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Professionalisation policies in the ECEC field: trends and tensions in the Italian context

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In recent times, a growing consensus has emerged, among researchers and policy-makers, that a well-educated, competent and adequately supported workforce is crucial for the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Despite governmental initiatives aimed to enhance the professional preparation and continuing development of early years practitioners being high on the political agenda of many EU member states, very few studies are analysing professionalisation policy developments and their implications within the national contexts of ECEC. Against this background, the article describes the key features of ECEC policies in Italy and their current trends by focussing specifically on the professionalisation of early childhood practitioners working across 0–3 and 3–6 services. Drawing on the data collected from documentary sources and interviews with key informants, this paper will critically review policy discourses as well as recurring themes and tensions arising from the academic and political debate. The findings from our analysis highlight that the increasing discontinuity characterising professionalisation initiatives across the 0–3 and 3–6 sector might lead to widening the gap among professionals working in such services. The risks that are associated with this trend are, on the one side, to devalue the educational role of 0–3 services and, on the other, to produce the *schoolification* of educational practices in 3–6 services. In addition, our analysis identified inconsistencies between initial and continuing professional development policies, which are progressively creating a dichotomy between initial and in-service training. The consequences of this process might produce, on the long term, the fragmentation of the ECEC system across public and private not-for-profit provision with the subsequent risk of impoverishing the local culture of childhood on which the Italian ECEC system has traditionally built its strength.

Keywords: ECEC policies; early years workforce; initial professional preparation; continuing professional development; Italy

Introduction

In response to recent demographic, economic and social challenges early childhood education and care has become increasingly prominent in the European policy agenda. A growing body of research in fact shows the beneficial effects of high-quality ECEC services for children, families and societies at large (Bennett, Gordon,

and Edelmann 2012). Despite the EU being a world leader in providing ECEC services, international reports have stressed that more effort needs to be made in order to increase the quality of provision across Member States (Eurofound 2012; NESSE 2009). In this regard, research evidence points out that a well-educated, competent and adequately supported workforce is crucial for the quality of ECEC services. Therefore, a growing consensus on the importance of investing in the professionalisation of staff working with young children and their families is emerging among researchers and policy-makers (Bennett and Moss 2011; OECD 2012; Peeters et al. 2015; Urban et al. 2011). Against this background, it needs to be noted that the distinctly diverse format of ECEC systems within which professionalisation initiatives are undertaken – as well as the underlying rationales driving such policy developments in each country – might generate contradictory effects within the national contexts of ECEC. In this perspective, the analysis of the conflicting visions underpinning professionalisation initiatives enacted within national contexts – along with a critical review of their implications – becomes of paramount importance for the elaboration of effective policies. Drawing on the data collected from documentary sources and interviews with key informants,¹ this paper critically analyses policy discourses as well as recurring themes and tensions arising from the academic and political debate concerning the landscape of professionalisation reforms recently taking place in the ECEC field in Italy.

The Italian context of ECEC

Early childhood education and care provision in Italy are organised within a split system. Early childhood services attended by children under three years of age – called *nidi d'infanzia* and *servizi integrativi* – fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Despite the educational role of these services – as opposed to a merely social assistance function – being widely recognised, they are still considered by law as socio-educational services on individual demand, no entitlement exists at the national level, and the administrative responsibility for their regulation and funding is devolved to regional and municipal authorities (Law 1044/1971).² More than 80% of ECEC services for children aged zero to three years by children under three years of age are run by local governments or subsidised by them.

Instead, pre-school institutions attended by children aged three to six (compulsory school age) – named *scuole dell'infanzia* – fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. The State took over complete responsibility of the pre-school sector in 1968, when Law 444 led to the development of state-maintained pre-schools and integrated previously existing institutions – mostly run by Catholic providers and municipalities – within the education system in order to ensure the generalisation of the service. Since Law n (62/2000) was enacted, all non-state pre-schools – either private NFP or municipal – that meet certain quality standards (in relation to educational planning, collegial participative bodies, special needs children inclusion and staffing) are officially recognised as part of the national educational systems (*paritarie*) and therefore are entitled to receive annual financial support from the State.³

As has been noted elsewhere (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010), the fact that responsibilities for regulation, funding and management of ECEC services are not only split between different ministries, but also assigned to different administrative levels (municipal, regional and national) with little coordination between each level, creates a very complex system with significant regional disparities. Within such a diversified system, while middle-size and large municipalities in central and northern Italy

are well known – even internationally – for the high quality of their early childhood services and for their innovative pedagogical practices, in most parts of the country ECEC accessibility for younger children is still an issue of major concern (Gruppo di Lavoro per la Convenzione sui Diritti dell’Infanzia e dell’Adolescenza 2014).

In order to grasp fully the implications of recent professionalisation policies for the future developments of ECEC services in Italy, we need to start our analysis from the acknowledgment of these striking disparities that are affecting – to a certain extent – the professional support provided to staff working in different forms of provision across the country.

The early years workforce: professional profiles and initial preparation

Core professionals working in 0–3 services (‘educatori di nido’)

In Italy the core practitioners who work in ECEC services for children aged zero to three years are named *educatori* (educators). No national profile exists for early childhood educators, as professional profiles and qualification requirements are defined at the regional level and vary according to regional laws, which regulate services for under-threes in different Italian regions. By analysing regional regulations, which report a description of early childhood educators’ tasks and responsibilities, we found an idea of professionalism that recalls the main features characterising the pedagogy of early childhood education in Italy. The educator’s professional profile focus is on sustaining children’s global development in both aspects of care and education, paying attention to the quality of the learning environment and play materials, establishing good relationships with parents and promoting their participation in the everyday life of the service, cooperation among colleagues and networking with other social and education agencies in the area (Mantovani 2007).

These dimensions of educators’ professionalism are the result of a long-standing debate that took place over the last 40 years – since ECEC services were established – and involved practitioners, policy-makers and researchers who contributed to the advancement of educational practices within municipal ECEC institutions. Such a debate fostered the development of a ‘culture of childhood’ (Mantovani 2010a)⁴ from which a shared vision of the educational and social function of these services emerged. Still today, ECEC services for children from zero to three years are understood as places of children’s daily life – which should provide them with significant social and cognitive experiences – and places which should promote parental participation, offering parents opportunities for discussing parental experience among them and together with professionals (Musatti and Picchio 2010). Therefore, nowadays it is widely acknowledged that educators’ professionalism should be defined by a wide range of interconnected competences (Catarsi 2004a):

- cultural and psycho-pedagogical competences (knowledge about pedagogical, sociological, anthropological, historical, philosophical, institutional aspects of early education and parents’ needs and beliefs);
- organisational competences (arranging children’s learning environment and play materials according to their developmental needs and capabilities, planning and proposing play activities);
- methodological competences (using observation, documentation and evaluation tools);

- relational competences (listening, communicating, interacting with children empathically in order to support the development of their full potential);
- reflective competences related to the on-going revision of educational practices with colleagues (analysing practices collectively in order to improve them).

Most professional descriptions in official documents emphasise that such complex competences should be acquired through an adequate provision of initial training and enhanced through continuing professional development opportunities. In fact, despite educators' professional profiles defined in official documents showing a high degree of commonality, early year practitioners' representations and perceptions of their professional role have been found to vary according to pedagogical reflections and practices developed within these local opportunities (Caggio and Mantovani 2004; Falcinelli and Falteri 2005; Ongari and Molina 1995; Terlizzi 2005).

In contrast with the high-level and complex professional competences that are demanded of early childhood practitioners, the minimum qualification requirement for becoming an educator is – so far – an upper-secondary school diploma (ISCED-3). Most of regional laws were updated in the last 15 years in order to raise the initial education of early years professionals to tertiary level. However, many laws still require either an upper-secondary school diploma in educational studies (ISCED-3) or a degree (Bachelor or Master) in Educational Sciences or in Psychology. Moreover, even in regions (Emilia-Romagna, Marche, Umbria, Puglia, Calabria) where a university degree is required definitively, de facto, due to the lack of public funding for employing qualified staff, the implementation of such a statement has been delayed and the qualification at the tertiary level is still optional. For all these reasons, to date, most of the educators (generally women) who work in ECEC services for children under three years old have a qualification at upper-secondary school level, even if the number of educators with a university degree in education or psychology is increasing among newly employed educators.

Beyond these tensions, changes in regional requirements contributed to developing a debate in the Italian academic world about which programme could provide an appropriate initial training at the tertiary level. At the time of this writing, heterogeneous programmes were co-existing, mainly displaying two different approaches – generic or specific – to the professionalisation of educators.

Most Italian universities provide a programme to obtain a BA in Educational Sciences (*Laurea in Scienze dell'Educazione*) that is not oriented to preparing early childhood professionals specifically. This programme defines a broad competence profile of an educator who will work with persons at different ages (childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and elderly people) and in different contexts and institutions (ECEC services, out-of-school education, social and health services, and adult learning centres). Within this programme, the relevance of relationships between theoretical knowledge (in pedagogy, psychology and sociology) and methodological and practical competences is stressed. The programme provides workshops and on-the-job training, which are organised in cooperation with the institutions and services in the local area. Within a common framework, each university is allowed to define the contents of the curriculum. A detailed analysis of university curricula shows that in many of them topics related to early childhood education are marginal or even absent. Therefore, the broad professional profile underpinning the BA in Educational Science – as well as the high degree of autonomy that universities have in defining curricula – often

do not allow prospective professionals to gain an adequate knowledge and understanding in regard to the education and care of young children.

In recent times, some universities have set up specific BA programmes in early childhood education. These specialised BA courses for early childhood educators were mostly implemented in those regions where investments in ECEC services were made over long periods of times (e.g. Emilia-Romagna and Toscana). These programmes⁵ aim at forming an ECEC educator who is able to read children's and families' needs in relation to the wider social context, to give articulated answers, to develop new knowledge by reflecting upon practice, and to adopt a research attitude towards children's learning experiences. The twofold supervision of students by university tutors and professionals of ECEC services during the on-the-job training often produces a reciprocal enrichment of both institutions. However, up to today, no national framework exists for the regulation of BA programmes in Early Childhood Education and the degree obtained by attending such university courses does not provide prospective educators with a specific professional qualification.

Actually, we can affirm that a vicious circle is emerging. Due to the lack of a national definition of both a professional profile and an initial training for educator – and to the fact that specific programmes in early childhood education are activated only by a few universities – most regional regulations require a non-specific university degree in Education or Psychology. The other side of the coin is that many universities hesitate to provide specific programmes in Early Childhood Education. In all cases, it is remarkable that the issue of initial training for an ECEC educator is discussed only within few universities and decisions are often made on the basis of the competences of the teaching staff employed by such universities. This is due to the fact that no financial investments have ever been made by the Ministry of Education or by Regions in order to elaborate appropriate initial training pathways for ECEC staff working in 0–3 services.

Core professionals working in 3–6 services ('insegnanti di scuola dell'infanzia')

The core practitioners who work in pre-schools attended by children aged three to six years are named *insegnanti* (teachers). As the *scuola dell'infanzia* is considered a part of the education system, the professional profile of pre-school teachers is explicitly defined within national curriculum guidelines (Ministry of Education 2012) and the Ministry of Education establishes qualification requirements at the central level (Ministerial Decree n. 249/2010). Since 2010, all prospective core practitioners employed in state pre-schools are required to hold a five-year university degree (ISCED-5) in Primary Education Sciences (*Scienze della Formazione Primaria*) conferring them a qualified teacher status which allows them to work either in pre-primary and in primary school settings.

Within the National Curriculum Guidelines enacted by the Ministry of Education in 2012 (*Indicazioni Nazionali per il Curricolo*), teacher's professionalism is acknowledged to be an essential quality component of pre-school educational environment. In fact, the presence of motivated, well-educated and responsive pre-school teachers is seen as crucial in fostering children's learning experiences and in facilitating relationship of trust with families and local communities. Interestingly, the competences defining the professional profile of pre-school teachers within National Curriculum Guidelines show a certain degree of continuity with the competences characterising early childhood educators' professionalism that were highlighted in the previous section. In fact, the document reports:

'Teachers' educational style is connoted by listening, participative interaction, communicative mediation and scaffolding abilities which are combined with the ongoing capability [of teachers] to observe children, to take care of their 'world', to interpret their discoveries and to sustain and encourage the development of their learning experiences toward progressively more autonomous and intentional forms of knowledge creation.' (*Indicazioni per il Curricolo della Scuola dell'Infanzia* 2012, 17 [translation from the authors])

In this sense, it is stressed that the quality of children's learning experiences ultimately depends on teachers' intentional and meaningful arrangement of the educational environment (*regia pedagogica*), where the dimensions of space, time, routines and activities are inextricably intertwined with children's exploration and socialising processes. The document also highlights how teachers' professionalism is enriched through the collegial dimension of pedagogical practice, which finds concrete expression in opportunities for teamwork, joint reflection upon didactic practices and ongoing professional development. A prominent role is ascribed to school directors and pedagogical coordinators, who are responsible for sustaining the professional development of pre-school teachers by promoting pedagogical innovation within school and ECEC institutions.

However, a certain discontinuity can be noticed if we juxtapose the professional profile of pre-school teachers outlined in the National Curriculum Guidelines (Ministry of Education 2012) with the training profile reported in the National Regulations for Teacher's Initial Preparation (Ministerial Decree n. 249/2010). The latter document (M.D. 249/2010) is in fact the result of a heated political and educational debate, which accompanied the restructuring of initial training degree for pre-school and primary school teachers within a wider process of reforms concerning higher education institutions. Whereas – from 1998 and up to then – teachers working in both pre- and primary school settings were required to hold a four-year University Degree in Primary Education Sciences, towards the end of the last decade a governmental committee was nominated by the Ministry of Education in order to reform teachers' initial training degree in line with Bologna Process objectives. In the years preceding the enactment of the reform (M.D. 249/2010), two opposed positions emerged. The first position proposed to combine a three-year BA (*laurea triennale*) for pre-school teachers with a two-year MA (*laurea magistrale*) for primary school teachers, underpinning the idea that teaching in compulsory school would demand a higher level of professional specialisation due to the subject-oriented curriculum. The second position argued instead for a five-year degree (*laurea a ciclo unico*) drawing upon the same university curricula for both pre-school and primary school teachers, underpinning the idea of teaching as a high-level graduate profession. Highly contentious issues were raised out of this debate, in which counter-posed visions of teachers' role (generic vs. specific professionalism) and initial preparation (broad pedagogical core vs. subject-oriented approach) seemed to be irreconcilable.

Remarkably, the outcome of the cultural and political debate on teachers' professionalism and professional preparation taking place at the time favoured the second position, by choosing a five-year, subject-oriented curriculum instead of a more balanced combination of broad pedagogical core and subject-specific approaches to learning (Cappa, Niceforo, and Palomba 2013). As a result, the professional profile outlined within the National Regulations for Teacher's Initial Preparation (M.D. 249/2010) underlie a radical shift in the understanding of pre-school teachers' role, which appears to be totally assimilated to the role of primary school teachers. This

is attested by the description of competences that prospective teachers are required to achieve at the end of the five-year Degree in Primary Education Sciences which include:

knowledge related to taught subjects and ability to articulate their contents according to children's age and school level, competences related to the management of learning progression and to the use of appropriate tools to promote children's learning, relational and organisational skills in order to facilitate fruitful work within the class and team-work abilities enabling cooperation with colleagues both in the design of educational activities, both in the internal and external work activities. (M.D. 249/2010; art. 6)

For this reason, the changes introduced by teachers' initial training reform in 2010 have been strongly contested by early childhood experts who claim that the length and the content of the new qualification are increasing the gap between professionals working across 0–3 and 3–6 institutions. On one side, the fact that the BA in Early Childhood Education is not placed in continuity with the MA in Primary Education Sciences is seen as a potential threat to the furthering of the pedagogical culture of early childhood education on which Italian services have built their strength over the last 40 years (Mantovani, Oberhuemer Schreyer, and Neuman 2010). On the other, the alignment of initial training pathways for pre-school and primary school teachers – which emphasises a narrow subject-oriented approach to teaching over a broader pedagogical approach to learning – is potentially leading to the *schoolification* of early childhood education practices (Lazzari and Balduzzi 2014).

Patterns of continuing professional development in the ECEC field

In the Italian context of ECEC, the word used to define continuing professional development is *formazione*. The term derives from the word *forma* – which means shape – and it underpins the idea of taking form (Nigris 2007) through a process of personal and professional growth (Rinaldi 2005). Far from being understood as a source of technical knowledge, *formazione* is conceptualised by experts and early childhood practitioners as an opportunity to deepen insights into educational practices through the acquisition of pedagogical tools that support reflection in ever-changing contexts (Lazzari 2012; Picchio et al. 2012). This understanding of professional development – which is rooted in the high-quality experiences elaborated within municipal *nidi* and *scuole dell'infanzia* in Central-Northern Italy (e.g. in Reggio Emilia, Pistoia, Milano, Bologna, etc.) – contributed over the years to build up a strong consensus around the importance of providing ECEC staff with on-going support in order to enhance the quality of their practice in relation to the ever-changing needs of children and families within local communities where services were embedded.

In this sense, it is generally acknowledged that the Italian ECEC system built up its pedagogical identity through a significant investment in continuing professional development of educators and teachers that was carried out by Municipalities and, to a lesser extent, by the State (Nigris 2007).

However, the fact that the responsibility for the in-service training provision was entirely devolved to the bodies that were responsible for running the ECEC services (Ministry of Education national and regional agencies, municipalities and private NFP bodies) generated a considerable fragmentation of initiatives and produced striking territorial disparities in regard to the availability and accessibility of continuing professional development opportunities. Still today, no national framework exists

for regulating in-service training provision for ECEC staff: this means that the conditions under which professional development opportunities are provided to early childhood educators and teachers vary greatly according to the typology of services in which they are employed and to the segment of the sector in which they are working.

Continuing professional development within ECEC municipal provision

Due to the strongly emancipatory and educational function that connoted municipal ECEC services since their origin (Catarsi 2004b), particular attention has always been paid by municipal administrations to the professionalisation of the staff working with young children. In a context where initial teacher preparation was set at the secondary level and scarcely focussed on early childhood education, municipal administrations developed a coherent system for the on-going professional development of educators and teachers. Municipal early childhood professionals could access a substantial amount of paid working hours for attending in-service training initiatives, collegial meetings and meetings with parents (120–200 hours per year). From the beginning, professional development initiatives were carried out on a

group basis with the intention of sustaining practitioners' collective reflection on their everyday practices.

The systems for the on-going professional development of staff put in place by municipal administrations contributed greatly not only to the quality improvement of municipal ECEC services at the local level, but also to the elaboration of a culture of early childhood education in Italy (Mantovani 2010b). Such a culture emerged mostly within community-based professional development initiatives that were developed by municipal services in close cooperation with research agencies and universities. These initiatives therefore were deeply rooted in the pedagogical culture locally developed within the ECEC services in each city and at the same time strongly connected to the actual needs expressed by the professionals working in the services. The fact that not only practitioners, but also auxiliary staff, are involved in centre-based professional development initiatives is still today a qualifying element of the municipal ECEC systems, as it allow practitioners to co-construct and

innovate their educational practices starting from a shared reflection on the ever-changing needs of the children and parents they are working with. In this sense, most in-service training initiatives are aimed at analysing and discussing educational practices (on the basis of observation and documentation) rather than at transmitting theoretical or practical knowledge.

In these contexts, the pedagogical coordinators – who are qualified professionals with management responsibilities – play a crucial role.⁶ The function of pedagogical coordination was created in the 1960s in some municipalities, in Emilia-Romagna and Toscana, in order to promote and sustain the quality of municipal *nidi* and *scuole dell'infanzia*. Today, most municipalities employ pedagogical coordinators and the presence of a coordinator is one of the basic requirements for private services receiving public funding. Pedagogical coordinators are in charge of a number of services and are organised in terms of coordination at municipal or inter-cities levels. Their function is to support the educational practices, promote and organise in-service training, interface between educational services and municipal administration, and promote networking among services and other initiatives for young children and families in the city. They play a relevant role, in promoting professional development of practitioners, adjusting in-service training initiatives to the specific needs of each

service and inscribing the educational practices of the single service within a wider cultural perspective.

Professional development initiatives for educators and teachers in municipal services have become a privileged context for developing theoretical insights starting from practices and for translating theoretical knowledge into educational practices. In this regard, research findings showed that sustaining this reciprocal dialogue between theory and practice in the space of centre-based training initiatives makes pedagogical innovation sustainable, therefore enhancing quality improvement of ECEC services over time (Lazzari, Picchio, and Musatti 2013; Urban et al. 2011).

Continuing professional development within state provision

Prior to the implementation of the degree in Primary Education Sciences (Ministerial Decree 1998), professional development courses were provided to teachers working in state-maintained *scuole dell'infanzia* by a state training organisation called *Servizio Nazionale per la Scuola Materna*. This national agency was responsible for planning professional development initiatives that were related to the expressed staff needs and that would provide a basis for staff to pursue innovative projects (Nigris 2007). At that time teachers working in state pre-schools were granted an average of 80–210 paid working hours per year for attending professional development initiatives – as well as collegial meetings – and in-service training was considered, in official documents, both as a right and as an obligation. However, as soon as initial preparation for teachers was made compulsory at the tertiary level, these regulations changed and participation in in-service training was considered only a professional right of teachers and no longer an obligation. In addition, as no clear legislative framework exists for organising and coordinating in-service training provision within the system of state-maintained pre-schools, initiatives tend to be patchy and financial resources quite scarce. In this context, the provision of in-service training opportunities is mostly left to the discretion of local organisations, individual school directors and individual teachers and it seems to produce a limited impact on the improvement of pre-schools' educational quality over time. In addition, the literature documenting these experiences is extremely scarce and rarely disseminated beyond the single setting in which they are realised. For all these reasons, educational experts warn that the current situation could generate – in the long period – negative repercussions on the quality of the educational work carried out within pre-schools (Gruppo di Lavoro per la Convenzione sui Diritti dell'Infanzia e dell'Adolescenza 2014).

Continuing professional development within private NFP provision

In the private NFP sector, the access of teachers and educators to in-service training opportunities is regulated within working contracts agreements that are undersigned by service providers (National Federation of Catholic Pre-schools in the case of 3–6 services and social cooperatives in the case of 0–3 services) in accordance with the Ministry of Education (Law 62/2000) or municipal administrations. Within working contract agreements, practitioners' entitlements to in-service training are included in the yearly amount of paid working hours to be carried out without children. It needs to be noted, however, that the amount of paid working hours available to ECEC staff working in private NFP services that are publicly subsidised is – at the time of this writing – a contentious issue. On one side private NFP services are

required to provide their staff with a certain number of paid working hours without children in order to receive public subsidies, on the other side these requirements are sometimes not fully implemented as this amount of hours tend to be absorbed by the work with children. Given the fact that private NFP services which are publicly subsidised tend to become increasingly important in ECEC provision in Italy,⁷ it is feared that the patchy landscape of in-service training regulations – combined with the increased fragmentation of working contract agreements – could potentially lead to the undermining of the educational quality of ECEC services in the long term (Gruppo Nazionale Nidi e Infanzia 2010).

Current challenges, opportunities and future directions

At the present time, the issue of continuing professional development is mostly discussed in the context of the re-organisation of the ECEC sector, which is progressively evolving into an integrated system of services encompassing both public and private NFP providers. In the light of these transformations, a major challenge will be to create a common pedagogical ground for sustaining the growth of early childhood services within an integrated framework. As the crucial role played by continuing professional development in sustaining the educational quality of ECEC services is widely acknowledged, in-service training initiatives could be seen as a privileged place for facilitating the dialogue among different institutions and pedagogical models at the local level. In this perspective, the professional role of pedagogical

coordinators could be strengthened and redefined in order to become key-actors of change in re-creating a ‘new culture of childhood’ – that is responsive of the new needs of young children and their families in contemporary society (e.g. inclusion of diversity and support to parenthood). In the Emilia-Romagna Region, for example, experimental initiatives are currently being carried out in order to support pedagogical coordinators in this transition. Such initiatives aim to promote peer-learning exchanges among pedagogical coordinators operating across the public and private NFP sector, to enhance their policy-making capacity and to strengthen their competence in team management for fostering the innovation of educational practices. The key-role played by pedagogical coordinators in sustaining the innovation of ECEC institutions between continuity and change seems even more salient in the light of

the significant generational turnover of personnel currently taking place (Musatti, Picchio, and Mayer forthcoming). In fact, as ECEC services had a significant expansion in the 1970s, most of those educators and teachers who contributed to develop and nurture a ‘pedagogy of early childhood’ within such services over the last 40 years are now retiring. In this context, creating opportunities for inter-generational learning among experienced and newly recruited practitioners becomes vital for accompanying ECEC services in facing this transition without losing the wealth of knowledge and good practices developed over long periods of time (Balduzzi 2011). Moreover, an increasing consensus is currently emerging – among educational

experts – on the necessity to introduce a more unified approach to staff professionalisation policies across the 0–3 and 3–6 sectors. As illustrated in the article, ECEC professionalisation policies in Italy display a high degree of discontinuity and fragmentation which become even more salient in a context where administrative responsibilities

for regulation and funding of training provision are not clearly defined and coordinated across different governmental levels (national, regional and local). In such a scenario,

practitioners’ access to initial and in-service training pathways differs greatly across

the different segments of the ECEC sector in which they are working and across geographical areas within the country. Given this situation, many experts fear that the lack of a coherent strategy to the initial professional preparation of ECEC staff – that is currently widening the gap between *nido* educator's and pre-school teachers' professionalism – might have long-term repercussions on widening the gap between care and education practices implemented within such services. In this regard, the risk of reducing the role of *nido* to 'child care' and the role of *scuola dell'infanzia* to 'compulsory school preparation' has been highlighted by several authors (Gruppo di Lavoro per la Convenzione sui Diritti dell'Infanzia e dell'Adolescenza 2014).

The considerations carried out so far highlight the need for an increased coordination of policy formulation and planning both vertically – between different levels of responsibilities (state, regional, municipal) – and horizontally – between the different initiatives undertaken by ECEC providers (state, municipal and private). Although these issues are periodically discussed within the policy debates that accompany any major reform of the education system, decisions at the political level tend to be constantly procrastinated. This relatively stagnant situation seems now to have received a new impulse for the Law Proposal 1260, which is currently under discussion in Parliament. The Law Proposal is the result of a long process of policy advocacy that was strongly supported by stakeholder groups active in the ECEC field, among which the *Gruppo Nazionale Nidi e Infanzia*⁸ was a major actor. The Law proposes the introduction of a national framework for the governance of 0–6 services, in which the educational value of *nido* is strongly affirmed. Within such a framework, the right of children to receive competent care and education is recognised from birth and granted through State financial support towards the expansion and quality improvement of ECEC provision. In this perspective, the changes introduced by the Law Proposal could contribute to overcoming the fragmented management and funding of ECEC services across the 0–3 and 3–6 sectors, as well as the existing gap between professional status and qualification requirements of educators and pre-school teachers. In fact, by recognising the right of children to high-quality ECEC, the Law proposes the qualification of educators at the university level and – at the same time – it envisages a coherent strategy for the ongoing development of staff that foresees the generalisation of pedagogical coordination across public and private NFP provision at local level.

Concluding remarks

The article critically reviewed policy discourses concerning the professionalisation of ECEC staff in Italy by focussing on recurring themes and tensions arising from the academic and political debate. Such an analysis highlighted that the increasing discontinuity characterising professionalisation initiatives across the 0–3 and 3–6 sectors might lead to widening the gap among professionals working across these services. The risks that were found to be associated with this trend are, on the one side, the devaluing of 0–3 services' educational function and, on the other, the *schoolification* of 3–6 services. In addition, the inconsistencies characterising initial and continuing professional development policies were found to be associated with the risk of fragmentation of the ECEC system across public and private NFP provision, with the subsequent risk of impoverishing the local culture of childhood on which the Italian ECEC system has traditionally built its strength.

Our analysis suggested that combining framework requirements for the initial and continuing professional development of ECEC staff (educators and teachers) at the

national level – with the devolution of responsibility for in-service training initiatives and pedagogical coordination at the local level – would allow the overcoming of these risks by restructuring ECEC provision within an integrated system that builds on the success of existing experiences. In this sense, the article argues for the re-thinking of professionalisation policies within a systemic perspective (Urban et al. 2011) that takes into account the complex features of ECEC in Italy and moves towards a parti-cipatory approach to the ongoing quality improvement of such services by capitalising the successful experiences realised over the last 40 years within the municipal provision.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. The sources analysed within this article draw on the data collected by the authors during the course of two research projects: *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care* (Urban et al. 2011) – which was funded by the European Commission, DG EAC – and *Fort- und Weiterbildung frühpädagogischer Fachkräfte im europäischen Vergleich* (Oberhue-mer 2012) which was funded by the Deutsches Jugendinstitut. However, for the scope of this article the data collected have been updated and complemented with relevant materials regarding recent policy developments and debates.
2. Overall 0–3 services are attended by 13.5% of children population on national average. However, the data on attendance rates show important regional disparities (ranging from 27.3% in Emilia-Romagna to 2.1% in Calabria) due to the fact that the administrative responsibility for the planning, construction, regulation and management of these services lies with municipal and regional authorities (ISTAT 2014).
3. At the present time, approximately 56% of pre-schools are state-maintained (mostly attached to primary schools and under the supervision of their directors), 34% are run by private not-for-profit (often church) providers, whereas the remaining 10% are run by Municipalities (ISTAT 2012). In Italy *scuola dell'infanzia* is a well-established educational institution, as attested by the fact that approximately 96% of the 3–6-year-olds, on national average, are currently attending it, although it is not compulsory.
4. The expression ‘culture of childhood’ (literally translated from the Italian *cultura dell'infanzia*) refers to the culture of grassroots early childhood experiences rather than merely to the work of academics in the field. As reported by the author herself: ‘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 practices becoming method or theory rather than vice versa’ (Mantovani, 2010a, 63).
5. These programmes take up different names depending on the university within which they are located: *educatore di nido e di comunità infantili* (*nido* and early childhood communities educator), or *Scienze dell'infanzia* (Early childhood sciences), or *Educatore dell'infanzia* (Early childhood educator).
6. Most pedagogical coordinators have a Master’s degree in Education or Psychology.
7. Approximately 30% of children attending *nidi* are enrolled in 0–3 services run by social cooperatives that are publicly subsidised by municipalities; similarly 29.3% of children attending *scuola dell'infanzia* are enrolled in private (mostly Catholic) pre-schools that receive state financial support (Gruppo di Lavoro per la Convenzione sui Diritti dell’Infanzia e dell’Adolescenza 2014). The number of private NFP services receiving public subsidies grew steadily –over the last 10 years – especially in the 0–3 sector. In fact, the constraints to public expenditure posed to municipalities by recent stability pacts drove local administration to subcontract the management of 0–3 services to social cooperatives in order to reduce the cost of their direct management. In most cases, however, municipal administrations kept the responsibility for providing continuing professional development and pedagogical support to publicly subsidised services.

8. The *Gruppo Nazionale Nidi e Infanzia* was founded by Loris Malaguzzi in 1980 and gathers researchers, managers and decision-makers, *educatrici, insegnanti*, and pedagogical coordinators. The association is committed to the development of quality in early educational services and has been constantly engaged both at the scientific level – organising conferences and seminars on early childhood and educational issues – and at the political level – campaigning for the extension and quality improvement of ECEC services.

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