

ECEC PROFESSIONALISATION AT A CROSSROAD: REALIZING AN INTEGRATED SYSTEM IN TIME OF REFORMS IN ITALY

PROFISSIONALIZAÇÃO DA EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL: IMPLEMENTANDO UM
SISTEMA INTEGRADO EM TEMPO DE REFORMAS NA ITÁLIA

Arianna Lazzari^{1,*} 

Lucia Balduzzi² 

ABSTRACT: In Italy, the issue of initial preparation and continuing professional development (CPD) of early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce has become a particularly contentious issue in the light of the recent reform on the institution of the integrated ECEC system from birth up to six years. The article will critically review the historical evolution of the two different university degrees for the professional preparation of early childhood educators and pre-school teachers and will reflect on its implications for ensuring pedagogical continuity across the 0-6 sector.

Keywords: ECEC workforce. Initial education. Integrated ECEC system. Policy reform. Italy.

RESUMO: Na Itália, a questão da formação inicial e continuada na Educação Infantil tornou-se uma questão controversa à luz da recente reforma da instituição do sistema integrado de educação e formação desde o nascimento até aos seis anos. O artigo descreverá e fará uma revisão crítica da evolução histórica, bem como caracterizará os dois diferentes graus universitários para a preparação de educadores da creche e da pré-escola. Na conclusão, serão apresentadas uma reflexão sobre as implicações para a atuação junto à faixa etária de 0 a 6 anos.

Palavras-chave: Profissionais de educação infantil. Formação inicial. Sistema integrado de educação infantil. Reformas políticas. Itália.

1. Università di Bologna – Dipartimento di Scienze dell’Educazione ‘G. M. Bertin’ – Bologna, Italy.

2. Università di Bologna – Dipartimento di Scienze dell’Educazione ‘G. M. Bertin’ – Bologna, Italy.

*Corresponding author: arianna.lazzari2@unibo.it.

Thematic issue organized by: Rodrigo Saballa de Carvalho, Bianca Salazar Guizzo e Arianna Lazzari

The Context of ECEC in Italy: Moving From a Split to an Integrated System

In Italy, the system of early childhood education and care (ECEC) for children up to statutory school age (6 years) comprises a variety of provision for 0- to 3-year-olds—such as early childhood centres (*nidi d'infanzia*) and integrative settings for children and families (*servizi integrativi*)—and preprimary education institutions (*scuole dell'infanzia*) for 3- to 6-year-olds. Until the School Reform enacted by the National Government in 2015 (Law 107), ECEC provision in Italy was organised within a split system. Early childhood institutions attended by children under three years of age (*nidi d'infanzia* and *servizi integrativi*) fell under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, while preprimary institutions attended by children aged three to six (*scuole dell'infanzia*) fell under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. The origin of this enduring split in the governance of ECEC provision could be dated back to the second half of the last century, when both preprimary and early childhood education institutions obtained formal recognition in national law. The State took over complete responsibility of the preprimary education sector in 1968, when Law 444 (ITALY, 1968) instituted state-maintained preschools and integrated previously existing provision (mostly run by Catholic bodies and Municipalities) within the national education system, with the far-reaching goal of ensuring generalisation of children's attendance throughout the country. By contrast, early childhood centres for children aged 0 to 3 were considered by Law 1044 (ITALY, 1971) as services on individual demand and—despite their educational role was progressively recognised over a merely social assistance function—no entitlement was set at national level, devolving the administrative responsibility for their establishment, regulation and funding to regional and municipal authorities. In this context, the vast majority of ECEC services for children under 3 years are run, or subsidised, by local and regional governments—with stark disparities in provision and attendance rates across the country (CONSORZIO MIPA, 2020).

In order to overcome such disparities and thus ensure equal educational opportunities to all children starting from birth, the Italian Parliament passed two pieces of legislation—Law n. 107 (ITALY, 2015) and its implementation act, Law Decree n. 65 (ITALY, 2017a)—triggering a broad reconfiguration of the sector by establishing an integrated ECEC system from 0 to 6 years (*Sistema integrato di educazione e di istruzione da 0 fino ai 6 anni*) under the authority of the Ministry of Education. While the establishment of an integrated ECEC system has been hailed as a watershed moment in the history of Italian early childhood policy—and, indeed, of the country's education system—the implementation of such reform poses complex and daunting challenges.

Specifically, the envisaged reshaping of the ECEC sector has brought a crucial shift in focus towards issues of educational continuity. The roll-out of integrated early childhood services on a nationwide level will necessarily entail a redefinition of the methods used to govern transitions between *nido* and *scuola dell'infanzia*, by ensuring continuity of pedagogical approaches and educational/didactic strategies (BONDIOLI; SAVIO, 2018). Having formally relinquished their segmented structure, with the onset of the new integrated system many ECEC services will be required a profound recasting of their institutional vision and professional culture across the 0–3 and 3–6 sector (MARI, 2017). As part of this considerable effort toward institutional transformation and renovation, arguments for rethinking initial education and in-service professional development of early childhood educators and preschool teachers are gaining new prominence in Italy and are expected to continue to make progress on the policy reform agenda (CERINI; SPINOSI, 2021; GRUPPO NAZIONALE NIDI E INFANZIA, 2021). These arguments appeal to the idea that the successful establishment of the integrated system uniformly across the country will remain partly contingent upon workforce capacity to address, and resolve, the contradictions stemming from fragmented institutional legacy and pedagogical traditions underlying the ECEC sector in Italy.

The Professionalization of ECEC Workforce in Transition: Trends and Current Developments

The crucial role played by workforce initial professional preparation and continuing development in ensuring the pedagogical quality and inclusiveness of ECEC provision has widely been acknowledged in international research. As emphasised in the research overview carried out by the ET2020 Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission:

[...] the workforce is central to ECEC provision as it accounts for the greater part of the total cost of early childhood services and is the major factor in determining children's experiences and their outcomes. For these reasons, the initial and ongoing training of ECEC staff seems to be critical for ensuring quality of early childhood services and for the inclusion of all children. (ET2020 Working Group on ECEC, 2021, p. 16)

At the same time, it is noted that only in those cases when the content of the initial education programmes and their associated learning outcomes match the competences required to work in the ECEC sector the pedagogical quality of ECEC provision is enhanced. On the contrary, if there are significant mismatches between the outcomes of initial professional preparation programmes and the competence required to be successful at work, staff are less able to provide high quality ECEC. The studies reviewed in the report further highlight that continuing professional development (CPD) programmes can have a huge impact on the quality of staff pedagogy and children's outcomes, as they are key in creating—and sustaining over time—a shared understanding of quality among all staff working in ECEC settings (ET2020 Working Group on ECEC, 2021).

The findings of research carried out in EU member states seems to be in line with those derived by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Teaching and Learning International Survey (OECD-TALIS) Starting Strong Survey conducted in 2018 by involving early childhood educators, preschool teachers and leaders in 9 countries worldwide (four of which displaying an integrated ECEC systems):

The evolving notion of professionalism in the ECEC sector reflects the active role of staff in developing their knowledge and skills, including through structured training, collaboration with colleagues, ownership of their professional practice and a commitment to continuous improvement. Policies can support ECEC staff in becoming lifelong learners by providing consistent pathways for skills development that are accessible to all staff, and by creating conditions for staff to embrace a professional growth mind-set. Such pathways should span across career stages and build on the alignment of initial preparation programmes, in-service training activities and opportunities for informal learning. These issues are critical to [...] ensure high-quality ECEC for children. (OECD, 2020, p. 30)

Being cognizant of the crucial role played by policy measures related to workforce professionalization and ongoing support in enhancing the quality of ECEC provision across the 0–6 system and throughout the country, the legislator devotes attention to such issue in the reform implementation act. Within the Law Decree 65, Article 1.3 explicitly states the commitment to raise the quality of educational provision through multiple measures, among which: (a) employment of university qualified personnel, (b) provision of relevant CPD programmes for early childhood educators (*educatori di nido*) and preschool teachers (*insegnanti di*

scuoladell'infanzia), (c) promotion of collective work within ECEC institutions (*lavoro collegiale*), and (d) the development of a pedagogical coordination infrastructure at regional/local level (*coordinamenti pedagogici territoriali*) (ITALY, 2017). At the present time, however, pedagogical coordinators (*coordinatori pedagogici*) are an established professional figure supporting the collegial work of educators' and teachers' teams only within municipal and private (publicly subsidised) ECEC provision (LAZZARI, 2012).¹ Law Decree 65 advocates for the introduction of such figures in state-maintained preschools as well, as their role will be crucial in sustaining the development of a coherent pedagogical approach to the education and care of children from 0 to 6 years of age along a continuum (ITALY, 2017).

The Pedagogical Guidelines recently issued by the Expert Commission on the 0–6 Integrated System under the auspice of the Ministry of Education (*Linee Pedagogiche per il Sistema Integrato Zerosei*) (ITALY, 2020) further articulate this concept by making explicit reference to the professionalism of educators and teachers:

Pedagogical planning and educational work within *nidi* and *scuola dell'infanzia* are rooted upon collegial work of practitioners' teams. The main coordinate references for educators and teachers are the child and the educational environment (*contesto*). The educational environment should be characterised by shared values, norms and understandings in order to ensure a coherent pedagogical approach, which reassures and give stability to the child, so that s/he can proactively engage in her/his process of growth. [...] Observation, documentation and evaluation practice take on great importance. These are interwoven professional tools activating practitioners' collegial reflection and allowing them to gain a deeper and shared understanding of the development processes taking place at the level of each individual child and at the level of the group of children. (BIGI, 2021, p. 17-18, our translation)

While Law Decree 65 (ITALY, 2017) and the Pedagogical Guidelines for the 0–6 Integrated System (ITALY, 2020) point towards converging elements which should characterise the professionalism of educators and teachers across 0–3 and 3–6 institutions, the fragmented landscape of ECEC provision in Italy—as well as its multilayered governance—are posing serious challenges to the implementation of such joint vision. The different historical pathways along which the professionalism of early childhood educators and preschool teachers was constructed and evolved over time could potentially generate tensions in the receptions and implementation of the above-mentioned Pedagogical Guidelines. As we will illustrate in the next paragraphs, at present educators and teachers have different professional profiles and identities, and this often generates feelings of reciprocal mistrust (BOVE; CESCATO, 2017). In this scenario, reconfiguring the professional competence profile and identity of early childhood educators and preschool teachers starting from existing initial training routes seems to be crucial if the challenges related to the implementation of the Reform are to be overcome.

The Professionalization of Early Childhood Educators: From In-Service Professional Development to a Graduate Profession

With the establishment of *asili nido* (Law 1044/1971), a specific professional figure for these services began to emerge. Initially, however, the law referred only to the employment of *qualified personnel*, without further specifying neither competences requirement or professionalization routes to access this role. Such situation created a diversification of strategies implemented for the professional development and recruitment of early childhood educators across the country. In the regions characterised by a certain sensitivity and cultural awareness

regarding the educational role of early childhood services (i.e. Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany to name the most well-known examples), staff qualification policies were oriented toward investing in systematic in-service professional development for both newly recruited staff and those previously employed in services run by *Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia* (OMNI), which were social assistance institutions with a merely custodial and hygienic function. The importance attributed to in-service learning to qualify early childhood educators is also attested by the terminology used in policy documents at the time to define such professionalization strategy, which was *formazione professionale permanente* (literally translated as *continuing professional development*) rather than *aggiornamento* (literally translated as *in service-training*). Systematic CPD was therefore considered as a powerful tool to fill the gaps between the healthcare/hygienic training received by OMNI staff and the educational expertise required for the personnel working in *asili nido*. At the same time, CPD became an essential pillar supporting educators in their daily work with children and families—both at individual and collegial level—by providing them with systematic opportunity for reflection on practice, pedagogical guidance and peer-learning (MANTOVANI, 2007). In terms of CPD contents, the need to move away from the previous healthcare and social assistance model towards an educational one has led, in first instance, to emphasise the relational dimension of early childhood educators' professionalism in relation to children and parents:

[...] educators become reference figures for children, whose role is to personalise daily care practice and routines (nappies changing, lunch, sleep), thus creating a nurturing and welcoming environment for both children and parents. This is crucial especially during transition practices, such as settling in (*inserimento*) and daily welcoming (*accoglienza*), as these build the ground for fostering an ongoing and reciprocal dialogue with families. (BONDIOLI; FERRARI, 2004, p. 15, our translation)

Subsequently, the focus of CPD shifted from the relational dimension to the cognitive and learning dimension of ECEC. In-service development initiatives became more centred on issues related to the creation of a rich educational environment—with specific reference to space arrangements, choice of materials, organisation of children's groups and proposed activities. Within this perspective, the pedagogical intentionality of educators was emphasised as key for providing children with quality educational experiences. This ongoing process of *nidi's* educational provision quality improvement has been entrusted for a long time mainly to CPD because, until the entry into force of the Law Decree 65/2017, there were no qualification requirements at university level to access the profession and most early childhood educators held a five-year secondary school diploma (BOVE; CESCATO, 2017).

This situation led to the development of high quality CPD models implemented by municipalities and social cooperatives providers. These were characterised by two methodological pillars: reflexivity and collegiality (LAZZARI; PICCHIO; MUSATTI, 2013). CPD was systematically provided within a coherent pedagogical framework – linking the theoretical dimension with the praxeological dimensions in order to address contextualised learning needs of in – service educators. For this reason CPD programmes were delivered (and still are delivered today) on a team rather than on an individual basis and often they are inspired by action-research models (BOVE et al., 2018). The reflective nature of CPD initiatives is supported by the role of pedagogical coordinators who direct, support and facilitate team's work, encouraging follow-up and pedagogical experimentation in early childhood centres thus fostering innovation and improvement of educational practices.

Even though professional preparation of early childhood educators at university level was not compulsory until 2017, it has been urged by some Italian regions so strongly that in certain cases agreements between regions and universities were stipulated for co-designing a 3-years bachelor's degree (BA) in ECEC. In most cases this process, which we could define as a local authorities' advocacy, led to the creation of two

distinct models of university training for early childhood educators. The model pursued by most of the Universities has been a 3-years BA oriented to the formation of social workers and educators through a generalist approach: university curricula, in this sense, mainly provided a generalist preparation in human sciences (pedagogy, psychology, cultural anthropology, history and philosophy), with specific insights into the themes of educational and didactic planning, but without any specific professional preparation component for early childhood educators (RESTIGLIAN, 2017). Only few universities—among which the University of Bologna and the University of Rome LUNSA (*Libera Università Maria Santissima Assunta*)—have chosen to put in place a 3-year BA purposefully designed for the professional preparation of early childhood educators. In these cases, the BA curricula is oriented to provide prospective educators with a broad knowledge of education sciences' theoretical frameworks (i.e., pedagogy, didactics, psychology, anthropology and sociology) and, subsequently, with an in-depth knowledge of methodological tools and strategies that are relevant to educational work in early childhood settings (planning, didactic and evaluation strategies, observational and reflective methodologies, play, psychomotricity, languages, sound and image education). In this pathway, particularly significant are the experiences of hands-on workshops and placements in ECEC institutions, which aim is to connect the knowledge acquired in the theoretical field with direct experience, under the supervision of qualified and experienced staff, to support the development of practical and reflective competence (BALDUZZI; PIRONI, 2017).

When Law Decree 65/2017 and subsequent regulations (Ministerial Decree 378/2018) were enacted, the qualification required to access the role of early childhood educator was identified as a 3-year BA in educational sciences, comprising one-year binding programme dedicated to the acquisition of ECEC-specific pedagogical knowledge and didactic competence. The standard defines, albeit in general terms, the content areas within which such knowledge and competence unfolds, namely: early childhood pedagogy, history of pedagogy, didactics, planning and evaluation, developmental psychology, hygiene and special need education. In addition to these, hands-on workshops, and placement in early childhood settings² are made compulsory. In the implementation of the ministerial directives, many universities made an effort to find points of convergence—at organisational level—between the BA degree for early childhood educators and the master degree (MA) for teachers (see following section for more details). Within such model, lectures and workshop activities are conceived within linked modules (i.e., 48 hours of lectures combined with 8 hours of workshop), thus interpreting the function of workshop as a space for application of theoretical contents learnt during lectures rather than as a context of active experimentation, co-construction and students' collegial reflection.

Although the introduction of university qualification requirements for early childhood educators represents a clear step forward, the decision to devote only one year of the BA curriculum to the specific contents related to ECEC does not yet seem sufficient for the full qualification of these professional figures during initial training. In fact, important core contents related to pedagogical work with children and families in contemporary ECEC settings—such as parents' engagement, intercultural education and multilingualism—are not sufficiently covered by the university curriculum. Moreover, a narrow interpretation of hands-on workshops as sites for application of taught contents entails the risk of transforming these experiences from possible moments of action and reflection within students' groups into merely uncritical applications of knowledge and tools acquired during lectures, thus widening the gap between newly recruited and experienced staff professional mindsets.

The Professionalization of Preschool Teachers: a Contentious Debate

In stark contrast with the process of gradual recognition of early childhood educators' professional role—which was accompanied by a progressive acknowledgement of their professional development needs

paving the way toward initial education programmes being carried out at university level—the historical pathway characterising the professional recognition of preschool teachers’ role appeared to be more linear. As *scuola dell’infanzia* was considered part of the Italian education system—with its own curriculum—since the inception, the professionalism of preschool teachers was explicitly recognised and qualification requirements set at national level within the law instituting state-maintained preschool. Within Law 444/1968 initial training requirements for preschool teachers were set at vocational level (4-year secondary school diploma). Starting from 1998, teachers working in both pre- and primary school settings were required to hold a four-year Degree in Primary Education Sciences (*Scienze della Formazione Primaria* – SFP) conferring them a qualified teacher status. The degree was structured in two-year cycles as follows:

- The first two-year-cycle was built upon a broad curriculum focusing on humanistic subjects (pedagogy, psychology, sociology, anthropology) for the common preparation of pre- and primary school teachers;
- The second two-year-cycle was built upon a specialised curriculum focused on early childhood pedagogy and learning (literacy, numeracy, natural sciences, art, music, play and movement) or, alternatively, on primary school education (subject knowledge combined with didactic methodologies).

The flexible combination of the two-year pathways within the degree was designed to encourage educational continuity between pre- and primary school settings through the promotion of a transdisciplinary approach for the professional preparation of teachers. The aims of the course were to equip teachers with interpretative tools allowing them to make sense of educational problems and to be responsive toward children’s needs and potentialities along the continuum of their development. Within such program, teachers’ professionalism was conceptualised more as the acquisition of a reflective stance on educational practices rather than as the ability to apply predetermined or subject-specific didactic procedures (NIGRIS, 2007). In this sense, research studies conducted within those universities where the SFP degree was implemented since 1999, underline the central role played by specific activities—such as placement (*tirocinio*) and workshops (*laboratori*)—for the competence development of future teachers (GALLIANI; FELISATTI, 2001; 2005; SUPERVISORI DI BOLOGNA E MODENA-REGGIO EMILIA, 2006). In particular, the strength of workshop devices has been identified in bridging theory (university lectures) to practice (placement experience in schools) by promoting an alternative approach to the construction of knowledge through the active involvement of students in project work activities.

After a decade, a governmental committee was nominated by the Ministry of Education in order to reform teachers’ professional preparation programmes within the scope of the broader University Reform initiative taking place at European level, the so called ‘Bologna Process’ (EUROPEAN EDUCATION AND CULTURE EXECUTIVE AGENCY, 2020). In the years preceding the enactment of the reform (ITALY, 2010), two opposed positions emerged. The first position proposed to combine a three-year BA for preschool teachers with a two-year MA for primary school teachers, underpinning the idea that teaching in compulsory school would entail a higher level of professional specialisation due to the subject-oriented curriculum. The second position argued for a five-year unified degree course—instead of a combined BA and MA degree—drawing upon the same university curricula for both preschool and primary school teachers, underpinning the idea of teaching as a high-level graduate profession. Such policy debate arose highly contentious issues, ranging from the understanding of teachers’ professional role (generic vs. specific professionalism) to the curriculum orientation adopted for initial professional preparation (broad pedagogical core vs. subject-oriented approach). Remarkably, the outcomes of the cultural and political debate on teachers’ professionalism and professional preparation favoured the choice of a specific professionalism strongly connoted by a subject-oriented curriculum over the more balanced combination of broad pedagogical core and subject-specific approaches characterising the four-years pathway previously described (CAPPÀ, NICEFORO, PALOMBA, 2013; LAZZARI, PICCHIO, BALDUZZI, 2015). As reported in Ministerial Decree 249/2010, reforming SFP university degree:

[Over the five-years course the students] have to acquire a sound knowledge in the subject-related area of their teaching and the ability to transfer such knowledge in relation to the school level, to the age and to the culture of the pupils. [. . .] Since the beginning of the course the knowledge acquired by future teachers in each subject area has to be strongly linked to teachers' ability in managing the classroom and in planning educational and didactic pathways. (ITALY, 2010; p. 17-18, our translation)

As attested by the excerpt above, educational competences of pre- and primary school teachers are now viewed as merely instrumental to subject-directed teaching activities rather than being inscribed in a broader pedagogical framework assuming teachers' reflectivity at its core. In this sense, the profile outlined within the National Regulations for Teacher's Initial Preparation (ITALY, 2010) marks a radical shift in the understanding of pre-school teachers' role and professionalism—which appears to be totally assimilated to those of primary school teachers—thus increasing the risk of *schoolification* and widening the gap between professionals working across 0–3 and 3–6 institutions. This trend appears even more worrisome if the landscape of state-maintained preschool teachers' in-service professional development is considered. Whereas CPD in municipal and private (publicly subsidised) *nidi* is compulsory and foreseen within educators' employment contracts, in state-maintained *scuola dell'infanzia* CPD is only mildly encouraged, as no binding requirements are in place within preschool teachers' contracts nor systematic in-service training opportunities are made available to them within their institutions.

Overcoming the Split in Workforce Professionalization: Challenges and Ways Forward to the Implementation of an Integrated ECEC System

From the analysis of trends and developments related to professionalization policies examined in this article, it emerges that certain elements connected to the training pathways of early childhood educators and teachers are posing serious threats the full implementation of the Reform on the Integrated ECEC System in Italy.

Historically educators and teachers' professionalization pathways developed along divergent routes (consistent investments in CPD for 0–3 professionals vs investment in initial preparation at university level for 3–6 professionals) and context-dependent initiatives (localised CPD initiatives run by municipal and private providers vs centralised curriculum for SFP university degree). Such fragmented landscape in professionalization pathways lead to significant differences in the way professional profiles and identities of educators and teachers were constructed over time, generating and feelings of reciprocal mistrust between 0–3 and 3–6 professionals.

As of today, the structure and content of initial training routes for educators (BA with a generalist approach) and teachers (MA with a strong subject-oriented focus) seems to widen the gap between 0–3 and 3–6 professional profiles. This is in stark contrast with the strategic objectives of the Integrated ECEC System reform, which are pointing toward convergence in pedagogical approaches and in the professional reflective stance adopted by practitioners working across the two segments of the 0–6 sector. Moreover, a worrying tendency towards *schoolification* of early childhood pedagogy could be detected in the way bridging curricular activities—such as workshops and placement—are designed within BA and MA degrees, giving prominence to application of taught knowledge rather than to students' collective reflection and knowledge co-construction. This also signals a significant mismatch between the competence profile underlying initial professional preparation programmes and the competence profile underlying the conceptualisation of professionalism within the integrated curricular framework recently issued as part of the Reform (*Linee pedagogiche per il sistema integrato zerosei*).

Finally, a two-folded gap could be detected in relation to CPD: a systemic gap in availability and uptake (participation to in-service professional development programmes is compulsory for early childhood educators while it is left at individual discretion for preschool teachers) and a gap related to the pedagogical framing of core content and delivery methodologies in the light of the changes introduced by the Reform (currently joint CPD initiatives connecting professionals working across the 0–3 and 3–6 sectors, as well as across different providers, are extremely rare).

In this scenario, reconfiguring the professional competence profile and identity of early childhood educators and preschool teachers starting from existing initial training routes seems to be crucial if the challenges related to the implementation of the Reform are to be addressed. In conclusion of this article, we argue that certain steps could be undertaken in this direction.

In first instance, reflexivity could become the pillar sustaining the design of initial professional preparation as well as in-service development initiatives around a strong pedagogical and methodological core. This would induce not only greater coherency between initial and in-service professionalization routes, but also greater alignment between the competence profiles underlying initial education programmes and professional competence profiles in the workplace, thus increasing the quality of pedagogical practices enacted across the whole span of the 0–6 provision (ET2020 Working Group on ECEC, 2021).

Secondly, more consistent investment should be made at systemic level to increase state-maintained preschool teachers' participation in CPD by taking advantage of governmental funding allocated to regional authorities for the experimentation of joint in-service training initiatives involving both 0-3 and 3-6 professionals.³ In this sense, the policy framework outlined by the Reform on the Integrated ECE System can significantly support ECEC staff in becoming lifelong learners by providing consistent pathways for enhancing their reflective competence and by creating the conditions for them to embrace a professional growth mindset (OECD, 2020).

Finally, the deep fracture—in terms of curriculum design and delivery—currently existing between the BA for early childhood educators and the MA for preschool teachers should be narrowed by leveraging on elements that are supportive of educational and methodological continuity across 0–3 and 3–6 services. The debate in Italy on this issue is particularly lively. On one side, some experts argue that preschool education should be removed from the sphere of influence of compulsory schooling. In line with this perspective “a unified ECEC university degree leading to a qualification which allows graduates to work on the entire 0-6 segment” is seen as more desirable than a split degree to support continuity of pedagogical approaches and educational practice across *nido* and *scuola dell'infanzia* (BALDUZZI; FARNÉ, 2018, p. 83). Other positions, on the other hand, see in this choice a more worrying break with the compulsory education sector that would once again relegate preschools to a marginal role compared to primary school, to the detriment also of the processes of vertical continuity that have been painstakingly achieved over the last decades (BALDUZZI; RESTIGLIAN; ZANINELLI, 2021). In this context, the area in which experimentation could be more feasible on the short-medium term—while waiting for possible further reforms of the initial professional preparation system—involves the curricular activities that could be transversally shared across to the two university programmes, the BA for early childhood educators and the MA for teacher. These might refer to the teaching of common core subjects (i.e., early childhood pedagogy, family pedagogy, intercultural pedagogy) and, above all, to the implementation of joint workshop activities where students from both courses can engage in discussion and reflection on placement experiences with the facilitation of an experienced academic tutor. In this sense, the latter activities could serve as a *bridge* to connect the placement experience of students across the two degrees by centring collegial reflection on shared topics—such as for example observation, documentation, educational continuity—thus nurturing the co-construction of a common pedagogical ground and educational knowledge cross-fertilisation.

Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization: Lazzari A and Balduzzi L; **Methodology:** Lazzari A and Balduzzi L; **Investigation:** Lazzari A and Balduzzi L; **Writing – First version:** Lazzari A and Balduzzi L; **Writing – Review & Editing:** Lazzari A.

Data Availability Statement

All research data has been analysed in this article.

Funding

Erasmus+KA3 - INTRANS
Grant No: 612133-EPP-1-2019-1-BE-EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Notes

1. Pedagogical coordinators are generally university qualified professionals with educational and management responsibilities, whose role is to sustain, monitor and improve the quality of ECEC services under their responsibility by enhancing collective reflectivity within practitioners' teams. They are usually responsible for a limited number of 0-3 and/or 3-6 centres, according to regional and local regulations.
2. Despite the substantial time allocated to students' placement within the BA (250 h), it is noteworthy that only 50% of them are currently a binding requirement for obtaining the degree, with the risk that slightly over a hundred of hours of students' direct activities in 0-3 settings are considered sufficient to achieve the formative goals attributed to this important experience.
3. Cfr. Piano di azione nazionale pluriennale funded by the Ministry of Education for the implementation of the Reform on the integrated system: www.istruzione.it/sistema-integrato-06/piano-di-azione.html

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Received: 17 Sept. 2021

Approved: 25 Mar. 2022

Associated Editors:

Alessandra Arce Hai e Juan Manuel Sánchez