



Country profile: Italy

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



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The programme

Working for Inclusion is examining how improving the qualifications and skills of those working with our youngest children is helping to reduce poverty and improve social inclusion. Taking place from February 2009 - January 2011, the programme encourages and facilitates discussion and debate over the role of the early years workforce. It will enable greater, more extensive and effective dialogue between local and national governments, education and qualification providers, employers, practitioners and policymakers.

Programme partners

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

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

Research

The programme encompasses research, which offers a clear picture of early years services and their workforce across the EU and how these relate to levels of poverty and social inclusion. In addition, country profiles of Scotland and the UK, Poland, Norway, Italy, Slovenia, France, Denmark, Portugal, Sweden and Hungary have been produced. This data will contribute towards policy development at EU level as well as Scotland and the rest of the UK. The research is led by Professor Peter Moss and Dr John Bennett.

Study visits

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

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

- Working with the child as an active agent in their own learning (Italy)
- Working with diversity, in particular ethnicity, language, disability and gender (Scotland)
- Inclusive workforce models for rural and remote areas (Norway)
- Exploring the role of the pedagogue in working in an inclusive way with children and families, across agencies and age groups (Poland).

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Glossary of key terms

Main services

Nido (literally, nest – plural *nidi*) – officially still known as *asilo nido* (shelter nest) for children aged zero to three years, are provided and run, in general, by the communes. The term “nido d’infanzia” is used only in some regions (Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany). National Acts still use “asilo nido” or “nido”.

Scuola dell’infanzia or infant school (plural: *scuole*), the first (voluntary) level of public education for children aged three to six years and provided by the State, local authorities and confessional bodies;

Main occupations

Educatori (educators) are the professional contact staff in the nido and other services for under threes

Insegnanti (teachers) are the professional contact staff in the *scuola dell’infanzia*

Coordinatori (coordinators) are the pedagogues or psychologists in charge of municipal services for children aged three to ten years.

The social context of early childhood in Italy

At a glance (all figures from EU sources):

Population: 59.6 million. Population density 199.7 Total fertility rate: 1.34 ; Children in lone parent households: 7% (EU25 average 13%)
Employment rates (2008): Men 70.3%; Women 47.2%. 27% of women and 5% of men were in part-time employment, 2007 (EU average: 31% and 8%). Employment rate of mothers with a child 0-3 years: 52%: with a child 3-6 years: 57%
GDP per capita in PPPs (compared to EU average =100): 101; Children 'at risk of poverty' ¹ 24% (EU average 19%); Gini coefficient: 0.32 (EU average = 0.30)²; S80/S20, that is, the income of top 20% compared to bottom 20%: 5.5 (EU average 4.8) Gender Gap Index: 67th (2008)
Tax receipts: 43.2% of GDP (EU average: 40.5%); Public expenditure on education: 4.23% of GDP (EU average 4.72%); Public expenditure on social protection: 26.4% of GDP (EU average is 27.2%);
Period of leave after birth: 13.5 months, of which 4.5 months are paid at two-thirds or more of previous earnings

Government

Italy has been a democratic republic since June 2, 1946, when the monarchy was abolished by popular referendum. The constitution was promulgated on January 1, 1948. Because of cultural, economic, and political diversity, it is often thought that Italy is administratively decentralised. In fact, for most of its existence, the Italian state has been highly centralized, although divided (today) into 109 provinces. The prefect of each of the provinces is appointed by and answerable to the central government.

In addition to provinces, the constitution provides for 20 regions with limited governing powers. Five regions - Sardinia, Sicily, Trentino-Alto Adige, Valle d'Aosta, and Friuli-Venezia Giulia - function with special autonomy statutes. Regions were established in 1970 and all vote for regional councils and governors. The establishment of regional governments throughout Italy has brought some decentralisation to the national governmental machinery, and recent governments have devolved further powers to

the regions. Many regional governments are seeking additional powers. An important reform of the system of taxation on a regional basis is now under discussion at the Parliament (*federalismo fiscale*).

The 1948 constitution established a bi-cameral parliament (Chamber of Deputies and Senate), a separate judiciary, and an executive branch composed of a Council of Ministers (cabinet), headed by the President of the Council or prime minister. The Council of Ministers—(in practice composed mostly of members of parliament) must retain the confidence of both houses. The houses of parliament are directly elected by the people through a proportional representation system. The Chamber of Deputies has 630 members (12 of whom are elected by Italians abroad). In addition to 315 elected members (six of whom are elected by Italians abroad), the Senate includes former presidents and seven other persons appointed for life according to special constitutional provisions. Both houses are elected for a maximum of five years, but either may be dissolved before the expiration of its normal term. Legislative bills may

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originate in either house and must be passed by a majority in both. The President of the Republic is elected for seven years by the parliament sitting jointly with a small number of regional delegates. The president nominates the prime minister, who chooses the other ministers. The government must be approved by the Parliament.

In national elections held in April, 2006, Romano Prodi's centre-left Union coalition won a narrow victory over Silvio Berlusconi's Freedom House (centre-right) coalition. In January 2008, the Prodi government fell when a small coalition partner UDEUR withdrew support. Prodi was replaced at the head of the Union coalition by Walter Veltroni, mayor of Rome. In February, the President dissolved Parliament and in April Berlusconi returned to power. Berlusconi's winning coalition was composed of the People of Liberty (a union of Forza Italia and National Alliance), the Northern League, and the Movement for Autonomy. Berlusconi was sworn in as Prime Minister on May 8. Veltroni resigned as leader of the opposition in February 2009, and his deputy, Dario Franceschini, was elected new Democratic Party leader.

Demographic, social and economic contexts

The Italian population is about 60 million people, living in a land area of 43,094 km². The 2007 fertility rate was 1.34 and the population density is 199.7 persons per square kilometre making it the fifth-highest population density in Europe. Italy is largely homogeneous - ethnically, religiously and linguistically - but is quite diverse culturally, economically, and politically. Minority groups are small, the largest being the German-speaking people of Bolzano Province and the Slovenes around Trieste. There are also small communities of Albanian, Greek, Ladino, and French origin. Immigration has increased greatly in recent years, while the Italian

population is declining overall due to low birth rates.

Employment

Unemployment is a regional issue in Italy-low in the north, high in the south. Chronic problems of inadequate infrastructure, corruption, and organised crime act as disincentives to investment and job creation in the south. A significant underground economy absorbs substantial numbers of people, but they work for low wages and without standard labour contracts, social benefits and protection. Unemployment levels are significantly higher amongst young people and women than amongst men.

The overall employment rates in 2008 for men and women in Italy are as follows: 70.3% male employment and 47.2% female, compared to the EU average of 71.7% and 58.3%. Italian employment rates are therefore significantly lower than, for example, Nordic employment rates. In particular, the employment rate of women is low, the Danish female employment rate for example is almost 30 points higher at 73.2%. The majority of Italian women who are employed work full time, but 27% work part-time, compared to 5% of men (EU average: 31% and 8%). The employment rate for women with a child under three years is 52% and with a child from three to six years 57% (EU averages are: 57% and 67%). According to OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) sources, lone mother employment in 2007 was 76%, well above the average employment rate for women.

Child and family poverty

Child and family poverty are high in Italy. Social analyses from across the world agree that children in workless families, sole parent families, and large families are most likely to be poor. In fact, only 7% of Italian children

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live in lone parent families, compared to the EU average of 13%, but 24% of children live in poverty compared to the EU average of 17.2%. Expenditure on families with children is low at 1.3% of GDP and significantly less than the OECD average of 2.3%. Priority is given in the public (municipal) *nido* and *scuola dell'infanzia* to families in need and to single mothers.

Tax receipt and social expenditure

Italy has a GDP per capita just at the EU average (\$32,400 per capita). In terms of income inequality, its performance is weak with a Gini coefficient of 0.32 (EU average = 0.30) and an S80/S20 ratio, (that is, the income of the top 20% compared to the bottom 20%) of 5.5 (EU average 4.8) It spends less on education (4.23% of GDP) and less on social expenditure (26.4% of GDP), compared to the EU averages of 4.7% and 27.2% respectively. Tax receipts account for 43.2% of GDP compared to the EU average of 40.5%.

Leave policies

Parental leave in Italy is organised as follows: 20 weeks maternity leave (at least 4 weeks to be taken before birth), paid at 80% of earnings with no ceiling for salaried workers. No paternity leave except under certain conditions.

Parental leave (six months for each parent but ceilinged at 11 months combined, and paid at 30% of earnings when leave is taken for a child under three years). In total, only 4.5 months of leave is paid at two-thirds salary or more.

Some flexibility of leave is allowed. Leave can be taken at any time until a child is eight years old, although most of it remains unpaid. There are two options for taking this leave: a

single leave period up to a maximum of six months; or shorter leave periods amounting to a maximum of six months. It is possible for each parent to take leave at the same time. A lone parent is entitled to 10 months leave.

Current cultural attitudes to child-rearing

In the last decades, a process of homogenisation has taken place all over Italy in regard to attitudes towards parenting, early education, grand-parenting. Modernization processes (such as the influence of the media, increasing employment of women, the generalisation of the *scuole dell'infanzia* and the limited extension of *nido* services have greatly influenced family attitudes towards child rearing and early education. Most families seem to want Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as a priority. Waiting lists for *scuola dell'infanzia* and *nido* are increasing everywhere, including in Southern Italy, and grand-mothers no longer oppose children's access to early educational services. All local administrations, whatever their politics, see the expansion of early childhood services as a central point of their campaigns. The fact that Southern Italy has fewer *nidos* is less a question of attitude than one of greater poverty, less employment among women and lower investments in policies for families and children. In addition, the birth rate is declining in the South, including among immigrant families.

Historical overview of early childhood services in Italy

During the 19th century – and indeed, for much of the 20th century – a collaborative model of home-based child care had been the norm and the ideal. Responsibility for the care of the young child, particularly of infants and toddlers, was considered a family responsibility involving both nuclear and extended family members, generally women. However, the first educational institutes for very young children, *asili d’infanzia*, date from the 19th century. The oldest of these was established in Cremona by F Aporti in 1829.

Given this history, it is significant to note that by the turn of the 20th century, some Italian communities and private entrepreneurs – particularly those in the more industrialised regions – were experimenting with the concept of child care for pre-school age children. In 1907 Maria Montessori established her *Casa dei bambini* in Rome and her approach had expanded to the city of Milan as early as 1915-16. By that time Milanese citizens had begun to recognise the needs of working mothers and the commune opened up its own pre-school programme in 1917, drawing upon the work of the Agazzi sisters as a source of pedagogical influence.

Under Mussolini, a system of state-run ONMI services (National Organisation for Mothers and Infants) was established in 1925, for the care and support of children in large, poor families. Then in 1928, nursery schools were placed within the framework of public education through the Gentile reform and Consolidation Act. This reform led to these preschool services being given the official denomination of *scuole del grado preparatorio*, ie preparatory schools (to primary education). In spite of the growing success of these programmes, the demand for child care or early educational programmes was minimal for the first half of the century. The implementation of the relevant law was still the responsibility of local bodies, so that almost all preparatory schools had a mainly

charitable or social function and depended mostly on the initiatives of private individuals or of bodies and associations. The only institutes depending directly on the State were the *giardini d’infanzia* which were located inside the *istituti magistrali* and *scuole magistrali* whose main function was the training of primary and nursery school teachers.

Following the Second World War, interest grew in out-of-home experiences for pre-school-aged children, especially in the industrial settings in the northern part of the country. A number of local administrative bodies developed some form of municipal child care or early education for pre-primary children, among them, Reggio Emilia. Other cities in the wealthy region of Emilia Romagna, including Bologna, Parma, and Modena, were also engaged in the provision and development of pre-primary schools for young children. The successes of these local experiences influenced the growing public support for high quality out-of-home care, particularly for children of working mothers. The tension between Catholic and lay movements increased, as the Catholic Church struggled to have the preschool sector completely privatised. However, in 1958 the ministry of Public Education enacted *Guidelines for Preschool Education*, still under the influence of Agazzi pedagogy.

The State took over complete responsibility for the pre-school sector (three to six years) only in 1968 with Law no. 444. This law marked Italy’s changing cultural interpretation of early childhood education as a response to children’s needs and rights, rather than as a form of assistance for working mothers. The decree led to the development of a state-run *scuola dell’infanzia* (called at that time, *scuola materna*) system. It also formalised the “three-pronged” (state, communal, private) system of Italian early childhood care and

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education that would characterise the field up to the present time. With Law no. 444, even though pre-school education becomes part of the state educational system and keeps a certain level of continuity with the primary level of education, it gains full pedagogical autonomy.

As state *scuole dell'infanzia* were established throughout much of Italy, a steady stream of legislation was developed to regulate and improve these services. In 1969, the Ministry of Public Education enacted *Guidelines for Educational Activity* in the state *scuole dell'infanzia*, which included a strong emphasis on collaboration with parents, religious education, and play. In recognition of the implicit partnership that was beginning to develop among municipalities, private entities and the state in providing sufficient places within the system for all three to six year-old children, Law 1073, passed in 1962, allowed state contributions to be made, under certain conditions, to the regions, provinces or other institutions of social relevance, through the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno*. A primary aim was to provide meals free of charge to disadvantaged children. Adherence to minimum programme standards and an acceptance of the general aims as outlined in the 1969 *Orientamenti* was also taken into account.

In 1971, in response to trade union and women's campaigns, Law 1044 was enacted and established the *asilo nido* for children under three years. It was one of the first laws after the creation of regional governments and envisaged a new distribution of power and competences among the different governmental levels. In future, the regions would be responsible for planning and regulating the *nido* centres, the communes for their construction and management. The Law was intended to provide the temporary custody of children under three years "within

the framework of a policy for the family" and it aimed at "facilitating women's access to work". It considered the *asilo nido* "a social service of public interest".

The Law established a fund for the construction (2/3) and the management (1/3) of 3,800 services within five years, a sum that was later renewed for a further five years. Regional governments could request and distribute funds to the communes for the construction of services. Owing to different local policies, most requests for construction funding were made from the North and Central regions, while in the Southern area, the money was not requested or not used. The majority of *nido* centres were opened between 1975 and 1985. In the following 15 years, an economic crisis engulfed the country. National funding for building was curtailed and substantial financial constraints imposed on local governments – which practically stopped the extension of the services. However, even in these years, there was a small but constant increase in the number of centres due to the increase of parental demand.

Following the policies established in numerous municipal programmes throughout Italy, Law 360 (1976) and Law 517 (1977), established the rights of disabled children to be educated in public school settings. Also in 1977, Law 616 transferred the responsibility for construction of *scuola dell'infanzia* to local governments. This decision had unfortunate consequences for many parts of southern Italy, where massive funds were dedicated to construction projects that were never completed. Some ten years later, DPR 268 (1987) detailed some of the standards of the state *scuola dell'infanzia*, including the number of hours worked by *scuola* personnel as well as the number of children per section (a maximum of 25).

Historical overview of early childhood services in Italy

In 1984 the Italian government revised the pre-existing agreement with the Vatican (Patti Lateranensi, signed by Mussolini in 1929). As a consequence, Law 121/1985 stated that the teaching of the Catholic religion should no longer be compulsory in public schools. Minority children can now be *exonerated* by specific request from their parents, but if there is not a signed request, agreement to Catholic teaching is presumed. When parents disagree, children can either receive an "alternative" teaching, continue working under the supervision of the school, or be free to leave the school. In all public (state and municipal)³ *scuole dell'infanzia*, the same regulation applies but the Ministry of Education has imposed two hours of Catholic religious teaching at this level. This teaching is provided by the regular class teacher (unless she or he disagrees) after a specific training.

As the state attempted to give direction to their *scuola dell'infanzia* through these various pieces of legislation, municipal programmes in Reggio Emilia, Milan, and Pistoia were documenting their own work with children and their families in ways that not only promoted professional development in their respective programmes but also served to contribute to discussions regarding the nature of *scuola dell'infanzia*.

Under the first Prodi government (1996-2001) two important laws concerning childhood were passed. In 1997, Law 285 "For the promotion of the rights of children and adolescents" funded a variety of programs aimed at respecting children's rights and preventing social and psychological issues. Only one article addressed early childhood issues, but it provided funding for some new types of educational service, such as Centres for Children and Parents (*Centri per Bambini e genitori*) and Places for Children (*Spazi Bambini* or *Centri gioco*). These services already existed, since 1986, in several cities.

Law 285/1997 also provided guidance for their functioning. In the same year, the Law 451 established the Committee for Childhood in the Parliament (composed of members of both houses), the National Observatory for Childhood and Adolescence (which must articulate a National Plan every two years) and the National Centre of Documentation and Analysis of Childhood and Adolescence, whose functioning has now been assigned to the Istituto degli Innocenti di Firenze (Innocenti Centre for Young Children in Florence). Since 1971, much regional legislation on *asilo nido* has been produced. Three periods can be identified in this:

The 1970s, in response to the prescriptions of National Law 1044.
In the 1990s, when faced with the rapid evolution of services for under threes, eg the need to create municipal coordinators.

Since 2000, concerned with updating the regulation to cope with new service developments, eg new regulations for new types of services and regulations on accreditation. The communes also passed new Acts in order to regulate the functioning of municipal services (*nido* and *scuola dell'infanzia*): the number of children per section and centre, opening hours and calendar, personnel, parents' participation, etc. Some communes produced also pedagogical guidelines.
Since the '90s, communes, professionals, and parents' associations have been asking for a new national law. Two People (extra-parliamentary) proposals of law were organised in 1994 and 2006 (a minimum of 500,000 signatures were needed), and received by the Parliament. Neither, however, was discussed as the government resigned. The main point of these proposals was to redefine the nature of the *nido*, as the phrase in the current law "a service individually requested", had had negative consequences

Historical overview of early childhood services in Italy

with regard to finance and extension of the service.

In 2001, an important change was introduced in the Italian Constitution concerning the competences of regional governments (more decentralisation). Education has been acknowledged as a responsibility of both national and regional levels (competing responsibilities), but what this means in practice is still under discussion. Early childhood education is still very much caught up in this debate. There is no doubt that *scuola dell'infanzia* is part of the Education system at the national level as Laws 30/2000 and 53/2003 on Education state that *scuola*

dell'infanzia is a component of the national system of instruction and formation. However, the increasing decentralisation of the state may assign more competences to regional governments in this field. A fortiori in regard to nido services: the *nido* is considered a "social service" and social welfare is a regional competence. The situation has contributed to stopping the campaign for a new national law. However, the Constitutional Court has issued a judgement (#370/2003) in which it agrees with the Regions (who had affirmed that *nido*, as a social service, is under their competence), but at the same time it acknowledges the *educational quality of nido* service. This is the first official act to do so.

Key concepts and important influences on ECEC

The long tradition of extended family responsibility for children. Grand-parents are still quite important in young children's daily life as many live close by and are visited regularly by their grandchildren. Surveys show that grandmother care of young children is still the main resource of working mothers with a child under three (rather less in Southern Italy). However, all the surveys conclude that increasingly grandparents consider their involvement complementary to rather than substituting for grandchild enrolment in a *nido*. Some decades ago, the surveys showed that mothers with lower socio-cultural status preferred grandmother care to *nido* care (for economic or cultural reasons).⁴ Similar findings were found in 2002 by an ISTAT (Italian National Institute of Statistics) Survey.⁵ Other surveys report that parents are more satisfied with early childhood care than with grandparent care. Grandparent help seems to be undergoing a process of change in its meaning from both grandparents' and parents' points of view.

The influence of Reggio Emilia.

At first, Reggio Emilia experience was another important educational experiment conducted by municipal pedagogical coordination in Emilia-Romagna. In the '80s and later, it became increasingly the point of reference for all municipalities that wanted to have good quality *scuole dell'infanzia*. This was due to the cultural relevance of the Reggio experience as well as its capacity to be open to the new experiences of *nidos*. In addition, unlike other pedagogies, it was not based on a school-like approach. In the following years, the international success of Reggio became a strong argument for all municipalities in their struggle to keep open municipal *scuole dell'infanzia* or if they came under pressure to accept lower standards in these schools or in the *nidos*. During the first Prodi government, the importance and high quality of the Reggio

Emilia experience was acknowledged also by the Ministry of Education. In the latest official Ministry of Education Act, Reggio is still quoted as one of the main points of reference for preschool and *nido* experience.⁶

The importance given to children's socialisation.

The idea that it is important for the child to be socialised from an early age is widespread and has become the major motivation given by parents for enrolling their child in a *nido* or other service for under threes. This change in attitude has been helped by the extension of both the *scuola dell'infanzia* and the *nido*. Surveys suggest that only about one-third of the children who do not attend these services actually meet other children in the playgrounds.

The importance given to parent participation and to community involvement:

This is particularly characteristic of the culture of the cities and regions of Northern and Central Italy. Historically, North-Central Italy has been the centre of Italian independence, from Fascism and of post-war social democratic politics.

The importance given to the space arrangements and play materials in the scuole dell'infanzia and nidos:

In Italy, this is certainly due to Montessori influences, but the tradition was significantly expanded and developed in cities such as Reggio Emilia and Pistoia. Today, all regions of the country know of the importance of the learning environment, even though it is not always implemented as it should be. Buildings and environments depend not only on teachers' work but also on aspects of financing, management and the like.

The structure of ECEC in Italy

Service organisation and provision

In Italy, the administration and provision of children's services are non-integrated or split. The large picture is that services are divided between those run for children under three years and services provided to children aged three to six years of age. The former are varied and are the responsibility of the municipalities and regions. The latter has basically one form, the *scuola dell'infanzia*, provided to 60% by the State. A large non-state pre-school education sector also exists, run by municipalities, confessional providers, and private individuals.

Children from zero to three years:

The regions and municipalities are responsible for the *nido* and all other services for under-threes. At local level, in response to community demand, municipalities may provide and operate services, using their own funding. Local authorities are also responsible for financing buildings of *nido* as well as of all *scuole dell'infanzia* (municipal or run by the state) and state primary schools (elementary and junior for children from six to 14). Maternal and child health services, infant and toddler care, child welfare, and related social services are largely the responsibility of regional and local governments. To a small extent, the Regional governments may supplement municipal budgets for *nido* services. In the first years after Law 1044, this should have been done through the distribution of the employer's 1% contribution to the Regions by the Ministry of Health, but funds for *nido* were rarely disaggregated in the general budget for social welfare. However, in the 80s and 90s, regions began to distribute funds for *nido*, covering from 1% to 10% of commune expenditure for *nidos*. Some regions, such as Emilia-Romagna and Umbria, allocated this money to be linked to specific purposes, eg enhancing service quality,

experimenting new type of services and supporting the employment of coordinators, etc.

The majority of *nido* services are provided directly by municipalities, though in recent decades there has been a growing number of *nidos* provided by the private or associative sector (cooperative and associations). In most cases the private providers operate in the framework of agreement with the local government, which supports them partly or entirely using these services to respond to the growing demands of families. In many cases, these subsidized services are fully integrated into the local network of services together with those provided by the commune. Parents request a place at the municipality and places are distributed according to each child's residence. A small number of private providers also operate, often on a non profit basis. In 2000, it was calculated they could cover about 5% of places, but in fact many of these services are not regulated and unknown to the census.

Children three to six years:

The *scuola dell'infanzia*, although not compulsory, has now the status of the first stage of basic education. It covers just over 96% of the entire population aged three to six years. There is basically no organisational or structural alternative to the *scuole dell'infanzia* for this age group. The *scuole dell'infanzia* are mainly provided by the state, funded and administered by the *Ministero della Istruzione* (Ministry of Education) and accounts for about 60% of total provision. A large non-state pre-school education sector exists however, run by municipalities, confessional providers, and private individuals.

State and municipal *scuole dell'infanzia* are free of charge. In both cases, transport and canteen services are provided and subsidised

The structure of ECEC in Italy

by municipalities with families being asked to contribute to costs except for low-income families who are generally exempt. The number of hours offered per year lies between 875 and 1,700 hours, corresponding roughly to a minimum of 25 (about 10% of schools) and a maximum of 48-49 hours a week. Most *scuole dell'infanzia* provided by municipalities are fulltime (from 8-8.30 to 16.00-16.30). Generally, children are organised in groups according to their age. Groups are composed of a minimum of 15 children and a maximum of 25 children. In many municipalities, the enrolment age regulation is that children have turned three by the 31st of January of the current calendar year, but for some years now, the State *scuole dell'infanzia* accept children who have turned three by the 31st of April.

Law No. 62 of 10 March 2000 acknowledges parity between schools run by organisations or private citizens but which are officially recognised by the State and that comply to certain requirements. This law also included *scuole dell'infanzia* (which constitute the majority of private schools in Italy). Parity schools are free to choose their cultural orientation and their educational-didactical approach. Parity status implies annual state funding. Thus municipal *scuole dell'infanzia*, which were considered private, can now receive money from the state, as well as confessional schools. Non profit-making schools benefit from special tax treatment in accordance with article 34 of the Italian Constitution.

In order to implement the right of families to choose either State or parity schools, an extraordinary financing plan has been proposed to the Regions to enable them to support disadvantaged families with regard to education expenses. These additional funds are provided by the regions either directly to schools or to the students' families. Direct

financing of teacher salaries in parity schools is also practised. This decision is due to the fact that non-state, parity pre-schools supply almost 40% of the requirements at this level of education. Non-financing would imply the closure of many parity schools with the consequence of an increase in the financial burden for the state budget. After the entry into force of the law, most non-state *scuole dell'infanzia* successfully applied for equal status recognition. They now follow the State general education guidelines as well as observing quality and effectiveness requirements.⁷ In particular, they must:

- have an educational project in line with the principles of the Italian Constitution,
- have an educational plan (POF) consistent with regulations and provisions in force,
- have collective bodies based on democratic participation
- guarantee access to all children whose parents apply for a place
- implement current regulations for disabled or disadvantaged children
- employ fully qualified teaching staff, with individual contracts in accordance with the national collective contracts for the sector⁸

Where service mapping is concerned, large and persistent imbalances in provision are found at national level between areas and regions, the North having far more services, especially for children aged zero to three years, than the South. Recent education reform aims at ensuring the "generalisation"⁹ of attendance at *scuola dell'infanzia* across Italy. The slight new increase of birth-rate due to immigrant families has re-actualised the question. In some regions and cities there are again waiting-lists for enrolment at *scuole dell'infanzia*.

In 2007, the last Prodi government funded a three-year plan for the extension of *nido*

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services all over the country, aiming to move towards the EU Barcelona targets and to righting the gap between North-Central Regions and the Southern Regions and Islands. An initial budget of 100 millions of euro per year was allocated, but the Ministry for Family Affairs succeeded in increasing this budget money for the first two years. In addition, the Ministry of Education allocated significant sums directly to schools in order to open *Sezioni Primavera* (literally, Spring classes), classes within the *scuola dell'infanzia* that cater for two year olds

Main types of service provision

At a glance:

child care and education services for children aged zero to six years in Italy

Service type	Age & % enrollment	Opening hours	Auspices
Scuola dell'infanzia (infant school)	3 to 6 years	8.30am to 4.30pm but municipal and private scuole often during holidays. About 10% of state scuole dell'infanzia (mostly in South) open only in the morning (8.30-12.30)	Ministry of Public Education authorities Network open longer and of Catholic Preschools (FISM)
State (59,2%) Communes and other public authorities + 13,3% of provision	95% national coverage (less in South)		
Nido (day nursery). Provided mostly by communes and private non-profit providers (mostly cooperatives and/or associations). Most are subsidised by municipalities... Some for-profit enterprises	0 to 3 years: 9.6% national coverage. Wide range of enrolments between regions. 2% national coverage	9 hours daily average, minimum of 24 hours weekly. In many services children can have different daily schedules.	Ministry for Family Affairs Regional social welfare or education authorities Municipal welfare or education departments
Other services for 0 to 3 year olds Early enrolments in scuole dell'infanzia			

Sources: Enrolment data for nido are drawn from ISTAT (National Bureau of Statistics) Survey on Communes' expenditures in welfare (2006).

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A major difficulty with early childhood enrolment statistics in Italy is that there is no official or regular data collections at national level. Some regions do collect data but data collection rules are not uniform across the different regions. Thus, the number of two-and-a-half-year-old children enrolled in *scuole dell'infanzia* may not be always included; foreign children enrolled may be discounted as not being residents, etc. In addition, numbers declared by private schools may not be sufficiently verified.

Nido services for children three months to three years, open for eight to 12 hours daily. These services are generally municipal or private but subsidised by municipalities and cater for children from three months to three years. In recent years, their numbers have increased dramatically and in 2006 (ISTAT DATA) they catered for about 160,000 children. Non-state providers have increased: their share of provision from 6.7% in 1992 to 20.1% in 2000. A recent survey from Banca d'Italia¹⁰ on 57 main cities in 10 regions (all over the country) found that 46% of *nido* in these cities were run privately, but 43% of these operate within an agreement with the local government, and thus were subsidised. However, this survey does not indicate the number of places provided by private services, generally fewer than in public services. The distribution of *nidos* is not homogeneous on the national territory and availability of places varies. Data drawn from the ISTAT survey reported for 2006 the following percentage of children in *nido*: North-West regions 12.3%, North-East regions: 14.7%, Central regions 12.7%, Southern regions 2.6%. Islands 6.1%.¹¹

Nido centres may operate from 1st September to 31st August. According to the most recent available data¹², most (36%) are open 45-48 weeks, 34% are open 40-44 weeks, around

20% are open 49 weeks or more, and 105 are open 39 weeks. They are open from Monday to Friday with variable daily working hours: the majority of them (36%) operate 11-12 hours, 34% operate nine to ten hours, 27% operate seven to eight hours, only about 3% operate seven hours.¹³

The *scuola dell'infanzia* for the three to six year olds is the only early childhood service in Italy, catering for about 96-99% of the children in the age group. These *scuole* open during the academic year with different timetables, ranging from a minimum of 875 to a maximum of 1,700 annual hours. About 60% of *scuole dell'infanzia* are now under the direct responsibility of the Ministry of Public Education. *Scuole dell'infanzia* generally offer a full day programme, from 8.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. from September to June, with municipal services also offering summer programmes. Attendance at state and municipal *scuola dell'infanzia* is free, except for meals. Modest fees are charged in confessional *scuola dell'infanzia*, as these services receive some regional and state funds. Other private providers may charge higher fees, but many private services are, in fact, non-profit.

Integrative services –The so-called “new service typologies” or *integrative services* were created in the late '80s to respond to the demand for differentiation of the *asili nido* provision and meet the diverse needs of families, women and children. In 2000, 504 municipal integrated services for zero to three year olds and at least 228 private ones were calculated (31% of total).¹⁴

There are two types of integrative services.

- *Centres for children and parents*, catering for zero to three year olds, where children are to be accompanied by their parents or other adults. The location for service provision is fixed and

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appropriate, but not necessarily exclusive. The activities are carried out on a regular and permanent basis. Some of these Centres cater only for a group of children over the year, some other Centres have free entrance. Most of the Centres do not request any fee.

- *Children's Places (or Play Centres)* for children aged between 18 and 36 months: Children are admitted either in the morning or in the afternoon for a maximum of 5 hours daily. Extra services, like meals and afternoon rest, are not provided. A fee is requested to parents.

Family day care services (child minders caring for children in their own home) are quite rare in Italy. In the last ten years, some regions experimented with the idea. The most solid experience was made by the Province of Bolzano (Bozen) where family daycare now caters for 6,3% of the under-threes. Many family daycare homes were transformed into *mini-nido*, that is, with two caregivers catering for six or more children either in the home of one of them (caregivers) or (more often) in another place. The Emilia-Romagna Region experimented with a different type of service, that is, a group of three children younger than three years were catered for by qualified staff, but it seems that this service type is expansive and may be discontinued.

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The governance of early childhood services

The Constitution of the Italian Republic (art. 33 and 34) establishes that it is a duty of the State to provide access to education to all young people living in the country, regardless of geographical condition and their individual social and economic situation. The State central and peripheral administrations, as well as regional, provincial and local administrations (Communes) are responsible for setting up and operating educational establishments all over the national territory, based on the age of the pupils, the geographical environment of the area and the social conditions of the families living there.

Responsibility for governance of the zero to three sector

Central government

Although there is no budget for the function, traditionally a ministry other than Education has responsibility within the Regions for policy in the childcare field. In recent years, that ministry has been the Ministry of Family Affairs and/or Ministry of Welfare (according to governments), never the Ministry of Education. In the present government, there is a Department for Family Affairs with an Undersecretary (Sottosegretario) who takes responsibility for the Plan to extend the *nidi* network, according to the Agreement between State and Regions. Overall policy and legislation of the zero to three year old sector is the responsibility of this Department, but the daily funding, administration and management of early childhood services for children aged zero to three years is a communal responsibility.

Regions

The regions, of which there are 20, are the

articulation of the Italian state. At the moment, discussions have been engaged to create a better balance of power between state and regions. In this new structure, welfare and health will become the full responsibility of the regions entirely, with the state deciding the "essential standards". At the present time, regions regulate the zero to three years sector by specific laws and may give some money to communes. This money is allocated from the social welfare fund.

Communes or municipalities

There are about 8,000 communes in Italy which provide and manage services in answer to families' demand. In general, communes take responsibility for the daily funding, administration and management of early childhood services. They supervise the quality and educational content of local services and provide adequate staffing and sufficient support to staff. They may also issue regulations and provide subsidies to private services.

All services should observe the requirements set by regional law. If the regional law does not regulate the private sector, the communes themselves can decide whether to give money to the private sector. Enterprise services (*nidi aziendali* or *crèches d'entreprise*) are also considered as a licensed service if they comply with regional and municipal regulations. More than one third of communes run *nidi* and spend a great portion of their budget on this service.

Provinces

The province, of which there are about 100, is an intermediate level of government between the region and communes. In the education sector, they provide buildings for high school. Provinces have a role in welfare and training but no direct role in early childhood services.

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Indirect financing may take place through provincial administrations providing money to communes for special purposes, for example the Province of Modena recently supported the creation of *nidi* in the small communes on the mountain parts of its territory.

Responsibility for governance of the three to six years sector

Governance of the three to six years sector is a state responsibility. The administration and direction of the *scuola dell'infanzia* across Italy is the responsibility of the *Ministero della pubblica istruzione* (Ministry of Public Education). It runs *scuole dell'infanzia* for 60% of Italian children and also issues licenses to private schools to operate in the early education sector. Since 2000, the Ministry has provided some funding to *scuole dell'infanzia* run by municipalities (which were considered just private up to that time), and to confessional and private services, when they observe the requirements to be considered *paritarie*.

Because attendance at pre-primary school is seen to be of great importance for the development of children and for their future success in education, several laws in the past decade confirm the objective of generalising *scuola dell'infanzia* throughout the country. Every child has a de facto entitlement to a place in a *scuola dell'infanzia* from the age of three years.

System financing

Expenditure on pre-primary educational institutions as a percentage of GDP is, by latest OECD figures, 0.61% of GDP, with 0.46 being spent on the *scuola dell'infanzia* and 0.15 on services for young children. 88.8% of this expenditure comes from public sources and 11.2% from private (household) sources. In general, the proportion of funding from the national budget is significantly greater than

that from regional budgets. The *scuola dell'infanzia* is universally provided and attendance at state-run *scuole dell'infanzia* is free by law.¹⁵ In parity municipal services (local authority), tuition is also free. In both state and municipal schools, transport and meals are provided by the local government (as is the case also for primary schools). Families are asked to pay a contribution for these services according to their means (for low income families services are free).

Municipal and subsidised *nidos* are almost entirely funded by municipal budgets. In 2006, communes assigned on average 16% of welfare expenditure to *nidos* (about 40% of municipal budgets is assigned to policy for childhood, adolescence and families). Only 18.0% of costs are funded by parents. This percentage varies according to the geographic area: North-West: 24.0%; North-East: 20.4%; Centre: 13.6%; South: 9.2%; Islands: 8.7%¹⁶. As fees are income-related, this variability is due to both municipal policy and the local incomes. Average yearly fees are 1312,9 Euros, but they vary according to the geographic area: North-West: 1589.7 Euros; North-East: 1434.1 Euros; Centre: 1249.9 Euros; South: 481.7 Euros; Islands: 481.7 Euros¹⁷. For low income families, services are free. Parents' fees may range from 90 to 600 Euros monthly.

Data collection, monitoring and research

In Italy, there are no regular and official data collection at a national level, but some regions or other initiatives collect data, as specified in the following:

The supply and distribution of early childhood services across the country : some regions (Emilia-Romagna, Toscana, Veneto) collect data regularly concerning *nidos* and other services for under threes; Enrolments and profiles of children enrolled

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(eg age, disability, ethnicity, etc.): Ministry of Education collect data on disability for state schools. Data on children issued from non-Italian families are also collected by the Ministry of Education¹⁸. *Caritas Diocesana* publishes a dossier every year on immigrants in Italy, in which precious information on children from immigrant families can be found. Care arrangements for children aged zero to twelve years (ie who cares for them during the day, including out-of-school care): There is no official national data collection. Sparse information can be found in different surveys; The workforce - numbers, qualifications, pay and profile (eg age, gender, ethnicity): The Ministry of Education collect data on numbers for state and parity-private *scuole dell'infanzia*.

Structural standards, e.g. ratios and group sizes) Standards are established by the Ministry of Education for state preschools, but there is no regular data collection about their implementation. Regions are not responsible for municipal *scuole dell'infanzia* and do not collect data about them. With regard to *nidos* and other services for under threes, see section c. above.

In 2000-2001, the National Institute for Evaluation of the System of Instruction tried to launch a national system of evaluation of state *scuole dell'infanzia*. The initiative was not successful and the change of government in 2008 has stopped the attempt.

Monitoring

The Ministry of Public Education does not provide any evaluation of the state *scuole dell'infanzia*, at least not in a regular or consistent way. The monitoring of this service is committed to the local school authorities but, as is often the case, school inspectors may not consider the infant school as of particular importance and may only inspect if

a specific problem has been reported. In recent decades, the Ministry has funded some important pilot initiatives in state *scuole dell'infanzia*: Ascanio, Alice, Orme, in response to the *Nuovi Orientamenti* (New Educational Guidelines) of 1991. Some of the pilots have not led to further development. Regional Research Centres have recently undergone a process of transformation within the framework of the reform of National Education.

Municipalities organise in-service training for their *scuole dell'infanzia* and *nidos* personnel.¹⁹ A certain amount of paid training - 80 to 240 hours per year is compulsory. This training is monitored by the municipal pedagogical co-ordinators who are in charge of three to ten services each. From the start, local governments turned to the university and research sector to take on the in-service training of the educators. This has led to the development of an educational culture linked to knowledge produced within the scientific community.

A further move towards the development of an educational culture has been signalled by the appointment of pedagogical co-ordinators in all the regions. An important role was also played by the association known as *Gruppo Nazionale Nidi Infanzia*, founded by Loris Malaguzzi in 1980. This gathered together researchers, managers and decision-makers, educators and pedagogues sensitive to the problems of early childhood and committed to the development of quality educational services for early childhood. The association is engaged both at the scientific level (organising conferences and seminars on early childhood and educational issues), and at political levels, campaigning for the extension of ECEC. The association favours the exchange of educational experiences (such as Reggio Emilia, Pistoia, Modena, etc) and has built up a network among cities to expand high quality

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services.

Some regions and local governments, such as in Reggio Emilia, Pistoia, and a few others, support research on their own services, in so far as budget restrictions allow. Much of the research undertaken is action-research studies carried out through the cooperation of researchers and teachers in the framework of in-service training. Such initiatives have led to national discussions concerning the frontier-line between, on the one hand, studies conducted in universities and research agencies and, on the other, systematic analyses of educational practices carried out by expert teachers supported by research and university staff. One recent case is the study on CARE carried out at the University of Bologna together with an ECEC network, and funded by Region Emilia-Romagna.

Evaluation

During the '90s, in accordance with an international trend and with reference to the document provided by the Child Care Network of the European Commission in 1991, several regional (Emilia-Romagna, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Toscana, Umbria) and local governments (Milano, Trento, etc) supported experiences of evaluation of *nido* and *scuola dell'infanzia* quality. In all cases, the evaluations took into consideration both the quality aspects of the *nido* and the management aspects, such as the system's response to the demand for *nido* expressed by parents. These experiences did not give rise to systematic evaluations by the regional or local governments. In the last years, new attention is given in Emilia Romagna and Toscana to the monitoring and evaluation of both public and private services seeking accreditation and subsidisation. New experiences of evaluating accredited services have also been undertaken in the City of Rome.

Access levels and strategies

Overall access levels at a glance

ECEC for 0-3 children	% in services = 23%
Parental care or family care	>70%
Licensed family day care	Estimation (Istituto degli Innocenti, 2009): 23% (16% enrolled in early childhood centres and c. 7% enrolled already in the scuola dell'infanzia)
Day nurseries	
Integrated institutions	Percentage enrolment= c.96%
Preschool services 3-6 years	

At national level, there are no precise figures on the percentage of children in childcare or cared for predominantly in the home. According to different local surveys most non-working mothers care for their child by themselves. Most care for infants during the first year is parental, and is often linked to the parental leave system. Parental care may be supplemented by informal (unregulated) family care, or *nido* provision.

1-2 years: According to the last survey conducted by ISTAT (National Bureau of Statistics) in 2002²⁰ - in which an important sample of working mothers with a one to two year old child were interviewed - during mother's working hours the child is cared for: 54.6% by grand-parents; 11% by a babysitter in the child's home; 12.1% in a public *nido*; 10.3% in a private *nido*, 8.9% by mother and/or father; and 3.2% by informal care.

0-3 years: c. 23% (see Table above)

3-6 years: Around 96% of children aged three to six are enrolled in a *scuola dell'infanzia*.

Admission criteria and procedures

Admission criteria for municipal and subsidised *nidos* vary according to city policies and regulations. In all sites, the main criteria are: family income, mother's working status, one parent family, number of children, and presence of a disabled person in the family. Usually, children with a psychological or physical disability have first call on services.

Children with additional support needs and rights

Children from low-income families: The child poverty level after redistribution policies is 24%, among the highest in Europe (average 19%). In Italy, daycare services are seen as playing a special role vis-à-vis these children and family fees are often waived for these children who, in general, are given first call to services.

Children with additional support needs and

Access levels and strategies

rights

In Italy, the general inclusion of children with disabilities into ECEC and schools is the rule, with reduced group sizes and additional support needs teachers at their disposal. In the academic year 2005-2006, 10,416 children with disabilities enrolled in state *scuole dell'infanzia*, that is 1.07% of the total number of pupils. Out of 84,702 posts for general teachers, there are 4,217 posts for additional support needs teachers, not including extra teachers recruited in exceptional cases. Psycho-pedagogical support interventions can be either external or internal to schools, while paediatric interventions are the responsibility of the national health service structures. They are free of charge and available for all children.

Ethnic and bilingual children

The 2007-2008 rate of attendance at state and non-state *scuole dell'infanzia* of foreign children is 6.7% of the total number of enrolled children.²¹ Compared to 2003-2004 the rate has increased by 2.9%, thus confirming a long-standing trend. Of the 111,044 foreign children enrolled in *scuole dell'infanzia*, more than six children out of ten are enrolled in state schools (61.9%). The national rate of foreign enrolments in the *scuole* is not homogeneous, ranging from:

10.5% in north-western regions; 10.4% in north-eastern regions; 8.3% in central regions; 1.6% in southern regions; and 1.6% in the islands²² In origin, the 111,044 foreign children attending *scuola dell'infanzia* in the academic year 2007-2008 come from diverse backgrounds: 20% come from EU countries, 25% from European countries outside the EU, 31% from Africa, 8% from America, and 16% from Asia. Fifty one children are from Oceania or are stateless.²³ However, Roma and human rights organisations – including the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights - have expressed concern on several occasions during the past year concerning the exclusion of Roma children and families in several Italian municipalities. Indeed, the recent decree that considers the status of *clandestinità* (persons living in the country non-officially) a crime reinforces exclusionary attitudes. On September 8 2009, the Minister of Education issued an Orientation Act (*Atto di indirizzo*) in which she affirmed that the school is “a place of learning as well as of building individual, civil and social identity”. This made clear that nobody should be left behind, and nobody should feel excluded. The school must give “the greatest attention to inclusion and give priority to children with disabilities and to intensive actions towards foreigners, especially, but not exclusively recent immigrants”. The question of children without papers is not mentioned.

Conditions for quality improvement and assurance

The workforce at a glance

Type of provision	Title of lead staff & assistant (with literal translation)	Pre-service education level required	Diploma delivered
Services for children 0-3	<i>Coordinatori</i> ²⁴ (coordinators) essentially district co-ordinators. Frequently, they have responsibility also for <i>scuole dell'infanzia</i> .		Varies according to locality, but normally:
<i>Family daycare</i>	This typology is rare but exists legally in some cities and provinces. Staff are called: <i>Assistente familiare</i> (family assistant) or <i>Assistente domiciliare</i> (home assistant), understood as someone who gives, predominantly physical care.	Under discussion: pre-service training varies according to local regulations. In Emilia-Romagna and Toscana, at least, 3 years tertiary training college will be required.	3 years tertiary training college
<i>Nido d'infanzia</i> or day nursery	<i>Educatori</i> , (educators) and <i>Assistente d'infanzia</i> (child assistant)	3 years tertiary training college	In the <i>nidi</i> lead staff will have three-year tertiary degree or a tertiary training institute diploma.
Integrated services	Same as in <i>nido</i> , that is, <i>educatori</i> and <i>assistente</i>	3 years tertiary training college	Same as in <i>nidi</i>

Pre-service training requirements for *scuola dell'infanzia* teachers

The current reform of the training system is a major national initiative. Two laws were enacted in 1997/1998 with the aim of raising

the qualifications of preschool and primary teachers to university level. Prior to this law, teacher training was undertaken at mid-secondary level in largely Catholic training institutes or in state training institutes (*scuole magistrali e istituti magistrali*). Staff-training

Conditions for quality improvement and assurance

reform is still underway: teachers of the *scuola dell'infanzia* will in the future have a five-year university degree. Co-ordinators of the *nidos* have a five-year university degree, while *nido* educators already require a three-year university degree in some regions. The law confirms that teacher training has to be undertaken in universities (second degree courses), and that the university degree obtained – which includes the assessment of the teaching practice – gives Qualified Teacher Status. Additional support needs teachers (teacher assistants) can be admitted to the university course in “Sciences of primary education” (art. 3, par. 2, of Law no. 341 of 19 November 1990), under certain conditions: they must pass the relevant entry tests, and have an upper secondary school diploma. They can be awarded learning credits on the basis of their previous learning pathway.²⁵

Regional laws determine the educational level required for educatori in the nido

the trend is for having three-year university degree personnel. Personnel are recruited by a public examination (*concorso*). Sometimes the selected personnel are submitted to a training course before employment, but mostly they join the other educators in in-service training. Private *nidi* must comply to the same requirements.

Professional development

Regulations require that contact staff in all licensed early childhood services (family day care varies according to local regulation) have pre-training in the care and education of young children and participate in regular in-service training. The bodies directly responsible for the *scuole dell'infanzia* organise in-service training activities for the staff: the State, through the Regional Institute for Educational Research (IRRE) and the National Documentation Institute for

Educational Innovation and Research (INDIRE). In addition, municipalities generally organise in-service training on a group basis for all the personnel in their early childhood service. When private services are subsidized, the personnel can also participate in the same in-service training with municipal *nidos* personnel in the city. Private individuals generally may provide refresher courses through initiatives carried out by their associations.

Work conditions and salaries

In the state *scuole dell'infanzia*, teachers are currently paid at the same rates as primary teachers, and conditions of work are good. The State provides them with many opportunities for in-service training. Conditions for staff in municipal *scuole dell'infanzia* are different: they may work two to six more hours per week in order to have the opportunity to stay together in the class (*compresenza*), thus enhancing the educational quality. There exists a continuous tension between municipalities and teachers about these points. Conditions for staff in the *asili nido* are much less satisfactory. Although often as highly trained, these staff are paid less and have longer working hours than teachers in the *scuola dell'infanzia*.

Evidence of recruitment shortages

There is no evidence of recruitment shortages. All the public examinations for new personnel in the various early childhood services are taken up by thousands of young women. However, a major problem has been employing sufficient personnel in municipalities and in state preschools because of funding curtailment and other restrictive measures. In addition, the non-flexibility of the labour market in Italy seems to place a burden on the educational sector.

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Trade unions and other workforce organisations: Teachers of state *scuola dell'infanzia* are organised by school trade unions (CGIL-Federazione Lavoratori Conoscenza, CISL-Scuola, UIL-Scuola, etc), while teachers of municipal *scuola dell'infanzia* and *nidos* are organised by the sectors of the same trade unions that care for public employees. Teachers of private *scuola dell'infanzia* are organised by other trade unions according to their employment status. This separation of trade unions according to the type of employment contract weakens both the workers' strength and initiatives for reforming the early education sector.

Other conditions for quality

Child:staff ratios and group sizes
Child-staff ratios in the nidi d'infanzia

The maximum group size in *nido* varies according to local regulations. Usually, the established ratio in the *nidi* is 6:1, but this ratio is modified according to the age of the child: 4:1 to 6:1 for zero to one year olds, 8:1 for one to two year olds, 8:1 to 10:1 for two to three year olds.

For *integrative children's services* catering for 18-36 month-olds, the ratio is 8:1. In municipal *nidi*, working hours are 30 hours per week with children for 42 weeks per year. *Child-staff ratios in the scuole dell'infanzia* are higher: 20 children per teacher (if there are children with disabilities) and up to 25 children per teacher if a half-session is being worked. Exceptionally, there can be groups of 28 children per two teachers if working hours are more than 25 per week), plus at times a teacher assistant (additional support needs teacher) and a religion teacher. The ratios are more or less the same in state and municipal *scuola dell'infanzia*. Sections are established according to the number of enrolled pupils. The number of pupils, not rigidly fixed, varies

according to certain factors, such as the presence of pupils with a disability, the geomorphology of the territory, financial conditions, the presence of large-scale social disadvantages, or the availability of the regional number of school staff units. Generally, sections are made up of a maximum of 25 and a minimum of 15 children.

State *scuole dell'infanzia* define the weekly and daily timetables, on the basis of their educational projects and according to their organisation and teaching autonomy. The timetables should be consistent with the number of teachers assigned to the schools and with the families' requirements. Within the total amount of hours, which can range between 25 and 48-49 weekly hours per 35 weeks in a year, three timetable models can be offered: a minimum of 25 hours service only in the morning; 40 hours service; and a maximum of 48-49 hours service.

Curricula for children aged zero to six

The *Indicazioni nazionali* of 2004 establish the general objectives, basic content and performance levels of the state *scuola dell'infanzia*. They exclude pedagogical approaches aiming at anticipating formal learning and set out the general objectives of a balanced educational approach towards young children, namely to develop personal identity, autonomy and competences. They also classify specific learning objectives in four areas: 1) the self and others; 2) body, movement and health; 3) receiving and producing messages; 4) exploring, knowing and planning.²⁶ This list is not mandatory but describes general learning goals and teaching activities that can be modulated according to each child's needs and abilities. The learning units, implemented with the differentiations that some children may require, form the *Personalized Educational Plan*, which is at the disposal of families and is an important

Conditions for quality improvement and assurance

document for the development of each child (See *Competences Portfolio*).²⁷ Throughout the *scuola dell'infanzia*, each child records the competences acquired on a Portfolio made up of: a basic description of courses attended and progress made; and a standard but significant documentation of his/her work, including information on learning resources, and on his/her personal interests, aptitudes and aspirations.²⁸

The *Guidelines for the Curriculum* of 2007 (3.2.3.10.) further emphasise certain elements to be followed by schools in order to create an effective learning environment. The *scuola dell'infanzia* should be an educational environment where children can make real experiences and learn by reflecting, thus integrating the children's various forms of doing, thinking, expressing and communicating, enjoying beauty and understanding. It requires adults' attention and availability, flexibility and adaptability; it should create a pleasant atmosphere of curiosity and joy about play. It acknowledges the importance of: the relationship among peers and with adults; the role of play; the relevance of productive meaning making and of direct experience of contact with nature, materials, social environment and culture as a way of leading the children's curiosity towards gradually more organised exploration and research paths.

With recent legislation²⁹ state educational institutions – including state *scuole dell'infanzia* – enjoy autonomous management and are in charge of designing and carrying out their educational provision, within the framework of the tasks and functions transferred to regions and local authorities.³⁰ Each educational institution designs its *Educational Plan*. The Plan is the essential document for the definition of the cultural and planning identity of the school. It sets out the plan for curricular, extra-curricular,

educational and organisational activities that each school adopts autonomously.³¹ In some cities, such as Rome, the city incorporated in its own regulation - the National Guidelines for state *scuole dell'infanzia* (1996). Cities with more notable track records in education developed high quality programmes (such as in Reggio Emilia, Pistoia and Milano). There is no set of national guidelines for *nidi*.

Attention to children's outcomes

The *scuola dell'infanzia* foresees the occasional and systematic observation of children as well as the documentation of their activities in order to evaluate their needs and share these with their parents. The evaluation of the level achieved by individual children may have different objectives, for example: to measure the child's abilities when accessing pre-primary education; to evaluate the child's understanding within a particular didactic activity, so as to adjust and individualise the educational activity; or finally, through assess learning outcomes, to measure the quality of educational and didactic activities and the whole educational experience. In general, the levels attained at individual level are described and understood, instead of being measured and assessed. The authorities see the central task of the *scuola dell'infanzia* as one of promoting, supporting and strengthening processes that allow pupils to develop their abilities in an optimal way.

Licensing and inspection

All *scuole dell'infanzia* are licensed by State school authorities and should be inspected by them. In parallel, the municipal authorities – through their own coordination teams - also regulate, inspect and orient their own *scuole dell'infanzia*. Though public services, they are considered private (now *paritarie*) by the State and are under State control. The situation is quite absurd in some cities where

Conditions for quality improvement and assurance

the municipality runs a great number of *scuole dell'infanzia* (such as in Roma, Pistoia, Reggio Emilia, Genova, etc). In recent years, some communes have tried to reach an agreement with the state authorities to rationalise procedures of enrolment and inspection for children aged three to six. *Nidi* and other services for under-threes are governed by regional laws and municipal regulations. Private providers must be licensed to operate and must operate according to local regulations.

Family and community involvement

An important quality element of a pre-school institution is cooperation with parents. In the *nidos* and municipal *scuole dell'infanzia* parents' committees and councils guarantee the social management of the services. Enhancing parents' participation is considered an important goal of the educational project. In the state *scuole dell'infanzia* inter-section councils have been operating for years: they are composed of all teachers and one representative of parents for each section. Parents of children enrolled in state *scuole dell'infanzia* can be elected in district councils (*consigli di circolo*).³²To get the status of *parity* (see above) non-state *scuole dell'infanzia* must set up collective bodies based on democratic participation.³³

Relationship and transitions between ECEC and school

All official acts and guidelines claim to plan for *continuity* between *scuola dell'infanzia* and primary school. However, it is far from being a widespread practice. Even the transition between *nido* and *scuola dell'infanzia* can involve difficulties and frequently lacks adequate planning.

Out-of-school services

Municipalities may operate pre- (7am to 8.30am) and post-school services (16.30 to 18.00 or later) for families in difficulty. However, it is not an obligation and varies according to the financial position of the city. Most of these actions are now provided by associations privately or subsidised by the municipality. During summer holidays (particularly during July) municipalities may also organise some play areas for children aged from two to 11 and older. In some cities, a *nido* is organised in each district to care for children whose families cannot care for them in July or during the Christmas holiday. Sport and leisure activities are entirely paid for by families, even if these activities are sometimes organised by the school committee.

Current issues and development

Current issues and developments

1. In recent years, the extension of ECEC services for under-threes has become an important issue for the political agendas of both right- and left-wing parties. This is due to real social pressure from families as well as the impact of the Barcelona targets. In 2007, the last Prodi government launched a three-year National Plan for the extension of *nidos*. The Plan aimed to achieve a coverage of 15.9% (from 9%) over three years and to reduce the imbalance of *nidi* between the different regions. Two points are worthy of mention:

1. Funds were allocated for both facility construction and the functioning of *nidi* - thus supporting the efforts of local governments weakened by financial restrictions, and the present economic crisis); 2. A monitoring procedure was instituted (committed to Istituto degli Innocenti di Firenze) to support the implementation of the Plan (mostly in the Southern regions). The first 2007 budget could be requested in total by regions.

2. In 2007, the Ministry of Education together with Ministry of Family and Ministry of Welfare launched the experiment of *sezioni primavera*. These services cater for two year olds and provide them with an environment more adapted to this age than *scuola dell'infanzia* (a smaller number of children, facilities for naps, play materials, etc). This type of service had already been tried in some cities, such as Roma, Terni. Initially, the project launched by the Ministry of Education was to be piloted within state *scuole dell'infanzia*. However, the budget was ultimately provided to the private sector as well. Monitoring was the responsibility of the Ministry of Education but its results are still not known. In 2009 the experiment was re-financed and the Ministry of Education has confirmed the continuation of the initiative. However, the institutional status

of these services remains ambiguous and in regions where local regulations are older, the *sezioni primavera* risk being neither regulated nor monitored.

3. As a consequence of a certain increase in the number of births (mostly due to immigrant families) there is a new shortage of places in *scuole dell'infanzia*, and also in Northern and Central areas. In addition, the increased enrolment of children born from foreign parents in the early educational services has not yet brought a serious re-consideration of pedagogical approach.

4. The transition to a different balance between national and regional powers, brought about by modifications to the Italian Constitution as well as by the reform of the taxation system (*federalismo fiscale*) may have serious consequences for early childhood services in Italy. From an optimistic perspective, the change may favour the construction of regional and locally integrated early childhood systems and services.

Notes

¹ The definition of 'children at risk of poverty' used here follows the EU definition, that is, children living in households with less than 60% of the national equivalised median household income for a couple with two children.

² The Gini co-efficient measures the extent to which the distribution of income among individuals or households within a country deviates from a perfectly equal distribution. Perfect equality has the value of 0 and perfect inequality the value of 1. The higher the decimal number assigned to a country, the greater the inequality that exists in a country. The EU average is 0.31. S80/S20 is the ratio of the total income received by the 20% of the population with the highest income compared to the income received by the 20% with the lowest income; the higher the ratio, the greater the income inequality between the rich and poor in a country. The EU average is 4.8.

³ Exceptionally, State legislation includes here municipal scuole dell'infanzia among the State preschools.

Musatti, T. *La giornata del mio bambino: madri, lavoro e cura dei più piccoli in Italia*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992.

⁴ Musatti, T. & D'Amico, R. Nonne e nipotini: lavoro di cura e solidarietà intergenerazionale. *Rassegna di sociologia*, 37, 563-588, 1996.

⁵ Istat "Avere un figlio in Italia – Indagine campionaria sulle nascite 2002", Roma, ISTAT, 2005.

⁷ Law n. 62 of 10 March 2000, art. 1, par. 2

⁸ Law n. 62 of 10 March 2000, art. 1, par. 4

⁹ Government decree 19 February 2004, n.59, art. 1, item 2

¹⁰ Zollino, F. (2008) Il difficile accesso ai servizi di istruzione per la prima infanzia in Italia: i fattori di offerta e di domanda. Questioni di

Economia e Finanza, 30, Banca d'Italia.

¹¹ Source: ISTAT (National Bureau of Statistics) Survey on Communes' expenditures in welfare (Year 2004).

¹² I servizi educativi per la prima infanzia. Indagine sui nidi d'infanzia e sui servizi educativi 0-3 anni integrativi al nido al 30 settembre 2000, Florence, Istituto degli innocenti, 2002.

¹³ Cf. above, p. 73.

¹⁴ These are the last available data from survey I servizi educativi per la prima infanzia. Indagine sui nidi d'infanzia e sui servizi educativi 0-3 anni integrativi al nido al 30 settembre 2000, Florence, Istituto degli Innocenti, 2002, p.79. The survey on public integrated services for 0-3 year olds is a proper census, but for private ones the estimate may reflect either only a small part of the actual provision or, vice versa, reflect the number of services temporarily funded by Law 285/1997 that closed in the following years. In 2003 and 2004 ISTAT Survey on Communes expenditures for welfare made a census on these services but they put together the integrative services with mini-nidos. This misunderstanding has been now made clear and hopefully next survey will give correct data.

¹⁵ Law n. 444 of 18 March 1968, art.1: "Enrolment is optional, attendance is free."

¹⁶ ISTAT (National Bureau of Statistics) Survey on Communes' expenditures in welfare (Year

¹⁷ see above.

¹⁸ Alunni con cittadina non italiana, Anno scolastico 2007-2008 MIUR, April 2009.

¹⁹ In most cases in-service training initiatives are directed also to personnel of subsidized nidos or to other scuole dell'infanzia existing in the city, such as the confessional paritarie of the network FISM (Federazione Italiana Scuola Materna)

Notes

²⁰ Indagine campionaria sulle nascite Istat, 2005.

²¹ Data drawn from Alunni con cittadina non italiana, Anno scolastico 2007-2008 MIUR, Aprile 2009

²² Cf. above

²³ Cf. above

²⁴ To be distinguished from the teacher – coordinator (mentioned for state scuole dell’infanzia in the 2004 Indicazioni) who is just a teacher with some more responsibilities

²⁵ Cf. above

²⁶ Cf above, pp. 4 e 5

²⁷ Cf above, p. 6

²⁸ Cf above, p. 7

²⁹ Law n. 59 of 15 March 1997, art. 21, and Decree of the President of the Republic n. 275 of 8 March 1999

³⁰ Decree of the President of the Republic n. 275 of 8 March 1999, art. 1, item 1

³¹ Cf. above, art. 3

³² The functioning of collective bodies is still regulated by the Decree of the President of the Republic n. 416 of 1974, contained in the Consolidation Act of 1994

³³ Law n. 62 of 10 March 2000, art. 1, par. 4

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