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Early childhood education and care in times of transition: the role of policy reforms and advocacy processes in improving the accessibility of services for young children and their families.

CHAPTER 8

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Early childhood education and care in times of transition: The role of policy reforms and advocacy processes in improving the accessibility of services for young children and their families

The analysis carried out in this chapter will explore the issue of *equal access to educational opportunities* in the context of the current reform trends that affect the governance, regulation and funding of early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision in Italy. Whereas up till now the governmental responsibility for under-three services (called '*nidi d'infanzia*') and pre-school institutions for children aged three to six (called '*scuole dell'infanzia*') was split across the Ministry of Welfare and the Ministry of Education, since Law 107/2015 was enacted, an integrated system of ECEC was created under the Ministry of Education. Research has shown that the way ECEC systems are structured (split or integrated ministerial responsibility), regulated (centralised or decentralised governance), funded and managed (public, subsidised or private provision) might have a significant impact on the accessibility and quality of early childhood services (Gambaro, Stewart & Waldfogel 2014). These aspects are therefore crucial to our discussion, as they have an important role to play in providing favourable (or, rather, hindering) conditions for processes of transformative change to happen within ECEC institutions.

On the other hand, research has also revealed that providing favourable conditions at macro-level is not sufficient (UNESCO 2015) as, in order to understand differential enrolment and thus change it,

> we need to adopt an ecological and systemic approach combining elements of
> ECEC policies (the macro-level), institutional cultures and procedures (the meso-
> level) and family characteristics (the micro-level). (Vandendroeck 2015, p. 107)

In fact, it is well documented by empirical research that the agency of all actors involved in decision-making processes within ECEC institutions – coordinators and coaches, practitioners and families – plays an important part in deepening professional pedagogical understandings which, in turn, contribute to improving the inclusiveness and quality of ECEC

practices (Jensen & Bradi 2017; Peeters & Sharmahd 2014). As reported by Peter Moss (2014) in his latest work on real utopias and democratic experimentalism, collective deliberation processes that are constantly co-constructed and negotiated among all stakeholders should be at the heart of any sustainable pedagogical innovation aimed at equitably sharing the benefits of education:

> Lasting public innovations are invariably deeply collaborative undertakings, which succeed only with the *mobilisation and collaboration of many different participants*. In the case of changes to education, these players involve at least children and parents, teachers and governments, politicians and policy-makers, both national and local, as well as related public agencies, employers and the community […] Public innovation is more like mobilising a social movement … *That process of open, collaborative innovation, is impossible unless the people involved share common goals and frames of references.* (Leadbeater 2008, p. 14, quoted in Moss 2014, p.137 – emphasis added)

In light of these considerations, the analysis conducted in this chapter will examine the conditions upon which the reciprocal interactions between governmental reforms and bottom-up policy advocacy processes can sustain ECEC services' institutional change and pedagogical innovation for responsively addressing the newly emerging needs of children and families in contemporary society as well as nourishing their potentialities.

In the first section, the policy context of ECEC in Italy will be outlined with specific reference to recent reform trends that have led to the transition from a split system to an integrated system (Balduzzi 2018); in particular, the implications for improving the accessibility and quality of early childhood provision (0–3 services) throughout the country will be examined.

In the second section, the social and institutional dimensions of ECEC will be considered by identifying challenges and opportunities for transformative change to happen. While on one hand the economic crisis has exacerbated social inequalities with important consequences for the dynamics of accessibility to 0–3 services (Innocenti Institute 2015), on the other hand, the increasingly diversified landscape of publicly subsidised provision opens new avenues for the

experimentation of innovative pedagogical models that might potentially tackle such dynamics more proactively (Bassi & Lazzari 2016; Lazzari 2017).

The cultural and pedagogical dimension of ECEC practices will be explored in the third section by referring to *ricerca-form-azione* as a participatory action-research approach and professional development method (Asquini 2018) that can be used to facilitate professionals' critical reflection on such challenges and opportunities, as well as being used to empower their role as agents of change within early childhood institutions.

In the fourth part of the chapter, the action-research project conducted by the authors as part of a locally-established professional development initiative involving pedagogical coordinators will be analysed as a possible example of how the accessibility and qualification of ECEC services could be sustained through bottom-up experimentation and advocacy processes in times of policy transition.

Finally, in the concluding section a systematic analysis of key success factors will be presented by referring to the interstices between the macro-, meso- and micro-levels of the ECEC system where transformative change can happen by combining long-term political vision with the sustained agency of all those involved in educational processes: professionals, families and children alike.

1. The policy context of ECEC: Recent reform trends

Up until the enactment of Law 107/2015, ECEC in Italy was provided within a split system. The Ministry of Education was responsible for the administration of preschool (*scuola dell'infanzia*) – attended by approximately 96% of children aged 3–6 on national average – whereas services for children under three (*nidi*) fell under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, with administrative responsibilities for regulation and funding decentralised at regional and municipal levels. *Scuola dell'infanzia* was established as part of the National School System at the end of the sixties (Law 444/1968) and since then it has been provided within a tripartite system encompassing state-maintained institutions (accounting for approximately 57% of current provision) and previously existing municipal and Catholic institutions.[1]

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[1] Following Law 62/2000, both municipal and Catholic institutions complying with the national school system's requirements are subsidised by the state.

The scenario is very different for 0–3 services (*nidi*), as they only became a quantitatively relevant phenomenon during the seventies after National Law 1044/1971 was enacted in response to trade unions' and women movements' campaigns. Within this law, *asilo nidi* were mostly conceived of as a measure for supporting parents' employment (so-called services for individual demand) rather than as educational institutions for young children; for this reason, the administrative responsibility for their regulation, funding and management was placed at the level of the municipal and regional authorities which are also responsible for welfare services. As a consequence of the diverse socio-economic contexts within which such welfare policies were inscribed, the quantitative expansion of *nidi* was not – and still is not – homogeneous throughout the country, with a marked polarisation between central-northern and southern regions of Italy. Whereas 0–3 services are attended by approximately 13% of Italian children, this percentage varies considerably across regions, ranging from 30% in Emilia-Romagna to 2% in Calabria (ISTAT 2017).

In the regions where 0–3 provision is nowadays more developed (Emilia-Romagna, Toscana, Lombardia), *nidi* were conceived to exist within an educational policy framework since inception on the impulse of the 'culture of childhood' that was locally generated within municipal ECEC institutions (Mantovani 2010; Musatti & Picchio 2010) and constantly sustained in public debates (Lazzari 2012).

Despite the contradictory effects generated by the previously existing split system (which created a *conceptual dichotomy* between the *educational* and the *social function* of ECEC, long pointed out as detrimental by both pedagogical experts and advocacy groups[2]), the issue of integrated governance of 0 to 6 institutions only recently gained political attention.

On the impetus of EU policies (European Commission 2011; 2013) and of a growing number of studies attesting the positive effects of ECEC attendance, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Del Boca & Pasqua 2010; Vandenbroeck & Lazzari 2012), the rationale of *equal access to educational opportunities* from early years became a powerful driver in the national policymaking debate. This created fertile ground for the reception of 'Law 1260, proposed by the Citizens' Initiative for the implementation of an integrated ECEC system sustaining children's rights to equal educational opportunities from 0 to 6

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[2] The Gruppo Nazionale Nidi Infanzia – funded by Loris Malaguzzi in the eighties and bringing together early childhood practitioners, administrators and scholars in public debate initiatives – has been traditionally, and still is today, the most active group in advocating for the full recognition of the educational value of *nidi* by overcoming the split governance of 0–3 and 3–6 services (Musatti 2010).

years'[3] that was discussed in parliament in 2014 and eventually included in the National Reform of the School System under Law 107/2015 (Puglisi 2018). The reform approval was followed by the enactment of sector-specific Implementation Decrees, outlining the framework conditions for 'overcoming the territorial, socio-economic, cultural and ethnic disparities' that are currently existing in relation to children's access to ECEC services fostering their holistic development through socialisation, learning and play from birth until the beginning of compulsory school' (L.D. 65/2017 2017, p. 2). In this perspective, the main changes introduced by Law Decrees 65/2017 can be synthesised as follow:

- integrated governance of *nidi* and *scuola dell'infanzia* under the Ministry of Education, which is now responsible for the development of a national 0–6 curriculum[4]
- the allocation of state funding to regional and municipal administrations in order to increase the availability of early childhood provision (especially in deprived areas) and its affordability for parents (lowering the enrolment fees)
- the introduction of mandatory qualification requirements for early years educators, set at tertiary level (bachelor's degree)
- the distribution of financial resources to regional and municipal authorities for improving the quality of ECEC services through ongoing professional development initiatives
- the generalisation of the role of pedagogical coordinators as 'key figures' promoting vertical continuity (between *nidi* and *scuole dell'infanzia,* which are run by different providers) and inter-institutional collaboration with social, cultural and health services within the local community.

Indeed, the changes introduced by L.D. 65/2017 might offer favourable macro-level conditions for addressing regional disparities in terms of the accessibility and qualification of ECEC provision. By focusing specifically on the issue of access, it deserves to be mentioned that – despite no legal entitlement for ECEC attendance existing – the attendance of *scuola dell'infanzia* is almost generalised throughout the country since the institution of state-maintained provision (Law 444/1968) whereas stark inequalities are displayed at regional and

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[3] https://parlamento17.openpolis.it/atto/documento/id/31456

[4] No national curriculum for 0–3 services existed before: depending on local authorities, pedagogical planning in *nidi* was oriented by municipal regulations and guidelines.

municipal level in regard to the available provision for children under three years old, with demand exceeding the supply in most cases (Eurydice 2014). In this sense, one of the main goals of the national reform with the integrated system (L. 107/2015 & L.D. 65/2017) was to address such inequalities through funding measures geared toward increasing the number of available places and the affordability of day care provision. Notably, the issue of entitlement was left out of the political discussion as it would have implied a sustained commitment and substantial investment by the state, which might have hindered parliament's approval of the reform.

In this context, it becomes clear that the successful achievement of the goals set out by the reform will crucially depend on how the above-mentioned policy measures will be locally re-interpreted and implemented in order to act as meaningful drivers of pedagogical innovation and educational experimentation within the diversified socio-cultural contexts where ECEC services are based. The latter also implies that opportunities will be created for engaging ECEC professionals in processes of critical reflection, allowing them to 'understand', 'make sense' and 'welcome' the complexity of needs and potentialities that children and their families bring to the services, adopting these as a starting point for rethinking pedagogical approaches and educational practices in a pluralistic way (Zaninielli 2018).

2. ECEC in times of crisis: Challenges and opportunities

At the present time, the context of ECEC in Italy is not only marked by policy transition but also affected by the changing socio-economic and cultural conditions within which families and children are living.

From the most recent surveys carried out by the Italian National Institute of Statistics, it emerges that the number of children who are experiencing conditions of vulnerability since early years is dramatically increasing, with one out of ten children being born in a family that is living in conditions of poverty. At the same time, the IX Report monitoring the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Italy (Save the Children 2016) highlights that equal access to education and care services is still denied to most Italian children and – in particular – to those who are living in the more economically disadvantaged regions of the country.

However, the problem of unequal access also exists in those regions where 0–3 services are more widely available. The National Report on the Monitoring of ECEC Provision in Italy (Istituto degli Innocenti 2015) warned that data on the increasing gap between the availability

of places and their uptake by families should not only be interpreted in the light of recent demographic trends but also in relation to services' accessibility. In particular, by combining the data collected by the Innocenti Institute for the monitoring report (2008–2014) with the data from National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT 2008–2012), it emerges that the economic crisis has impacted on the accessibility of early childhood services from two sides (Istituto degli Innocenti 2015, pp. 43–44): on the side of ECEC provision – as the constraints of public expenditure made it difficult for municipalities to subsidise ECEC services to their full operational potential – and on the side of families – making it difficult for parents who experience precarious working conditions to cover the expenses for attendance fees. The latter is attested by the fact that children who are offered a place in day care either do not follow it up with enrolment or withdraw from the services after a few months of attendance. Research (Bolognesi 2016; Gigli 2016) has also shown that the traditional organisational culture and codified practices developed within ECEC institutions might make it more difficult to responsively meet the newly emerging needs of families living in complex situations (the absence of a kin network and social support, vulnerability) and coming from increasingly diversified socio-cultural backgrounds (parenting styles, beliefs about education and upbringing).

On the side of provision, the issues of the quality and economic sustainability of ECEC services became progressively relevant as a consequence of the economic crisis and the constraints on public expenditure imposed by the central government upon local authorities (National Stability Pact). Whereas, since their origin, *nidi* were mostly run directly by municipalities, nowadays, indirect management through public subsidies distributed to private not-for-profit providers (mostly social cooperatives) is becoming an increasingly common strategy in order to balance the quantity and quality of provision (Passarini 2012). In this context, an integrated system of public and private NFP provision has recently started to emerge, especially in those regions where a substantial investment in educational services for young children was made since inception. Within such system, all subsidised *nidi* are required to comply with the same regulations as municipal ones in regard to providing staff with systematic opportunities for professional development and non-contact time for joint planning, documentation and meeting with parents, as well as in regard to the employment of a pedagogical coordinator for supporting the ongoing improvement of pedagogical practices by sustaining educators' collective reflection on the experiences of children and parents within the setting.

Within such an integrated system, encompassing different ECEC providers, the figure of the pedagogical coordinator (*coordinatore pedagogico*) has taken an increasingly prominent role as a 'connecting figure' (Mantovani, Bove, Cescato & Braga 2016). In fact, the function of pedagogical coordinators today is not only limited to sustaining the ongoing improvement of educational practices by enhancing practitioners' collective reflection and professional development but also to promote horizontal networking among ECEC services and engaging proactively in policy consultation processes and dialogue with local authorities (Musatti, Picchio & Mayer 2016).[5] In this sense, pedagogical coordinators can potentially play a crucial role in policy-advocacy processes by connecting the needs of children, families and communities to the formulation of coherent educational local policies, built on a shared vision where the diverse contributions of all stakeholders involved in ECEC are valued and seriously taken into account (Peeters, Urban & Vandenbroeck 2016). In this way, early childhood services can not only give a contribution toward addressing contemporary educational and social challenges but can also – as highlighted by the findings of the Emilia-Romagna region case study carried out within the EU-funded project INNOSI[6] – generate processes of social innovation[7] within local communities:

[5] In the 1970s, those administrations which were more receptive of the 'culture of childhood' emerging from municipal ECEC services introduced a new professional role — that of *pedagogista* – someone who had the responsibility to support educational practices in ECEC services by sustaining practitioners' professional development within a collective framework (Andreoli 2003). Over the years, municipalities — sometimes with the support of regional administrations — invested in this professional role which has become crucial for the qualification of ECEC services from an increasingly systemic perspective (Benedetti 2009). In this sense, the shift in the terminology used to define this professional role – from *pedagogista* to *coordinatore pedagogico* – attests the move toward a more systemic understanding of its coordination functions, encompassing not only the enhancement of practitioners' collective reflection and professional development, but also the building of inter-institutional networks among ECEC services and the administrative bodies responsible for educational policymaking at the local level (Lazzari 2012).

[6] The project 'Innovative social investment: Strengthening communities in Europe' (INNOSI) – funded under the EU programme H2020 and coordinated by the Policy Evaluation and Research Unit at Manchester Metropolitan University – was carried out to identify and analyse social innovation initiatives emerging at regional and national levels across the 28 Member States, with in-depth case studies taking place in 10 countries. By looking specifically at the areas of ECEC, the labour market and employment policies, the project examined existing innovative experiences and strategic approaches in order to collate useful, practical learning evidence and mobilise it to inform policy and practice across the EU (http://innosi.eu/).

[7] 'Social innovation can be defined as the development and implementation of new ideas, services and models to meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. [...] Social innovations are innovations that are social in both their ends and their means. They are innovations that are not only good for society but also enhance individuals' capacity to act.' (DG Regional & Urban Policies 2013).

By constantly relating – in their everyday work – the educational and social needs emerging in the context of local communities (regular meeting with families, supervision) with the innovation of pedagogical practices within ECEC services (guidance, professional development initiatives) pedagogical coordinators become catalysers of change both at the level of institutions and at the level of local policies. In this regard, research findings highlight that it is precisely the mutual interaction of bottom-up and top-down innovation processes – characterising the connection between experimental pedagogical practices and responsive local policies – to be a key success factor of social innovation in the case studied. (Bassi & Lazzari 2016, p. 122)

3. Reconceptualising the social and educational role of ECEC within action-research-for-professional-development pathways

Starting from the premises illustrated so far, the methodological approach that we chose for connecting the macro-level of ECEC policies – providing the conditions for transformational change to happen – with the meso-level of early childhood institutions' pedagogical culture and practices – where new understandings can be co-constructed and shared for generating educational innovation through experimentation – was *ricerca-form-azione.*[8] *Ricerca-form-azione* is a specific action-research approach that was developed over the last decade in the field of education, starting from the empirical studies and theoretical reflections that originated from within a group of Italian academics referring to research group called the Centre for Educational Research on Teachers as Professionals (CRESPI).[9] CRESPI is a research centre that was funded in 2014 at Bologna University with the aim of connecting and promoting innovative research methodologies for sustaining the ongoing professionalisation of teachers and early childhood practitioners. In this sense, the action-

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[8] The Italian term *ricerca-form-azione* is the combination of three different words, meaning respectively research (*ricerca*), professional development (*formazione*) and action (*azione*). As an equivalent term cannot be found in English language, in this chapter we will use the tentative translation 'action research for professional development' (translation by the authors).

[9] The Centre for Educational Research on Teachers as Professionals: http://crespi.edu.unibo.it/centro

research-for-professional-development approach strives to connect research (*ricerca*) with professional development (*formazione*) by engaging practitioners in experimentation with innovative educational practices (*azione*). The main feature characterising this approach is therefore the involvement of practitioners and teachers as co-researchers – working side by side with academic researchers – in shared processes of critical reflection aimed at generating transformative change in educational institutions, starting from situational analysis, data collection and interpretation, and leading to joint planning, documentation and evaluation of experimental projects (Asquini 2018).

The first theoretical reference to *ricerca-form-azione* comes from the model of action research (Barbier 2008), which is undoubtedly the most closely connected approach, so much so that one can affirm the derivation of the former from the latter. In this perspective, the action-research framework that we choose to adopt in our work (illustrated in the next section) was informed and inspired by three other complementary approaches: critical action research (Davis 2008), socio-constructivist research (Pontecorvo et al. 1995) and practitioner-oriented research (Schön 1983).

In the perspective outlined by critical action research, ECEC professionals and stakeholders work along with researchers to define the problem, set the research agenda, find new ways of seeing the situation and work toward solutions, as described by Davis (2008):

> The critical action research process turns the traditional power hierarchy between 'professional' researchers and research 'subjects' upside down and invokes a commitment to break down the dominance and privilege of researchers to produce relevant research that is able to be sensitive to the complexities of contextual and relational reality […] This process empowers both the researchers and the research participants. (Davis 2008; p. 139)

One of the most important consequences of this approach is to put the dimensions of context and relationships at the core of research, not only in a political or cultural sense but also in an ethical one (MacNaughton 2001). This approach places particular emphasis on the relevance of social and political contexts in the processes of sharing knowledge, values and assumptions and therefore obliges the researchers to take into account the ethical and political dimensions in their pedagogical and educational reflection. The underlying assumption is that educational decision-making shall be considered to be an inherently political act as – being

concerned with the common good of children, families and local communities – it requires a commitment to democracy, and in parallel, policy deliberation is considered an inherently educational act given its implications for the lives of children, families and local communities (Moss 2007). In this perspective, pedagogical visions – as well as educational praxis – cannot be considered 'objective' and 'neutral': theory and practices are always the interconnected outcomes of co-constructed processes that involve researchers, professionals and – directly or indirectly[10] – children and their families, as well as policy decision makers.

Such relational and intersubjective dimensions are strongly connected to the second approach we refer to in our research, derived from socio-constructivist studies that postulate that 'knowledge is a process in which the social and intersubjective dimension are not only central but even more substantially foundational' (Pontecorvo et al. 1995). Therefore, assuming that pedagogical knowledge is co-constructed within intersubjective and socially connoted processes in which the political and ethical dimensions assume a particularly significant value has a clear impact on the way educational practices are developed and implemented within practitioners' teams.

The last contribution we refer to is practitioner-oriented research and development that is focused on enhancing professional reflectivity through action learning (Schön 1983). The empowerment of practitioners as 'agents of educational and social change' (Peeters & Peleman 2017; Jensen & Bradi 2018) stands at the core of this approach as they become co-researchers in analysing setting- and context-specific needs when developing new theories by participating in the processes of data collection and interpretation, and in elaborating strategies to address problems and to overcome challenges. Therefore, the recursive interaction between theory and practice – as well as the ongoing movement between reflection and action – become the salient features of such a research and development approach, which can be defined as truly emancipatory as it strives to 'give voice to' and 'share power with' all the actors involved in decision-making processes within ECEC institutions (Boog 2003).

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[10] It is to be noted that in the context of the project illustrated in this chapter, children and families were only involved indirectly in the *ricercar-form-azione* process whilst, in other cases, their voices were placed at the very core of the participatory action research and professional development processes that bring about transformative change in educational settings (Van Laere, Boudry, Lazzari, Balduzzi, Rezek & Prodger 2018) [then list what follows in your bibliography] Sustaining Warm and Inclusive Transitions Across the Early Years (START): Facilitating Collaborative Learning of Childcare Workers, Preschool and Primary School Teachers. *Learning for Well-being Magazine,* Issue 6: www.l4wb-magazine.org/mag06-art-03

Our ultimate goal in carrying out such action-research-for-professional-development pathways as the one we will describe in the next section is to raise ECEC practitioners' awareness of the social, political and educational implications that their everyday pedagogical choices might have in fostering – or, rather, hindering – inclusive processes where the voices of children and families are listened to and seriously taken into account.

4. Improving the access to and quality of ECEC services by developing local experimental projects

In this section, we will illustrate and review a *ricerca-form-azione* pathway that was carried out by the authors over a one-year period (from October 2016 to September 2017) and involved a group of 28 pedagogical coordinators working for a social cooperative running ECEC services in several Italian cities (Parma, Trento, Torino, Aosta, Brescia). Our intention in presenting and critically discussing the lessons learnt from this action-research project – which originated from a locally-established professional development initiative – is to provide a tangible example in order to reflect upon how the accessibility and qualification of ECEC services could be sustained through bottom-up experimentation and advocacy processes in times of policy transition. In the following paragraphs, the salient features of this experience will be described by making explicit reference to, on one hand, the challenges and opportunities identified in the second section of this chapter and, on the other hand, to the training and research tools that were adopted for facilitating processes of transformational change at the level of institutional practice and beyond.

4.1 *From training to research: Framing the 'problem' within a shared pedagogical vision*

A foundational aspect of any action-research initiative is the orientation toward the solution of a problem emerging from practice, which is therefore necessarily grounded in the everyday experiences of those 'stakeholders' who are directly involved in the process as co-researchers (Barbier 2008). In our case, the 'research problem' was raised by the social cooperative's steering group of pedagogical coordinators who approached us with the request of providing a professional development course on the theme of ECEC services' inclusiveness. The choice of this theme was motivated by the fact that the early childhood professionals operating within the services run by the social cooperative found it increasingly challenging to responsively deal with the complexity of the newly emerging needs of children and families and therefore sought additional support in this area through in-service training. In welcoming

the request forwarded by the steering group, we proposed carrying out the professional development course in the form of participatory action research (*ricerca-form-azione*) – which implied the pedagogical coordinators preliminary commitment to engaging in a collaborative undertaking leading to the innovation of educational practices within the services they are working in. As the proposal was widely accepted by the group, the first step was taken by involving the coordinators in the process of 'translating' the core theme of the training – 'the inclusiveness of ECEC services' – into generative questions. The purpose underlying this first step was to collectively negotiate the 'conceptualisation(s)' of the problem that would have been at the core of the action research (De Poy, Hartman & Haslett 1999) and professional development pathway:

> Inclusiveness is a systemic concept which requires – in order to be implemented in everyday practices – the political commitment of all the stakeholders involved at different levels: what is the role of ECEC services in this process?

> In order to develop inclusive practices it is not only necessary to interpret the emerging needs of children and parents but also to find appropriate answers: how can the functions of ECEC services be rethought by connecting and integrating them with the functions carried out by other agencies working with children and families in the local community?

> The pedagogical innovation of ECEC practices in an inclusive perspective also requires taking into account the new landscape of the 0–6 integrated system: what opportunities are there for including those children and families who are currently excluded from ECEC? (an extract from the pedagogical coordinator's diary, 26 October 2016)

On the basis of inputs that emerged from the group discussion with pedagogical coordinators, the researchers proposed to adopt (as a *shared pedagogical framework* for investigating and addressing the issues pointed out in the research questions reported above) the *Proposal for the key principles of a quality framework for early childhood education and care,* elaborated

by the Thematic Working Group on ECEC under the auspices of the European Commission (2014).[11] Such a choice was motivated by the following reasons (Milotay 2016):

- the document offers a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing the issue of ECEC accessibility from multiple angles, encompassing both political and pedagogical perspectives, as it is the result of a consultation process that involved policymakers as well as professional and stakeholder groups

- it is an open, flexible tool that clearly articulates values and principles, allowing for multiple paths to achieving common goals and for scaffolding change and development regardless of the starting point

- the framework sets the basis for the creation of a shared language for the improvement of ECEC across different fields of practices (education, family support, health and social services) and it is therefore particularly suitable for promoting practitioners' reflection once it is adapted to the diverse national, regional and local contexts

- the document carries the potential to be policy driven but at the same time in line with the comprehensive view of ECEC quality and accessibility established by research, being grounded on practice-based and research evidence, the framework can therefore become a very useful tool for professional development.

The *Proposal for the key principles of a quality framework for early childhood education and care* was therefore presented to the group and its relevance to the project was critically discussed with the pedagogical coordinators. Based on the output of this discussion, a specific focus on the areas of ECEC accessibility, the curriculum and on governance was adopted as a pertinent framework for further exploring the issues pointed out in the research questions elaborated by the group:

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[11] The *Proposal for the key principles of a quality framework for early childhood education and care* was developed through a process of policy cooperation with experts from 25 Member States (plus Norway and Turkey) and a parallel stakeholder group with members from 55 European stakeholder organisations. The ongoing dialogue and consultation process – which engaged experts and key decision makers across the two working groups (ECEC-TWG and a stakeholder group) over a two-year period – built a broad consensus about what characterises high-quality ECEC by focusing on five areas: *access, workforce, curriculum, evaluation and monitoring* and *governance and fundin*g. The full document can be retrieved by clicking on the link: http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf

In which way can we work with the principles proposed by the European Quality Framework? Are they too distant from our work or can we find a way to connect them to our everyday practice? […] In order to make it meaningful we need to focus on two levels in particular:

✓ the level of ECEC institutions, where educational practices are played out in the relationships with the children and among adults in the participation of families and in the connection with local social and health services

✓ the level of governance, where the responsibilities for the management of ECEC provision is shared between public (municipal and regional) and private (social cooperative) bodies.

(an extract from the pedagogical coordinator's diary; internal meeting, 2 December 2016)

4.2 *Investigating the problem: Providing the research tools to carry out situational analysis*

In the second phase of the project, the local socio-cultural contexts where ECEC services are placed were investigated with specific reference to the issue of accessibility. For this purpose, two half-day *training sessions* were dedicated to understanding the phenomenon of unequal access. In the first session, the underlying factors acting as enablers or barriers to the participation of children and families in ECEC provision were examined by reviewing the findings deriving from recent European research (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari 2012; Leseman and Slot 2014) and by sharing insights within the group of pedagogical coordinators. In the second sessions, examples of good practices validated by research for overcoming the issue unequal access (TFIEY 2013; TFIEY 2014; Hayward et al. 2013; Cambi & Monini,2008) were presented to the group and critically discussed by collectively analysing the strengths and weaknesses in the light of the contextual conditions within which each experience took place.

Both training sessions were followed by *hands-on workshops,* during which pedagogical coordinators (organised into territorial sub-groups) were actively involved as *co-researchers* in investigating the situation of the access of children and families to ECEC in the diverse territories wherein their services were operating. In the first workshop, anecdotal evidence was collected in order to identify those families who are less present in ECEC and the reasons

why they might be unintentionally excluded by the way services operate (e.g. by enrolment procedures, language barriers, cultural barriers). In the second workshop, pedagogical coordinators were asked to carry out a mapping of the resources and opportunities that are present in their local communities and to which ECEC services might potentially connect in order to increase their accessibility through practices innovation (with specific reference to the criteria[12] of *usefulness* and *comprehensibility*) and outreaching initiatives (*desirability*). The outcomes of this investigation process – leading to the mapping of local needs and resources – were shared collectively within the group and confronted the spaces for transformative change opened by recent legislative developments (L.D. 65/2017). In this way the basis was set for the next phase, focusing on the development of experimental projects aimed at increasing the inclusiveness and quality of educational opportunities within ECEC services:

> We now perceive it necessary to raise questions about what kind of transformational change we envisage in our services: is it possible to have a more flexible approach to, or even challenge, existing rules and regulations by involving parents in their negotiation? Is it possible to rethink the inclusiveness of ECEC practices starting from a more integrated pedagogical approach valuing 0-to-6 continuity as well as networking with other services in the community? (an extract from the pedagogical coordinator's diary; internal meeting, 23 February 2017)

4.3 *From research to action: Developing locally based experimental projects*
In the third phase of the project (March–June 2017), action plans for the experimentation with innovative practice within ECEC services were elaborated by pedagogical coordinators on the basis of the priorities acknowledged in each local context. Building on the outputs of the workshops carried out in the previous phase, three thematic working groups were formed in order to design the key initiatives to be implemented over the next year with specific reference to the key areas for improvement identified:

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[12] The reference here is to the accessibility criteria identified in Principles 1 and 2 of the *Proposal for key principles of a quality framework for early childhood education and care* (pp. 21–26).

- families' involvement and outreach
- participatory pedagogical planning
- networking and integration with community services.

For this purpose, three one-day sessions were carried out. In the first one, the researchers took up the role of 'facilitators' and proposed hands-on activities aimed at stimulating brainstorming discussions within each group; at the end of the session, the core ideas that emerged from each group were reported in plenary and formalised as 'directions for change'.

[*insert images here*]

In the second session, the researchers took up the role of 'trainers' and provided the pedagogical coordinators with the tools for planning, documenting and evaluating change within action-research projects that are aimed at sustaining pedagogical innovation. Afterward, each group had the opportunity to start drawing up their action plan, availing themselves of the external support and supervision of researchers if they required it. The action plans were finalised by each group independently and sent to the researchers for a preliminary reading before the last session.

Finally, in the third plenary session, the action plans designed by all the groups were collectively shared and critically discussed under the guidance and support provided by the researchers (giving feedback to strengthen the implementation, further development and sustainability of experimental initiatives over time). As documented in the excerpts reported below, the initiatives illustrated in the action plans took place precisely in those interstices between the macro-, meso- and micro-levels of the ECEC system where transformative change can happen by combining long-term political vision with the sustained agency of all those involved in educational processes:

> Recently the political choice of C. Municipality has been to increase the accessibility of ECEC services by opening a new space for negotiation with families. […] Therefore the *nido* can become a crucial node for reconsidering the practices related to accessibility and inclusion within a new advocacy perspective […] which moves beyond the implementation of merely organisational arrangements such as flexible, all-year-round opening hours. […] Pedagogical coordinators and educators have the possibility to take up the role of researchers in finding a new balance [between the social and educational function of ECEC services] by redefining the meaning of *children's settling-in practice*

(*ambientamento*), by re-thinking daily routines and social interactions within children's groups and by redesigning educational activities throughout participatory pedagogical planning with families. (an extract from the project '*Nido come snodo per una nuova Advocacy*')

Fifty per cent of the children attending the day-care centre E.T. have a migrant background (Romanian, Ethiopian, Nigerian, Senegalese, Tunisian and Filipino communities are the most represented). In recent years, the increasingly diversified needs of families – who have expressed several times their difficulties in adapting to the educational model implemented in our service – triggered the demand for educators to get to know better and understand the diverse educational, care and childrearing practices adopted by parents in their home context. We realised this is an important step to be undertaken if we want to create authentic relationships of trust, especially with those parents who enrolled their child to the service not by choice but rather by necessity. […] The experimentation we will undertake is therefore focused on 'creating bridges' between the day-care centre and the local community organisations which are already engaging with these families on an informal basis (advocacy groups, cultural associations). (an extract from the project '*Spazio Bimbi E.T.*')

This project originates from the opportunity provided by a 'shared space' which is located at the entrance of two institutions: our *nido* (run by a social cooperative under the mandate of the municipality) and a state-maintained institution [*Istituto Comprensivo*] encompassing both pre- and primary-school classes. This situation gives us the possibility to involve the school director as well as municipal administrators in the development of a joint project aimed at transforming such 'empty space' into a 'shared atelier', where inter-generational exchanges among children of different ages and adults (educators and teachers) can be facilitated. […] As part of the project, this shared space will be arranged by using unstructured, recycled and multi-media materials that children can explore. The purpose is to create an environment where divergent thinking can be nurtured by offering all children attending the *nido* and the school the possibility to engage in

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aesthetic experiences and to be listened to. […] The ultimate goal of the project is to sustain a participatory approach to pedagogical planning which involves not only inter-professional collaboration between educators and teachers but also the engagement of key decision makers at the local level. (an extract from the project '*Una Stanza tutta per sè*']

5. From action research to policy advocacy: Concluding remarks

As attested by the *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems,* recently issued by the European Commission (2018),[13] the present time is indeed characterised by a growing momentum to reform ECEC policy and provision at European level as well as at national level (*Commission Staff Working Document* 2018, p. 27).[14] Against this background there are, now more than ever before, significant opportunities to make a real difference and real improvements in the lives of young children and their families by rethinking ECEC policies and practices in a more inclusive perspective where equal access to educational opportunities is placed at the core of collaborative innovation. Taking into account that the policy landscape of ECEC – at European level as well as at national level – is characterised by the presence of multiple stakeholders (from local actors to international organisations), fostering an active and reciprocal dialogue among all relevant players becomes crucial 'in order to find the best solutions that are tailor-made for national, regional local contexts and to serve the best interests of children and their families' (Milotay 2016, p. 127).

The case study illustrated in this chapter might have contributed to shedding some light on how such dialogue could be promoted by combining policy-reform processes, enacted at national level, with local advocacy initiatives, sustaining the agency of all those involved in ECEC (pedagogical coordinators, educators, families and children) as protagonists of transformative change. In the specific case examined, collaborative innovation in regard to early childhood services was achieved by implementing a professional development pathway where pedagogical coordinators were engaged in designing action-research projects aimed to increase the participation of children and families in ECEC in their local community. A

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[13] https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/ecec_en_act_part1_v8.pdf

[14] https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/ecec_en_autre_document_travail_service_part1_v4.pdf

critical review of the case study findings in the light of recent research literature reveals that the key success factors of such an experience might be connected to the following aspects. In the first instance, adopting experiential learning strategies – such as the analysis of pedagogical practice and knowledge exchanges – proved to be effective in sustaining professional development initiatives where ECEC professionals are positioned as agents (rather than objects) of change (Bove et al. 2018; Peleman 2018). Secondly, the introduction of new theoretical perspectives for stimulating experimentation and dialogue at the crossroad between policy and practice fostered a renewed understanding of pedagogical coordinators' everyday practices, from which a shared pedagogical vision, orienting transformational change, emerged (Moss 2014; Vandenbroeck & Peeters 2014). Lastly, providing ECEC professionals with relevant methodological tools for sustaining practice-based research and advocacy within their own settings allowed them to tailor the implementation of such a shared vision by taking into account the specificity of each context and by giving voice to the different actors involved (McKinnon 2013; MacNaughton & Hughes 2008).

At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that the success of the action-research-for-professional-development (*ricerca-form-azione*) initiative illustrated in the case study relied, to a certain extent, on supportive systemic conditions that are specifically related to the political and socio-cultural context in which such an experience took place:

- the reform of the ECEC national policy framework according to an 'integrated system*'* (Law 107/2015) and the allocation of co-funding and additional resources at regional and local level for increasing the quality and accessibility of early childhood provision (Law Decree 65/2017, comma 3, art. 12)
- a well-established tradition of inter-institutional collaboration between universities, early childhood institutions and municipal governments nurturing a culture of 'democratic experimentalism' where ECEC is viewed as a public good (Lazzari, 2012)
- the presence of 'system figures', such as pedagogical coordinators, connecting the educational level of ECEC institutions to the political level of local administrations and playing a crucial role in ensuring a contextualised implementation of action-research initiatives and their follow-up within early childhood settings over the long term.

Therefore, the experience presented in this chapter should not be viewed as an example of a 'best practice', but rather as an 'inspiring case' contributing to reflection on how

transformational change at the intersection between policy, research and practice can be sustained *starting from the pedagogical work* carried out by professionals within ECEC institutions. In this regard, we would like to conclude our contribution by quoting a particularly relevant excerpt taken by the recent work of Peter Moss on transformational change and real utopias in early childhood education:

> [When speaking of] democracy being the 'most important terrain' for institutional innovation, I would extend that to include all educational innovation, including pedagogical work. Formal democracy can create policies and structures to stimulate and support experimentation […] While everyday democracy can create a milieu in which a culture of experimentation can flourish, that willingness to try something new, that desire to bring something new to life, that belief in potentiality. (Moss 2014, p. 138)

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