



INTRANS LOCAL BASELINE REPORT

Policy Baseline Report – ITALY (Emilia-Romagna Region)

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Introduction

The two-year period between 2015 and 2017 has witnessed a radical transformation in the Italian early childhood education and care (ECEC) scene. During this relatively short time span, two key pieces of legislation were passed by Parliament (Law n. 107/2015 and its implementation act, Leg. Decree n. 65/2017) triggering a broad reconfiguration of the system of early childhood/preschool education until 6 years of age. Chief among the reform pledges, the provisions introduced an integrated early childhood education system from 0 to 6 years (*'sistema integrato di educazione e di istruzione da 0 fino ai 6 anni'*) to overcome the traditional split between early childhood educational development services (*'servizi socio-educativi per la prima infanzia'*) catering to the 0-3 age group, and pre-primary settings (*'scuola dell'infanzia'*) for children aged 3 to 6 years.

Whereas the establishment of an integrated ECEC system has been hailed as a watershed moment in the history of Italian early childhood policy – and, indeed, of the country's education system – implementation of the reform poses a number of complex, daunting challenges to national and local authorities (Cerini & Spinosi, 2021; Mari, 2017; Falcinelli & Raspa, 2018). Which organizational models are to be adopted by the new integrated system such that it leads to high effectiveness? Which governance model is best suited to 'govern the integrated system', given the polarization of Italy's ECEC context? Which implementation approach is likely to be the most effective, in the sense of preventing an increase in service disparities among already developed and lagging Regions¹? Which strategies, finally, are most likely to succeed in order to transition two separate workforces into a new one?

These concerns have fueled inquiries into the capabilities of national authorities and local governments to effectively govern the development of an integrated ECEC system. Significantly, however, these questions have also fallen short of exhausting the debate on the broader implications of the reform. Specifically, the envisaged reshaping of the ECEC sector has brought a crucial shift in focus towards issues of continuity (Balduzzi, 2021; Bondioli & Savio, 2018; Zaninelli, 2018). The establishment of integrated early childhood services on a nationwide level will necessarily entail a redefinition of the methods used to govern transitions – both between daycare and preschool settings, and between non-compulsory and compulsory education – alongside a reallocation of resources to prioritize attention toward such crucial transition phases between previously split educational levels.

Furthermore, having formally relinquished their segmented structure, with the onset of the new integrated system many ECEC services will be required a profound recasting of their operational structures, procedures and organizational design (Mari, 2017). As part of this considerable effort toward institutional transformation and renovation, arguments for investing directly on warm transitions are gaining new prominence in Italy (Balduzzi, 2021, Zaninelli, 2018; Bondioli & Savio, 2018) and are expected to continue to make progress on the policy reform agenda. In broad terms, these arguments appeal to the idea that the successful establishment of the integrated system – that is, to approximate its full functional

¹ The distribution of 0-3 services in Italy has been and remains severely fragmented across regional boundaries (for a comprehensive overview see: Lazzari, 2012).



capacity, uniformly across the country – will remain largely contingent upon regional and local authorities' capacity to address and resolve the problems arising from the sector's fragmented institutional legacy.

Methodology

The findings presented in this report are based on:

- (1) the policy analysis of legislative acts and official pedagogical guidelines issued by Italian Ministry of Education (MIUR) and by the Emilia-Romagna Region;
- (2) the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with stakeholders involved at various levels of administration and provision of ECEC services in Emilia-Romagna as well as with key-decision makers and policy advocates at national level.

The list of interviewees included:

- regional (n=1) and municipal (n=2) officers, among whom a senior civil servant and two representatives of municipal administration educational departments (*dirigenti di area servizi educativi*), one of which located in a large city;
- a council member of a middle-size city in the Emilia-Romagna Region (ERR);
- a 'high-level pedagogical coordinator' representative of the main ECEC private NFP provider in Emilia-Romagna Region (*Federazione Italiana Scuole Materne-FISM*);
- a MIUR consultant with coordination role in the national steering committee responsible for developing a unitary curriculum for children's education from 0 to 6 years of age;
- the president of the most important ECEC advocacy organization in Italy (*Gruppo Nazionale Nidi e Infanzia*), which is also associated partner to this project;
- a member of the national network of social cooperatives *Legacoop Sociali* (division of ECEC services), who is responsible for PROGES education unit;
- a pedagogical coordinator responsible for research and development unit at PROGES social cooperative;
- a local administrator responsible for implementation of socio- educational services the metropolitan area of a big city (*Dirigente Area Servizi alla persona*) and a high-level pedagogical coordinator (working closely with the above-mentioned local administrator) who is responsible for the coordination of 0-18 services in the same area;
- a Council Member of a small-size municipality characterized by one of the highest (and raising) rates of 0 to 5 years-old children with migrant background in ERR (who also act as representative of the educational district within the metropolitan area's council of a big city).

To ensure a comprehensive view over local provision, the selection criteria for interviewees aimed at covering the key dimensions of planning and regulation (E-R Regional Authorities), day-to-day management of Local Authorities' ECEC service provision both at administrative level (council member) and at the point of service delivery ('*dirigenti di area*', pedagogical

coordinator). The selection thus endeavored to ensure a balanced sample across the entire local structure of ECEC management and delivery.

Furthermore, given the importance of policy advocacy in the scope of WP2 of the InTRANS project, representatives of ECEC stakeholders' organization and MIUR steering committee were also included in the sample.

Interviews were collected between March and July 2020. A total of 12 stakeholders were contacted and agreed to sit for digitally recorded interviews, which lasted an average of 40 minutes. The authors transcribed all interviews verbatim for analysis. With a rather narrow research focus - collection of inside information on specific dynamics of policy implementation – we opted to follow a strongly guided interview set up. However, the subjective nature of the reflections shared by interviewees, also suggested to keep the guideline open, so as to allow for occasional ad hoc or spontaneous queries.

The question route for the interviews focused on three areas:

- (i) Organizational changes and transformations triggered by the recent implementation of the D.L. 65/2017 ;
- (ii) Opportunities and challenges of the post-reform scenario;
- (iii) Priority areas of policy intervention for upcoming implementation efforts.

Interview data were analyzed in accordance to the 'framework' approach (Ritchie and Spencer 1994). The method involves a systematic five-stages process. The first step consists in 'familiarization', a careful scrutiny of collected data through multiple readings and re-readings of transcribed interviews. The second stage sees the definition of a first thematic framework (or 'index'), built by grouping recurrent ideas and topics into themes and sub-themes (index categories). Following this stage are the phases of 'indexing' and 'charting'. The indexing process refers to the systematic application of the thematic framework to the entirety of the transcribed material. Charting consists in moving textual data outside of its original location in the transcribed passages and placing it into analytical charts, organized according to indexed categories (themes and subthemes). The final stage consists in the interpretation of charted data, which is when actual in-depth examinations of the sifted material is performed, looking to define concepts, finding associations between themes, and identifying causes and explanations for the research questions under investigation.



Policy Context and Dynamics

ECEC Policies in Italy

July 2015 saw the introduction in Italy of **Education Reform Act n. 107** (commonly known as 'La Buona Scuola' or 'The Good School'), bringing a number of profound – and in certain cases long-awaited – transformations to the country's educational system. Most significantly for the ECEC sector, an integrated early childhood education system from 0 to 6 years was formally established – Article 1(180-181)(e) – under the authority of the Ministry of Education. **The creation of a unitary 0-6 cycle in Italy has been described as the end of an era for the early childhood sector:** the closing of the curtains on the country's dual ECEC structure, being replaced by a new institutional arrangement inspired by principles of **equal educational opportunities, child-centered and holistic learning, pedagogical continuity and organizational integration**. In this sense, **Law 107/2015** allowed to definitively **overcome, at least at policy level, the conceptual split between 'childcare provision'** – until now 0-3 services were conceived as *social assistance* services for working mothers in national legislation (Law 1004/1971) – and **'early learning' provision** – with 3-6 services being officially recognized as school institutions within the national system of education.

The enactment of the Reform Act on the integrated system was the result of an enduring process of policy advocacy which lasted nearly 30 years (the first proposal for a Law of Popular Initiative could be dated back to 1993) and which was persistently carried out from bottom-up by professional networks and advocacy groups – such as *Gruppo Nazionale Nidi e Infanzia* (InTrans AP) – as well as by those local and regional administrators who proactively invested in the early childhood services (especially *nidi*) within a commitment to social justice and children's rights to education since the 1960s².

This enthusiasm notwithstanding, multiple barriers seemed to impede a straightforward implementation process. Replacement of the dual structure entailed, first and foremost, phasing out the many organizational traits/elements that had formed the core of the old system, fleshing out its split character. Secondly, concerted and relentless efforts would be needed to bridge the organizational boundaries inherited from previous decades and let the unified system take root. **Legislative Decree n. 65 of May 2017, which further defined the principles underlying the Reform Act and laid out a first broad implementation program, should be regarded as a crucial first milestone in this direction.** The legislation laid out an ambitious agenda of measures targeting institutional capacity and sectoral structures across national, regional and municipal governance levels, in the attempt to create a common ground for action by taking into account the extremely diversified landscape of educational approaches and professional practices that are embedded in the history and development of the two segments, along with the establishment of common coordinating bodies, related pathways of joint professional development, and aligned pedagogical guidelines. These

² For a more detailed account of the early years of ECEC in Italy and of the evolution of municipal ECEC services in Emilia-Romagna Region see:

Catarsi, E. (2004). Loris Malaguzzi and the municipal school revolution. *Children in Europe*, 6, 8-9.

Lazzari, A. (2012). The public good. Historical and political roots of municipal preschools in Emilia Romagna. *European Journal of Education*, 47(4), 556-568.



aspects will be analysed in details in par. 1.4, after a brief overview of the previously existing split system and its dynamics is provided in par. 1.1-1.3.

A brief history of ECEC policy developments in Italy

Under the split system, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (*Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali*) and the Department of Family Policies (*Dipartimento per le politiche della famiglia*) within the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (*Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri*) were in charge of ECEC services for children from 0 to 3 years, while the Ministry of Education, University and Research (*Ministero dell'istruzione, dell'università e della ricerca*) was responsible for settings catering to children from 3 to 6 six years. This crucial administrative separation, that long epitomized the split nature of the Italian ECEC system, reflected entrenched differences among the two segments in historical/institutional background, organizational culture, and operational scope.

Day-care centers for children under 3 years of age (*asili nido*) were first introduced in Italy around the mid 1920s, as means-tested relief programs targeting working mothers. Almost half a century later, in 1971, Law n. 1044 introduced a five-year plan for the establishment of municipal nurseries (*piano quinquennale per l'istituzione di asili nido comunali*). From an organizational perspective, the legislation is often regarded as the symbolic birth of modern early childhood provision in the country. The plan laid out the basis for a decentralized governance system, whereby local authorities effectively took control of 'planning, regulating, and running' ECEC services³. As from 1971, responsibility over the sector was distributed across a tripartite structure: (a) national ministry and government departments holding 'administrative responsibility' over the sector, which amounted to a loose form of general oversight; (b) regional councils and public administration authorities, with broad responsibility over planning and regulation; (c) municipal governments, in charge of day-to-day management, personnel recruitment and training, maintenance, and basic oversight. Within this decentralized framework, the persistence of considerable cross-regional inequalities in financial, administrative and infrastructure asset terms resulted in a severely uneven development and distribution of municipal day-care services throughout Italy.

The elementary education act n. 2185 of 1923 (*Legge Gentile*) was the first legislation to officially designate voluntary preschools catering for children aged 3-6 years as educational institutions within the elementary cycle, renaming them preparatory school (*scuola di grado preparatorio*). Although formally a part of elementary education, the *grado preparatorio* operated autonomously, often on the premises of existing charitable institutions. Throughout the 1920s, the preparatory classes became known as maternal school (*scuola materna*)⁴ and special training schools were established for staff employed at this level (*scuole di metodo maternale*). The establishment of a state-run kindergarten service (*scuola*

³ The 1971 legislation unveiled a national fund for ECEC infrastructure development, accessible to Regional councils at the request of municipalities. The legislation further instructed Regional authorities to include planned investment in annual strategic planning and programming exercises, and establish frameworks and criteria to be used in assessment and monitoring processes.

⁴ Royal Decree n. 3106 of 1923 (art. 1) contains one of the first official appearances of the term *scuola materna*, as an alternative designation for *scuola di grado preparatorio*. The term '*materna*' accentuated the importance assigned to reproducing a homely environment inside the facilities, 'based on the 'motherly' competences of the personnel' (Mantovani, 2007:240).



materna statale) grounded in national legislation came in 1968, at the end of a tumultuous decade of social and economic change. In that year, state authorities extended their control over all existing preschool facilities, integrating them into the national education system. Law n. 444 of 1968 described state-maintained settings as 'voluntary and free of charge', while private – mostly Not-For-Profit (NFP) – preschools would be allocated state subsidies to help maintain a low fee structure and prevent the crowding out of disadvantaged families. At this stage, national attendance rates for *scuole materne* were already higher than 50% (Mantovani, 2007). As the demand continued to soar, national authorities addressed the lack of preschool facilities (particularly severe in southern Regions) through a comprehensive expansionary program. Within a decade, rising figures for enrolment, infrastructure and workforce participation confirmed the impact of the investments. By 1980, the number of preschool facilities had risen by nearly 50 per cent (from 20,522 in 1968, to 30,487), the workforce had more than doubled (from 46,158 to 108,451), and enrolled pupils increased by nearly half a million units (from 1.43 to 1.90 millions) (ISTAT 2011). *Scuola materna* remained the official denomination for preschool until 1991, when the new educational guidelines for state-maintained services (*'Orientamenti'*) replaced the term with *scuola dell'infanzia*.

General organization of the 0-3 provision

Under the label early childhood development, we refer in this report to a wide array of socio educational services that in Italy are currently provided to children younger than 3 years of age. The complete list includes:

- Municipal day-care settings, directly managed by municipalities (*'nidi d'infanzia'* and *'micronidi'* depending on capacity); typically adopt income-based segmented fee structures;
- Municipal day-care settings managed by social cooperatives, not-for-profit private associations (*'privato sociale'*), catholic bodies, or other foundations: typically required to adopt the same segmented fee structure as settings directly managed by municipalities;
- Complementary services (*'servizi integrativi'*), such as home-based day care (*'nido famiglia'*) for small groups, play spaces for children, centers for children and parents; usually managed by municipalities, either directly or through social cooperatives, or by private educators (in the case of home-based care); in the latter case services may be subsidized by Municipalities under local agreements (*'accreditamento'*);
- Transition "spring" classes (*'sezioni primavera'*), for children from 24 to 36 months which are normally attached to preschools; state-maintained settings are managed and financed directly by state authorities via local offices, whereas private NFP settings (usually run by Catholic bodies within their preschools) receive public subsidies from multiple sources (eg. State and Local Authorities).

ECEC services for the 0-3, with the exception of state-maintained "spring classes", are financially supported by municipal budgets and family contributions. Municipal governments have no real say about this arrangement, as *nidi* have been classified since 1983 (Law n. 131 of 1983) as an "on-demand service" (*'servizio a domanda individuale'*) – a category of non-indispensable municipal services for which local governments are requested to charge participation fees to meet part of the overall running costs.

Since the onset, long-term objectives, strategic goals, and minimum operational standards for the 0-3 sector have been defined locally within Municipal regulatory frameworks and Regional Legislative Frameworks¹. Without relying on national authorities for general frameworks or criteria, municipal authorities have in fact been expected to lay out quality guidelines (*'carta della qualità dei servizi'*) for the monitoring and evaluation of provision – with particular attention to structural standards which play a key role in competitive public procurement procedures. Minimum standard requirements concerning structural quality (children-per-setting, children-per-staff, and children-per-square meter ratios, etc) are defined within regional regulatory framework and legislation and so were qualification requirements for the workforce until National Law 107/2015 was enacted.

With specific reference to **Emilia-Romagna**, the Regional Law defining the organizational features and pedagogical orientations of 0-3 services is R.L. 19/2016, which has been recently updated to include qualitative criteria requirements ECEC providers should strive for in order to award regional funding (*'accreditamento'*).

One of the most important quality criteria that was recently introduced by D.G.R. n. 704/2019 – along with the presence of pedagogical coordinator and parents' participation bodies – is the requirement, for subsidised providers, to lay out a the *'Pedagogical project'* of the service outlining educational goals and methodologies according to a regional index (*'Indice del Progetto Pedagogico'*). This document should also set the basis for the self-evaluation of services to be systematically carried out – under the guidance of the pedagogical coordinator – in order to sustain team reflection on enacted educational practices and to foster quality improvement of services over time. The adoption of this tool for design and evaluation of the pedagogical project of ECEC settings was developed over a 5-year consultation process with 0-3 stakeholders in order to sustain the creation of a shared culture within ECEC settings managed by different providers, by inscribing them in a broader framework that facilitate dialogue and reciprocal exchange of experiences within the regional integrated system of 0-3 services (*'qualità diffusa'*). For this purpose, a key-role is assigned in this process to the pedagogical coordinators – who are responsible for nurturing collegial reflection among professionals within each individual service – as well as to local coordination networks (*'Coordinamenti Pedagogici Territoriali'*, lit. Platform for Pedagogical Coordination), which constitute the forum where the experiences and perspectives of services run by different providers are shared and negotiated by facilitating the emergence of a common vision.

General organization of preschool services for the 3-6

Non-compulsory ECEC provision for children aged between 3 and 6 years is commonly referred to in Italy as *scuola dell'infanzia*. It includes a variety of kindergarten, or preschool, services:

- State-maintained settings, directly managed by state authorities (*'scuole dell'infanzia statali'*); publicly financed, no enrolment fees are charged;
- Municipal settings, managed by local authorities (*'scuole dell'infanzia comunali'*); occasionally charge fees;
- Recognized private settings (*'scuole dell'infanzia paritarie'*), managed by private – mostly Catholic not-for-profit organizations (FISM)⁵ - which comply with state or local mandated criteria for receive public funding and may also charge participation fees;

⁵ Italian Federation of Catholic Preschools (*'Federazione Italiana Scuole Materne'*).

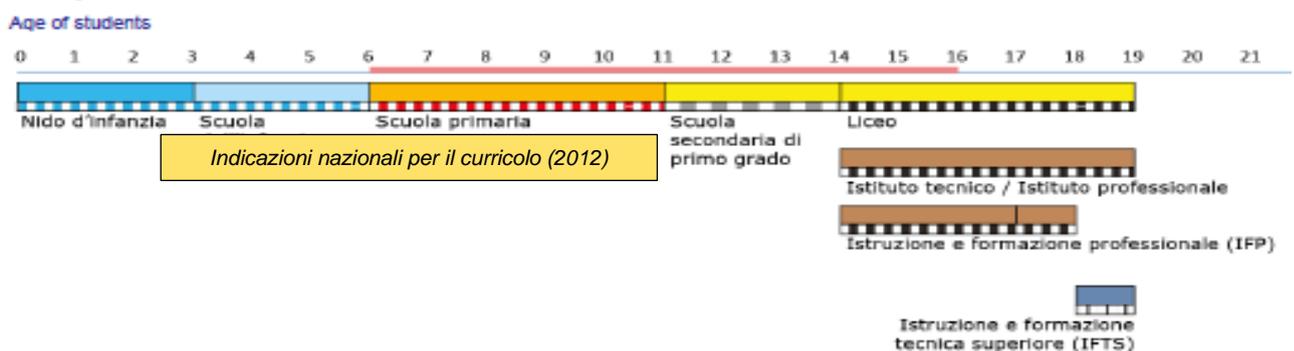


- Non-recognized private settings ('*scuole dell'infanzia private*'), not always qualifies for state subsidies; typically charge higher fees than subsidized ECEC (only an extremely small number of preschools falls in this category).

About 60% of ECEC services attended by 3-6 children at national level come under direct responsibility of the State, through the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR). Attendance in state-managed schools is free of charge, while municipal and confessional settings, which are normally subsidized through national or regional fund, may charge modest participation fees. State-maintained preschools are operated as part of Comprehensive School Institutions ('*Istituti Comprensivi*'), which are including primary and lower secondary schools located in the same district and are coordinated by a *school director who is responsible for the overall management and coordination*.⁶ Each school institution is autonomous in deciding whether to assign middle-management coordination roles in relation to the different school levels (eg. preschool, primary school, lower secondary school) by availing of senior staff according to their internal resources (eg. converting partially or entirely teaching working hours into coordination tasks).

Preschool curriculum guidelines ('*Indicazioni per il Curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia*') are issued by the Ministry of Education and periodically updated in synergy with the following levels of the National School System according to a vertical continuity perspective accompanying children's educational pathway from preschool to lower secondary school (Indicazioni Nazionali per il Curricolo, 2012). Along the same line, the tool used for the self-evaluation of preschools ('*RAV-infanzia*') derives from the evaluation instrument developed by MIUR for the monitoring and evaluation of compulsory school education ('*Rapporto di Autovalutazione*'-RAV). The convergence of these elements contributes to steer – to a certain extent – the educational approaches and practices adopted within state-maintained preschools more toward a *school readiness* perspective than toward an *edu-care* perspective.

Italy



Nido d'infanzia are marked as ISCED 0 on the basis of the law 107/2015, implemented from school year 2017/18.

⁶ As State-maintained Comprehensive Schools are attended by children aged 3 (preschool entrance) to 14 (end of lower secondary school education) living in the same geographical area, these are usually large-scale institutions which might cater for the education of over 1000 pupils at the time. 10



The integrated system introduced by the 2015-2017 reforms

The reforms undertaken between 2015 and 2017 have introduced an integrated early childhood education system in Italy. As of 2017, the Ministry of Education, University and Research is responsible for a unitary entire ECEC cycle, from 0 to 6 years, which will be established 'gradually' – in accordance to the timeframe and action steps laid down in a multi-year implementation plan ('*piano di azione pluriennale*').

The 'integrationist agenda', as we may consider it, revolves around four overarching priorities:

- (i) **Structural continuity:** managing the organizational transition toward the new system by means of infrastructure improvement, rescaling and recalibration of governance
- (ii) **Professional continuity:** Streamlining professionalism by leveling qualification requirements at University level and promoting joint in-service opportunities for early childhood educators and preschool teachers
- (iii) **Pedagogical continuity:** developing national pedagogical guidelines for 0-3 services and designing an overarching 0 to 6 curricular framework
- (iv) **Horizontal continuity:** widening the relationships between ECEC, families and the community (tackling social exclusion by increasing participation to ECEC for disadvantaged groups, providing parental support across a range of diversified services).

[A more detailed yet concise overview is provided by the excel table in [Annex 1](#)]

Principles, scope and rationale of the reform

Article 1 of LD 65/2017 sets out the general principles, scope and rationale underlying the gradual establishment of an integrated ECEC system from 0 to 6 years.

General principles (Art. 1.1):

- Guaranteeing equal education for all children to have access to education, learning, care, social interactions and play;
- Overcoming territorial, economic, ethnic and cultural barriers and inequalities;

In order to pursue these principles, the integrated ECEC system (Art. 1.3):

- promotes learning and developmental continuity throughout a unitary educational process,
- strives to reduce social and cultural inequalities, while responding to relational needs of children, by fostering inclusion through personalized interventions as well suitable organization of spaces and activities,
- welcomes children with disabilities,
- respects and welcome diversity,
- supports families in their primary educational role and foster their participation in the life of the educational/school community
- facilitates the conciliation of working and care responsibilities, with a particular attention to single parents' families

- promotes the quality of educational provision by employing university qualified educators/teachers and by fostering their ongoing professional development through in-service training, collegial work and pedagogical coordination.

Strategic objectives

The 2017 legislation includes a clear emphasis on providing a baseline set of strategic operational goals for the new integrated system. The baseline was introduced with the twofold purpose of, on the one side, defining a uniform framework of quality standards for the promotion of integrated ECEC services across the country, on the other, supporting regional government and local authorities' actions in defining their strategic priorities and allocating resources to their fullest potential.

Article 4 lays out the strategic goals to be pursued through, and by means of, the new integrated arrangement:

- (a) Increasing childcare accessibility and participation to balance out territorial divides and ensure coverage to 33% of children in the 0-3 group (2002 Barcelona targets);
- (b) Expanding provision to ensure ECEC coverage to at least 75 per cent of Italian municipalities;
- (c) Improving the inclusiveness of ECEC, mindful of the idea that daycare centers, nurseries and complementary services, as educational institutions, should cater to all children, regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, family-of-origin type – similarly to the preschool level.
- (d) Raising qualification levels of the teaching staff;
- (e) Improving workforce participation in in-service training;
- (f) Establishing a network of coordinating bodies, or Platforms for Pedagogical Coordination (PPCs) for the integrated ECEC cycle (*'coordinamenti pedagogici territoriali'*) across the entire national territory; aside from coordination responsibilities, such centers should be able to provide a reliable source of pedagogical support and guidance to ECEC managers and practitioners.
- (g) Selecting and introducing new tools of financial support for facilitating access by disadvantaged groups.

In laying out the short and long-term goals of the integrated system, the legislation adopts the wording 'strategic objectives' (*'obiettivi strategici'*) instead of 'minimum standards for provision' (*'livelli essenziali delle prestazioni'*). This wording choice, along with the conspicuous absence of specific timeframes for meeting the objectives, has been stigmatized as plausible evidence of a wavering commitment by the Italian legislator to follow through the expansionary commitments made by the reform.

Another issue to have been raised is the allocation of funding to local governments without an explicit commitment to a quality management plan. Decree n. 65/2017, in fact, does not bring any substantial alteration to the tripartite governance structure that has served the early childhood development field since 1971. Under the integrated regime, local authorities will retain ample responsibility for implementing the integrated ECEC cycle, as well as to



pursue the broad set of strategic goals set out in Article 4. Such delegation of authority, however, is neither bound nor made contingent upon commitments by Regional governments to any predefined implementation agenda. Furthermore, given the current absence of a national reporting framework, based on transparent monitoring criteria and widely agreed-upon outcome indicators, observers have highlighted the risk that local authorities could feel released from any obligation to report on their progress toward the strategic goal.

Access to ECEC in 2020. The Italian situation in a snapshot

The risk of policy variability between Regions, inherent to the absence of national minimum standards for provision, is compounded by the magnitude of change to be accomplished, which is particularly significant in the area of ECEC accessibility ('*accessibilità*'). As outlined in the previous section, Decree n. 65/2017 frames access as a strategic objective, in the context of the broader expansion of ECEC services envisioned by the reform. In parallel, it confirms the increase to a 33 per cent nationwide coverage rate (for children under three) as perhaps its only well-specified quantitative target. A brief clarification should be made with respect to the conceptual difference between coverage and accessibility.

Coverage is a quantitative representation of participation in ECEC activities: it refers purely to the proportion of a targeted population (children or their families) that attends day-care or home-based centers, receiving the services they need. The concept of accessibility, on the other hand, calls attention to the opportunity and conditions for participation, and as such presents (at least) three crucial dimensions: (i) *affordability* (ECEC enrolment fees should allow families to pay for services without significant financial hardship); (ii) *physical accessibility*, or *availability* (ECEC centres should be within reasonable reach; opening hours and appointment systems should be adjusted to the needs of people in the area); (iii) *acceptability* (ECEC services should be perceived as effective and of value across socio-economic, ethnic, and urban/rural fault lines).

A recent joint report commissioned by the Department of Family Policies to ISTAT, University of Venice "Ca' Foscari" and MIPA consortium, titled '*Nidi e servizi educativi per l'infanzia, stato dell'arte, criticità e sviluppi del sistema educativo integrato*' (June 2020), highlighted a structural shortage of licensed centers for the under-threes, largely insufficient to meet potential demand and further exacerbated by services' uneven distribution across regions.

ECEC coverage for the under-threes was reported to be about 12 per cent in Southern regions and less than two points higher (13,5 per cent) in the Isles – against a national average of nearly 25 per cent (data refer to the school-year 2017/2018). In the same period, Central and North Eastern regions recorded coverage rates above 32 per cent, while the North Western average settled slightly below 30 points (29 per cent). The report further pointed out how urban centers, on average, benefit from disproportionately higher coverage rates than rural areas, as ECEC facilities tend to be concentrated in and around cities or large towns, while they are rarer to encounter in sparsely populated areas, small, and very small municipalities. On this point, by 2017 ECEC availability had significantly surpassed the Barcelona target level



of 33 per cent in all Northern and Central provincial capitals (*'capoluoghi di provincia'*). The cities of Aosta and Bolzano, in particular, could vaunt coverage rates above 60 per cent. On the worst-off end of the spectrum: in addition to the entire Southern region, Northern Alpine districts and municipalities located along the Appenine ridge in central Italy were reported to be facing significant difficulties in ensuring basic levels of provision.

Beyond place of residence, socio-economic status was reported as another key determinant of ECEC participation. In 2018, average family expenditure on full time ECEC stood at about 2000 EURO per year – a potentially unsustainable burden for low-income families. Although publicly maintained day-care centers tend to adopt income-based fee scales, monthly enrolment rates continued to represent the most significant obstacle faced by disadvantaged children in accessing the services. Differentials in ECEC enrolment patterns between families provided a further mirror-image of socio-economic inequalities in the country. Significantly, the average household income of a family with at least one child attending ECEC was 40.092 Euro per year, against the 34.572 Euro per year recorded by families with children under three years of age not enrolled in any type of early childhood service. Finally, the percentage of children from households in the lowest income quintile that were reported to attend ECEC (13,4 per cent) differs quite significantly from households in the second (23,5 per cent), third (24,8 per cent), fourth (25,9), and particularly in the fifth (31,2 per cent).

Infrastructural improvement and Unitary ECEC settings.

The implementing decree 65/2017 legislation clearly stipulates that realizing the benefits of the integrated system remains contingent upon the establishment and dissemination of adequate ECEC infrastructures across the country, in particular for the 0-3 stage. Increasing territorial coverage of *nidi* is seen as fundamental for tightening the network of ECEC providers. Infrastructure improvement is thus not exclusively framed as a strategic lever to increase enrolment rates and bridge participation gaps across Regions, it also represents a key precondition for promoting developmentally appropriate edu-care approaches and practices against the risk of anticipation of formalised learning in a readiness perspectives, which can be recalled by the phenomenon of 2-years-olds early enrollment in preschool (*'anticipi'*)⁷. Another route envisaged by the 2017 legislation to foster structural integration between ECEC stages is the gradual establishment of Unitary Childcare Settings (*'Poli per l'infanzia'*) that integrate day-care (*nidi*) and preschool (*scuola dell'infanzia*) settings within the same premises. Regional Governments, in agreement with Regional School Offices (*'Uffici Scolastici Regionali'*)⁸ can schedule/plan the establishment of new unitary ECEC settings, in view of improving childcare coverage and promoting educational continuity across levels.

⁷ The 2020 report by ISTAT, Ca'Foscari University and MIPA consortium highlighted that, in the Southern regions of Italy, nearly 16% of children avails of early enrolment to preschool because of the lack of 0-3 services, and this resulted in an increase of early enrolment rate to primary school of 5-years-old children.

⁸ The Regional school office (*Ufficio Scolastico Regionale, USR*) is a branch of the Ministry of Education: usually, it is divided into Local offices (*Ambiti Territoriali*), depending on its duties and local requirements: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/administration-and-governance-central-and-or-regional-level-39_en



The 2017 Decree provides for the creation of a targeted national Fund for the integrated system (*'Fondo nazionale per il Sistema integrato'*). Resources made available through the Fund may be used to support the establishment of Unitary Childcare Settings, managing existing service costs, and setting up in-service training programs. Regional governments, in agreement with Regional School Offices, are expected to lay out and submit to Education Ministry a yearly programming document, built upon the requests to access the Fund submitted by local authorities interested in establishing new unitary settings. The Fund is currently endowed at approximately 240m €. Critics have highlighted the inadequacy of this level of funding to support any nationwide initiatives of infrastructure improvement, and pointed out that the amount will also certainly prove insufficient to raise participation in daycare services above the 33 per cent level indicated in the 2002 Barcelona Targets (ISTAT - Ca' Foscari University - MIPA 2020). In light of these financial constraints, it seems prudent to expect that local authorities will not see any significant improvement in their investment capacity in the short term, which in turn will affect the speed at which new ECEC facilities and Unitary childcare settings are established.

Professionalism and Pedagogy

The reforming effort of 2015-2017 also introduced the first national framework of mandatory qualifications for professionals working in 0-3 ECEC services (*'educatori'*). Starting from schoolyear 2019/2020, the following degrees are required for accessing ECEC positions within all types of publicly-financed settings:

- (i) three-year B.A. in Education (*'Scienze dell'educazione e della formazione'*) with specialization on ECEC for *'educatori'*;
- (ii) five-year M.A. in Primary Education (*'Scienze della Formazione Primaria'*) for preschool teachers (*'insegnanti'*)⁹.

As noted in the explanatory memorandum to Decree n. 65, the majority of Italian Regions already enforced a set of minimum qualification at the time the reform made them mandatory nationwide. Article 1.3 of the Decree specifies that the 0-6 integrated system endeavors to raise the quality of educational provision through multiple measures, among which employment of university qualified personnel, provision of relevant in-service training programs for educators and teachers, promotion of collective work (*'lavoro collegiale'*) and the development of regional/local platforms for pedagogical coordination (*'coordinamenti pedagogici territoriali'*).

Article 10 of Decree n. 65 further called on the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) to create an *Expert Commission for the Integrated system* to ensure further support and guidance to local governments and administrators in a phase of deep institutional change. This Expert Commission, which after some difficulties in the initial phase has finally been established, is responsible for defining national pedagogical guidelines (*'Linee guida*

⁹ The MA Degree in Primary Education confers a qualified status to teach both in preschool and primary school settings since 2010. This change, that was introduced to overcome the previous 2+2 model (2 foundational years in educational sciences + 2-years specialization track in either preschool or primary school education and didactics) in accordance with the Bologna process, has been looked with a certain apprehensions from ECEC experts and academics who fears this could be potentially contributing to the *schoolification of early childhood pedagogical approaches* (Lazzari, Balduzzi, Picchio, 2015).

pedagogiche nazionali) for the integrated 0-6 system as well as to perform consultative and advisory services for the Ministry¹⁰. Along this line, Article 5 of the Decree clearly stipulates that pedagogical guidelines must foster educational alignment across curriculum frameworks for the 0-3 and 3-6 sectors, in view of securing educational continuity between the two stages. In this respect, the significant innovation introduced into the ECEC system by the 2017 act is the first national curriculum framework for the 0-3 sector (*'orientamenti educativi nazionali per i servizi educativi per l'infanzia'*), to be developed by the Ministry of Education following the framework document launched for consultation by the Expert Commission in March 2021 (*'Linee Pedagogiche per il Sistema Integrato 0-6'*)¹¹.

The fact that national curricular guidelines for the 0-3 sector were never elaborated is in itself a compelling evidence of the *'social assistance' legacy of the field within national legislation*, which seems to be in *stark contrast with the long-standing pedagogical traditions and high quality educational experiences* developed by Municipalities and Regions in Northern-Central Italy (Lazzari, 2012). Quite on the opposite, National guidelines for preschool (3-6) were first issued in 1969 and were constantly updated until recent years, when they have been included in the vertical curriculum for the education of children aged 3 to 14 (*Indicazioni Nazionali per il Curricolo*, 2012).

In this sense, the different historical pathways along which *nidi* and *scuola dell'infanzia* build their cultural and pedagogical identity over time – as well as the different *'educational ideologies'* that are underlying professional and institutional practices enacted within such services¹² – should not be underestimated, as these could potentially generate tensions in the receptions and implementation of the new guidelines elaborated by the Expert Commission (*'Linee Pedagogiche per il Sistema Integrato 0-6'*).

Governance

Outlining the articulation of the integrated ECEC cycle was clearly a concern for the legislator. Whereas the implementation of the integrated system entails the reconfiguration of ECEC services in accordance with a logic of institutional continuity, this integration should not be construed as a merger of the two levels into a single, *'unified'* early education stage.

In this respect, experts and professionals have repeatedly underscored the importance, while transitioning towards an integrated regime, to do the utmost in order to preserve both the organizational autonomy and the distinct institutional and pedagogical culture of the two

¹⁰ The Expert Commission consists of representatives from regional and local authorities (policy officers, one of which was interviewed), MIUR senior advisors (among which the coordinator of the Commission, who was interviewed), representatives of professional and advocacy organizations (among which GNMI, whose president was interviewed), ECEC academic researchers.

¹¹ The opening event of the consultation process on the framework document *'Pedagogical Guidelines for the Integrated 0-6 system'* held by the Italian Ministry of Education is publicly available in English here: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/4at2PkTtW1c>

¹² Eg. *'Edu-care'* and *'child-centred'* approaches are much more commonly found in 0-3 services, instead *'early learning'* and *'readiness'* approaches are increasingly gaining ground in 3-6 services, especially in state-maintained preschools. Evidence of these claims could be found by comparing daycare centres' pedagogical projects (*Progetto Pedagogico*) with (pre)school educational plans (*PTOF*) as well as by comparing self-evaluation tools used within such institutions (eg. *Indice Progetto Pedagogico ERR* vs *RAV-infanzia*). 16

ECEC segments (Cerini, 2018). On the other hand, the rapprochement between the two segments will lead to:

- the development of *new territorial governance structures*, such as inter-institutional working tables established at Regional and Local levels including representatives of each components of the integrated system (Regional/Local administrators, Regional/Local school officers/directors, ECEC public and private providers, Universities)
- to the growing importance of existing *coordinating bodies*, such as the *Platforms for Pedagogical Coordination* (*'Coordinamenti Pedagogici Territoriali'*), which are to be re-designed and enhanced in order to embrace the coordination figures¹³ who are operating within State-maintained institutions.

Albeit at two different levels – and with different roles and tasks – both the inter-institutional working tables and the Platforms for Pedagogical Coordination – are charged with supporting policy implementation at territorial level, improving communication procedures across ECEC stakeholders (vertically and horizontally) and enhancing their mutual commitment toward the (diversified) implementation of a shared pedagogical vision (Chitti, 2019)¹⁴. It is precisely within this niche that rethinking transitions between *nido* and *scuola dell'infanzia* could become a catalyzer of change.

The role of pedagogical coordinators in municipal provision

'A very important feature of municipal provision is the employment of pedagogical coordinators, qualified professionals with management responsibilities whose role is to support educational practices within ECEC services. Pedagogical coordinators do not operate within a national legal framework: where given an official status, their operating framework (professional category, working conditions, responsibilities) is established by Regional Law: the statutory role of pedagogical coordinators in Emilia-Romagna is detailed in Article 33 of Regional Law n. 19 of 2016.

The role of pedagogical coordinator was created in the 1960s and 1970s, when some municipalities in Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany opened their first ECEC services, and in the following decades it spread across regions following the diffusion of the services (Musatti, Mayer, and Braga 2003). Nowadays, pedagogical coordinators are present in almost all municipalities governing ECEC services. Due to the democratic involvement of local communities, which has characterised municipal ECEC services since their inception, the choice was made to valorise the educational responsibility of the practitioners' group in the ECEC service rather than to entrust a director with this task. Consequently, the pedagogical coordinators are expected to support educational practice at team level through counselling and organisational activities, to promote innovation through the provision of professional development initiatives for their personnel, and to coordinate the work carried out by all ECEC services in the city. This function of supporting and improving the quality of ECEC services at systemic level characterises specifically the role of Italian ECEC coordinators compared with the role played by coordinators of ECEC services in other countries such as France (Baudelot et al. 2003). In fact, pedagogical coordinators are expected to work together as a team at municipality level. Distributing educational responsibility among networked services has had a major positive impact on their improvement as it developed the ECEC system within a coherent pedagogic project of the city, which acted as a driving force for the growth of a local culture of early childhood education.

[Lazzari, Picchio, Musatti, 2013]

¹³ Although these figures are not further defined in the text of Law Decree 65/2017, we can infer these to be, for example, school directors or leaders, senior teachers with middle-management role or coordination responsibilities.

¹⁴ <http://zeroseiup.eu/appunti-per-la-costruzione-del-sistema-integrato-di-educazione-fin-dalla-nascita/> 17



From pedagogical coordinators to a system of pedagogical coordination (Platform for Pedagogical Coordination) in Emilia-Romagna

The fundamental role played by pedagogical coordinators in improving children's educational experiences in early childhood services has been acknowledged by regional legislation since 1979. In the following years this led to a growing concern for their professional preparation and in the mid-1980s a regional training programme was put in place. It was designed and jointly conducted by the *Istituto Regionale di Psicopedagogia dell'Apprendimento — sezione infanzia* (IRPA) (Regional Institute of Psychopedagogy of Learning — early childhood section) that was given the responsibility to identify needs, modes and resources for organising it — and by the University. IRPA took the lead by adopting a bottom-up approach that not only enhanced the knowledge and expertise generated within ECEC settings, but also increased the opportunities for exchange and incrementation. Initiatives were undertaken, such as establishing regional working groups and promoting opportunities of networking among coordinators operating in different provinces. Concerning the way in which the culture of grassroots early childhood education interacted with the work of academics, Mantovani (2010, p. 63) states:

'In those years, the two met and at times influenced each other, but this influence worked from the bottom up, rather than top down. This seems to be a specific feature of Italian early childhood pedagogy: community practice becoming method or theory rather than vice versa.'

These initiatives generated a process of networking and collaboration between coordinators at local, provincial and regional level that led to an important shift of focus: *from the role of pedagogical coordinators to that of a system of pedagogical coordination*. This marked the move towards an increasingly systemic approach to pedagogical coordination in which pedagogical coordinators became part of an increasingly complex and inter-connected structure aimed to integrate actions and initiatives for the qualification of the whole ECEC system (Servizio Politiche Familiari, Infanzia e Adolescenza della Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2007).

[Lazzari, 2012]



Preliminary discussion of findings

Overview of the themes and key-issues emerged from stakeholders' interviews

Section 2 in this report contains a preliminary discussion of the findings of the interviews with ECEC stakeholders conducted during the spring and early summer months of 2020. The section presents the results of a content-based analysis of the collected data. Thoughts, evaluations and reflections that were summarized and included in the next pages are those that were considered most relevant to the topic of transitions in the Italian ECEC system.

As mentioned in previous sections of this report, Law n. 107 of 2015 introduced an integrated ECEC system in Italy, placing it under the authority and steering of the Ministry of Education. The long-awaited replacement of the country's split ECEC structure with a unified cycle from 0 to 6 years turned the **attention of decision-makers towards the theme of transitions between 0-3 and 3-6 services as a crucial aspect sustaining the integration process from the bottom-up by fostering continuity of pedagogical approaches** (Balduzzi, 2021; Falcinelli & Raspa, 2018). In this respect, the interviewed stakeholders consistently reported how the successful implementation of the ECEC integrated system will depend to a great extent on national, regional and local authorities' commitment to promote cooperation and continuity across the previously split sectors of early childhood education (0-3 services) and preschool (3-6 services).

It seems evident that – in a context characterized by an **extremely fragmented landscape** with specific reference to the **multi-layered governance of the ECEC system** (*national, regional and local responsibilities*), to the **plurality of providers** of early childhood and preschool services (*state, municipal, private NFP bodies*¹⁵) and to the variety of **educational approaches and professional cultures** which were developed as result of local pedagogical traditions (see also: Lazzari, 2012) – replacing an understanding of ECEC as a split sector with a new pedagogical and organizational culture, centered on continuity and cooperation, entails working simultaneously on many fronts.

These will range from the introduction of financial programs (Special Fund allocated to Regional and Local Authorities for the implementation of the integrated system) and funding of new typologies of ECEC institutions (such as the **unitary settings**¹⁶) to the development of a national steering document for 0 to 6 education (**unitary curriculum**); from the creation of new inter-institutional agreements (*protocolli di intesa*) and re-design of governance arrangements at the level of Regions to the roll out of emerging professional roles (eg. **pedagogical coordinators, preschool leaders and key system-figures**) capable of

¹⁵ Among private NFP bodies, the main players are Social Cooperatives in the 0-3 sector and the Italian Federation of Catholic Preschool (FISM) in the 3-6 sector.

¹⁶ The so-called *poli integrati per l'infanzia* are conceived as privileged sites for the experimentation of innovative pedagogical approaches and educational methodologies supporting the socialization and learning of children along a continuum from 0 to 6 years. Under Law Decree 65/2017 a special stream of funding was allocated as capital grant for supporting Regional Authorities in building such innovative ECEC centres in their territories based on the launch of competitive tenders (max 3 proposals in each Region were eligible for funding). In Emilia-Romagna the proposal awarding the capital funding are located in three sites: Bologna, Ravenna and Scandiano (D.G.R. n. 704 del 13 Maggio 2019).



operating across institutional boundaries, bridging 0-3 and 3-6 services' institutional cultures across different services and providers (*State, Municipalities, FISM and social cooperatives*). While the **implementing Decree n. 65/2017** laid out the details of the 2015 reform plan, including a list of overarching principles and operational goals for the new system, it is to be noted that such act **devotes considerable space to outline the envisaged institutional framework through which a fully implemented integrated system would operate but it fails to provide concrete guidelines on how the transformative process leading to integration should be realised on the ground**, leaving therefore ample margin to the discretionary initiatives of **Regional and Local Authorities**. In doing so, the DL 65/2017 places a substantial focus on processes of 'structural transformation' but leaves **great gaps in relation to how such process of change should be accompanied and achieved** in order to facilitate the development of unitary pedagogical approaches and professional practices within and across existing services. As stated by the experts we have interviewed:

'Notwithstanding the important value of the Decree, there are some gaps. If these gaps are not readily addressed, my fear is that at every level – from the national, to the regional and to the local authorities one – autonomous and independent choices will be made [*in regards to policy implementation*] and, once these are made, it will not be possible to come back. This means that the initiatives we are setting up now will have a great impact on the future of the reform implementation. Therefore the 'silence' – the 'policy silence' – on certain issues will imply that the actions we are undertaking now will be very difficult to redirect in the future...' [MCV-ERR, min42, translation by the authors]

'The reform on the integrated system is a very important Law, because it aligns the Italian situation to the European policy orientations, not only at conceptual level (meaning that the pedagogical reflections on ECEC developed in our country were already not so distant from the EU orientations) but also at the level of a coherent organisational and management strategy. However my worry is that - if the initiatives connected to law implementation will be scattered - the risk is that the already existing inequalities (not only between Northern and Southern Regions of the country, but also within the same territory or city) in accessing ECEC services will remain...and we know this will have important consequences on educational poverty...' [AG-GNNI, min19, translation by the authors]

Against this background, the key themes emerged from the interviews analysed in the section below highlight how these critical implementation gaps could be filled out by drawing on the initiatives that are proactively being undertaken by key-stakeholders in the field (question 2) and outline directions for both policy-advocacy and training actions to be carried out within the InTRANS project (question 3).

Quality as a strategic goal of the integrated ECEC system, from which a renewed attention on transitions derives

One of the general ideals standing at the core of the 2015 Act and recalled from all the experts interviewed in relation to the significance of L.D. 65/2017 is the impetus given by the reform to the quantitative expansion of 0-3 services provision as well as to the qualification of ECEC provision throughout the national territory. The rise in centrality of ECEC quality provision in this sense marks a definitive turn away from instrumentalist understandings of day-care and nurseries as a means to achieve social and economic ends outside the field (previously *nidi* were considered **services for individual demands of working parents** within national

legislation), and indicates a shift in focus towards a recognition of the full educational value of early childhood services for nurturing children's holistic development and learning.

In according significance to quality ECEC as recalled in EU policy documents, national policies are now fully acknowledging the complexity of 0-3 institutions, finally agreed to be pursuing broad educational and social purposes (eg. **providing equal educational opportunities since the early years**) beyond employment activation and social assistance. At the same time, the educational value of 3-6 institutions is clearly recognised from a holistic development perspective, firmly endorsing an *edu-care perspective* against a *schoolification perspective*.

Multilayered quality

The growing recognition of ECEC settings as complex learning and caring environments – where multiple ends are simultaneously pursued – has been conducive to an equally multidimensional approach to the notion of quality. Along this line, the experts interviewed recalled the multiple layers which concur to define the idea of quality that lays at the center of the 2015 reform, ranging from the **improvement of existing ECEC infrastructures to providing solutions to the challenges posed by multilevel governance**, from **increasing access to 0-3 provision to narrowing the coverage gap between Regions**, from **creating new professional roles capable of sustaining the ongoing qualification of pedagogical practices within ECEC settings to the development of new strategies for promoting horizontal and vertical continuity among these** (AG-GNNI, GC-MIUR, MCV-RER).

Variance in transition practice

From the data collected through the interviews it clearly emerges that the renewed focus on transitions is itself a byproduct of the rising attention on ECEC quality across 0-3 and 3-6 provision. Albeit the importance of transitions from an educational point of view is increasingly being recognised in recent years (OECD, 2017), the experts acknowledged that the **decentralised governance models under which 0-3 and 3-6 services were operating so far lead to the emergence of multiple local practices of transition management, which in turns is cause for the high recorded variance in transition quality across regions and providers.**

Within municipal ECEC provision, the role of pedagogical coordinators is crucial in fostering practitioners' reflections over the transition periods and in facilitating the development and consolidation of continuity practices aimed at making children's transitions from *nido* to *scuola dell'infanzia* as seamless as possible¹⁷: in some cases this has also been facilitated by the fact that *nido* and *scuola dell'infanzia* are located on the same site (IZ, ComBO; RR, ComSPC).

Quite on the opposite, a greater discontinuity is experienced by children's and families in the transition between *nido* and state-maintained *scuola dell'infanzia* as the responsibility for developing transition projects is left to the initiatives of single school institutions or teachers' committees, very often without any particular guidance provided¹⁸.

¹⁷ A comprehensive overview of such initiatives is provided in the START training toolkit, Annex 4: http://start.pei.si/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2019/07/annex_4.pdf

¹⁸ In the case of state-maintained institutions, the development of educational continuity initiatives is the responsibility of an ad-hoc committee (*Commissione Continuità*) consisting of small number of teachers who ~~are~~



In the case of private NFP provision educational continuity is often managed within each single institution, with *sezioni primavera* (lit. 'spring classes', attended by 2 to 3 years old) which are conceived as transition classes, complementary to – and at the same time integral part of – preschool education (LV-FISM; GC-MIUR).

In broad terms, there is a consensus among the interviewed experts that smooth transitions would ideally require:

- a relevant set of **shared guidelines (0-6 curricular framework) to pursue the goal of ensuring pedagogical continuity between 0-3 and 3-6 services** (GC-MIUR; AG-GNNI),
- a **workforce collaborating across institutional boundaries under the competent guidance of pedagogical coordinators sustaining the co-design of transition projects across 0-3 and 3-6 institutions** (MCV-RER, IZ-ComBO, PZ-ComFO; RR-ComSPC),
- trained **professionals that are able to foster children's learning along a continuum within a shared pedagogical vision and image of the child** (IZ-ComBO; LV-FISM; MCV-RER; ID-SoCop). **At the same time, however, these objectives are perceived as far from being achieved by the stakeholders who took part to the interview.**

The commitment to quality during the Covid-19 pandemic: potential risks...

The commitment to quality as a central staple in the new integrated system will undergo a crucial test in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic – a period that will be marked by the challenges of the transition back to a fully-functioning economy. A great deal of focus is certain to be placed on measures aimed at creating and maintaining jobs, which in turn will ensure the increasing popularity of "activation arguments" for investing in ECEC. **While not a given, there is a risk that an 'activationist' agenda focused on quantitative issues of provision will take over the sector, relegating concerns with a multidimensional improvement of service quality to a backseat position** (AG, GNNI).

In light of the deep disparities that continue to characterize the Italian context, providers and professionals need to act in a harness to sustain the inextricable link between service quality and their institutional effectiveness. Only a multidimensional effort to improve the quality of ECEC, in other words, will bring about a system that is capable to deliver on a varied range of policy priorities related to equal educational opportunities and social inclusion evenly across the entire national territory.

Confronted with this scenario, ECEC stakeholders must reiterate in the strongest terms their enduring commitment to quality as a strategic goal of the new system. Accordingly, particular emphasis needs to be placed on the systemic perils connected to slipping back into old organizational inertias and habits, whereby ECEC becomes once again regarded as a residual tool to reconcile family and work responsibilities.

An in-depth analysis of the way in which the Italian ECEC system adapted and reacted to the Covid-19 emergency can be found in the 2021 **NESET comparative report 'Governing quality ECEC in a global crisis'** (<https://nesetweb.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/NESET-AR1-2021-report.pdf>)

representing each educational level of the *Istituto Comprensivo*, from preschool to lower secondary school. As consequence, vertical 'internal' continuity initiatives (eg. between preschools and primary schools as well as between primary schools and lower secondary schools) tend to be prioritised over continuity with 'external' educational institutions (eg. 0-3 services), therefore introducing a greater risk of *schoolification* (Lazzari & Balduzzi, 2013).

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...and opportunities: investing in high quality ECEC as key for overcoming the crisis

'Relying on education to overcome the crisis entails making Unitary ECEC settings a strategic priority [of the education system], ensuring that every child has access to adequate opportunities since the first years of life – an objective that cannot be postponed any further. Moving decisively in this direction is a cornerstone towards narrowing achievement gaps and supporting vulnerable families, particularly in disadvantaged areas. It implies placing children at the center of the policy agenda, as beneficiaries of a social entitlement to ECEC, and promoting efforts and initiatives to reconcile work and family life [...] We appeal for the establishment of Unitary ECEC settings across the country, starting in the poorest areas, so as to lay the groundwork for the transformation of quality ECEC into an enforceable universal entitlement under the Ministry of Education, providing a free of charge access to underprivileged households. We further call for the development of a strategic investment plan addressing the expansion of these services. Unitary ECEC settings constitute a tangible and dynamic social space, supportive of parental engagement in education and youth activities, promoting collaboration and participatory practices, bringing different generations of parents and teachers into contact with one another. Educating communities are built upon this type of educational services.' (Rete #EducAzioni, 2020; pp. 1-2)

<https://www.alleanzainfanzia.it/infanzia-e-adolescenza-nove-reti-della-societa-civile-scrivono-a-conte-urge-un-piano-strategico-nazionale-e-al-sistema-delleducazione-il-15-degli-investimenti-previsti-per-la-ripresa/>

Accessibility and equity across the integrated system

The themes that were brought to the surface by the introduction of Decree n. 65 included **increasing the overall accessibility** to ECEC – especially in relation to 0-3 services – meaning that quality provision must be made available to all children and families, regardless of where they live and of their socio-economic background. In this sense, **increasing structural accessibility to ECEC through measures aimed to expand 0-3 services provision especially in the most disadvantaged areas of the country and to reduce parents' fees was highlighted by the interviewees as another important strategic goal of the integrated ECEC system, moving forward towards equity goals.**

Improving accessibility within the integrated system

The debate on accessibility is framed around two main questions: increasing availability of 0-3 services and bridging regional gaps in participation. In relation to the first point, the interviewees noted how, in light to the profound differences in infrastructure development, regulations and availability of services, expanding provision across the country entails relying on a diverse mix of services and providers which is responsive to local needs and resources (*'diversificazione delle tipologie di servizi educativi'*).



Moreover, diversification of provision may prove strategic also in view of the second question linked to accessibility, namely bridging regional and territorial gaps in participation. As of 2014, the gap between the Region with highest and the Region with lowest participation in municipal day-care (Emilia-Romagna and Calabria) was as wide as 22.5%. Similar differences are recorded when measuring attendance figures for Lombardy, Tuscany and Trentino (solidly above 20 per cent) against those of Campania and Sicily (below 5 per cent).

Budgetary constraints combined with limited external sources of financing (National Fund for the integrated system) will prevent Italian Regions from undertaking large-scale infrastructure development projects in the foreseeable future. In this context, interviewees suggest that significant increases in ECEC participation are more likely to arise from the better or innovative use of existing infrastructures than from the outright construction of new settings (AG-GNNI; GC-MIUR). A case in point seems to be that of the transition “spring” classes (*sezioni primavera*).

Equity concerns

Addressing the challenge of territorial accessibility may serve as a springboard to tackle the broader problem of inequality – linked to the unequal distribution of ECEC uptake across socioeconomic groups. Measures known to have been effective in raising participation across economic fault lines normally concentrate on (i) reducing ECEC costs (tuition, fees and charges), (ii) preventing the concentration of ECEC settings in specific areas, overcoming urban/rural divides, (iii) improving service flexibility (longer opening hours, flexible drop-in/pick-up policies), and (iv) **improving the meaningfulness and desirability of ECEC services for a diversity of children and families** (Vandenbroeck and Lazzari, 2014).

Interventions aimed at improving the inclusiveness of educational transitions may be regarded as an example of the fourth category of measures. **It is remarkable, however, that only initiatives related to increasing structural accessibility – such as expanding availability of places and reducing parental fees** (points (i) and (ii) above) – **were mentioned by the interviewees as keys to promote the participation of children from disadvantaged background to ECEC.**

It is also to be noted that issues of **parents’ participation and inclusion of diversities were only mentioned** by one of the interviewees despite these principles are among the foundational pillars of the reform on the integrated system (see section 1: principles, scope and rationale of LD 65/2017):

On a district level we are looking to open new 'family center' services (*centri per le famiglie*), to help parents with very young children to meet and engage with other families, to provide them with specialist assistance. (...) [The new services] would also look to streamline the provision of family care - as there are currently multiple services of this type on our territory, but hardly working together in a systematic way (RR-comSPC, min 23, translation by the authors)

Whereas the issue of transition from home to ECEC setting (*ambientamento*) – which marks one of the starkest difference between *nido*'s and *scuola dell'infanzia*'s pedagogical approaches – was not mentioned by any of the interviewee.

This denotes a lack of awareness in regard to the role that inclusive transitions could play in this respect, especially in contexts that are increasingly characterized by socio-cultural diversity such as the Italian one¹⁹. An explanation for this might be that research approaches investigating the issue of inclusion of diversity from a critical perspective – focused on social inequalities and exclusion mechanisms – are only recently starting to emerge in the Italian ECEC debate (Balduzzi, Migliarini & Lazzari, 2019; Picchio & Mayer, 2019; Bove, 2019).

The importance of developing equitable funding schemes.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted enduring differences between ECEC providers in terms of access to financial resources. The case of tuition reduction initiatives represents the most emblematic example of this discrepancy. Over the course of the last three years, and in particular since 2020, regional funding schemes were introduced to support efforts by ECEC providers to decrease enrolment fees. The aim of these measures was to encourage ECEC participation by reducing the financial burden on families at a time of heightened economic uncertainty.

Evidence from the interviews suggests however that targeted funding schemes largely went to subsidize tuition reduction initiatives in municipal day-care settings (both directly managed by municipalities and outsourced to NFP providers), whereas significant barriers to accessing the same programs were reported by private providers. Private centers adopting a mixed funding model (receiving public subsidies to cover but a limited number of places) faced the option whether to lower enrolment fees for the places officially listed as 'publicly subsidized', or pass on the funding altogether (MP-SoCop).

This dynamic clearly risks to open a growing divide between state-maintained preschool and municipal daycare centers that are increasingly moving in the direction of affordable – or even free-of-charge provision – and private settings struggling to decrease their dependency on tuition revenue (LV-FISM). The equity implications of this scenario are clear. In a regional context characterized by inadequate ECEC supply, families are often constrained in their choice of provider by logistical/geographical considerations. This results in private provision often representing the only available option for families, regardless of economic status.

As warm and inclusive transitions have been shown to play a key role in improving children's well-being and learning experiences when entering a new setting, with even greater benefits for children from socioeconomic disadvantaged families and groups (Lazzari et al., 2020), transition guidance should be regarded as a key to achieve educational equity goals and mainstreamed into existing frameworks. However, **according to the interviews conducted so far inclusive transitions do not seem to have received, as of today, particular consideration as means to level the playing field. As reported by the interviewees, equity frameworks that have been set in place within the context of the integrated system, have so far given priority to structural measures only**, chief among which lowering tuition

¹⁹ It needs to be pointed out, however, that interviews to local administrators who are operating in contexts of where socio-cultural diversity is increasing have not yet been interviewed: they gave their availability to be interviewed before Covid broke in, but then did not respond to further email (probably because too busy in the re-organisation of socio-educational services for the reopening phase (i.e. summer camps). We will send them another reminder in early September.

fees. This makes it even more salient to strive toward this goal through the advocacy and TOT initiatives that will be carried within the InTrans project in the Emilia-Romagna Region (ERR), in order to generate awareness around the issues of educational inequalities and unintentional exclusion mechanisms entrenched within educational systems (Sharmahd, 2020).

The challenge of multi-level governance

The steering role for the national level and the endurance of the decentralized system

Decree n. 65/2017 did not resolve the issue of governance within the new system. The legislation devotes numerous articles to set out the respective prerogatives of each level of government, retaining for the national government the right to set general objectives and basic service standards, such as minimum workforce qualification requirements. The State also broadly defines implementation plans (*'piano pluriennale di attuazione'*) and holds responsibility for the provision of supplementary funding to the local levels (Regions and Municipalities). Despite ensuring a clear governance framework, the Decree contents itself with delegating powers of implementation to Regional and Local Authorities.

Endurance of this highly decentralized governance framework rests on path dependence, whereby Regions and Municipalities retain their historic prerogatives over the ECEC sector and conflict on the reshuffling of responsibilities among levels are avoided. In respect to this issue, interviewees have highlighted the need for reinforced national level steering and supervision (*'rafforzamento della regia nazionale'*) to ensure the success of local implementation programs (AG-GNNI; GC-MIUR; MCV-RER). National authorities, in this regard, should also make up for their failure to establish nationwide minimum standards for provision (*'livelli essenziali delle prestazioni'*) reclaiming responsibility for setting mandatory quality requirements for ECEC services across the whole sector (AG-GNNI).

A further aspect that has been highlighted as a challenge to the implementation of the Reform is the high degree of autonomy granted to Regional School Offices (*Uffici Scolastici Regionali*) in regard to local governance arrangements to be negotiated with Regional Governments and Local Authorities for the implementation and coordination of the integrated system at territorial level (*'protocolli d'intesa inter-istituzionali'*). Despite the stipulation of such inter-institutional agreements is envisaged in L.D. 65/2017 as key element of the implementation plan, so far Regional School Offices have only been mildly encouraged to engage in this process (AG-GNNI; GC-MIUR; MCV-RER) through a Note of the Ministry of Education (nota MIUR 404/2018).

Exchanging decentralization with multilevel and coordinated governance

Aside for this longed-for reassertion of a government-level steering role, there remains the problem of how to reconcile the pursuit of uniform quality and equitable ECEC service distribution on a national scale, with a decentralized framework based on local legislation and anchored in principles of regional autonomy and delegated authority. **Cooperative**

provision through enhanced synergies between levels of government may yield the only plausible solution to this challenge, and yet a complicated one to implement.

Replacing a decentralized self-governing system, structured around a clear division of responsibilities, with a model of multilevel governance based on cooperation and concordance between State, Regional, Local Authorities (municipalities) and providers will hinge upon the ability of local actors to forge new relationships outside the traditional governance patterns. It will depend on the commitment of Regional Governments, Regional School Offices (*'Uffici scolastici regionali'*) and Local Authorities to negotiate at length, find a common ground, and enter into inter-institutional agreements (*'protocolli d'intesa inter-istituzionale'*). One such example of *protocollo d'intesa* was introduced in Tuscany in 2018 upon the agreement between Regional Government, the Regional School Office and the representative Association for Italian municipalities (*'Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani'*)²⁰. In Emilia-Romagna **the inter-institutional agreement proposal issued by the Regional Government so far did not encounter the agreement of the Regional School Office, leaving an important part of the implementation plan of the integrated system partially unattended.**

In order to overcome this shortcoming, the ERR government supported – through allocation of dedicated funding²¹ – bottom-up initiatives undertaken by local authorities in this direction: i.e. *development of joint in-service training programmes for educators and teachers fostering educational continuity, pedagogical coaching projects run in accordance with school directors within state-maintained preschools, strengthening pedagogical coordination capacity within the private-NFP sector (MCV-ERR).*

Proactive actions in this sense are also undertaken under the spontaneous initiatives of some municipalities, which established inter-institutional working tables involving representatives of Local School Offices (*'Ufficio Scolastico Provinciale'*) (RR-comSPC; ADM-DistPE) and developed inter-institutional agreements with local stakeholders (including school directors) for better coordinating local educational planning (eg. *'Patto per la scuola'* – MC,ComFO), strived toward engaging representatives of local preschool institutions in ECEC pedagogical coordination meetings (usually attended by municipal and private NFP providers only).

As the aspects related to a reinforced steering for facilitating the process of inter-institutional negotiation was recalled by nearly all experts interviewed, the advocacy initiatives to be implemented within the InTRANS project's local stakeholder group will be centred on these priorities.

²⁰ https://www.minoritoscana.it/sites/default/files/idi_form_congiunta_181205.pdf

²¹ D.A.L. 195 del 12 Febbraio 2019: *Indirizzi per gli interventi di qualificazione e miglioramento delle scuole dell'infanzia.* (L.R.26/2001 e L.R. 12/2003)

Platforms for Pedagogical Coordination (*Coordinamenti Pedagogici Territoriali*)

Platforms for Pedagogical Coordination as lever of vertical and horizontal continuity

Within the framework outlined by L.D. 65/2017, Platforms for Pedagogical Coordination (PPCs) are supposed to operate at multiple levels to support the integrated system: according to the experts interviewed the key-function of local PPCs is twofold.

On one side they seek to improve vertical coordination across 0-3 and 3-6 services by promoting continuity of pedagogical approaches and educational practices. Vertical alignment finds perhaps its fullest expression in the organization of 'integrated' in-training programs (*'percorsi di formazione congiunta'*), focused on the development of a common educational language for the entire 0-6 cycle (*'creazione di un linguaggio comune allo 0/6'*) centered on notion of children's holistic learning along a developmental continuum (*'processo di sviluppo unitario'*).

On the other side, **PPCs are also considered strategic for catalyzing inter-institutional negotiation processes from bottom-up by outreaching to key-figures operating within state-maintained preschools (eg. motivated school directors, leaders and teachers) where institutional representatives at a higher level are not available** (MCV-ERR, PZ-ComFo, RR-ComSPC). On another level, PPCs look to consolidate the horizontal flow of information among ECEC providers, supporting communication and dissemination of good practices (ADM-DisPE, CO-DisPE).

In this sense, PPCs are perceived by all the experts interviewed as key infrastructure for working in the direction of leveling the ECEC playing field, facilitating access to pedagogical guidance for all for stakeholders involved in the sector and improving coordination between public authorities, not-for-profit and private providers.

The importance of PPCs in times of Covid-19

'The Covid-19 pandemic was a litmus test for some of our initiatives. So, we understood how we were moving in the right direction, some of our ideas were indeed correct. Some structural features that we had been developing were what kept the system afloat during the pandemic. The platform for pedagogical coordination, for instance. Having it in place within our district, well-functioning, made an enormous difference. Pedagogical coordinators played a crucial role in developing distance-learning procedures, bridging the relationship between families and ECEC centers [...].' [CO-DistPE, min. 25 – *translation by the authors*]

'These transversal, system-level, roles are invaluable for local ECEC systems. Who fulfills their functions where they don't exist? Our intuition was that these professionals are key organizational nodes for the entire system, they represent a lever for its improvement, help smothering inequalities, bring together the larger ECEC professional community. Their relevance became clearer in times of crisis. Wherever we had [pedagogical coordinators], we saw how valuable they could be.' [ADM- DistPE, min. 28 – *translation by the authors*]



The Implementation of PPCs: a critical node

Three years into the reform, there is considerable evidence of the uneven implementation of PPCs among different Regions and local areas. To best of our knowledge, only Tuscany and Umbria Regions have recorded significant success in negotiating protocols, conventions and joint working procedures with the Regional School Offices. Most Italian Regions are still struggling to achieve the same results and Emilia-Romagna is among them. Multiple reasons can account for this discrepancy.

- 1) PPCs are a consolidated reality only in a small number of Italian 21 regions, namely those where municipal ECEC provision is more developed as result of long-term investments of local and regional governments (cfr. Lazzari, 2012). Therefore, it does not seem plausible to think that a similar infrastructure could be built on the short- and medium-term of reform implementation (GC-MIUR). **This implies the risk that, in many parts of the country, the implementation of the reform will rely mostly on patchy local initiatives, therefore contradicting the principle of ensuring equal educational opportunities against inequalities (AG-GNNI).** Interviewees have highlighted the urgent need for the Ministry of Education (MIUR) to step in, begin a reviewing of operations undertaken so far, and issue a set of warnings and official reminders to Regional Education Departments (*'Direzioni regionali'*). Such reminders could prove particularly effective in those cases where inaction was due to issues of bureaucratic slowness and lack of initiative.
- 2) The PPC infrastructure recalled by the reform on the integrated system took inspiration from the **pedagogical coordination model developed within Municipal institutions** – and subsequently enhanced by some Regional Authorities – which is based on a **'network-like' structure** (Lazzari, Picchio, Musatti 2013). Quite on the opposite, the organizational structure of state-maintained institutions recalls a pyramid-base, hierarchical model. In this sense, **the considerable degree of organizational adaptation that the establishment of 'integrated' PPCs will require from existing institutions has in so far acted as a further powerful disincentive to embrace into inter-institutional agreements between Regional Governments and Regional School Offices. State-maintained institutions, in this sense, have proven among the most resilient bodies to the introduction of PPCs.**
- 3) Whereas the professional profile and tasks of pedagogical coordinators operating within municipal and private-NFP provision are clearly defined within Regional legislation and Local Authorities' regulations, **such a profile is not contemplated in any official document concerning the functioning of state-maintained institutions. As LD 65/2017 did not address this gap, the result is the impossibility of defining 'a model of pedagogical coordination' within state-maintained preschools. To state more clearly, this model is yet to be developed.**

The TOT piloted in the context of Emilia-Romagna Region will bring a relevant contribution in this direction, by deepening the reflections on different models of



pedagogical coordination/leadership and sustaining the development of a suitable model for state-maintained preschools.

Innovative experiences of pedagogical coordination in state-maintained preschools

Despite a high degree of institutional complexity – the existence of concurrent organizational logics within a system, leading to divergent expectations, values and identities – several interviewees have reported of innovative cases across Emilia-Romagna, where senior preschool teachers have in fact been contracted by preschools in a coordination capacity. From a procedural/organizational standpoint, recruitment of these professionals followed different approaches, as illustrated below.

The first approach identified by interviewees (GC-MIUR) is that of establishing pedagogical coordinators through the '*organico di potenziamento*', a mechanism allowing institutes to apply for additional regional resources in order to increase their teaching staff. As per this approach, the extra funding allowance is normally used by school to cover the costs of hiring substitute staff – filling the position left vacant by the “promotion” of an experienced teacher to a senior coordinating position.

A second route that has been followed is to access targeted regional funds, earmarked for the hiring of additional support staff on a temporary contract (MCV-RER). This mechanism was treated as complementary to the first route, broadening the options at the disposal of school directors.

The third model is that of the internal reallocation of resources, whereby institutes tap into their own limited budgets to finance the additional workload related to the establishment of coordinating figures (GC-MIUR). Foregoing external financing sources would normally prevent state-maintained institutes from creating full-time positions, and coordinators established through this internal route would not be expected to spend but a limited amount of their working time on pedagogical guidance.

A fourth way that has been reported is that of school authorities reaching out directly to senior coordinators employed in municipal ECEC for informal consulting tasks – often focused on targeted advice activities with families, or assistance in setting up broader in-service training programs. Within this model, the “loaned” coordinators have been observed to grow into increasingly transversal professionals, capable of providing advice to a range of audiences, across institutional boundaries (MCV-RER).

Interviewees (IZ, ComBO; RR, ComSPC) have referred to one further scenario where pedagogical coordinators were introduced in state-maintained settings. It relates to a restricted number of '*mixed-management unitary settings*²² (*poli per l'infanzia a gestione mista*)' which resulted from a gradual strengthening of links between municipal daycare settings and state-maintained preschools in close physical proximity. In this few cases, the role of pedagogical coordinators not only has been instrumental to govern a collective effort

²² **Mixed-management unitary settings** refer to those cases where *nidi* and *scuola dell'infanzia* operated by different providers (eg. daycare centre run by social cooperative/municipality and state-maintained preschool) are located on the same site/premises.



towards a unitary curriculum for the entire 0-6 cycle but also proved to be crucial in improving the relationships between ECEC staff and families.

Lastly, the key-informants we interviewed (MCV-ERR, GC-MIUR) made reference to a recent pilot initiative recently undertaken by the Local School Office ('*Ufficio Scolastico Provinciale*') in Modena where 5 preschool teachers with high professional profile were appointed as pedagogical coordinators of large-scale school networks ('*Reti di scuole territoriali*').

Pedagogical continuity at the crossroad between top-down and bottom-up curriculum design

A national curriculum for the education of children from 0 to 6

Decree n. 65 stipulated the establishment of an Expert Commission for the Integrated system under the Ministry of Education, tasked with defining national pedagogical guidelines for the entire 0-6 system. Such national guidelines - '*Linee pedagogiche per il sistema integrato 0-6*' – were formally unveiled in March 2021 and the release was followed by an extended open consultation process between the Ministry of Education and regional stakeholders²³. The guidelines for the 0-6 cycle are expected to function as an overarching pedagogical framework ('*cornice pedagogica*') encompassing both the existing 3-6 national curriculum framework ('*Indicazioni per il curricolo di scuola dell'infanzia*') and the yet-to-be finalized curriculum framework for the 0-3 sector ('*orientamenti educativi nazionali per i servizi educativi per l'infanzia*') that will draw upon the richness of high quality pedagogical projects carried out across 0-3 municipal and private NFP provision over the last decades (GC-MIUR; AG-GNNI).

The adoption of the 'integrated' guidelines represents a significant departure from the previous system (no national curriculum for ECEC 0-3) and **a major step forward in introducing an instrument of vertical continuity**. In the view of the interviewees (which were all consulted before the official release of the **guidelines**), **the document will provide a vision for cooperation across 0-3 and 3-6 segments, helping the integrated system to achieve a balance between the hierarchical culture of preschools settings and the polycentric structure of the early childhood field** (GC-MIUR; MCV-ERR). They are further expected to provide an input to a broad range of management and operational decisions, from the organization of Unitary childcare settings to the establishment of 'integrated' in training programs for the entire ECEC workforce.

For all these reasons expectations, prior the release of the guidelines, were high among ECEC stakeholders. In this respect, most of the interviewees expressed great concern for the fact that the operational role of the Expert Commission had not been prioritised enough by the Ministry of Education. They seemed to consider that the elaboration of shared pedagogical guidelines – along with the consultation processes that accompanies it – should have been

²³ A full version [in Italian] of the final conclusions of the consultation process can be retrieved at:

www.istruzione.it/sistema-integrato-06/allegati/Analisi%20dati%20consultazione%20Linee%20pedagogiche%200-6.pdf

at the very core of the reform since the very beginning. The following is an excerpt of the interview conducted with Giancarlo Cerini, Chair of the Expert Commission, in March 2020:

'In the following months it will be crucial that the Expert Commission start working on the process of elaborating pedagogical documents, which will serve as a **pedagogical-organizational framework sustaining the development of the integrated system**...Then proceeding with the launch of a large-scale public consultation involving educators, pedagogical coordinators, local administrators...We need to give new impetus to the discussion of themes related to 0-6 education, so that [*the reform on the integrated system*] could become more meaningful for school professionals. Because as of today, it is more relevant to local administrators and officers, it more about issuing resolutions for managing the allocation funding...but there is little in this that speaks to the heart of professionals...' [GC-MIUR, min 48, translation by the authors]

Representing a multifunctional document of guidance, with multiple applications beyond its pedagogical core, the national guidelines for the integrated 0-6 system released by the Expert Commission in March 2021 could be used as a powerful tool to facilitate reflection and exchange among TOT participants, thus sustaining the co-construction of a common vision across diverse ECEC providers.

The pedagogical dimension of the 0-6 national guidelines

With respect to the pedagogical dimension of the document, we already mentioned how it aims to bring the national guidelines for the 3-6 curriculum (*'Indicazioni Nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia'*) and the envisioned but yet-to-be-realized national curriculum for the 0-3 within the same framework. With respect to the latter, the Expert Commission will work with a number of expert groups (**involving academic researchers, ECEC professional and advocacy organizations, local administrators**) to bundle existing regional indications, guidelines, and municipal regulations, and weave them a single national document. This process will require skimming though a wide array of ECEC experiences – collected nationwide – in order to single out those pedagogical elements which characterize the most interesting and innovative projects and that could be a source for inspiration even beyond the original context within which they were developed.

Albeit with different nuances, both the national-level experts we interviewed as key-informants for the 0-3 sector (AG-GNNI) and 3-6 sector (GC-MIUR) stressed the importance of developing a unitary curricular *framework* that sets out shared pedagogical vision and language (eg. image of the child, understanding of caring and learning, underlying ideas of children's development and parents' participation...) but – at the same time – respects the existing differences along which the cultural identity of *'nidi'* and *'scuole dell'infanzia'* have evolved over time.



The National Pedagogical Guidelines

The national pedagogical guidelines^(a) for the 0-6 cycle were officially released on March 31, 2021^(b). The date also marked the beginning of a four-month public consultation process, that concluded towards the end of July^(c) and brought together representatives from the Ministry of Education with national and local ECEC stakeholders in 7 national-level and 21 regional-level meetings^(d).

The national guidelines are framed around six sections. The first ('Rights and Childhood') and last ('Governance') touch upon institutional aspects of the integrated system's functioning, whereas the second ('Educational Ecosystem'), third ('Centrality of the Child'), fourth ('Curriculum'), and fifth ('Professionals and professionalism') represent the "pedagogical core" of the document. The guidelines are conceived as one of three key tenets, within the broader framework of the upcoming integrated curriculum for the 0-6 cycle.

(a) The complete guidelines document [in Italian] can be retrieved at: www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/1945318/Bozza+Linee+pedagogiche+0-6.pdf/5733b500-2bdf-bb16-03b8-a299ad5f9d08?t=1609347710638

(b) A live stream recording [dubbed in English] of the launch event is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/4at2PkTtW1c>;

(d) Live stream recordings [in Italian] of the consultation meetings chaired, respectively, by the Emilia-Romagna School Office ('Ufficio Scolastico Regionale') and by the Regional Government, are available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=7lWtgaFwsYo and: www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpPR8Mo7uns&t=4722s

Mixed-management unitary settings as sites for local experimentation (joint pedagogical planning: from transition to bottom-up 0-6 curriculum)

In the wait for the national pedagogical steering document (*0-6 unitary curriculum*) to be issued by the Expert Commission, in a certain number of cases proactive initiatives focused on the *co-construction of a 'bottom-up' unitary educational project were pursued by Municipalities* (MCV-ERR; IZ-ComBO, RR-ComSPC, PZ-ComFO) *in the contexts of 'mixed-management unitary settings'*. These are settings where a *nido* and a *scuola dell'infanzia* operated by different providers (eg. *nido* run by social cooperative/municipality and state-maintained *scuola dell'infanzia*) are located on the same site or are sharing the same premises.

As reported by the experts interviewed, the main features characterizing these pilot initiatives are:

- creating an inter-professional working groups including 0-3 educators and 3-6 teachers under the guidance of municipal pedagogical coordinator (see **Innovative experiences of pedagogical coordination in state-maintained preschools**, last paragraph)



- developing a joint professional development pathway²⁴ aimed to promote collective reflection on enacted practices, with a focus on 'empowering' professionals (see for example START pilots)
- deconstructing reciprocal 'stereotypes' and create a shared pedagogical ground for experimentation (i.e. joint planning and implementation of transitional activities or, more broadly, of an integrated 0-6 educational project)
- support educators and teachers to work across boundaries by sharing tools or by re-working existing ones (eg. '*Indice progetto pedagogico*', '*PTOF*', '*RAV*' were among the most frequently cited).

The experts also reported the most frequent challenges encountered in the implementation of such initiatives, which are:

- disparities in allocation of no-contact time to devote to such activities (as educators and teachers are employed under different working contracts depending on the providers)
- sustainability over time if such initiatives are not endorsed and supported by school directors of state-maintained preschools.

Unitary 0-6 curriculum but enduring split in qualification requirements for 0-3 and 3-6 professionals

On a critical note, the interviewees pointed out how the emphasis placed on promoting pedagogical continuity through the elaboration of a common curricular framework seems to be partially at odds with the **lack of attention paid by Decree n. 65 to creating a common route into ECEC professions** (AG-GGNI; IZ-ComBO; LV-FISM). Instead, qualification requirements remain distinct, confirming the endurance of a cultural and pedagogical split between the two workforces. Educators in 0-3 settings are required to complete a three-year bachelor degree in Education ('*Scienze dell'educazione e della formazione*') with a specialization on early childhood studies. Once entered into the profession, their pedagogies favor child-centered and '*edu-care*' approaches focused on play. Conversely, the qualification requirement for preschool teachers is the five-year degree in Primary education studies ('*Scienze della Formazione Primaria*'), which curriculum is modeled around compulsory education, focused on content-disciplines and evocative of ideas of schoolification.

As the curricula for initial training of educators and teachers are established by Law from the Ministry of Education (central-level policy making) it does not seem feasible to undertake advocacy initiatives in regard to this matter.

Unitary 0-6 curriculum but enduring split in working conditions for 0-3 and 3-6 professionals working across the state-maintained, municipal and private sector

A crucial challenge towards the development of an integrated system is observed at the workforce level, where the unification of the 0-3 and 3-6 segments into a single 0-6 cycle is

²⁴ The role of pedagogical coordinator is key in designing and facilitating such training pathways, as well as in accompanying and following up the experimentation phase (planning, implementing and evaluating innovative transition / educational continuity practice)

faced by the absence of uniform employment standards. The authors of the 2017 legislation, in this respect, chose not to incorporate clear provisions addressing disparities in work terms and conditions of practitioners employed in the different segments of the newly established integrated system. This decision, alongside the enduring lack of nationwide mandatory quality requirements for provision, seemed to crystallize existing differences between preschool and daycare institutions, as well as between types of providers.

Most, if not all, disparities in workforce conditions can be traced back to the variety of sectoral collective agreements currently in force across the ECEC sector. Whereas staff in State-maintained preschools remain covered by the National agreement for Public School (*'contratto collettivo nazionale del lavoro della scuola statale'*, also known as *'CCNL scuola statale'*), workers in municipal and recognized private settings are committed to the different provisions of other agreements, respectively the National agreement for Municipal School (*'CCNL scuola comunale'*) and the National agreement for the recognized private School (*'CCNL delle scuole paritarie'*). Differences between these collective agreements are not limited to hour-load, salary and wage progression, but extend to working schedule flexibility, degree of management discretion, and most crucially in-service training arrangements.

The situation is even more polarized in the 0-3 sector. In this context, the split between employment arrangements in public and private settings is compounded by the great internal variance of the latter, as well as by the prominence of outsourcing initiatives in the last decades, rooted in a pervasive concern for cost-containment. The general framing of employment relations in the ECEC sector has been significantly labelled one of 'widespread contractual anarchy' (Mari, 2021), where neither national nor regional legislation have so far shown interest in enforcing a discipline in employment conditions outside of municipal provision.



CONCLUDING REMARKS: roadmap for policy advocacy and training actions

Opportunities

The analysis of the interviews collected during the first twelve months of the InTrans project highlighted how the current period may prove to be particularly auspicious for policy advocacy initiatives aimed to promote inclusive transitions, and thus provide a significant chance for reform and change. Contributing to this circumstance there have been a number of major factors, but certainly one of the most important has to do with warm and inclusive transitions having received priority consideration in the implementation process of the 2017 Reform, overseen by the Ministry of Education.

This shift in focus towards greater consideration for the fed into a growing alignment between EU, national and E-R Regional policies with respect to the significance of building professionalism across the entire ECEC sector. In this regard, the recently-issued implementation plan for the 2021-2025 period provides for Regions to invest a minimum of 5% of state transfers earmarked for activities linked to the establishment of the integrated system in programs of in-service training and professional development, as well as in the setting up of local platforms of pedagogical coordination²⁵. An expanding recognition of the potential value of targeted professional training schemes for supporting not only the management of warm transitions but also, in a broader perspective, an inclusive and child-centre ECEC environment can certainly contribute to make the advocacy message of InTrans more 'powerful'.

Finally, the interviews have revealed how the advocacy initiatives undertaken within the INTRANS project may contribute to address a variety of crucial challenges concerning the implementation of Law Decree 65/2017.

Three issues in particular should receive consideration:

- ✓ **sustaining inter-institutional coordination and exchange processes**
- ✓ **developing a shared in-service training base for pedagogical coordinators and pre-school leaders operating across different services and providers**
- ✓ **generating awareness about issues of inclusion and equity in relation to transition (particularly important to cover the gap between intended principles of LD 65/2017 and their actual implementation on the ground of practice (beyond structural accessibility measures)**

In light of the **challenges and in-between spaces for change** identified by the analysis carried out in section 2, we briefly recall here the **actions to be undertaken in the forthcoming months within InTrans local project**:

(WP2) set-up the stakeholder group by involving key representatives from Emilia-Romagna Regional Government (Associated Partner), Regional School Office,

²⁵ www.istruzione.it/sistema-integrato-06/piano-di-azione.html



Ministry of Education, Gruppo Nazionale Nidi e Infanzia (Associated Partner) and Trade Union (CIGL).

- ✓ the first meeting will be focused on presenting the project and highlighting field of tensions emerged from the analysis of interview (*challenges* and *opportunities*)
- ✓ the second meetings will be focused on presenting the local TOT and discussing the findings emerged from follow-up focus groups carried out with participants (*key-success factors* and *challenges* encountered in the piloting of innovative transition projects co-designed during the TOT)
- ✓ the third meeting will be focused more closely on preparation for the participation to the policy exchange in Denmark (spring 2022)

(WP3) implementing a regional TOT programme in collaboration with key-stakeholders affiliated to Regional School Offices and Regional/Municipal administrations

The seven TOT modules - delivered between the months of March and June 2021 - focused on a number of critical issues that had emerged during the analysis of the interviews. Key among these were the themes of pedagogical leadership (see par. 2.4) and inclusion (see par. 2.2). In broad terms, the TOT looked to equip participants (pedagogical coordinators and school directors/leaders) with a solid understanding of the reasons and motives which make educational continuity such a significant policy objective, and to provide them with multiple examples of good practices in the creation of inclusive transitions at centre level. A further goal pursued by the TOT was that of fostering *cooperation* among professionals in coordination roles within 0-3 and 3-6 settings. Finally, the training aimed to improve awareness of challenges of ECEC accessibility linked to socio-cultural diversity, economic inequalities, and mechanisms of un-intentional exclusion. The TOT attempted to show participants how delicate *transition moments may amplify the excluding effects of these pre-existing disadvantageous condition*. The TOT stretched over seven modules, which treated the topics of transition from a legal-institutional perspective (module n. 2), proposed a rethinking of classical constructs of vertical educational continuity (mod. n. 3), offered a general overview of the current implementation of the reform in Emilia-Romagna Region (mod. n. 3 and n.4), presented a number of good local practices in sustaining inclusive transitions (mod. n. 5) and provided some insights concerning the challenge of implementing vertical continuity in an inclusive perspective (mod. n. 5 and n. 6).

- **(WP4) running an integrated module on inclusive transitions within the BA on ECEC for future early childhood educators and within the MA on Primary School Education for future preschool teachers.**



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Annex 1 – Synoptic table of strategic priorities underlying the Reform on the integrated 0-6 system

STRUCTURAL CONTINUITY: Organisation and Governance

Setting up the integrated early childhood education system

Aims and Rationale	NATIONAL-LEVEL POLICY PROVISIONS	ENVISIONED REGIONAL/LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION	Possible Challenges
To support and foster ECEC integration, by bringing day-care centers, transition classes and pre-primary settings within the same	Introduction of Unitary Childcare Settings (UCS) → <i>'Poli per l'infanzia'</i> <i>art. 3, L.D.L. 65/2017</i>	Regions, in agreement with Local Educational Authorities – <i>'Uffici Scolastici Regionali'</i> – , schedule/plan the establishment of new UCSs <i>art. 3, L.D.L. 65/2017</i>	The Fund (currently endowed at approximately 240m l) may be insufficiently funded to both (i) trigger a significant expansion of participation in 0-3 services - certainly will not reach 33% coverage (2002 Barcelona Targets) - and (ii) to adequately support important investments in new ECEC infrastructures.
To exploit integration's potential (i.e. the opport. provided by integrationist process) for increasing service flexibility and diversification			↓ UCSs may never become the fundamental architecture of new cycle, remaining confined to <i>'non-urban areas'</i> .
To facilitate the establishment of UCSs by financially supporting local authorities	Establishment of a targeted national Fund for the integrated system → <i>'Fondo nazionale per il Sistema integrato'</i> <i>artt. 12 and 13, L.D.L. 65/2017</i>	Regions prepare and submit to Education Ministry a detailed programming document, built upon the requests submitted by local authorities for financing of UCSs. <i>art. 12, L.D.L. 65/2017</i>	Even rarer may be cases of new buildings being constructed anew with the specific purpose of
To financially sustain local authorities in their pursuit of a wider set of goals → (in service training programs)			No monitoring/reporting system based on process and/or outcome indicators + No timeframe for meeting the SD → local authorities may feel released from <i>'process-report'</i>
To establish service quality standards for the entire ECEC cycle	Introduction of baseline set of Strategic Objectives (SO) → <i>'obiettivi strategici'</i> <i>art. 4, L.D.L. 65/2017</i>	Regional authorities plan the development of integrated system taking national SO into account. ↓ SO incorporated into regional <i>'legislative'</i> <i>artt. 6 and 8, L.D.L. 65/2017</i>	'NO CLEAR GUIDANCE' as to which objectives to <i>'monitor'</i>
To better inform/direct Regions' and local authorities' actions in achieving minimum standards of ECEC quality			Commitment to quality management plan not laid down as a condition for allocation of funding
To improve governance in the integrated system	Promotion and establishment of local Platforms for Pedagogical Coordination (PPCs) → <i>'Coordinamenti Pedagogici Territoriali'</i> <i>artt. 4 and 13, L.D.L. 65/2017</i>	Regions promote activation of PPCs, in agreement with LEAs and local authorities → Regions promote protocols and conventions between different local authorities Regions promote protocols and conventions btw local authorities and state-maintained	Effective PPCs can only result from complex political pacts between local authorities and the variegated ECEC <i>'system'</i>
To develop and support mechanisms of vertical coordination btw ECEC levels			Pacts will be hard to achieve, due to degree of governance change/institutional adaptation state-maintained ECEC settings would have to undergo

Pedagogical Continuity

Expanding the vertical curriculum

Aims and Rationale	NATIONAL-LEVEL POLICY PROVISIONS	ENVISIONED REGIONAL/LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION	Possible Challenges
To promote alignment between curriculum frameworks for 0-3 and 3-6 ECEC services	an Expert Commission to define national Pedagogical Guidelines for the 0-6 system <i>art. 10, L.D.L. 65/2017</i>	Regions support the incorporation of the national guidelines by local 0-6 ECEC settings <i>artt. 6 and 7, L.D.L. 65/2017</i>	Differences in pedagogical culture btw ECEC staff 0/3 and 3/6 ECEC staff do not always share pedagogical understandings/disposition twd new practices/changing methods (i.e. contrasting notions of 'school-readiness')
To expand the 3-14 vertical curriculum into the 0-3 age range			Significant hurdle to alignment across levels
To promote 'horizontal' communication between ECEC providers: circulation of information, exchange of good practices	Promotion and establishment of local Platforms for Pedagogical Coordination <i>artt. 4 and 13, L.D.L. 65/2017</i>	Regions promote and support the activation of PPCs, in agreement with LEAs and with municipal and/or Provincial governments	Severe implementation challenges 0/3 and 3/6 ECEC staff do not always share pedagogical understandings/disposition twd new practices/changing methods (i.e. contrasting notions of 'edu-care VS school-readiness')
To increase 'vertical' homogeneity/alignment between educational techniques and strategies employed across ECEC stages			Significant hurdle to alignment across levels
To raise quality of the overall educational offer, with specific focus on educational methodologies	Framing of in-service training programmes among the strategic objectives of the 0-6 integrated system <i>artt. 1 and 4, L.D.L. 65/2017</i>	Local authorities activate targeted in-service training programs for the entire ECEC personnel, also by defining protocols and conventions with state-maintained ECEC settings. <i>artt. 1, 4 and 7, L.D.L. 65/2017</i>	Similar challenges to ones already mentioned: 0/3 and 3/6 ECEC staff may not show positive dispositions towards development of an extended 'professional community' characterized by participation into common training programs, sharing trajectory of continuous professional development
To foster vertical pedagogical alignment between ECEC levels by ensuring that all practitioners are equally exposed to innovation, new ideas			
To ensure quality transition management between 0/3 and 3/6 services (<i>educational continuity!</i>)	Supporting the continuity of the developmental process - interpreted as a single, continuous evolutionary process - through an 'integrated' perspective on children's growth <i>art. 1, L.D.L. 65/2017</i>	Local authorities promote and sustain initiatives promoting educational continuity within ECEC <i>art. 7, L.D.L. 65/2017</i>	0/3 and 3/6 ECEC staff do not always share pedagogical understandings/disposition twd new practices/changing methods (i.e. contrasting notions of 'edu-care VS school-readiness')
To avoid that children's development is disrupted/undermined by the difficulties of transition experiences			institutional cultures might create additional barriers toward planning and implementation of joint transition's projects



Professional Continuity

Constructing an integrated professional identity

Aims and Rationale	NATIONAL-LEVEL POLICY PROVISIONS	ENVISIONED REGIONAL/LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION	Possible Challenges
<p>To balance quality of practitioners across the entire ECEC integrated system</p> <p>To improve mutual consideration, foster communication btw practitioners in 0/3 and 3/6 services</p>	<p>Leveling of qualification discrepancies between ECEC practitioners with introduction of national framework of mandatory academic qualifications for professionals in 0-3 settings <i>art. 4 L/DL 65/2017</i></p>	<p>Regions enforce of the new qualifications standards by means of legislation</p> <p>Regions, within their competences, issue guidelines - "linee di intervento regionali" - on professional support for</p>	<p>Enduring differences in social recognition/professional self-identity may hinder cooperation btw ECEC staff employed in 0/3 and 3/6 settings.</p> <p>Traditional differences may continue to prevent cooperation, in spite of a more balanced qualification scenario, settings located in diff. premises, different...</p>
<p>To improve cooperation between ECEC providers, foster communication, create opportunity for exchange of good practices</p> <p>To foster alignment and continuity across ECEC levels, support the emergence of 'hybrid' (0-6) professional profiles</p>	<p>Promotion and development of local Platforms for Pedagogical Coordination <i>art. 4 and 13 L/DL 65/2017</i></p>	<p>Regions promote activation of PPCs, in agreement with LEAs and local authorities →</p> <p>Regions promote protocols and conventions between different local authorities</p> <p>Regions promote protocols and conventions btw local authorities and state-maintained</p>	<p>Structural roadblocks (distance btw premises) may prevent practitioners from engaging consistently</p> <p>Bridging organizational cleavages (ie. pedagogical coordinators are hist. central to 0/3 ECEC, while extraneous to pre-primary 3/6) will require relentless process of weaving together the two institutional threads</p>
<p>To raise quality of the overall educational offer, with specific focus on ECEC practitioners</p> <p>To improve the working environment of ECEC professionals, by building a space for consistent exchange and communication btw practitioners</p>	<p>Promotion and development of collegiality and other collective working practices <i>art. 1 L/DL 65/2017</i></p>	<p>Regions/local authorities may enact the recommendation by supporting the inclusion of collegiality within local guidelines for ECEC management/quality charters</p>	<p>Similar challenges to the ones already identified above:</p> <p>Widespread diffusion of collegial working practices across ECEC sector may require overcoming organizational resistances from settings (ie. pre-primary) less familiar with method in question</p>

Continuity with families and the community

Widening the horizontal curriculum

Aims and Rationale	NATIONAL-LEVEL POLICY PROVISIONS	ENVISIONED REGIONAL/LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION	Possible Challenges
<p>To secure effective reconciliation btw parents' work schedule and children's care needs</p> <p>To guarantee extra support to 'weaker' households (ie. single-parent)</p> <p>To promote families' active involvement in the local education community</p>	<p>Supporting and sustaining the educational and social function of children's families is classified as one of the key strategic objectives of the 0/6 integrated system <i>art. 1 L/DL 65/2017</i></p>	<p>Local authorities design and lay down the arrangements, methods, procedures for promoting engagement/participation by families <i>art. 1 and 7 L/DL 65/2017</i></p>	<p>Engaging disadvantaged groups has been found to be highly challenging → need for expert outreach</p> <p>Insufficient awareness about bridging home environment and ECEC especially in preschool settings</p> <p>Families are increasingly seen as active agents in the early educational process, but few mechanisms in place to take their views systematically and responsively into account</p>
<p>To foster inclusiveness and participation in early education by disadvantaged children</p> <p>To improve equity across the entire education system</p>	<p>Supporting the "integrated" development of disadvantaged children <i>art. 1 L/DL 65/2017</i></p> <p>Removing roadblocks that may prevent participation in settings that foster educational <i>art. 1 and 12 L/DL 65/2017</i></p>	<p>Regions/local authorities undertake initiatives aimed at fostering participation of disadvantaged families in ECEC activities concerned with addressing difficulties experienced by children while transition from pre-educational settings for... <i>art. 1, 4, 7 and 12 L/DL 65/2017</i></p>	<p>Challenging nature of initiative → complex outreach activities</p> <p>Outreach activities may be more effective if supported by targeted redistributive/equity measures</p> <p>Extra financial effort required from local authorities</p>

