



Early childhood education and care 0–6: The state of the art of the national and international regulatory framework from an inclusive perspective

Educazione e cura della prima infanzia 0–6: Lo stato dell'arte della cornice legislativa nazionale e internazionale da una prospettiva inclusiva

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a comprehensive review of the key documents and laws governing early childhood education in the 0–6 age range, which have contributed to the development of an integrated and unified system in Italy. The analysis of these materials reveals how international policies implemented since the 2000s have progressively shaped a multi-faceted concept of inclusion. Moving beyond the notion of eliminating barriers and addressing injustice faced by children in difficulty, there has been a paradigm shift towards a holistic understanding of the child, emphasizing the harmonization of physical, social, and cognitive aspects. The legislative guidelines increasingly incorporate important “constants” such as the significance of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in early identification of difficulties, the connection to family, community, and peer environments, and the need for high-quality initial and ongoing teacher training. These recommendations offer valuable insights for all stakeholders involved. While reviewing the milestones of Italian legislation, this study acknowledges the progress made and the challenges addressed, yet it also recognizes the importance of further implementation of certain recommendations.

Il presente articolo è una rassegna ragionata dei principali documenti legislativi sull'educazione della prima infanzia nel segmento 0–6, che ha portato in Italia alla costruzione di un sistema integrato e unitario. Dal materiale esaminato emerge come le politiche adottate a livello internazionale dagli anni 2000 in poi definiscono un concetto di inclusione sempre più composito: dall'idea di eliminare barriere e ingiustizie nei confronti di singoli o gruppi in difficoltà si passa a quella di una visione olistica del bambino, secondo la quale elementi corporei, sociali e cognitivi devono armonizzarsi. Le raccomandazioni legislative contengono sempre più delle costanti (importanza dell'ECEC per il riconoscimento precoce di difficoltà, raccordo con ambiente familiare, territoriale e dei pari, formazione iniziale e in itinere di qualità degli insegnanti), che forniscono piste di lavoro interessanti per tutti gli stakeholder. Esaminando le tappe fondamentali della legislazione italiana, raccoglie molte sfide e raccomandazioni ma deve realizzarne ancora alcune altre.

KEYWORDS

Inclusive early childhood education and care, International legislation in ECEC, European legislation in ECEC, Italian legislation in ECEC, Integrated system 0-6 in education
Educazione inclusiva della prima infanzia, Legislazione internazionale dell'ECEC, Legislazione europea dell'ECEC, Legislazione italiana dell'ECEC, Sistema integrato di educazione e istruzione 0-6

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1. Introduction

Awareness of the great strategic importance of integrated educational and care interventions for childhood in the 0–6 age group is widespread at a political, scientific, and institutional level. Clear proof of this is the fact that this field constitutes one of the main areas of the EEA (European Education Area), which has drawn up a precise definition of it. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) “refers to any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to compulsory primary school age, which may vary across the EU” (EEA, 2021).

Recent studies have shown that high quality early childhood education and care determine future success in life of every person in regard to education, well-being, employability and social integration. (Ianes & Amatori, 2022) In the case of children from disadvantages backgrounds this has been seen to be particularly true (Frawley, 2014).

Ensuring quality early childhood education and care is therefore also a valuable and effective investment in education and training. Every child in the European Union has the right to quality and affordable early childhood education and care for all social classes, as stated in the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR 2021). The level of education should be separated from social, economic and cultural status.

The purpose of this article is to provide an excursus, both Italian and international, to understand which steps led to the building of an integrated 0-6 system of the early childhood education and care from a legislative point of view and where are the main innovative features of the laws from an inclusive perspective. In fact, it is often the pedagogical value of the laws, in their democratic and republican inspiration and in their being marked by the common good (Zedda, 2017) that serves as an inspiration for the elaboration of quality pedagogical concepts and practices.

The integrated 0-6 system is therefore understood here both as the culmination of a process and as a starting point. It is a point of arrival because it provides the opportunity to take stock of the situation on inclusion policies and cultures, and at the same time it is a first step on which to graft a truly unified and comprehensive inclusive approach to education that is strongly characteristic for this important segment of life.

Many of these desires find their place in the IECEC, the body within the ECEC which has the main task of dealing with inclusion in the early years.

An important reference point of this paper is the literature review conducted by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, because although it focuses mainly on the age segment 3-6, it does not neglect 0-3 years, but above all because it follows the five principles identified by the European Commission’s Thematic Working Group on ECEC (European Commission, 2014), namely: access/transition procedures, workforce, curriculum/content, governance/funding, monitoring/evaluation.

This review shares some definitions adopted by the IECE literature review like ECEC itself, but primarily the term inclusion, which underlines the need to find common and fixed points of reference.

2. The international perspective

The interest and involvement of the EU and international organizations in ECE and IECE show the importance of this segment of life, which is an excellent preventive measure, considering that special needs are generally intercepted at the beginning of mainstream education.

It is no coincidence that one of the objectives in the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training is that at least 95% of children between the age of four and compulsory schooling age should participate in ECE.

At the same time, however, adopting a primarily inclusive focus according to the literature, a clear discrepancy is observed because the latest OCED data on the participation of children with special educational needs or at risk of social exclusion show that, in countries with separation between mainstream and inclusive education, only a quarter of these children are included in early education settings (EASIE report, 2022, pp. 47-56).

The 2008 UNESCO definition takes a dynamic view of inclusion, understood as a continuous process that provides quality education for all while respecting diversity, with the aim of eliminating all forms of discrimination (UNESCO IBE, 2008, p. 18).

Significantly, inclusive education is added to the generic idea of inclusion, considered a concern of the entire education system rather than of individual students or groups. (European Agency, 2015, p. 2).

If we consider inclusion in the early years of life, it is characterized both by terms that recall enrichment and variety such as “diversity” or “celebration of differences” and with others that are intended to render the idea of establishing balances to be restored (removal of barriers, satisfaction of needs, overcoming exclusion) (Devarakonda, 2013, p. 7).

It should not be forgotten, especially when adopting an international or at least a supranational perspective such as the one in this article, that the challenges of implementing inclusion-relevant education must take into account the cultural specificities of the countries involved. As was shown by a comparative study on the inclusion of children in early childhood facilities conducted in Canada and Finland. In these two countries, both at the top of international education rankings, the inclusion of children with difficulties is achieved in diametrically opposite ways: in Canada there is a choice between special schools and normal schools and exclusion is less felt as such, as it is a ‘naturalised’, whereas in Finland teachers and students have extensive, responsive, proactive and diagnosis-independent support available for around 30% of children from nursery school to third grade (Graham and Jahnukainen, 2011).

Sharing these definitions gives the opportunity to verify whether the legislation examined, especially that of the Italian tradition, is in line with them.

Many international organizations have acknowledged ECEC’s value and benefits, which are much more relevant for at-risk children.

In September 2005 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its general comment on Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood emphasizes that the right to optimum early childhood develop-

ment include the right to education with systematic and quality family involvement: access to services for all children – especially the most vulnerable – should be guaranteed. The document underlines the importance of ECEC for children with disabilities as a means of early identification.

The Committee states that young children with disabilities 'should never be institutionalized solely on the grounds of disability' and that 'it is a priority to ensure that they have equal opportunities to participate fully in education and community life' (UN, 2006, p. 17).

There is then a group of documents (UNCRC, 2005; Dakar Framework, 2000, UN 2006, World Bank 2011) that has gradually added new elements that have been constants to this day. The UNCRC 2005 speaks of family involvement and the need to ensure access for all, especially the most vulnerable, an aspect also reiterated by the Dakar Framework. The need for qualified personnel with appropriate psychosocial qualities is reaffirmed by the 2006 UN document, which states the importance of ECEC as a medium for early identification of disabilities that can be overcome or at least improved upon, and insists on the fact that disability should not be the sole cause of inclusion in institutions.

The Dakar Framework also defines a concept that will be present in subsequent legislation, up to and including the most recent one, namely the recommendation that ECEC programs should focus on all of the child's needs including health, nutrition, hygiene, cognitive development and psychosocial development.

The holistic view of the child will be a common feature of later documents such as UNESCO 2014b, which developed HECDI (Holistic Early Childhood Development Index). Here it is very appropriately pointed out that every child must reach his or her potential in all the areas mentioned. This vision will be taken up and reinforced by the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, which add the important idea that the quality of pre-primary education should be preparatory to the path children will take in primary education. Some of the previous concepts are effectively summarized in the World Bank's 3 pillars: invest early, invest smart, invest for all.

The next block of documents lays the groundwork for a clearer elaboration of the 5 quality indicators mentioned at the beginning of the article because firstly the SABER study on early childhood development and then the Starting Strong series (I-VI) consider more areas and more steps to achieve early childhood education.

SABER does this through three policy objectives: 1) creating an enabling environment; 2) implementing widely; 3) maintaining and ensuring quality. This sequence of desirable actions is transformed in Starting Strong III into a series of foundational levers on which ECEC can be built: 1) defining quality goals and regulations; 2) designing and implementing standardised curricula; 3) improving qualifications, training and working conditions; 4) involving families and the community; and 5) improving data collection, research and monitoring.

This last aspect enjoys special attention from the makers of prescriptive documents, as it is a crucial but also very delicate and difficult part for scholars to im-

plement. Starting Strong III in fact focuses on how countries can develop and use monitoring systems (by fixing targets of evaluation exercises, recommending the use of quantitative and/or qualitative evaluations, conducting systematic and participative analyses, and ensuring that the monitoring process focuses on the child's interest, (European Commission, 2014, p. 11). From the UNESCO (2006b) EFA Global Monitoring report it emerged how ECEC can soften the blow in the case of the transition to primary school by certain pupils, primary school to which explicit reference is made 1) for the need of an integration plan; 2) for continuity of the curriculum; 3) for home/school relations. Furthermore, this document points out not only the importance of the relationship between child and educator or teacher, but also how this constitutes a research gap that needs to be bridged, given the high drop-out rates of teachers found (50% within the first 5 years in the USA according to one study) especially when working with children in their early years.

Many international documents, in addition to the considerations already expressed, make further significant clarifications on the status of children with special educational needs.

Particularly in UNESCO (2009a), UNICEF (2012b; 2013a) the importance of early identification of disability in the early years of life is advocated as an aid to providing a diagnosis that enables effective planning of the child's needs. Indeed, according to the World Report on Disability, early intervention can reduce the level of educational support that children with disabilities need during their schooling.

An important finding, which has recently led to an implementation of studies in the same direction (Green et al., 2010; Salisbury et al., 2015) is worth reporting: early intervention is effective when families are involved, as they gain relevant information on how to optimize their child's learning potential.

A crucial point promoted by the UNICEF position paper (2012b) is also not to make a discriminatory assessment when referring children with difficulties to special schools.

In the Global Monitoring Report in EFA, UNESCO suggested that more attention should be paid to children with difficulties in order to build quality ECEC systems. Until then, only the Czech Republic, Norway and Scotland offered specific programs addressing the special needs of children at this educational stage.

As early as 2013 (UNICEF 2013b) it was highlighted that many children with disabilities have had to suffer deprivation from an early age, a condition that has worsened over the years, most recently exacerbated by the onset of COVID-19 and the most recent wars.

Already in the early 2000s, research complained about the shortage of resources in this area (Glosser, 2010, Lloyds 2014), which has been sharpened in recent years by the great global financial crisis.

UNICEF (2013b) highlighted the need to invest in expensive but useful tools such as support services and technologies. In this report, communities are also urged to work to break down prejudices against children with SEN, who are mainly nurtured by the majority peer group according to some studies (Aboud et al. 2012, Abram & Killen, 2014).

3. Some European specificities in the early childhood inclusion policies

Although the documents already reviewed are international in character, many of them were conceived within the European institutions, and thus contain specifically European aspects that deserve to be extrapolated and discussed.

Increasing the number of children with access to ECEC has been an EU priority since 1992, following the publication of the Council of Europe Recommendations on Childcare (Council of the European Community, 1992). From this very first text it is clear that the objectives related to ECEC are inseparable from the choices to be made in the field of family policy, in fact the first objective was to provide ECEC so that women would have equal access to work. This is also taken up by the European Council and the Commission in the Lisbon Strategy of 2000 and 2008 where it is highlighted that providing high quality ECEC is a key component in achieving gender equality. Secondly, ECEC was seen as a safeguard against school failure and thirdly as a way to reduce disadvantage and social exclusion by providing quality and equitable educational opportunities. ECEC should therefore be characterised by a universal access approach in order to be of quality, thus guaranteeing a place for all regardless of parents' employment status, special educational needs or ethnic background (OECD, 2001). In the European guidelines, ECE is increasingly understood as a general response to society, a second home for children with their own and increasingly defined educational identity (Llorent-Bedmar, 2013).

The focus of European education policies has, however, shifted over time from the idea of being an incentive for family work, especially for women, to that of educational and training aspects aimed explicitly at young children in their developmental phase.

However, the economic benefits of quality ECEC continue to be emphasized: member states are urged to integrate principles of efficiency and equity at all levels and for all, particularly the advantaged, as a means of reducing the long-term costs caused by inequalities in education and training. Furthermore, it is emphasized that early intervention programs can produce large socio-economic returns that persist into adulthood.

In 2009, the Council of Europe launched a strategic framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training until 2020 (ET2020). This framework includes four strategic objectives, one of which is the promotion of equity, social cohesion and active citizenship (European Commission, 2008a Council of the European Union, 2009a). ECEC is therefore also the basis for success in areas such as lifelong learning social integration, personal development and subsequent employability, and thus reduces the cost of public spending on welfare, health and justice in the long term.

The ET2020 strategic framework included an important benchmark for ECEC: at least 95 per cent of children between the age of four and compulsory school age should participate in ECEC. Data collected in 2014 by UNESCO showed that this average has been reached in many of the member countries, including Italy (UNESCO, 2014).

The 0-3 segment still remains relatively unexplored, for which data exists mainly concerning organisational arrangements.

In fact, it is noted that there are two main organisational models of ECEC in Europe. The most widespread is the split model, in which childcare for young children (under three years) and pre-primary education are separated. The other model is a unitary system in which ECEC provision consists of a single phase for all children in pre-primary education. The aim of the Integrated System 0-6, developed in Italy in 2017 and refined by 2021, is precisely to overcome political, administrative and in a certain sense also pedagogical divisions.

The most up-to-date analysis of European policies on the 0-6 segment is the one carried out by Motiejunaite (2021). She notes the shift from a welfarist role to a more modern training and education role played by ECEC and identifies some problematic issues that she transforms into a composite framework of indicators for a better monitoring of European policies: the need for an integrated governance, the requirement of a bachelor's degree for staff, educational guidance and the necessity of place guarantee. The analysis reveals great variation in the degree of integration of the ECEC system across European Union countries (Motiejunaite, 2021).

4. The Italian prospective: services and policies 0-3 and 3-6

In focusing on Italian legislation, we propose to reconstruct the main stages that led to the building of the integrated 0-6 system from an inclusive viewpoint. This allows us to capture the peculiar elements of Italian legislation in terms of inclusion in early childhood.

Before considering the specifics for the early years, it is necessary to review some important milestones of inclusion legislation in broader terms.

A significant change on integration in general only occurred in Italy with Law 118/1971 in which the inclusion of the 'impaired pupils' (minorati) in normal classes was mentioned. Article 29 specifies that these are normal classes as detached sections of the state school and that the teacher will have to implement the normal programmes and update the pupils on the school programme not carried out. However, this is merely a cursory remark within a law in favour of civil invalids (PI, 1971a).

The real turning point came with the establishment of the 'Falcucci Commission', a working group of experts in education established in 1975 who had the task of discussing the problem of the inclusion of impaired pupils in Italian schools. From the 'Falcucci Report' it emerged that even subjects with learning development and adaptation difficulties must be considered protagonists of their own growth (MPI, 1975). But the relevance of the work carried out by this group lies above all in adding to the debate considerations that will become fundamental in future concepts of inclusion in Italian legislation: the whole school must change in order to be able to value all differences and open itself up to the territory to overcome the boundary between real or supposedly disabled pupils and normal ones.

This laid the foundations for the law of 4 August 1977 no. 517, which emphasised the strong responsibility of individual schools in planning integrative activities (PI, 1977; Lichene, 2022) aimed at “realising individualised interventions in relation to the needs of individual pupils (PI, 1977, art. 2).

Since the 0-6 system is still of the “split” type, it will be considered separately, gradually highlighting the elements of similarity, intersection and continuity between the two systems.

A detailed review of the 0-3 laws becomes very difficult because management has always taken place on a local or regional basis, however an excellent example of reconstruction of the stages that led to the integrated system with very precise information on the 0-4 segment, is that carried out by Silva in 2018, which examines very closely the situation of Tuscan legislation between 2014 and 2018 and to which we send the reader for details on the stages that led to the integrated system (Silva, 2018).

The idea of a crèche daycare in Italy dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, when in European hotspots such as Milan and Paris, initiatives were set up to support the children of factory workers (Milan, 1850) and the general population (Paris, 1844) on a philanthropic basis in both cases.

In Italy we have to wait until 1971 for the first nursery school law. Law 1044/1971 ‘Five-year plan for the establishment of municipal crèches with State support’ is the law that established the crèche in Italy as we still know it today – i.e., as a ‘social service of public interest’ (PI, 1971b, art. 1). The main purpose of this crèche is ‘to provide temporary childcare, to ensure adequate assistance to the family and also to facilitate women’s access to work within the framework of a comprehensive social security system’ (PI, 1971b, art. 2).

In other words, the crèche is for law No. 1044/71 still primarily a care and assistance service, focusing more on the needs of adults, society, and the development of employment opportunities (particularly for women).

This law still represents a step forward compared to the ONMI (Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia /National Motherhood and Childhood Organisation), created in the fascist period in 1925 and aimed at defending and strengthening the family and the birth rate, but the educational needs of children are still secondary to the need for care and security.

The great value of this law lies in encouraging the widespread construction (through special funding) of the first municipal crèches. Furthermore, Article 6 (paragraph 3) of Law 1044/1971 specifies that nurseries must ‘be equipped with sufficient and suitably qualified staff to guarantee the child’s health and psychopedagogical care’ (PI, 1971b). This opens the door to the new figure of the kindergarten educator as they are now known (different from the ONMI, where only women were involved and trained to learn the art of child raising). On this point, the subsequent regional laws starting in 2000 (i.e., from the entry into force of law 328/2000, which assigns to the regions, among others, the matter of crèches), redefine part of the characteristics of crèches and specify the requirements for educators.

The first reference to 0-6 is contained in the framework Law 104/1992, which constitutes a legislative breakthrough in that it speaks of both school and social integration of the disabled person. Starting from the dignity of the disabled person, the law sanctions (PI, 1992):

- (a) the prevention but also the overcoming of the invalidating conditions that obstruct the development of the human person in order to guarantee the achievement of his/her greatest possible autonomy. The disabled person is thus guaranteed participation in community life (PI, 1992, art. 12.1);
- (b) the care of children up to the age of three and a day-care placement also for those with disabilities (PI, 1992, art. 12.1).

These statements are important not only because they give dignity to the inclusion of children in difficulty on an equal footing with all others, but also because they take up one of the aims of Law 1044/1971 (PI, 1971) establishing municipal crèches in which the institution’s educational function and that of reconciling family needs begin to go hand in hand.

Today’s kindergarten (pre-school segment) assumed the status of a real educational institution some time ago in Italy. Eventually, Law 444/1968 was enacted establishing what was then called the *Scuola materna statale* (state kindergarten) (PI, 1968).

The name ‘Scuola dell’infanzia’ was introduced by the 1991 Guidelines (*Orientamenti dell’attività didattica per la scuola materna statale*) to replace the term ‘scuola materna’, thus bringing it fully into the educational system (MPI, 1991).

In this document and, more recently, in the National Indications of 2021 (*Indicazioni Nazionali per la scuola dell’infanzia e del primo ciclo di istruzione*), we can see how inclusion has undergone a significant evolution: in the *Orientamenti*, in a separate section, there is a reference to the ‘diversity and integration’ of children in difficulty, for whom an accurate functional diagnosis and an individualised educational project are envisaged. However, it is pointed out that diversity should be understood as an existential dimension and not as a marginalising characteristic. Moreover, all the teachers in the school, and not only the support teachers, contribute collegially to the success of the ‘general and integration’ educational project.

In the National Indications the separate section disappears since it is a document in which the unity of the entire 3-14 segment is enshrined. Notwithstanding the reference to important previous laws, such as that of Law 170/2010 (PI, 2010) on special educational needs and the *Indicazioni Nazionali per i piani personalizzati*, (PI, 2004), an entire chapter is drafted in which the full implementation of the recognition and guarantee of freedom and equality is proposed, respecting the differences of all and the identity of each individual. Hence the duty to pay attention to disability and all kinds of frailty.

4.1 The integrated system 0-6

Law 107/2015 established the integrated system for educational services for children from age 0 to 6. In this document the inclusive perspective is taken because it aims to overcome inequalities and obstacles that hinder the development of the individual. It is remarkable that reference is not made solely to disability as a central element for the realization of social justice, even though the difficulty in itself is of great importance for democratic coexistence.

Explicit references to disability for the 0-6 segment are made, however, only in Italian Legislative Decree 65/2017: it proposed to reduce socio-cultural and relational disadvantages with the inclusion of all boys and girls through personalized interventions and by welcoming diversity and disability (2017, art. 1.1).

It is clear that disadvantage is defined not only in its medicalizing traits, and not even in the form of a generic sociological inequality, but aims at bridging the gap on the interpersonal level and on the cultural front, with the reclaiming of the right to an education for all.

The path of education for all is pursued and well defined by the Pedagogical Guidelines, which represent the implementation of the aforementioned decree and which came out in 2021 (Ministerial Decree of 22 November 2021).

They outline the common cultural and pedagogical framework for all educational services for children in the 0 – 6 age group in order to overcome administrative and management inequalities.

Until then, in fact, the 3-6 segment had been framed in the Guidelines for pre-school education (MPI, 1991) and in the National Indications (Indicazioni, 2021), whereas, as already mentioned, the legislation for the 0-3 group is characterised by variety and fragmentation.

The Guidelines consist of six parts, namely: the rights of childhood, an eco-formative system, the centrality of children, curriculum and planning: organisational choices, coordinates of professionalism, governance guarantees. Of these, the first and sixth parts have a more institutional slant, the heart of the document is more purely pedagogical. The central theme that inspired the entire document and that runs transversally through the six parts is represented by the centrality of the child in the educational process and by the founding values of participation, acceptance and respect for the uniqueness of each person.

4.2 Inclusive aspects in the “Pedagogical Guidelines”

There are a number of features that make this document particularly interesting from the point of view of building an inclusive approach to education. (see also Lichene, 2022).

1. They are not tied to particular pedagogical movements, but rely on a plurality of theories to enable the various actors to find the cultural references best suited to their own situation.
2. They promote the idea that inclusion does not only concern subjects with disabilities or with

special needs, but confirm it as a value principle to develop the potential of all subjects to the highest possible level.

3. They took into account the needs of the school staff and administration with whom the committee worked closely, thus recalling an idea of inclusion based on the plurality of voices contributing to the realisation of a common project.
4. They explicitly refer to international documents on childhood, including Agenda 30, to promote quality education in which acceptance, democracy and participation are the basis of learning processes.
5. They refer to the idea of the centrality of the child, which makes it necessary to elaborate a transversal pedagogical thought (throughout 0-3 and 0-6) that considered the child as a whole, in the unity of its development as a subject predisposed to intersubjectivity and that takes into account the gradual dimension of its evolution from one age to the next. Free play is considered as one of the ideal grounds for this development.
6. They aim at building quality contexts that take charge of the learning development of all children, who need different “partners” equally. These contexts consist of a synergic relationship between families, educators, the child’s needs, the peer environment and the school setting (the latter being of crucial importance for pupils with special needs).
7. They pose the problem of the high competence of teachers and educators in this area. For the child to experience quality relationships with the adult, the latter must be welcoming, encouraging, directing, responsible and participative
8. They define the need for an ecosystem approach consisting of an educational alliance between all the parties involved in the process of children’s growth: families, territory and school
9. A really new feature of the Guideline is the establishment of *Poli per l’infanzia* (Childhood Poles), which accommodate both 0-3 and 3-6 segment services in a single building or in neighbouring buildings for a better use of resources through the sharing of services, spaces and resources. This, in addition to making collaboration and continuity between the two groups more concrete, represents a major pedagogical challenge. It is an opportunity to implement an approach to education that is not only based on the developmental stages, but allows for the mixing and coexistence of children of different ages, who can practise ‘primitive’ forms of peer tutoring, to break down or enhance many differences.
10. They take into account the challenges posed by the pandemic, which has made everyone more aware of the need to ensure that children have opportunities to grow up in inclusive, safe and quality educational settings. This is why creating an educational ecosystem has become more urgent as well as responding to the needs of a more fragile humanity, which requires new solidarity between generations. In addition, lockdown has paved the way for the use of technologies that have brought schools and families closer to-

gether and that must also be exploited positively in the future. The pandemic has also had an impact on the work of mothers and therefore forces us to rethink labour policies that recognise the rights of children and parents. All this makes it necessary to strengthen an alliance that must involve multiple actors, including the social partners.

5. Discussion

In this section, we aim to discuss the Italian legislative scenario in the light of the European and international one, of which we have provided a useful synopsis. It is essential to verify to what extent it is aligned with the most advanced guidelines and recommendations on ECEC legislation from an inclusive angle.

According to the *Report on Fair and Sustainable Welfare in Italy*, 96% of children attend pre-school, thus being in line with European recommendations. The problems start with the attendance of crèches: the number of children between 0 and 2 years of age enrolled in early childhood services in Italy is still too low (26.1% in 2021) with marked disparities between North and South regions (ISTAT, 2021).

With regard to the concept of inclusion developed over time, it can be seen that in the integrated system inclusion is conceived as a value principle in accordance with the definitions that UNESCO has taken as a reference: inclusion in the Italian document is declined both in the form of valuing diversity and in that of breaking down barriers.

In Motiejunaite's recent analysis, Italy is considered worth mentioning precisely because it was in the process of building the integrated system, but Motiejunaite's considerations stop at the 2015 decree and do not give a judgement on the Pedagogical Guidelines, which were still being developed at the time of writing (Motiejunaite, 2021, p. 70).

The decision not to adhere to particular lines of thought in the elaboration of pedagogical guidelines recalls the need to rely on cultural specificities - which in Italy are very much present at the local level - present in international legislation.

According to Motiejunaite's analysis, Italy also ranks well in the issue of the minimum qualification requirement for staff. It is in fact, together with Malta, Ireland and Finland, one of the countries that raised the minimum qualification requirement for all or a high number of staff working with children. Italy aims to introduce the requirement of a tertiary qualification in education sciences for educational staff in nursery services (Degree Code L-19). Another way to qualify is to specialize after the Master's degree in Pre-Primary and Primary Education Sciences.

However, even in Italy it is necessary to monitor possible drop-out trends of teachers in the 0-3 segment due to the precariousness of the educator's role and the crisis of the social and institutional link between educational services and the public administration (Silva, 2018, p. 187).

Italy, too, is also called upon to treasure international indications, such as those that call for working against all forms of prejudice against children in diffi-

culty on the part of peers and enhancing the direct involvement of families.

An open question remains the one related to the place guarantee: Italy, along with Ireland, Malta, Romania and Slovakia, is one of the five European countries that still does not have a legal framework to ensure a place guarantee in ECEC (Motiejunaite, p. 73).

It is noteworthy that in Italy the 3-6 segment is already structured to be a sort of prelude to primary school: this is sanctioned first by the *Orientamenti* (MPI, 1991) and then by the *Indicazioni Nazionali* (Indicazioni, 2021) which define pre-school as the first stage of education. With the construction of the unified 0-6 segment a connection is also created between 0-3/3-6.

The creation of Poli per l'infanzia then represents a decisive step forward in the management of heterogeneity in education, which is a crucial aspect of inclusion. One of the greatest obstacles to a rethinking of the 0-6 educational project was in fact the strong anchoring to the Piagetian-inspired psycho-pedagogical stadial model of the child's developmental stages. This had prevented the hypothesis and design of increasingly diversified learning trajectories in the curricula, which would provide for the possible coexistence of children of different ages (Fabbri, 2016; Silva, 2018).

The invitation to invest economically in the 0-6 sector is also largely taken up by Italian school policies. For example the challenges launched by the recent pandemic, clearly illustrated in the above-mentioned *Linee Pedagogiche*, are being concretely taken up through the application of the PNRR,¹ which envisages a series of interventions exactly in important areas approached by the document, such as pedagogical innovation or the improvement of learning settings.

In particular, each year the Multiannual Action Plan makes financial resources available that the Regions, through their planning, allocate to local authorities for actions such as:

- a) new construction, renovation, building, safety and energy-saving work on public buildings that house schools and children's services;
- b) financing the running costs of schools and educational services for children, in order to lower the costs for families and improve the services on offer;
- c) in-service training for educational and teaching staff and promotion of territorial pedagogical coordination.

Next to this light is some darkness. In fact, especially in the 0-3 segment, the management of the PNRR can reveal itself to be impeding. Due to the strong territorial differences in the frequency of nursery school attendance and in general in the implementation of family policies in this field, the

1 PNRR National Recovery and Resilience Plan (*Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza*), abbreviated to Recovery Plan or NRRP, is the plan approved in 2021 by Italy to relaunch its economy after the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to enable the country's green and digital development.

grounding of the PNRR may widen the gap between the more advanced areas in this respect (which apply for and obtain financial support) and the less advanced ones, which do not invest in this type of education and therefore do not request funds.

6. Conclusion

It has also been observed that Europe strongly insists on ECEC policies, and it is clear that Italy is no exception in several areas. The attention of researchers in Italy who deal with inclusion in this age group also testifies to the continuous effort to develop and implement policies, practices and interventions, e.g. through recent contributions by Sannipoli (2022) Amatori, Maggiolini, Macchia, (2022), Stornaiuolo (2021) and Amatori and Maggiolini (2021). International and European legislation on the other hand is called upon to take greater care of the 0-3 sector, especially since it is stated that early intervention in all sorts of difficulties is of decisive importance.

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