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A Low-Threshold Non-Formal Educational Context as a Bridge to Early Childhood Education and Care: An Exploratory Qualitative Study

Un contesto educativo non formale a bassa soglia come ponte verso i servizi educativi per la prima infanzia: uno studio qualitativo esplorativo

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Abstract
This exploratory qualitative study investigates how non-formal educational contexts mediate access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services for families with a migratory background. The study is situated within research on inequalities in access to ECEC services, considering institutional, administrative, economic, linguistic, cultural and relational barriers.
The theoretical framework integrates Bronfenbrenner's ecological-systemic perspective, Rogoff's sociocultural approach and intercultural family-service alliances. Adopting an idiographic design with a longitudinal perspective, the study draws on participant observations and in-depth interviews with four Arabic-speaking mothers conducted across 2025 and 2026. Within this broader research design, the present paper focuses specifically on how mothers, after the participatory settling-in experience at *L'ABC*, narrate their subsequent trajectories towards formal ECEC services and articulate situated forms of maternal agency. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.
In line with this focus, the findings show that non-formal spaces enhance cultural accessibility, trust and peer networks through linguistic-cultural mediation, though structural barriers persist. Based on this empirical evidence, the study proposes an empirically grounded model of "low-threshold pedagogical mediation" that illustrates how non-formal educational contexts can complement formal ECEC services by fostering educational continuity, inclusive participation and inter-institutional collaboration.

Keywords: Inclusive ECEC; Maternal agency; Participatory settling-in; Families with a migratory background.

Riassunto
Il presente studio esplorativo di stampo qualitativo indaga in che modo i contesti educativi non formali possano mediare l'accesso delle famiglie con background migratorio ai servizi di educazione e cura della prima infanzia (ECEC), contribuendo a contrastare barriere linguistiche, culturali e relazionali. Condotta presso *L'ABC del Quartiere* a Milano, la ricerca esamina come uno spazio educativo a bassa soglia possa sostenere forme situate di agency materna nelle transizioni verso i servizi formali. Il quadro teorico integra la prospettiva ecologico-sistemica di Bronfenbrenner, l'approccio socioculturale di Rogoff e il tema delle alleanze interculturali tra famiglie e servizi. Lo studio adotta un disegno idiografico con una prospettiva longitudinale e si basa su osservazioni partecipanti e interviste in profondità a quattro madri arabofone, condotte nel 2025 e nel 2026. L'analisi si concentra sulle traiettorie di avvicinamento ai servizi ECEC formali dopo l'esperienza di ambientamento partecipato presso *L'ABC*, con particolare attenzione alle forme situate di agency materna che emergono dai racconti delle partecipanti. I dati sono stati analizzati mediante analisi tematica riflessiva. I risultati mostrano che il contesto non formale favorisce l'accessibilità culturale, la costruzione di fiducia e le reti tra pari attraverso la mediazione linguistico-culturale, pur nel permanere di barriere strutturali. Lo studio propone un modello interpretativo di «mediazione pedagogica a bassa soglia», empiricamente fondato, che illustra come i contesti educativi non formali possano affiancare i servizi ECEC formali, sostenendo la continuità educativa, la partecipazione inclusiva e la collaborazione interistituzionale.

Parole chiave: Inclusione nei servizi ECEC; Agency materna; Ambientamento partecipato; Famiglie con background migratorio.

Credit author statement

The author is responsible for the conceptualisation, data collection, analysis, and writing of the manuscript.

1. Introduction

Within international policy and legal frameworks, access to high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services is now widely recognised as a universal right. It is considered essential for supporting children's well-being, promoting cognitive, emotional, socio-relational and linguistic development and fostering social inclusion (Autorità garante per l'infanzia e l'adolescenza, 2022; Council of the European Union, 2021; European Commission, 2017; United Nations, 1989, 2015). A broad body of policy documents, recommendations and research studies affirms the collective responsibility to ensure educational conditions that support high-quality developmental trajectories from early childhood onwards, especially for vulnerable and socioeconomically disadvantaged families (Caselli, 2022; European Commission, 2024; Heckman, 2004, 2013; Schmutz, 2024). Access to high-quality ECEC is desirable for all children, but it is particularly relevant for those whose early opportunities are shaped by disadvantage, given its role in interrupting the intergenerational cycle of poverty and reducing initial inequalities (Alleanza per l'Infanzia & EducAzioni, 2020; Council of the European Union, 2022; European Commission, 2024; Infantino, 2021; Save the Children Italia, 2019; Vandenbroeck, 2010). Persistent disparities in access to and use of ECEC services are documented by international research and policy reports (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2025), which continue to stress the need to guarantee access for children from socio-culturally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Council of the European Union, 2019, 2021, 2022; European Commission, 2013, 2017, 2024). In Europe, families with a migrant background are among those who access ECEC services less frequently, often because socioeconomic and cultural vulnerabilities overlap (OECD, 2025). The document *Proposal for Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* (European Commission, 2014, 2018) emphasises the universal right to services for children aged 0-6 and develops principles and guidelines. Accessibility remains a key aspect of quality ECEC services to ensure greater equity and social inclusion, particularly for multiethnic, multilingual and socioeconomically disadvantaged families. Accessibility extends beyond affordability, encompassing cultural and linguistic inclusion, flexible service hours and territorial proximity (Lazzari, 2016; Mesa, 2023; Save the Children Italia, 2024). In Italy, these policy directions are reflected in laws and national documents since Law 107/2015 and Legislative Decree 65/2017, which define implementation criteria and establish the Integrated System 0-6, recognising children's right to quality education from early childhood, although attendance remains non-mandatory (Legge n. 107/2015; Decreto legislativo n. 65/2017; Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, 2012, 2018; Decreto ministeriale n. 334/2021; Decreto ministeriale n. 43/2022). Yet inter-institutional governance remains particularly complex and uneven. Access to 0-3 services is still highly fragmented and remains below the 45% target for children under three set by the updated Barcelona targets (Council of the European Union, 2022); for children aged three to the start of compulsory primary education, by contrast, participation rates are substantially higher, although the European target of 96% has not yet been reached and marked territorial inequalities persist (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2025). This gap particularly affects migrant families: more than one in three live in absolute poverty (35.6%), compared with 6.4% of Italian families, limiting their access to early education services (Caritas Italiana & Fondazione Migrantes, 2023; ISTAT, 2024). Specifically, in the 2023/2024 educational year, the participation rate of foreign children in nursery services was 14.7%, compared with 33.1% for Italian children, less than half the rate recorded for Italian children in the same age group (ISTAT et al., 2026).

The Eurydice 2025 report shows that only 19 out of 39 education systems have adopted specific policies to support ECEC access for children with a migrant background, and Italy is not among them. Italy has also yet to implement concrete measures such as specialised staff, linguistic mediation or flexible enrolment policies (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2025).

2. Theoretical Background

In an increasingly complex and heterogeneous world, cultural, social, political, economic and institutional dimensions are deeply interconnected and must be considered through an interdisciplinary lens when analysing educational contexts (Morin, 2017). The theoretical framework adopted in this study draws on

holistic, ecological and socio-constructivist perspectives, which acknowledge that individuals and their development are socio-culturally situated and embedded within multiple, interrelated systems that influence one another reciprocally and retroactively (Bateson, 1972/1976; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). An ecological approach allows child development and family participation to be understood as processes situated within historically, socially and culturally specific and interdependent systems. Families, educational services, housing contexts, institutions and social policies are produced and transformed through reciprocal interaction (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). From this perspective, access to ECEC services can be read as a non-linear intersection of barriers experienced by families with a migrant background. These barriers do not concern enrolment alone; they also involve institutional languages, administrative criteria, economic resources, representations of childhood, trust in services and the possibility for parents to recognise themselves as legitimate interlocutors.

Educational practices incorporate and reflect understandings of childhood, care and the role of adults that may take on different meanings across family and institutional contexts (Rogoff, 2003/2004). Development occurs through guided participation in shared sociocultural practices, in a learning process that actively involves both children and adults within their specific cultural contexts (Rogoff, 1990, 2003/2004; Wertsch, 1991). While care, development and learning are biologically universal themes, the practices and meanings attached to them are historically and culturally variable (LeVine & New, 2009; Rogoff, 2003/2004). It is therefore essential to interpret behaviours in relation to the systems of meaning and perspectives of the actors involved. When a family enters into a relationship with an ECEC service, the family niche, understood as a specific cultural system of belonging, meets an educational context organised around its own times, norms and implicit pedagogical assumptions. This encounter may generate continuity, discontinuity, negotiation and misunderstanding, making transition a particularly significant pedagogical passage (Super & Harkness, 1986).

In contexts marked by migration, nursery provision is often the first educational and institutional service that families encounter. It therefore becomes a privileged space for observing the conditions that make transition more or less inclusive.

Inclusive transitions draw attention to how ECEC services welcome vulnerable families and/or families with a migrant background. They bring into focus both the institutional and cultural conditions that make access possible and the practices of recognition, involvement and participation within services, in connection with questions of social justice and the unequal distribution of educational opportunities (Bove & Sharmahd, 2020; OECD, 2020; Peleman et al., 2020). The relationship between family and service is a crucial node in the quality of the educational experience (Bove, 2022). If transitions between educational systems and families are central to the construction of educational quality, Epstein's model of *Overlapping Spheres of Influence* allows the relationship between families and ECEC services to be read as a relationship between distinct but potentially interconnected spheres (Epstein, 2011). Such overlap depends on institutional, organisational and relational choices. The ways in which the relationship is proposed and enacted may support inclusion or, conversely, reinforce inequalities, especially for families with a migrant background. Reading family-service relationships through this lens helps make visible the tensions, asymmetries and possibilities embedded in educational relationships, opening up pedagogical reflection not only on the quality of relationships and transitions but also on the conditions that enable or hinder effective and recognised participation by different actors. For this reason, the concepts of accessibility and inclusion that guide the research design are understood as multidimensional constructs and processes. Accessibility refers not only to the possibility of formally entering services, but also to knowing them, understanding their logics, trusting them, choosing them and participating in them. Inclusion is not treated as a natural consequence of access, but as a situated capacity for action that is constructed together with the service.

3. Research Context: San Siro and *L'ABC del Quartiere*

The NIL 57/San Siro area, and particularly the area around Piazza Selinunte, is one of Milan's most densely populated neighbourhoods and has a strong presence of residents with a migrant background (Comune di Milano, 2026) (Tab.1).

Dimension	Indicator	Value	Note
Resident population	Total inhabitants	25,691	NIL 57 – San Siro
0–3 age group	Total children	499	
0–3 age group	Italian children	307	
0–3 age group	Foreign children	192	38.5% of the age group
3–6 age group	Total children	582	
3–6 age group	Italian children	314	
3–6 age group	Foreign children	268	46.0% of the age group

(Source: Comune di Milano, 2026; population data as of 31 December 2025)
Tab. 1: Resident population and presence of foreign citizens in NIL 57 - San Siro

The neighbourhood includes more than 85 nationalities and is characterised by the historical rootedness of specific foreign communities. The Egyptian community is by far the largest, accounting for approximately 37.2% of all foreign residents in the neighbourhood, followed by the Moroccan community, which accounts for approximately 10.4% of the foreign population (Politecnico di Milano - DAStU, 2021). San Siro is described as a multicultural, multi-problematic, peripheral and ghettoised context (Grassi, 2022), marked by housing, social and educational fragility (Cognetti, 2015). The neighbourhood includes one of the largest public housing areas in Milan and is characterised by processes of social and school segregation (Cordini & Ranci, 2025).

At the same time, San Siro has a dense network of associations, schools and third-sector organisations that support children, families and local communities (Zecca et al., 2024). Among these initiatives, *L'ABC del Quartiere*, promoted by the University of Milano-Bicocca, is a non-formal low-threshold multifunctional educational centre and a permanent laboratory for research, training and intervention. It has been developed through Community Service-Learning practices, interprofessional collaboration and participatory design (Zecca, 2024). Activated in the 2020/2021 academic year through the BiUniCrowd programme, the University of Milano-Bicocca's crowdfunding initiative, co-funded by Fondazione di Comunità Milano and part of MUSA1, Spoke 6-3.1.3 – a broader strategy focused on "Combating and Preventing School Dropout in Disadvantaged Urban Neighborhoods" – *L'ABC* is directed scientifically by Professor Zecca and aims to prevent and combat school dropout starting from assumptions of social cohesion and urban sustainability.

The centre welcomes approximately one hundred participants each week, including children and adults, predominantly Egyptian families with a migrant background. It is organised into interconnected areas: the Play Space for children aged 0-6, the Study and Literacy Space for children aged 7-13 and an Italian language course for mothers. Between 2024 and 2026, 28 family units were enrolled, with 26 mothers attending at least once the activities dedicated to them. There were 64 children overall; of these, 38 attended the Study and Literacy Space, while 30 participated in the Play Space. The interdisciplinary team at *L'ABC* includes 37 operational figures, including a linguistic-cultural mediator, professional educators, university faculty, master's and doctoral students, pedagogists, volunteers and upper-secondary school students. *L'ABC* operates in an intermediate position between institutions, socio-educational services, families and the local territory. It can be understood as an experimental educational model that seeks to bridge institutional gaps by fostering co-designed educational alliances with schools, families and local stakeholders. More specifically, the 0-6 Play Space – in the experience of settling-in and beyond – can be read in relation to *Tempo per le Famiglie* services: places «characterised by accessibility, informality and, at the same time, the presence of rules for use; educational services that perform a function of community building» (Musatti & Picchio, 2005, p. 68). This occurs through a "weak educational orientation", which does not prescribe models but offers, through concrete ways of being and doing with children, «a possible example of constructive relationality» (Mantovani et al., 1999, p. 18). The present article offers an initial analytical account of selected findings from follow-up interviews with Arabic-speaking mothers concerning their first relationships with, and access to, formal 0-3 ECEC/nursery services. It asks how, and to what extent, *L'ABC del Quartiere* may support or mediate access to ECEC services and sustain forms of maternal agency among families with a migrant background. The research is positioned within a field of inquiry that holds together

possibilities and ambivalences, mediation practices and structural inequalities, recognising the non-formal educational experience as a possible site for observing and constructing more accessible, participatory and dialogical conditions.

4. Research Design and Methodology

This exploratory qualitative research addresses accessibility and inclusiveness in ECEC services for families with a migrant background through an intrinsic case study of *L'ABC del Quartiere* (Bassey, 1999; Mortari, 2007; Yin, 2009). The case study allows for an in-depth investigation of a phenomenon within its real-life context and is well suited to exploring the interplay of educational, institutional and socioeconomic factors (Merriam, 1998). Its qualitative nature reflects an idiographic orientation, emphasising participants' subjective experiences and context-specific dynamics (Stake, 2008). The qualitative approach adopted is situated within an interpretive framework aimed at «making sense of, or interpreting, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them» (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). Through an inductive, idiographic design anchored at the micro-level, this study examines broader educational dynamics (Demetrio, 2020).

The study asks two main questions: first, whether and how the non-formal, low-threshold educational service *L'ABC del Quartiere* contributes to accessibility, inclusion and continuity in 0-6 educational pathways. Second, whether and how forms of participation and co-educational practices involving migrant families, educators, institutional actors and third-sector organizations contribute to building inclusive educational alliances and in what ways these alliances may influence access to and continuity in ECEC services.

4.1 Participants

The participants in the study are four Egyptian mothers with a migrant background who had taken part, with their children aged 0-3, in a settling-in experience at *L'ABC* between 2024 and 2026, and who were able to reconstruct the meaning of that experience in relation to actual or problematised access to formal ECEC services (Tab.2).

The group is internally coherent with respect to the topic under investigation: the mothers all have older children, none of whom had attended nursery, and they experienced *L'ABC* as their first non-formal educational space of co-presence with their younger children. The setting was characterised by linguistic-cultural mediation, gradual participation and direct observation of educational practices. At the same time, their subsequent trajectories are not uniform. Some mothers initiated or consolidated access to nursery or to a spring section; others maintained a more ambivalent position regarding early attendance of formal ECEC services. This internal heterogeneity is analytically relevant because it allows the role of *L'ABC* to be explored without assuming a linear relationship between participation in the non-formal context and access to nursery.

Code	Mother's profile	Children and 0–3/ECEC pathway
M1	Born in Egypt in 1990. Married in 2012. Arrived in Italy in 2014.	Four children, including three older children. Youngest child: 23 months at settling-in at *L'ABC*. Enrolled in a spring section during the 2025/2026 educational year, following a period on the nursery waiting list.
M2	Born in Egypt in 1990. Married in 2011. Arrived in Italy in 2013.	Four children, including three older children. Youngest child: 15 months at settling-in at *L'ABC*. Enrolled in nursery during the 2025/2026 educational year.
M3	Born in Egypt in 1996. Married in 2015. Arrived in Italy in 2020.	Three children, including two older children. Youngest child: 15 months at settling-in at *L'ABC*. Enrolled in nursery during the 2025/2026 educational year.
M4	Born in Egypt in 1997. Married in 2016. Arrived in Italy in 2019.	Four children, including three older children. Youngest child: 18 months at settling-in at *L'ABC*. Began attending *L'ABC* in October 2025. Not enrolled in nursery.

Tab. 2: Profile of participating mothers and children

4.2 Data Collection Instruments and Analytical Methodology

Data were collected through a range of qualitative instruments, consistent with the exploratory and idiographic nature of the study. Participant observations and in-depth semi-structured interviews were used. Participant observations were conducted during meetings in the Play Space between 2024 and 2026, with particular attention to the settling-in processes of children aged 0-3 and to mothers' co-presence in the educational space. Observation focused on interactions among children, mothers, educators, pedagogists, students and the linguistic-cultural mediator; modes of entry and separation; participation in routines; verbal and non-verbal communication; and situations in which mediation, negotiation or mutual recognition emerged. In line with qualitative research, observation was understood as a situated practice of knowledge, oriented toward understanding the meanings that actors attribute to their actions and relationships (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with four mothers whose children had experienced a participatory settling-in process at *L'ABC*. The present analysis draws on interviews conducted in 2026 with four mothers, three of whom had also been interviewed in 2025. Of the four children, two had entered nursery, one had entered a spring section, and the fourth had not enrolled in formal ECEC services. The fourth mother began attending *L'ABC* in October 2025.

The interviews explored the children's educational histories, the modes of enrolment or non-access to formal services, relationships with educators and teachers, linguistic-cultural mediation practices, perceived transformations in children and mothers, and the experience of *L'ABC* in comparison with formal ECEC services. The interview guide included common thematic areas while leaving space for participants' narratives and for the exploration of unexpected aspects, in line with the logic of the qualitative semi-structured interview (Lumbelli, 1998; Mantovani, 2006). Before the interviews, all four mothers were informed about the purpose of the research, the audio recording of the interviews and the use of the collected material for research purposes. Oral informed consent was obtained from each participant. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were audio-recorded. During the interviews, a linguistic-cultural mediator provided oral translation from Arabic into Italian. The researcher transcribed the mediator's Italian translations of the mothers' accounts. The excerpts presented in this article were subsequently translated from Italian into English. Participants are identified using codes (M1-M4), and potentially identifying personal details have been removed from the participant table and quotations.

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The analysis was conducted by the author through an iterative process of coding and theme development, identifying recurring patterns of meaning, differences and ambivalences across mothers' accounts, including the case of non-enrolment in nursery. No formal analytical discussions with other researchers were undertaken.

5. Results

The analysis of the four interviews led to the identification of significant categories that provide an in-depth understanding of mothers' reflections, perceptions and experiences in relation to ECEC services. The main results are presented below in terms of themes, labels and related units of meaning emerging from the thematic analysis of the documentation (Tab.3). Two aspects are then discussed in greater depth: *L'ABC* as a space of transition and accompaniment in access to ECEC services, and the emergence of situated forms of maternal educational agency in the relationship with services. Attention was paid both to recurrent patterns and to ambivalent cases, in which a positive experience in the non-formal context does not necessarily lead to a direct transition to nursery. This methodological choice made it possible to consider maternal agency as a situated, relational and non-uniform process, expressed through decisions about access, forms of trust and negotiation practices, but also through cautious or critical positions regarding early attendance of formal services.

5.1 *L'ABC* as a Bridge Space and a Space of Familiarisation with the 0-3 Educational Experience

Mothers describe the experience in the *L'ABC* as an opportunity for gradual familiarisation with structured educational practices: observing routines, adult-child relationships, modes of welcome, the management of separation and shared rules. The interviews highlight the pedagogical role of co-presence contexts in supporting families' social participation, their first encounters with public services, exchanges with other parents and familiarity with different educational practices (Musatti & Picchio, 2005). *«After starting here in the TF space, I thought about enrolling him (in nursery)»* (M2): the decision to access the service appears as the outcome of a pathway in which the mother observes the child in a non-domestic context and begins to recognise the possibility that he can stay with other adults and other children. *L'ABC* offers a context in which the mother can reinterpret what the child is able to do in relation with others, from a perspective in which development and learning occur through participation in socially and culturally organised practices (Rogoff, 1990, 2003/2004).

This shift in the mother's view of the child also emerges in M3's account: *«It was useful because he also got used to people; before, he was attached, he was attached to me, now he goes to others, still timidly, but he wants to be held by [an educator]»* (M3). The mother describes a gradual move from an almost exclusive relationship toward an initial opening to other significant adults, experienced as an expansion of the child's relational possibilities.

Macro-categories	Synthetic sub-categories	Interview excerpts
1. Formal, bureaucratic and administrative accessibility to ECEC services	Enrolment or non-access to formal services; knowledge of service functioning; waiting lists; linguistic and bureaucratic barriers.	«I enrolled her in nursery; she remained on the waiting list for a year and could not go, and she was accepted into preschool at age three» (M1)
2. Decision-making, cultural and educational accessibility to ECEC services	Possibility of choosing and attributing educational value to nursery; family needs, socialisation, trust, maternal representations of timing and child readiness.	«Before, he was very attached, he was afraid of people, he did not want to leave me. I did not have space, so I thought about enrolling him, so that I could do what I needed to do and he could also start getting used to people and being among other children» (M2)
3. ABC as a bridge and familiarisation space	Preparation for settling-in; observation of educational practices; accompaniment toward nursery; familiarisation with adults, spaces, routines and rules.	«After starting here in the TF space, I thought about enrolling him (in nursery)» (M2)
4. Inclusiveness as trust, graduality and participation in ECEC service	Participation in routines; dialogue with educators; recognition of mothers' educational role; active involvement and co-education.	«At first I was afraid, but I saw that everything was going well» (M3)
5. Maternal educational agency in the relationship with the ECEC service	Negotiation and educational choice. The mother as an active interlocutor, expert on her child.	«I was the one who told the educator that I did not accept her putting the diaper back on. And they said: okay, let's try» (M1)
6. Transfer and continuity of practices between service and home	Continuity between *L'ABC*, nursery and the family context. Routines, rules, autonomy and educational languages recognised and taken up across different contexts.	«What he learns at nursery he also transfers home» (M3)
7. Recognition of the child's acquired competencies	Socialisation, relationships with other adults, autonomy, adaptation to educational contexts, rules, language and play.	«Before she did not listen. Now she thinks and reasons and says, okay, listen to me» (M1)
8. Linguistic-cultural mediation and communicative accessibility	Linguistic-cultural mediation as support for access.	«I am going to [the linguistic-cultural mediator] today so she can explain, and so she can explain to me what I have to do» (M4)
9. Community agency and informal networks	Informal advocacy and circulation of information; mothers as resources and points of orientation for other families.	«Now I am talking to the other mother about going to enrol her child too» (M2)
10. Criticalities, ambivalences and negative cases	Fears about nursery, criteria of readiness, economic and communicative barriers, low perceived quality of services.	«I do not like the idea of nursery. She is not autonomous yet, she does not sleep alone, she cannot eat well; she will go to preschool when she is ready to be autonomous» (M4)

Tab. 3: Thematic mapping

The child learns by participating, and the mother learns by observing the child's participation and by revising her expectations about the child's social competencies. *L'ABC* is also recognised as an experience that precedes entry into preschool: «*The similarity is that here we welcome the children, and all of you educators, younger and older, welcome the children well until they get used to it, like the good teacher who welcomes the children and receives them. This is also an example: the children come in, leave their mothers and go directly to those who are with them. And this gives security, because if you did not have a good and proper method with the children, they would never have had this relationship…Because she began here, I say she began, she did the settling-in here before going to preschool*» (M1). The mother identifies welcome, relational quality and the educators' method as the elements that make the child's sense of security possible. Transition thus appears as a process built through continuity of practices and meanings, and settling-in becomes a «gradual process through which families approach educational institutions» (Bove, 2022, p. 37). In M1's account, this gradual process involves not only the child but also the mother, who progressively becomes familiar with different ways of understanding care, separation, play, rules and the role of educators. The experience of *L'ABC* anticipates, in a less binding and more flexible form, some elements that will later be encountered in the formal service.

The relationship between *L'ABC* and nursery is described as reciprocal: «*It was a reciprocal thing: first he used to come here, but at the beginning he cried too, he was still little and then he went to nursery and understood that at nursery he greeted the teachers, and then he came here afterwards and stayed willingly. It is reciprocal: here helped and there helped him understand that it is something temporary, an exchange, to reason that the two are connected*» (M2). The mother interprets the two environments as mutually reinforcing. *L'ABC* and nursery, "connected" in the maternal account, construct - from an ecological perspective - a mesosystemic continuity that helps the child understand the temporary nature of separation, the mother's return and the stability of the educational relationship.

Continuity between practices is even clearer when M3 observes that the child finds at nursery what he had already experienced at *L'ABC*: «*The discipline he learned here, that there is a time to play, a time to eat… We have to tidy up the toys; what he learned here, he found there in the same way*» (M3). Here, "discipline" refers to the legibility of the context: times, sequences, rituals and rules help the child orient himself. Continuity concerns not only routines, but also the communicative and relational style of adults. M2 states: «*I noticed that here they have a lot of patience and can communicate with the children; they have the same approach. Before he was afraid of her and did not play with her, always close to me, and now he is in [an educator's] arms too*» (M2). The mother observes the way in which the educational adult builds the relationship, not only the activities proposed. In this direction, *L'ABC* makes educational professionalism visible and can modify the representation of the service, recalling what Favaro et al. describe regarding immigrant parents' changing representations of nursery: from a response to a family or organisational need to «a good and positive educational space for all children, attentive to emotional, relational, cognitive and linguistic development. An experience that changes the child, like a small version of the world» (Favaro et al., 2006, p. 93). Similarly, Mussi (2023) shows how, for many migrant mothers, nursery and preschool may initially be linked to organisational needs, before being recognised as places of growth, socialisation, language learning and educational exchange.

"I saw… I felt" are recurrent words in the interviews. They suggest that the educational service takes on a different meaning in mothers' representations when it becomes observable and when mothers can participate in constructing the meaning of the experience.

L'ABC therefore works as a space of cultural and pedagogical mediation, allowing mothers to directly observe and experience educational practices. This experience fosters cultural accessibility by making visible how educators relate to children, respond to crying, organise daily routines and build trust. This passage is crucial if one considers, with Mantovani, that in the first encounter between family and educational institution it is necessary to make explicit the intense emotional component that accompanies the sharing of responsibilities for care and education, as a first step toward an alliance centred on the child and on the needs of the adults involved (Mantovani et al., 2000). In more ambivalent cases, such as M4, the mother may recognise the value of *L'ABC* while also maintaining a cautious position regarding early attendance of a formal service, especially when she believes that the child is not yet autonomous or ready. This point complicates a linear understanding of inclusion: participation does not coincide with immediate adherence to the institutional model, but with the possibility of knowing, interpreting, evaluating and choosing. Fol-

lowing Rogoff, educational behaviours must be understood within the actors' systems of meaning; what may appear as resistance may instead express maternal criteria of protection, autonomy, care and responsibility.

5.2 Maternal Educational Agency in the Relationship with the Service and Community Agency

«I felt that this is a point of reference I have; when I have problems I come here… because you are always by our side, always supporting us and this gives security, to come as a point of reference to ask what to do, how to behave and also to have information about how to move» (M4). In terms of participation, the issue is not only to facilitate communication, but also to create the conditions in which the mother can recognise herself as a legitimate interlocutor. The interviews show mothers who do not simply access or fail to access services. They interpret, negotiate, ask questions, propose strategies, transmit information and build continuity between contexts. This situated agency takes shape within linguistic, bureaucratic, economic and relational constraints, but also within concrete possibilities for recognition and participation.

Inclusion as participation in practices requires the possibility of understanding their codes and being recognised as participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991). One mother recounts: *«And then she asked to leave her free because she was no longer wearing the diaper; she had got her used to it three months before starting the settling-in, so that she would get used to going. And the teacher asked whether perhaps she should put the diaper back on and I said I had worked hard to get her used to it; she wears it only at night when she sleeps all night, but during the day I do training, I call her all the time and take her to the bathroom and she has got used to going to the bathroom willingly, so I must not ruin this rule»* (M1). By asking that an educational pathway already built at home be recognised, the mother negotiates with the service. The same position is expressed more directly: *«I was the one who told the educator that I did not want it, that I would never accept her putting it (the diaper) back on. And they said okay, let's try»* (M1). The data show a family-service relationship grounded in mutual recognition. The mother brings situated knowledge of her daughter; the service agrees to try. Following Epstein, the zone of overlap between family and school expands precisely when the mother is considered a competent subject in the construction of educational practice.

M1 also proposes a concrete communicative strategy to help the child make herself understood: *«I explained that when she needs to, she asks the teacher to go pee, but I also understood that the child is still too small; so she would go and kneel down close to the teacher's leg, take her trousers and I would say, do this, tell the teachers, touch these trousers, tell her you want to go pee, you must not be ashamed. And the teacher understood; she said I was a good mother because I had reasoned with her in this way, really, to make the idea come across somehow»* (M1). Here, maternal agency takes shape through the construction of a mediating tool between the child's need and the communicative code of the service.

M3 also describes her participation during settling-in as an educational intervention recognised by the teachers: *«They left me free because I noticed the child when he did something wrong and I showed him that this should not be done. When he did something with a classmate I said no, you don't do that; when he ate I said you have to taste it, and the teachers noticed this teaching on her part. Instead, other mothers saw children throwing food or doing things that should not be done and did not give instructions to the children. In fact, in the end they said that [the child's] mother had been good, because the child never did all those behaviours»* (M3). The mother participates in regulating the child's behaviour and is recognised as competent by the teachers. The service makes possible a form of participation that is not merely peripheral but active (Wenger, 1998/2006). Educational co-responsibility emerges in M1's words: *«For me, I am satisfied to take my daughter to every environment to learn the rules, to respect them, to have an order for the whole day, better than leaving her at home; and I say that I too must have my approach, my role in explaining to the child that what the educator is saying is right, that she must respect the rule, and between me and the school we reach one goal»* (M1). The expression *"between me and the school we reach one goal"* makes it possible to read the relationship with the service as an educational alliance. The mother recognises the role of the school and, at the same time, claims her own: she explains to the child, supports the rules and accompanies the meaning of the experience. Family and school remain distinct spheres, but they can overlap when they share goals and responsibilities around the child (Epstein, 2011).

Finally, maternal agency also takes on a community dimension. The positive experience generates in-

formal advocacy toward nursery: «*I acted as spokesperson; I told all my friends that they should go to nursery school, that they should not be afraid, because before [name omitted] would take him out in the cold while she was going to the market, she would give him the phone because he was bored or would watch cartoons, whereas now he plays more. And her friend said that her son was still too young, and I said no, enrol him, because my experience was beautiful. Now when the friend sees me she says, I wanted to tell you every day, thank you, because you did me a great favour, because now he does not like playing alone either*» (M3). The mother becomes a "spokesperson" for an educational possibility, translating her own experience into reassurance for other mothers. Similarly, M2 states: «*Now I am talking to the other mother about going to enrol her child too*» (M2).

The mothers' community functions as a space of social learning in which experiences of ECEC services are shared and become a source of reassurance and practical guidance for other families. Maternal agency thus extends beyond individual educational choices, taking on a community dimension through peer support and the circulation of knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

6. Conclusions

This study examined how a non-formal, low-threshold educational context can support families with a migrant background in approaching formal ECEC services. The findings show that access is not merely an administrative entry point, but a situated and relational process shaped by trust, communication, cultural meanings and the possibility for mothers to be recognised as legitimate educational interlocutors. *L'ABC* thus functions as a pedagogical bridge: it makes routines, separations, adult-child relationships and service expectations visible before families enter formal settings.

The analysis also highlights maternal agency as a relational and situated capacity. Mothers choose, observe, negotiate, ask for information, support their children's transitions and share knowledge with other mothers. This agency may lead to nursery enrolment, but it may also take the form of cautious or critical positioning; such ambivalence should be read as analytically meaningful rather than as resistance. *L'ABC* does not remove structural barriers to ECEC access – waiting lists, costs, online procedures, discontinuous mediation or uneven service quality – but it creates conditions that make services more understandable, trustworthy and practicable. These findings support an interpretative model of low-threshold pedagogical mediation centred on three interconnected processes: making educational practices visible through gradual participation; fostering trust and maternal agency through relational and linguistic-cultural mediation; supporting continuity between families, non-formal contexts and formal ECEC services. The model highlights processes that may facilitate access to ECEC services, without assuming a direct relationship between participation in *L'ABC* and nursery enrolment. Given the small sample of four mothers and the context-specific nature of the case study, the findings should be interpreted in relation to this specific setting, while offering insights that may be relevant to comparable educational contexts. The study therefore points to the pedagogical value of stable proximity spaces, especially in urban contexts marked by socioeconomic, linguistic and institutional vulnerability, as part of wider territorial networks for early childhood.

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