

START

A good start for all: Sustaining
Transitions across the Early Years

Rethinking Educational Continuity through Participatory Action-Research and Professional Development Pathways



Case study
ITALY

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This report illustrates the findings of the Italian case study carried out within the START project. The project – which was born with the aim of promoting a renewed reflection on the issue of educational continuity in the light of the new regulatory scenarios outlined by Law 107/2015 (with specific reference to the establishment of the integrated system 0-6) in the national context, and in the light ET2020 strategy with reference to the European context – is aimed at supporting the educational action of educators and teachers through the co-design and experimentation of innovative practices facilitating children's smooth transitions from one grade to the next. After briefly outlining the context in which the overall project is located, the present report will focus on the experimentation carried out in the Italian case study, which involved university researchers at the Department of Educational Sciences of Bologna University and pre- and primary school teachers of DD Vignola in a shared action-research and professional development pathway.

1. Contextualization

As it is increasingly recognised, it is no longer possible to separate the European level from the national level when dealing with educational policy issues. One level influences the other in relation to the furthering of research knowledge, to the development of innovative pedagogical approaches, to the elaboration of shared political orientations as well as guidelines for good practice.

In the last decade, the issues of transition and continuity has assumed a progressive relevance in the European debate both on the side of educational policies and on that of pedagogical research. The Council Conclusions on the ET 2020 highlighted in particular the importance to promoting access to good-quality pre- school and school education in order to reduce the number of early school leavers and improve educational outcomes, especially for disadvantaged groups¹. By acknowledging that in-service training is a crucial in determining the quality of the educational environment within which children's learning takes place, the Council Conclusions also invited Member States to make further efforts – together with the relevant stakeholders – in order to improve the continuing professional development (CPD) of staff working in such institutions, including teachers, school leaders and trainers. Within this framework, the Directorate for Education and Culture of the European Commission, in recent years, has promoted several studies aimed at investigating in more detail how educational practices enacted during the transition from one school grade to another influence the children's development and educational attainment. As indicated in the 'Study on the effective use of ECEC in preventing early school leaving (ESL)', positive experiences of transition between educational levels can be a critical factor for children's future school success, while negative experiences can have lasting difficulties leading to poorer educational performance (Dumčius et al., 2014). Furthermore, it is well documented by a growing body of research that paying particular attention to smoothening transitions – by adopting a more unified approach to learning across educational settings in order to sustain continuity of children's experiences over time – can significantly improve children's educational achievement and socio-emotional development (Brooker, 2008; Woodhead & Moss, 2007). In these regards, promoting professional exchanges among ECEC practitioners and teachers as well as involving parents in the transition process are considered to be key factors in ensuring successful transitions (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Margetts & Kiening, 2013; Moss, 2013).

As for the national context, the theme of *educational continuity*² - after having gone through a period of substantial stalemate in the pedagogical debate over the last fifteen years - has now returned to the center of a renewed interest of education professionals (coordinators, managers scholastic, educators and teachers) in correspondence with the new regulatory scenarios outlined by Law 107/2015. The generalization of Comprehensive School Institutions (*Istituti Comprensivi*) as a way to manage pre-, primary and junior high schools under the same director on the one hand, and the reform on the ECEC integrated system from 0 to 6 on the other (Law Decree 65/2017) highlight, in fact, the potentials and risks that could derive from the operational declination of the concepts of continuity and unity of the educational paths on two sides.

On the one hand, the possibility of referring to a comprehensive pedagogical project that takes into account the development needs of children - as well as their relational and cognitive potentialities - in a holistic perspective that supports them in their growth path starting from first experiences in

1 In Italy Early School Leavers from Education and Training represent the 14% of the reference population (Eurostat 2017).

2 Educational continuity (*continuità educativa*) is understood as a way to conceptualise the relationship between different parts of the education system in Italy: from nido (for children under 3 years) to scuola dell'infanzia (for children from 3 to 6 years), from scuola dell'infanzia to scuola primaria (for children from 6 to 11 years) and from scuola primaria to scuola secondaria di primo grado (for children from 11 to 14 years). Although the perspective of educational continuity has been explored, with specific reference to municipal ECEC institutions, since the end of the 1970s (Mantovani, 1986; Bondioli, 1987; Genovesi, 1992), it is only in the early 1990s that such a perspective finds official recognition within a broader legislative framework. In this sense, the perspective of educational continuity begins to be taken seriously, both at policy and institutional level, only towards the beginning of the 1990s, when two laws are enacted – Law 148/1990 (art. 1-2) and Ministerial Decree 16-11-1992. These laws not only acknowledged

the equal status of the educational activities carried out at each school level (pre-primary, primary and junior high), but also outlined the pedagogical practices to be carried out at institutional and inter-institutional level for promoting educational continuity. Within these documents, educational continuity is conceptualised in the following terms:

'Educational continuity does not mean to standardise educational initiatives [undertaken by each school level] or to refuse change; rather it means to elaborate formative pathways within a coherent developmental logic, that values the competences previously acquired by children and that recognise [...] equal dignity for the educational initiatives undertaken at each school level. (Circolare Ministeriale 339/1992)

nido until the end of *scuola dell'infanzia* offers the opportunity to definitively overcome the dualism between 'care' and 'learning' which, even today, continues to produce a certain fragmentation in the educational practices enacted within such services (dichotomy between practices mainly focused on care in *nido* and practices mainly focused on early learning in *scuola dell'infanzia*). On the other hand, the process of verticalization that has characterised the recent evolution of the National Curriculum 3-14 – by introducing an increasingly formalized approach to learning (MIUR, 2012) – as well as the recent reform of pre- and primary school teachers' training (MA degree in Primary Education Sciences) – by increasingly putting emphasis on a 'subject-matter' approach to teaching – could undermine the foundations of a strong 0-6 pedagogical identity centered on 'edu-care', thus extending the risk of *schoolification* by anticipating formal learning in ECEC services (Lazzari & Balduzzi, 2013)³.

In this sense, it becomes essential to start a critical reflection that involves early childhood educators, pre- and primary school teachers in CPD pathways generating awareness on such risks and potentialities, thus supporting processes of *redefinition of educational practices across institutional boundaries* (Karila & Rantavuori, 2014) starting from a shared vision of child-centered learning, needs and resources. In light of these considerations, the methodological approach that the research team has chosen to adopt for carrying out the Italian case study is that of *Ricerca-Form-Azione* (Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2018) which involved – as co-researchers – the teachers working in one preschool and one primary school institution (respectively Collodi and Moro) within the DD Vignola. This specific action-research approach – which was developed over the last decade starting from empirical studies and theoretical reflections originated within a group of Italian academics (CRESPI)⁴ – strives to connect research (*ricerca*) with ongoing professional development (*formazione*) by engaging practitioners in the experimentation of innovative educational practices (*azione*). Its main feature is precisely 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).

2. Analysis of local needs

2.1. Using *ricerca-formazione* as catalyzer of change: from needs analysis to co-design of inclusive transitions

Although research conducted at national and international level is consistent in affirming that educational practices aimed at smoothening children's transitions from one school grade to another play a crucial role in promoting children's school success over the long-term, in the everyday reality of ECEC- and school-based practices many critical issues are raised. In most cases, in fact, early childhood educators, preschool and primary school teachers operate within separate institutional contexts with the result that the pedagogical approaches and educational practices enacted in the transition from one setting to another continue to be characterized by discontinuity and fragmentation. This requires children to make more effort to settle-in in the new context, characterized by implicit rules and teachers' expectations which are different from the previous one they were familiar to. Whereas this effort can be a challenge that stimulates growth for children who already have good interpersonal and linguistic skills, for children who come from situations of disadvantage and vulnerability, this challenge could become an insurmountable obstacle, producing negative repercussions on their experiences of socialization and learning both on the short and long term, and eventually generating a spiraling process towards school failure (Dumčius et al., 2014). In the Italian context such critical issues – despite being underlined not only by scholars and researchers but also by teachers and educational experts – have not yet been considered with the attention they deserve, nor have they been addressed consistently in educational practice.

As highlighted by the review of Italian literature conducted by the research group, the issue of transitions from early childhood settings to preschool and from preschool to primary school

3 These trends and tensions are explored in more details in the chapter: Lazzari, A. & Balduzzi L. (2013) 'Bruno Ciari and educational continuity: The relationship from an Italian perspective'. In Moss, P. (Ed.) *Early Childhood and Compulsory Education. Reconceptualising the relationship*, pp. 149-173. London: Routledge.

4 Centre for Educational Research on Teachers' Professionalism: <https://centri.unibo.it/crespi/it>

institutions has been dealt with mainly within a short-term planning framework, that of *continuity projects*. The implementation of so called 'continuity projects' mostly involves the enactment of *liaison* practices aimed at promoting a formal exchange of information between educators and (pre- and primary school) teachers as well as the familiarization of children with the new environment through sporadic visits. In this sense, most of the experiences realized within such 'continuity projects' are limited to the implementation of joint educational activities structured *a priori* by adults for children. Very often, the perspective in which these activities are placed tends to be 'unidirectional', providing for the reception of children who come from the daycare centre or the preschool in the new context (pre- or primary school) that will host them the following year. In this sense, the exchanges between adults and children taking place during the transition periods are seldom focused on the acknowledgement of children's experiences in the previous environment, nor on the educational strategies that were adopted in such contexts to progressively support their autonomy, socialization and learning. Furthermore, it deserves to be noticed that parents are almost never involved as active interlocutors in the moments that characterize the transition of their children from one grade to another, apart from taking part in informative meetings in which they are explained 'how the new context works'. In none of cases examined, families were involved in the design of transition projects – which were mainly aimed at children – nor in the planning of continuity initiatives which stem from such projects.

Starting from the activation of a path of critical reflection in the light of these assumptions – a path that entailed the joint participation of pre- and primary school teachers from DD Vignola in peer-learning activities facilitated by university researchers – the action-research project undertaken within the Italian case study was focused on "**changing perspective**", by envisaging children and families as protagonists in transitions.

3. Development of the action plan

The most important need that emerged from the literature analysis, the context analysis and the discussion with teachers and educational leaders was to plan and implement experimentation initiatives aimed at improving the experiences of children and families in transitions, trying to give them a voice on these issues.

In particular, the *ricerca-form-azione* pathway developed with specific reference to both local and trans-national learning exchanges has been divided into 6 phases (see below).

1) 'Familiarization' with the research field: in this phase the research group was formed (2 university researchers and 8 teacher-experimenters)⁵ and the relevance of the project for the schools involved was discussed together with teachers, by taking into account their views as experts of the contexts in which they are operating (focus group). In addition, participant observations were carried out by university researchers with the aim of deepening the knowledge of the pre- and primary school educational environment lived by teachers and children on everyday basis,

2) Survey of the needs of all the actors involved starting from the analysis of their perceptions and expectations: for this purpose open-end questionnaires were administered both to pre- and primary teachers operating within DD Vignola schools⁶, and to the parents whose children attended 'transition classes' (last year of preschool and first year of primary school)⁷; furthermore children themselves have had the opportunity to express their points of view through the production of graphic works and group conversations⁸.

5 The teacher-experimenters group consisted of: 2 pedagogical coordinators (one for preschool and one from primary school), 2 preschool teachers (responsible for the 5-year-old groups at Collodi), 4 primary school teachers (which would have been responsible for Moro's first grade classes in the following school-year).

6 Overall 143 questionnaires were collected filled out by preschool teachers (n=46) and primary school teachers (n=97)

7 92 preschool parents and 12 primary school parents answer to the questionnaires (n= 104 in total)

8 First graders' views were collected through drawings and comments on differences they perceived between pre- and primary school environments (children's oral explanation was transcribed by their teachers), whereas group conversations were held in order understand preschoolers' lived experience in *scuola dell'infanzia* and their expectations about transition to primary school (overall 96 children were involved).

3) *Trans-national residential training* (Pen Green Centre) *exploring the theme of participatory action-research in connection with families' engagement*: the objective was to promote peer-exchanges and mutual learning among ECEC and primary school professionals across institutional and national boundaries.

4) *Joint planning and implementation of experimentation initiatives aimed at improving the experiences of children and families in transitions* through a collegial elaboration of educational practices that concretely respond to their emerging needs (rethinking continuity starting from the reflection on the experiences of children and families)⁹,

5) *Second international residential training* (OS Tisina) *on the theme of observation as a tool for reflecting critically on enacted practices in a developmental perspective entailing ongoing improvement*. The experiences realised at each country location were shared and analysed collectively beyond national boundaries: 'how can we move forward and make transition practices more inclusive in contexts of diversity?

6) *Critical evaluation of the outcomes of the transition project carried out by the teacher-experimenters' and of its impact on children and families involved as well as on the wider school community*. This last phase was characterized by two steps: in first instance, the pedagogical documentation¹⁰ related to the experimental project was discussed collectively within the teachers' reference group (*focus group*) by availing of the facilitation of university researchers, secondly the parents whose children took part to the project were invited to 'tell their experience of transition' through a video-interview¹¹.

The needs emerged from the preliminary analysis became for the research group the direction to be pursued in the case study experimentation. Therefore, the analysis of the data collected in the first two phases of the project represented the fundamental starting point from which identifying the specific goals and appropriate actions to be undertaken. The analysis of the data showed that – in a context already characterized by long-term initiatives focused on educational continuity¹² - addressing this topic from the point of view of experimentation would have meant taking a further step ahead of existing practice, starting from reflections on what emerged from the perceptions of children and families. Therefore, the teachers-and-researchers-group identified as the priority purpose of the *ricerca-form-azione* pathway to be jointly undertaken precisely that of 'giving voice' to those actors who, in educational institutions, tend to have less 'decision-making power' – i.e. children and families.

The first step made in this direction was to generate awareness within the group in respect to 'what matters to most', to children and their parents, in relation to transitions. In particular, the following research questions were formulated:

- what are the expectations of children towards the transition to primary school? What are the elements of 'continuity' and 'discontinuity' that, in their eyes, characterize the two learning environments and educational practices once this transition has taken place?
- how do parents experience this change? How do they feel supported, or not, by teachers in dealing with it?

9 In this phase participant observations into two preschool classrooms (4 observation of 4 hours in each group) were conducted by the university researchers. At the same time, primary school teachers observed the activities and the everyday life of the same preschool classrooms (2 observations per person in each classroom). Subsequently, two focus group with all actors – pre-school and primary school teachers, researchers, pedagogical coordinator – were conducted in order to enhance reciprocal confrontation on classroom observations and to co-design the experimentation that would have taken place at the beginning of the following schoolyear.

10 Such documentation includes also the artefacts produced by the parents (and their children) taking part to the transition project: 23 narrative accounts with pictures, 8 videos, 2 power-points.

11 Overall 17 testimonies from parents were video-recorded (approximately 1h 15 min total length).

12 See for example the experiences illustrated during the meeting in Corby, such as the 'preschool memories book' presented by children to their classmates during the first days of primary school, or shared projects linking preschool and primary school activities focused on emergent literacy (eg. *Sillaballando*, lit. trans.'dancing while sillabifying')

4. What was implemented

4.1. Changing perspective: children and families as protagonists of transitions

As underlined into the previous paragraph, to put at the centre of the *ricerca-form-azione* project the children and their families meant for the research group and for the teachers try to find strategies and tools to let their voice come out and be heard.

Children were given the opportunity to express their points of view both through collective conversations (5-years-old classes in preschool), and through drawings representing their experience in preschool VS primary schools (first-graders in primary school). In the same way, **parents** were asked to answer a questionnaire with open-ended questions aimed at grasping their perceptions on transitions by inquiring, on the one hand, their expectations (parents of 5-year-olds) and, on the other, what were the main challenges they encountered and how they were overcome (parents of 6-year-olds).

Children

From the analysis of the data collected through conversations with 5-year-olds emerged that their expectations regarding primary school contained both elements recalling their present pre-school experience (the possibility to make friends, to play in moments of pause between one activity and another, to learn new things) and elements that anticipate change (Corsaro and Molinari, 2005), such as a different structuring of spaces (presence of desks and blackboards) and a greater formalization of learning (learning to read and write, numbers, doing homework).

'I think that [in primary school] there are so many desks, the blackboard, the IWB and I think I can learn to read and write in italics' (*Giorgia, 5 years old*)

'I think that [in primary school] I'll be doing well, I think I go out and play, I expect to learn how to do gymnastics and write' (*Abraham, 5 years old*)

'[In primary school] I think I will find so many friends to tell secrets, I expect to learn a lot of words, numbers, and study...and I want to study leaves to know how they become leaves' (*Halit, 5 years old*)

'[In primary school I think I find] many friends with whom I can play, and then also a nice garden, and then also some nice things, and I think I learn to read and write' (*Thomas, 5 years old*)

From the analysis of the graphic representations produced by the children attending the first grade of primary school, on the other hand, emerges that the elements of discontinuity with preschool are decidedly predominant compared to those of continuity (which are highlighted only in rare cases). In particular, as it can be seen from the images below as an example, the main elements of discontinuity that characterize the transition between the two educational contexts refer to:

- learning environment: multiplicity of environments represented in preschool (classroom, garden, living room and rest room) VS class as the core of the teaching activities (the gym and the outdoor environment are rarely illustrated)
- activities: while the activities mostly represented in preschool refer to free play with classmates, to creative work and routines (such as lunch and afternoon rest), the activities that were most represented by children in primary school refer to situations such as listening to the teacher and copying what is written on the blackboard (moments of play during the recess are drawn only rarely)
- body and agency: if the body is fully drawn in preschool, referring to a full involvement of children in the learning situations represented (also through the body), at primary school the body tends to be represented mostly in a partial way and with a predominantly passive role (children sitting behind a desk, only the teacher is represented in full-body)
- relationships between children: although in both cases the children are mostly represented together with their peers, peer interactions seem to be the focus of the situations illustrated in the preschool whereas in the situations represented at primary school this aspect rarely appears (in most part of the cases the children are drawn frontally seated in separate desks).



ALLA SCUOLA DELL'INFANZIA



GIOCAVO, COLORAVO, DISEGNAVO, MI DIVERTIVO

ALLA SCUOLA PRIMARIA



SCRIVO, LEGGO, STUDIO, FACCIO I COMPITI

ALLA SCUOLA DELL'INFANZIA

- GIOCAVO IN SALONE CON
- LA CUCINA CON I MIEI AMICI



ALLA SCUOLA PRIMARIA

SCRIVO LA DATA E LA MAESTRA
TERRY CONTROLLA I QUADERNI





By observing children's drawing within the teacher-experimenters group, it became clear how children in the transition from pre- to primary school experience a sense of loss of control over the learning environment (eg. space and time), as adult-initiated activities and teacher-led instructions tend to be perceived as the 'only way' formal learning can be pursued in compulsory school. As stated by the **teachers** during the focus group when children's drawings were discussed:

'What was striking me when I first started working in primary school after eighteen years spent working in preschool, it was the organization of space in the classroom. There is no room: only desk and chair, desk and chair. I believe children are 'traumatized' at the beginning. Children who are coming from preschool are used to move freely in the space of the classroom as in preschool sitting at the desk is only one of the way to carry out activities. Instead, in primary school is the only way. In my opinion, if we want to create a real continuity between preschool and primary school we should then give more attention to the organization of spaces, furniture and the way daily routines are carried out...I think now children are split in halves by [pre- and primary] school expectations.' (*primary school teacher*)

'In fact I have often heard from primary school teachers that first graders are not school-ready ('scolarizzati') but what does that mean? To me, it means to have a passion for learning. But for them it means that children are not used to sit down, stay still and wait. Hence, it would be important to find a shared agreement on what 'being school-ready' means, as it would help us to find more similar strategies, a common ground where children can feel more at ease.' (*preschool teacher*)

'I think the relational dimension is also important. Yesterday I had the chance to speak to some parents whose children are now in primary school [siblings are still in preschool] and they reported to us precisely this. Their children are pleased to go to primary school but they miss a bit the affective dimension of preschool, for example that you can go and hug your teacher and then come back to finish your work. We [preschool teachers] are more used to deal with this relational dimension, whereas in primary school this is not so common' (*preschool teacher*)

'I also believe that the relational dimension is important. I have seen 6-year-olds suffering a lot for the separation from their mum: in fact in primary school children do not have the time to slowly get used to it. There is not a given settling in time ('inserimento') and I think a bit would be needed...' (*Primary school teacher*)

Parents

The perceptions linked to the aspects of dis-continuity - which differently connote the learning and socialization experiences of children within the two environments - are taken up in parallel by the **parents** whose children are about to face the transition. In this sense, the data collected through the questionnaires reveal that such assumptions are often at the origin of fears and concerns:

'[What worries me is] A negative initial impact. A very rigid method of learning could lead to the "closure" of my son who already has a shy personality in the group. "

'I expect a school where the children are always sitting at the desk and this worries me a lot because my son has problems with a condition of hyperactivity and oppositional disorder. [...] All schools of every grade and level should have at least some characteristics of preschool. The opportunity to play - even if with different frequencies and times - to move, not to receive formal evaluations (marks) but only in relation to children's competences.'

'The biggest fear is that he will not resist so much time sitting given his liveliness'

'The greatest concern is that my child might need emotional reassurance and there is not much room for this in primary school.'

'The emotional aspect of the transition to primary school is what worries me most: to have new rules, to change the classmates, the environment, the teachers...And I think all these things affect greatly those children who are more sensitive and introverted. I fear my son gets scared and loses his enthusiasm for going to school.'

If on the one hand the analyzed data show that the aspects of discontinuity linked to the different educational approaches and teaching methods used within the two school contexts are those that most affect the representations of children and their families during the transition, from the other they show that - in the expectations of the latter - the presence of a certain continuity in the relationship between adults (parents-teachers), between teachers and children, and within the class group (peer socialization) is seen as a potential resource to cope with these changes.

'I hope that in the new school there will be trained teachers, who are receptive and responsive like the ones I have encountered in *nido* and *scuola dell'infanzia*. It takes a long time to my son to get involved in the group but, so far, he met teachers who were able to understand him: they gave his time and won his trust, building with him a good relationship and making him love to go to school. I hope that the teachers as well as being good at teaching school subjects, have time and desire to understand his needs - and the needs of each child, that are different - in order to help them grow.'

'The expectations are that the new teachers are able to grasp the individuality of each child and accompany him in the best way in the transition and change of habits'

'We expect primary school to contribute to socialization, [we expect] that our daughter will continue to be comfortable with other children and teachers by establishing positive relationships with them.'

'We expect that [our daughter] will become more and more independent and that she will find a welcoming and motivating environment that will make her keep a good relationship with the school.'

In this sense, parents recognize that primary school teachers have an important educational role not only on the learning side but also on the promotion of the personal growth and wellbeing of children both at social and relational level:

'I expect teachers to be attentive in teaching the expected subjects but also in showing to the children how to live together in a community such as the school, how to face difficult times, how to help one another among peers [...]. I hope my daughter will find a positive, collaborative and stimulating environment to grow as a student and as a person.'

'We would like that new teachers - beside transferring knowledge to the children - would induce interest in knowledge as a value for children's individual and community growth.'

'[I expect] Teachers to be aware of how important is school in the life path of a child. Respect for every child in their abilities, emotions. Not just an instructional teaching but more related to the person, something that now is not happening much. I already have older children.'

'[I expect teachers] to teach reading, writing and the rules of civil coexistence.'

'My hope is that he will improve drastically for example in how to read, write and also be able to socialize well with others.'

Hence the importance, according to parents, to keep open communication through a constant dialogue with teachers, although the primary school context is perceived by them as less permeable to the participation of families compared to that of preschool. The presence of a close collaboration between school and family is considered as a crucial element especially in addressing any difficulties that the child may encounter at the beginning of the new scholastic path:



'[In order to support my child in the passage I think it would be important] Collaboration between parents and teachers. Individual interviews to find a meeting point on child management.'

'[To support my daughter in the passage I think it would be important] So much communication and attention between teachers and parents.'

'My concern is not being able to have a daily exchange with teachers of the primary school in case any problems arise...'

'I think it's important for all of us adults (teachers and parents) to understand each other, flexibility (in times, ways and strategies of teaching) enthusiasm, listening [...] The relationship between teachers and parents is very important for the transition because it's a big change from preschool to primary school.'

'I think it's important that parents make themselves available to collaborate with the teacher by accepting advice and suggestions.'

'I think our attitude as parents is important [...] Being present as parents ready to listen and support our children. Communication and mutual respect with teachers is essential.'

'I would like the family to be involved, where possible, in the activities carried out by children and, also, that there would be a sharing of values [between school and family].'

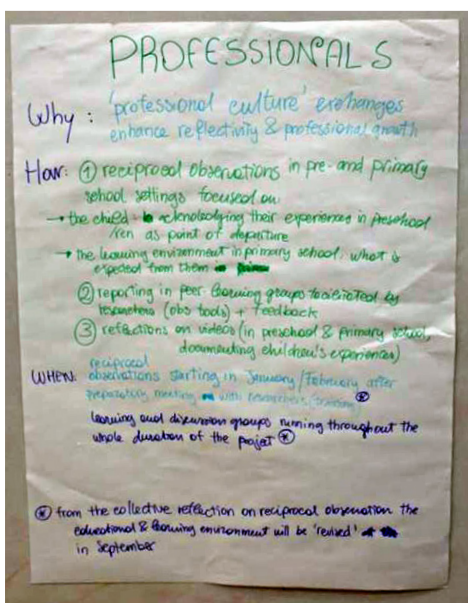
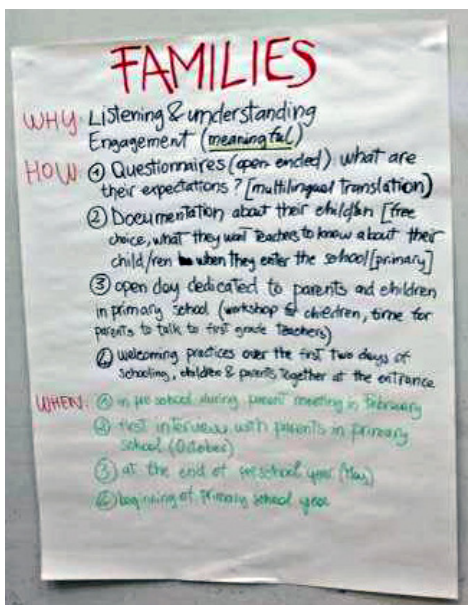
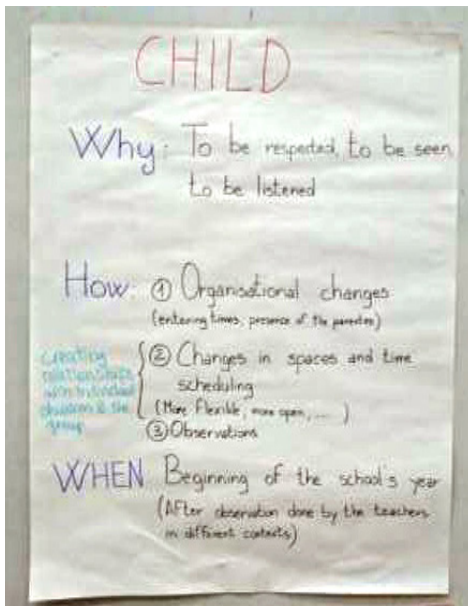
4.2. The key elements of the experimentation: generating change through collective action

Starting from researchers' reporting of what emerged from the analysis of the needs of children and families, a path of shared reflection began by involving the teacher- experimenters in the design and implementation of improvement actions. In the first place, this path has provided for the formulation of the 'research questions' that would have allowed us to focus on the object of experimentation, enhancing and welcoming the requests for participation that emerged from the perceptions of children and parents. Secondly, the working group questioned the ways in which it would have been possible to *soften the transition from one school grade to another, starting from the re-reading of the educational and didactic methodologies adopted within the two contexts*. The latter need emerged within the same group of teacher-experimenters, who found that it was necessary to promote greater reciprocity in the dialogue between teachers of pre- school and primary school in the phase of co-design of continuity initiatives.

'As we said in the last meeting, it would be interesting – starting step by step, because we cannot change everything at once – trying to put us in each other shoes through reciprocal observation. It is important to know each other by physically going on site. In this sense I – as a preschool teacher – can see what kind of work you do with the children in first grade and hence, what are the expectations that children are required to fulfill in terms of relational and learning competence. On the other, you as primary school teacher can see how the daily work with 5-year-olds is carried out throughout the day. And afterward we can find a meeting point ('*mediazione*'). For example, I can level my expectations a bit higher to get closer to primary school and the primary school can lower the expected learning requirements so that we can meet half-way.' (*preschool teacher*)

In this sense, the week of transnational training that took place at the Pen Green Center in Corby - an integrated centre considered to be at the forefront for promoting participation of families in the educational planning of the service (Whalley, 2017) - contributed by one side to deepen these questions in a participatory research-action perspective (McKinnon, 2013), on the other, to offer teachers a concrete example with which to confront themselves in order to rethink their educational practices in a transformative perspective. The opportunity to share the training with colleagues from different countries (England, Belgium, Slovenia) - explaining the doubts and uncertainties that in each context were accompanying the processes of change - has allowed teachers to 'think out of their cultural and institutional boundaries' (Van Laere, et al., 2018) and - at the same time - to overcome resistance to change through mutual exchange of experiences and peer learning. At the end of the residential training week - which resulted in the formalization of the research questions for action-research and the identification of some work tracks for implementation – the experimentation phase began.





In this phase, the teachers assumed the role of co-researchers - identifying possible improvement actions that started from the reading of the needs emerged - while the researchers assumed the role of facilitators - supporting the process of designing and implementing the experimentation through the pedagogical guidance (accompaniment) of the working groups. In practice, the role of guide and promotion carried out by researchers has been substantiated in:

- proposal of tools to support reflexivity (eg. tools to be used for reciprocal observations between teachers belonging to different school levels),
- coordination of discussion groups in which the 'pedagogical implications' underlying entrenched educational and didactic practices have been de-constructed and put back into play (eg analysis of observations' data within the group of teacher-experimenters),
- support for the participatory evaluation of implementation processes and formative feedback (eg how to promote the sustainability of the experimentation over the long-term).

5. Impact on children, families, teachers, organization

5.1 What worked for whom: the point of view of the school and of the families

The implementation phase of the experimentation, which took place from March to October 2017, envisaged, first of all, the joint observation by primary school teachers and researchers of the two 5-year-old classes in preschool. The objective of observations was twofold:

- to compare the 'gazes' on the child within his/her learning environment, thus bringing out the implicit 'pedagogical beliefs' that orient the educational and didactic choices in the two different school contexts (Ceconi, 2012),
- identify some pivotal elements - on the level of educational and didactic methodologies - that could have acted as a 'bridge' between these two contexts, introducing a more gradual approach to transition from preschool to primary school learning environment.

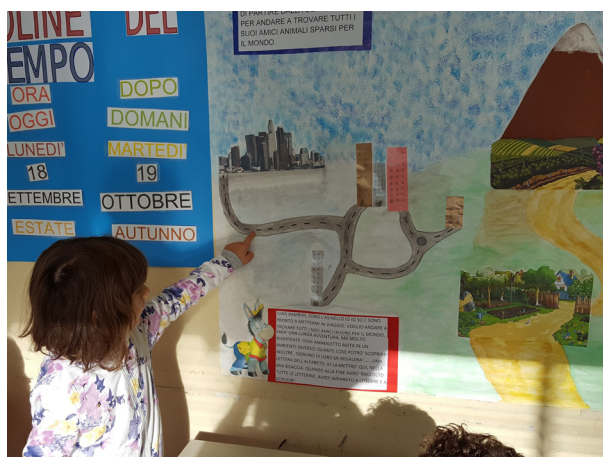
A further objective linked to the presence of primary school teachers within preschool classes was to foster mutual knowledge and a first familiarization between the children who would have made the transition in September and their future teachers. On the other hand, the presence of preschool school teachers in the first classes at the beginning of the next school year would have given children the opportunity to recognize a familiar figure, to whom they can tell and talk about themselves in the new environment, thus elaborating change.

Both researchers and teachers used the same tool for observation (focus: learning environment, teaching strategies, children's strengths) with the aim of encouraging

comparison with the data collected and a shared analysis of what emerged in collective meetings. In this process, the role played by researchers was, on the one hand, to bring out some shared interpretative categories starting from what was observed and, on the other, to facilitate the transition from reflection to operationalization by guiding the discussion on how to re-found some educational and didactic practices - typical of preschool but considered significant also for primary school - in the period of transition between the two contexts.

Starting from the results of the discussion that took place during the reporting of observation data and interpretation, the group of teacher-experimenters delineated in a more specific way the elements that would have characterized the implementation of the project's actions identified during the transnational training in Corby. In particular, it was decided to:

- propose to the parents of the children entering the primary school, on the occasion of the first meeting at the beginning of September, to prepare a presentation of their child by choosing freely the way to carry out the task (using photos, short video recordings, conversations or narrative accounts, significant objects ...),
- set up a first round of individual interviews with the parents of newly enrolled children in October, to give them the possibility to illustrate the presentation of their child (interview focused on listening), rather than performing only the traditional individual meeting in November (focused on giving parents a feedback on their child's school performance),
- set up three days of reception for the first children and their parents at the beginning of the school year, postponing for them the morning entry by 10 minutes (compared to the other classes) and allowing parents to enter the classroom with their children in order to share with them the beginning of the morning and have a daily exchange with the teachers,
- adopt a flexible articulation of spaces, times and activities in the first weeks of school (de-fragmentation time at the start of the day, more free play outside), also taking up some didactic methodologies used in preschool to encourage a gradual familiarization of children with the new school environment (eg. introducing circle-time and 'calendar' in the morning, adopting a 'mediator character' and a common 'thematic framework' for connecting children's learning experiences on the same thread across the three first-grade classes involved in the experimentation)
- pay particular attention to the creation of the class group and the establishment of a positive relational climate among children through the proposal of play activities (treasure hunt to familiarize with the new school's spaces) and moments dedicated to sharing and enhancing their experiences (individual presentation of the 'memories' book' made by children during the last year of preschool).
- Most of the educational and didactic innovations implemented in the case study experimentation were introduced in the primary school setting. In fact, both pre-school and primary school teachers agreed on the idea that transition must be re-conceptualized starting from the key concepts of *welcoming* and *settling in* – articulated in terms of educational relationships and didactic strategies – in the light of the specific context organization characterising primary school. At the same time pre-school teachers also introduced some minor changes, albeit these were not specifically related to the 'content' of their educational action and activities ('what') but rather connected to the 'way'



educational initiatives were implemented ('how'). For example, pre-school teachers started to offer to the children, during their drawing activities, colored pencils (which are more commonly used in primary school) instead of felt-tip pens, in order to accustom children to a less determined touch of colour and to an appropriate use of the penknife. The importance of this – and other different small changes – introduced in preschool is represented by the fact that teachers' intentionality and initiatives demonstrate how it is possible to prepare children to primary school by taking into account their actual abilities and competences, therefore without schoolifying ECEC practices or anticipating formal learning, but rather by working differently on the contents and activities that are typical of preschool education.

All the above-mentioned initiatives, undertaken within the case study experimentation, have contributed positively on the one hand to make the teachers gain greater awareness of the objectives and operational methodologies already adopted for some time within the DD Vignola (i.e. intentional use of space arrangements, 'care' and 'learning' approach) and, on the other hand, allowed children and families to feel welcomed, effectively becoming the protagonists of a delicate and important moment such as entering primary school. From the meeting with researchers reporting on the experimentation, it emerged in particular how having had the opportunity to *dedicate the first interview entirely to listening to the parents has contributed significantly to change their 'image of the child'*:

'This moment helps you a lot, as a teacher, to know the child at 360 degrees according to what is not only your perception - what you see in that particular environment, at that moment during school activities - but also outside. So, through the presentation of the preschool teachers, through the presentation of parents and through what you see in the classroom you can better understand the child, to have a broader vision...and this thing also helps you in the way you are relating to him ...!' (*primary school teacher*)

'After a month of school [when the individual interviews were held] we already had an idea of how the children were, but the interviews with the parents showed us, they made us understand a lot more about those children and their way of being in the classroom...and perhaps we are now more open to understand them, more receptive towards their needs, because we understand what stands behind.' (*primary school teacher*)

In turn, the parents involved in these actions reported that they felt more involved and active in their children's school life, as they felt listened, welcomed and reassured. From the parents' perceptions it also emerges that the children themselves have greatly appreciated the way in which they were welcomed, each child felt important and protagonist in the process. Therefore, the actions undertaken contributed significantly to creating a climate of trust that certainly positively favored the children's first approach to the new school reality.

'My son had no friends from preschool in his class and on the first day at school entrance he was lost ... the fact of entering the class 10 minutes after the children from other classes certainly helped us a lot, to have a little more intimacy [...] Then we accompanied him to his classroom, there were both me and my wife, and I remember his expression that looked around as if to say << And now what happens? What do we do? >> and from him who is a very lively child - even too much sometimes - this thing has struck me a lot. But being able to stay with him, being able to stay a little closer, was much appreciated, indeed it was really fundamental ... more for him than for us ...' (*father*)

'A very useful thing in my opinion was the presentation that we were asked to do for the teachers... Personally I preferred to make a video by giving to my son the responsibility 'to show himself to the new teacher ... and it was amazing ... he surprised me too! I would have talked probably as a mom and that's it, but he also said the things that, let's say, are a bit more difficult to say regarding his personality ... So this thing, to bring a story, a video of the child to the new teachers in my opinion was fundamental: both for teachers and for the child himself. Because he had to take time, to think "who I am", "what I do" and above all "what do I want to tell them about me?". This in my opinion was fundamental for my son.' (*mother*)

'Both my wife and I have been involved in accompanying M., the youngest of our three children, at school. We did it very willingly because we were a bit worried that he had no classmate from preschool in his new class. So being a child at the beginning, I do not say shy, but that tends to be a bit 'hidden', we were a little worried that having no friend could have been a bit of a problem. Instead with this '*inserimento*' ... these games we did for half an hour together with the

other parents and then children and the teachers together on the first day of school ... they probably unblocked this situation a bit and he faced it very well ... we had no negative impact whatsoever; on the contrary, the child goes to school very willingly since the first day and we are very happy with this. ' (father)

'As a parent you have many expectations, so many fears and - like the child herself - you do not know what you're going to meet ... Thanks to this project we have lived this important passage very smoothly, also because we have been given the opportunity to enter inside the school ... The first days we accompanied S. to school, the teachers have made us participate in games to know her classmates and the parents themselves ... In addition, they also gave us an interview to tell something about our girl: for the first time the teachers asked us "how is your daughter?" << what can we know more than her beyond the fact that she is a 6 year old girl who starts primary school? >> My husband and I sat down one evening and actually for the first time we looked at each other and asked ourselves "how is our daughter?" what are the right words to describe her? >> And it was very nice because, yes, we talk so much about her but we never sat down to tell the positive and negative sides of her personality ... So we wrote a kind of a letter in which we also spoke, for example, of her sensitivity, that if you do not know her deeply you might not notice it ... Thanks to this interview I think we have been able to give useful and important information to teachers. ' (mother)

6. Evaluation and sustainability

As university researchers, our main contribution in the action-research and development process has been to connect – through ongoing pedagogical guidance provided to the teachers' team - the local dimension of experimentation on transitions (illustrated in the case study) with the international dimension of project (shared understandings and common directions emerged in joint staff training weeks and transnational meetings). In this sense, our role has been to facilitate processes of sustainable change by supporting teacher-experimenters in planning and implementing small-step innovations within their own institutional contexts by taking into account what could be learned from the visits to educational institutions in other countries and peer-exchanges with international colleagues. This implied a constant effort toward balancing the needs and resources that were played out in the local context with a wider-perspective reflection allowing the re-contextualisation of the pedagogical principles underlying educational practices observed in the settings visited in partners' countries.

6.1. Key Success Factors & Barriers

By looking back at whole process, the main challenge encountered in our local project was to find a sustainable way (not threatening) of engaging preschool and primary school teachers in jointly reflective processes, given the two different institutional and pedagogical cultures characterising the educational contexts in which they were operating. In addition, DD Vignola had an already established tradition in developing educational continuity projects, the focus of which was mostly centred on consolidated activities. In this sense, the challenge we identified was twofold:

- on one side resistance to change, as exemplified in statements such as *'we are already doing these kind of things to soften children transitions'* or *'it is not possible to introduce such changes (for example space arrangement in the first-grade classrooms) due to existing constraints, otherwise we would have done it before'* (meeting 16-01-2017)
- on the other the risk of *'crystallization'* of existing practices, exemplified by the implementation of teacher-centred activities that might have lost their meaning over time.

Reciprocal observation, reflection and sharing

In order address the above-mentioned challenges, the researchers decided to re-activate teachers' critical reflection and their intentionality in planning by using strategies which allowed the implicit pedagogical meaning underlying everyday practices to become explicit through peer-confrontation. In this sense, the choice to introduce reciprocal observations across the two settings was made in order to stimulate the dialogue on purposes and meanings of practices (*'why things are done in the way they are'*).

In the first phase, teachers and researchers carried out observations simultaneously over a couple of days by using the same tools (fields notes on observational grid). In the second phase, the data collected were shared and discussed within each group (preschool teachers, primary school teachers and researchers). In the third phase, the different perspectives were brought together and divergent meanings / fields of tension were explored with the facilitation and guidance of the researchers. The more intentional planning of transition practices that arose out of such in-depth reflective process, made the difference in the way welcoming practices were implemented. As reported from one teacher: *'Although I think we have always paid a particular attention to welcoming children and parents in our school, the parents who have siblings attending our school have noticed the difference between what was done this year in comparison to the previous years'* (meeting 16-11-2017).

International training

Another key-success factor in overcoming the previously mentioned challenges was the way international training weeks were carried out, by privileging teachers' direct involvement in observation of educational settings in other countries (*inspiration and motivation*) and peer-exchange among professionals coming from different cultural backgrounds (*confrontation and learning*).


It needs to be acknowledged that undertaking a further step moving toward 'inclusive transitions in contexts of diversity' required a more extended time – beyond the duration of the project – as it would imply a deeper reflection on 'implicit biases' underlying educational practices. However, it is in the intentions of the teacher-experimenters group to proceed along this pathway in the future.

Changing perspective

By looking back at whole process, the following changes to the initial point of view could be identified:


- *The voices of children and families in transitions* – which was part of the first phase of action-research (needs analysis) – *gradually became the focal point guiding teachers' intentionality in planning and implementing change to their educational and didactic practices*. In this sense, teachers' insights and meaning making processes gradually became more and more important for the development of the local case study. The necessity to change educational and didactic methodologies at the beginning of primary school – by increasing the focus on welcoming relationships and by privileging a more active and co-constructed approach to learning – emerged from the fact that teachers *listened to children's and parents' needs, took them seriously into account and thus started questioning 'given for granted' practices*.
- Teacher's *'image of the child'* significantly changed along this process (i.e.: preschool children starting primary school were no longer considered 'in-competent novices') as result of ongoing confrontation among pre- and primary school professionals within the reflection group (in particular, making sense together of observed practices).
- Teachers' *understanding of parents'* participation became more meaningful by moving beyond institutionalised practices: as primary school teachers themselves put it, they started to *'listening to the parents rather than talking to them'* (meeting 16-11-2017).
- In turn, both these aspects (i.e.: taking children's and parents' perspectives seriously into account) produced a transformation in the pedagogical approaches and educational practices implemented at the beginning of the primary school-year: i.e. focus on caring and learning together, taking into account children's relational and emotional needs.

All the aspects mentioned above had a positive impact on children's school experiences even beyond the transition period, as teachers adopted a more responsive approach to teaching by looking more closely to children's diverse needs and learning strategies. This point is very important because it starts from an insight: teachers acknowledge that usually when they talk to parents their attention is centered on the child's learning process (if not outcomes), while when parents talk to teachers they are more interested in their child's socio-emotional wellbeing and overall development. In this sense, by *"listening instead of talking"* a change occurred in the communication flow between teachers and parents. Teachers started to adopt a more emphatic communication approach with parents and this gradually led them to reconsider – and eventually overcome – the conceptual split between 'education' and 'care' in their everyday practice.



'The group noted that the experimental project for welcoming children and families to primary school implemented within the START project really made the difference in the way the relationship between teachers and parents has been developing this year and on the settling in of children as individual and as a group. Allowing parents to enter the classroom with their children over the first days of school set the basis for developing mutual relationship of trust (feeling welcomed), which were reinforced by the way individual meetings with parents were conducted (parents could talk freely about their children rather than 'being told' by the teacher how their child is doing at school). This made the difference also for the teachers, who had the opportunity to learn to know the children better by listening to their parents. They developed a deeper understanding of children's way of acting and this allowed them to develop more responsive strategies on the basis of children's individual approach to learning and making relationship (one of teacher reported that she is now 'looking at the children with different eyes'). Also, the fact that certain routines from preschool – with which children were familiar – were kept during the first part of the school year (Sept-Dec) facilitated children's settling in the new environment, the relationship with the new teachers (children even pointed at similarities between their preschool and primary school teachers) and the creation of the classroom group (friendship).'

[Excerpt from the IT country group report – Tisina training week in December 2017]



What was the space of change and what really made the difference? The aspects that were key to the success of the experimentation could be synthesized as follow:

- Involvement of all school community actors from the very beginning: preschool and primary school coordinators were involved even in drafting the proposal, whereas teachers and parents since the start of the project. The objectives of the project and updates on the activities progressively carried out were regularly shared within extended collegial meetings (over 120 teachers attending) and parents' evenings (explaining the intentions of the initiatives undertaken). The project was also presented to the children both by the researchers – during the visits to pre- and primary school settings – and by their teachers throughout the year.
- Proceeding step-by-step toward the innovation of practice, implying that not all the input coming from transnational training weeks and meetings were equally taken in. In this sense, the experimentation taking part in the Italian case study was not only tailored to local circumstances but also co-designed with the group of teacher-experimenters, within their 'learning zone'¹³. In this sense, reporting the work accomplished during the training week back to wider group of professionals operating within their institutions and (re-)negotiating the action-research initiatives with them was crucially important.
- Gradually moving from peer-learning group's initiatives toward the creation of the conditions for systemic change: in this sense, the involvement of teachers' coordinators (acting as bridging figures between the researchers' and teachers' groups hence sustaining a contextualised implementation of planned initiatives and their follow-up) and of the school directors was crucial (endorsement of experimentation).
- Ownership of the project: the teacher-experimenters showed an high level of engagement during the periodical meetings facilitated by the researchers, as well as a sincere commitment to carry out in their everyday practice what was decided in the group. Moreover, the group of teacher-experimenters involved in the project progressively became bigger in order to include following year first grade teachers (sustainability of the experimentation over the long period).

6.2 Implications for policies at local, regional, national level

Preliminary conclusions toward the formulation of implications for policy and practice

From the analysis of findings illustrated in this report, it is possible to draw conclusions regarding the elements that contributed to the success of the experimentation and the reasons why the choices made were successful in the specific context examined.

13 In between 'comfort zone' (certainty) and 'panic zone' (threatening).

First of all, the fact that since the inception **children and their families** - as well as the **teachers** - have been involved with an **active role in the project, sharing goals and objectives**, has allowed to focus the initiatives undertaken within the experimentation on the issues that they considered important themselves. This produced a positive impact both on the experiences of children at the time of transition (less difficulties related to the settling in the new context) and on the relationship between teachers and parents in primary school. In this sense, having set up the relationship with the families from the beginning in a perspective of **welcoming and reciprocity** ('listening to parents' VS 'talking to parents') has encouraged the creation of **relationships of trust focused on dialogue** which, in turn, **contributed significantly to improve the experiences of children in the process of transition**. Receiving the parent's point of view as a resource to better understand the child has in fact allowed teachers to question what strategies are best suited to support each child - in different ways according to his/her peculiarities - not only during the transition period but also in their school learning pathways throughout the year.

Another aspect that has contributed in a crucial way to the positive outcome of the experimentation was the creation of an **inter-professional working group** that included **teachers and researchers belonging to different institutional contexts (preschool, primary school, university)**. This has facilitated, on the one hand, to 'make explicit' and 'de-construct' implicit pedagogical assumptions underlying each institutional context and on the other the 're-thinking' of educational practices within a **shared vision**. In this regard, it has proved to be of fundamental importance both the use of **mediating tools** - which allowed to **create a common ground for confrontation** (i.e. mutual observations between teachers in the two different educational contexts) - and the **use of training devices that facilitated peer-to-peer exchange and learning within national as well as international groups** (action-research, critical reflection, pedagogical guidance). The use of these strategies had a positive impact on the work of the teachers' team well beyond the duration of the experimentation project, generating virtuous paths that re-launched collegial planning between different school grades and between parallel classes as an authentic opportunity of exchange and critical reflection to improve educational and didactic practices.

In light of these considerations, we believe that the biggest challenge to be faced now it will be continuing to ensure the sustainability of the project undertaken so far over the long term: this does not mean replicating the 'good practices' originated within the experimentation, but rather **re-creating the systemic conditions so that the initiatives that were developed within such experimentation could be 're-read' and 'revisited' in an evolutionary key, in light of the constantly changing needs coming from children and families**.

For this to happen, certain steps are currently being undertaken:

- documenting and disseminating the transition practices developed within the START project - as well as their impact on children and families - in order to endorse the experimentation both 'inside'¹⁴ and 'outside' the DD Vignola school community (school website, E-twinning platform, publication on national practitioners' journals, local dissemination events)
- working toward a joint framework agreement between DD Vignola and UNIBO (Department of Education) for the provision of 20 hours/year in-service training on the theme of educational continuity where the teachers of 'transition-classes' are to be involved in *ricerca-form-azione* pathways by using the START toolbox (scaling-up the project by extending the experimentation to all pre- and primary schools of the district)
- sustaining processes of advocacy at local level by involving ECEC services (municipal and private-not-for-profit providers) as well as public administrators.

¹⁴ This aspect is particularly crucial in our case given the fact that the school director who supported the project retired last year, so there is a high risk that the efforts and knowledge developed within the START transition project could get lost.

As part of this process, we have illustrated the preliminary results of the projects to the whole team of teachers operating within the DD Vignola during last school-year collegial meeting (February 2017). Representatives from the local authorities responsible for the educational and social services in Vignola were invited at the meeting as well, as part of the process of local policy advocacy.

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