Law Decree (D.lgs. 65/2017) outlined a complex governance of the system within an articulated framework of cooperation between State, Regional governments and local governments and identified the major objectives and actions to extend, consolidate and qualify the system.

As the two provisions for 0- to 3-year-olds and 3- to 6-year-olds differ for governance, pedagogy, personnel qualification, and accessibility, the Law Decree outlined some organisational pivots to construct relations and elaborate a specific roadmap to implement the integrated system.

ECEC provision for 0-3 years old children

In 2019, 26.9% of children under three years of age attend a *servizio educativo per l'infanzia* [educational services for early childhood]. Most of them (24.6%) attend a *nido* [crèche], while *centri per bambini e famiglie* [centers for children and parents], *spazi gioco* [play group] and *servizi in contesto domiciliare* [family care services] cater for a small number of children. The first *nidi* were created in the early seventies and increased over the years slowly. The diffusion of services over the country is striking unequal and percentages of provision are dramatically different between Northern and Central areas, where in most regions the provision is over 33%, and Southern areas, where it is under 15%.

Percentages of children attending a service increase by age, quite low for under 1 year (after the maternity leave of at least 3 months from birth) to 22% of 12-24 months olds and 46,8% of children olds over 24 months.

The paucity of services for children under three years of age in the Southern area favours the anticipatory access of 25% of 2- years olds into scuola dell'infanzia [early childhood school] where they are received together with older children and in conditions that are not appropriate for their age. In order to counter this phenomenon, in 2007 sezioni primavera [spring classes] for 24- to 36-month-old children were created. These services are operated by nido personnel and regulated by the same norms than nido, though they are run within scuola dell'infanzia. Actually, a small percentage of 2-years olds attend these services, most of which were opened within publicly subsidized private scuola dell'infanzia.

Regulation and financial resources. More than half of places in the services for under 3s are provided directly by local governments with small financial support from regional governments and, only since 2017, from national government. Most of places in private service are subsidized by local governments on the basis of specific agreements and quality requirements. However, a certain number of places (estimated to be between 4 and 6%) are provided by completely private initiatives (with no public support). It is plausible that an unregulated/illegal provision exist in some areas.

The qualification of educators was recently defined by a national act as a 3yrs University degree (BA) in Educational Sciences with a specific pathway focused on early childhood education, while the structure and process standards of services and the modalities of their monitoring and evaluation are established by Regional acts. Local administrations have the responsibility of controlling private services and promoting the quality of both public and private ECEC provision.

Accessibility. Educational services for 0- to 3-years old children are *services on demand*. Children's access is regulated on the basis of their family status and parents' employment (in most sites mother's employment is valued specially) and fees vary according to parent/s' income. Children with disability have priority access as well as children from families with particularly disadvantaged socio-economic status. In 2019, parents' fees covered 18,7% of costs as a national average. Recently, a widespread political pressure demands to lower or suppress parents' fees and many Regions have chosen to allocate for this purpose part of the annual funding received from the Ministry of Education. Recent studies showed that parents with medium to high educational degree are overrepresented among *nido* users; this is partly due to the relevant effect of mother's education on her employment, and, consequently, on her child's access to the service.

Personnel. Educational services attended by children under three years of age are operated by:

- **educators** who are responsible for the education and care of children; the ratio of children per educator is regulated by Regional acts; the ratio in the *nidi* varies according children's age from 1 to 4 for babies to 1 to 7 -10 for toddlers. Usually, each group of children is cared for by 2 or 3 educators (according to children's ages and number);
- **assistant/cleaners** who clean the facilities, furniture, etc., and assist the cook in preparing meals but **do not have responsibilities in children's care and education**.

All professionals of an educational service - educators and often assistants - constitute an *educational team*, share decisions about the service organization, educational practices, and participate in collegial initiatives of in-service continuous professional development.

Each service is sustained by a **pedagogical coordinator** who support educators' reflection on educational practices, promote and support their relationships with children's parents, built links with other ECEC services in the area. The qualification required for pedagogical coordinators is a 5yrs university degree (MA) that may vary from Education to Psychology or Human Sciences.

Pedagogical Framework. Over the years, in *servizi educativi per l'infanzia* an original pedagogical culture emerged and new practices were experienced and diffused at local level. Up until today, such pedagogical culture was strongly hinged on local context and expressed in documents issued mainly by local governments. Since February 2022, national guidelines orienting educational practice in services attended by children under three years of age ([*Orientamenti nazionali per i servizi educativi per l'infanzia*](#)) have been issued by the Ministry of Education.

ECEC provision for 3-6 years old children

In 2019 the *scuola dell'infanzia* [early childhood school] catered for 90% of 3-years olds, 94% of 4-years olds, and 86% of 5-years old (a consistent % of them accessing primary school before 6).

62% of children are received in schools provided by the Ministry of Education, but almost a third are received in private pre-schools (mostly operated by an association of catholic pre-primary schools) and only 9 to 10% in schools provided by municipalities. The latter provision is particularly important in big cities as Rome, Milan, Turin, Bologna, but also in Reggio Emilia, Pistoia, Parma, where a continuous investment of the local government created advanced pedagogical practices.

Most of *scuola dell'infanzia* are full-time from 8-8.30 to 16-16.30 and children receive a meal together with their teachers inside the school. This is an important element related to the pedagogic perspective according to which the school is considered to be a social context and the organization of the daily life within it has an important impact on children's well-being and sociality. Moreover, it serves the social function of providing daily adequate food supply to all children. However, differences between Italian regions are found with regard to school time: in the Southern area many schools (43,41% to 21,84%) are opened only during the morning and many children do not receive a meal at school.

Regulation and financial resources. State-maintained schools are financed by the national government for what concerns personnel, but buildings, canteen, and transports are provided by local governments. Non-state pre-schools complying with Ministry of Education's quality standards (*parificate*) receive a financial support from the national government. Regulation, monitoring, and evaluation are established by the national governments. In state and municipal *scuola dell'infanzia* no financial contribution is required from the families other than for the meals.

Personnel. Two (or three) **teachers** share the responsibility of 20 to 29 children during educational by turn-taking during the day. Their co-presence during play and exploration activities is considered very important to ensure a coherent education action but, unfortunately, it is rarely achieved in State *scuola dell'infanzia*. Teachers share lunchtime and meal with children, but they do not provide any physical care, which is devolved to **assistants** (no qualification).



Teachers' qualification is a 5yrs University degree in Primary Education Sciences (*Scienze della Formazione Primaria*) conferring them a qualified teacher status which allow them to work either in pre-primary and primary school settings.

The *scuola dell'infanzia* run by local governments or private qualified associations employ a **pedagogical coordinator**, often the same than for educational services 0-3. Most of state *scuola dell'infanzia* are inserted in 'Comprehensive Schools Institutions' - including pre-primary, primary and lower- secondary schools – which are managed by **School Directors**, who do not have a specific pedagogical competence in early childhood. The institution of a specific profile of pedagogical coordinator in state institutions is under discussion (see below).

Pedagogical Framework. Documents issued by the Ministry of Education and updated periodically (*Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo e nuovi scenari*, 2018) present pedagogic outlines for *scuola dell'infanzia* within the curriculum framework for 3-14 education (including pre-primary, primary, and lower secondary schools).

Process of integration of the two provisions: major questions and strategies

The re-organisation of the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education has new responsibilities towards the educational provision for 0- to 3-year- old children and the consolidation of the overall system.

The Law 107/2015 and the Law Decree 65/2017 established a specific Committee that submits proposals and advises on the integrated system to the Minister. The Committee is composed by experts and representatives of Regional and Local governments.

The Committee has recently issued two documents:

- the “*Pedagogical guidelines for the integrated system zero to six*” (*Linee guida pedagogiche per il sistema integrato zero-sei*) which defines both the cultural and pedagogical framework of the integrated system proposing a unitary and holistic approach to the education of children from birth to six years, sketches the institutional and organizational framework of the system, and suggests the main strategies to consolidate and qualify it
- the “*National Orientations for early childhood educational services*” (*Orientamenti nazionali per i servizi educativi per l'infanzia*) which represents the first national pedagogical framework for the 0-3 provision. It was inspired by the main cultural achievements already realised in local experiences and discusses their relations with the pedagogical framework of *scuola dell'infanzia*.

Both documents were submitted to [consultation with stakeholders and public discussion](#) all over the country.

The institution and wide-spreading of a 'system of pedagogical coordination' through the country. A *local pedagogical coordination* team is to be created in each area under the impulse of



Regional and local governments (Law Decree 65/2017). This team will involve all pedagogical coordinators of educational services 0-3 (both public and private) and of *scuola dell'infanzia* (both public and private) operating in the same area. It will promote mutual acquaintance and collaboration between all ECEC services, plan shared initiatives of continuous professional development of personnel, and outline an integrated vision of children's educational needs in the area.

These teams already exist in the areas of the country where ECEC services are most widespread (i.e. Norther-Central Italy), but usually they involve only coordinators from educational services 0-3 and pre-schools run by Local governments or private associations.

In state-maintained *scuola dell'infanzia* the professional role of pedagogical coordinator is not yet defined. Current experimentations in this perspective are being carried out mostly at local and regional level by focusing on: 1) supporting pedagogical coordination functions within state-maintained *scuola dell'infanzia* through continuous professional development initiatives run by Regional Branches of the Ministry of Education where a 0-6 Unit has been established (e.g. *Ufficio Scolastico Regionale Veneto*), 2) granting a coordination role to experienced state-maintained *scuole dell'infanzia* teachers who become therefore responsible for providing pedagogical guidance within local networks of state *scuole dell'infanzia* in a given area (e.g. *Ufficio Scolastico Provinciale Modena*); 3) allocating a certain number of hours to municipal pedagogical coordinators for providing guidance and support to state-maintained *scuole dell'infanzia* (e.g. *Comune di Bologna*).

Shared initiatives of continuous professional development for personnel of 0-3 and 3-6 provisions. Sharing CPD initiatives represent an important lever of integration as they provide 0-3 educators and 3-6 teachers with the opportunity of exchanging reflections and practices and elaborating new strategies in order to ensure the continuity of children's experience in the transition to *scuola dell'infanzia* at 3 years. Actually, in the last years, many continuous professional development initiatives have been shared between the professionals of the two educational sectors.

One major obstacle is that the work contract of teachers in state-maintained *scuola dell'infanzia* entails poorer conditions to participate in continuous professional development initiatives than the work contract of teachers in municipal and private pre-schools. Joint in-service training pathways involving both pedagogical coordinators from municipal/private sector and teachers with coordination functions operating within state-maintained *scuola dell'infanzia* are currently being undertaken within the [EU-funded project INTRANS](#) with the aim of sustaining bottom-up experimentation of new forms of cross-sectoral dialogue and cooperation between 0-3 and 3-6 institutions – and their personnel – at local level.

The institution of Integrated areas: *Poli per l'infanzia*. The Law Decree 65/2017 outlined the institution of integrated settings, named *poli per l'infanzia*, where one or more educational services 0-3 and one *scuola dell'infanzia* will be opened within the same site or catchment area. This would allow to share organisational resources and promote continuity in access, relationships with parents, and children's experience, and might constitute a sort of meeting point for early childhood in the area. Particularly in areas where there is not yet any service for under 3, the opening of a



Spring class and/or a *centre for children and parents* close to a *scuola dell'infanzia* might help to build relations with the local community. Actually, in some areas similar projects, named 0-6 services already exist. Their functioning varies from having mixed ages classes to the common use of laboratories, playground and other facilities between same-age classes. Professionals share continuous professional development initiatives and collegial meetings.

Overcoming the gap between the qualifications of personnel for 0-3 and 3-6. It is a major challenge for the consolidation of the integrated system 0-6 the diverse pathways of initial training of professionals 0-3 and 3-6. The BA in Educational Sciences with a specific pathway on Early Childhood Education required for 0-3 educators is not placed in continuity with the MA in Primary Education Sciences required for *scuola dell'infanzia* teachers. This is as a potential threat to the furthering of the pedagogical culture of early childhood education on which Italian ECEC services have built their strength over the last forty years. The alignment of initial education pathways for *scuola dell'infanzia* and primary school teachers – which emphasises a narrow subject-oriented approach to teaching over a broader pedagogical approach to learning – is potentially leading to the *schoolification* of early childhood education practices, with the risk of reducing the role of *nido* to mere childcare and the role of *scuola dell'infanzia* to compulsory school preparation. For this reason, it would be necessary to introduce a more unified approach and coherent strategy to personnel's initial education across the 0-3 and 3-6 sector.

