

INSIGHTS ON FAMILY POLICIES

DOSSIER 1

ITALY'S INTEGRATED 0-6 REFORM: Balancing Innovation and Equity in Early Childhood Education and Care

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About the Insights on Family Policies

Insights on Family Policies is an editorial series dedicated to examining contemporary developments in family policy across European contexts. Published by the European Observatory of Family Policy, the Insights series engages with critical debates on the design, implementation, and coordination of policies that support families in diverse and evolving societal landscapes. Its analytical focus extends to cross-sectoral approaches in service provision, particularly those that integrate health, education, and social care systems to address the complex and interrelated needs of families.

The Insights proceed from the understanding that families constitute dynamic systems characterised by varying demands, dependencies, and potential tensions across gender and generational lines. Conventional policy divisions—between child-focused programmes, adult-oriented support, and elderly care—often fail to account for the interconnected nature of family well-being. The series thus emphasises the value of multi-agency cooperation as a means to overcome fragmentation, advocating for holistic frameworks that enhance accessibility and responsiveness.

By disseminating research on national and local policy innovations, the Insights seek to inform policymakers, practitioners, and scholars while fostering dialogue on effective family support mechanisms. The series maintains a commitment to evidence-based analysis, with particular attention to initiatives that strengthen coordination among public administrations, service providers, and community actors. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced and integrated approach to family policy in Europe—one that acknowledges the multiplicity of family structures and the necessity of adaptable, interdisciplinary solutions.

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FOREWORD

Martino Serapioni

The Italian early childhood education and care (ECEC) system underwent a transformative reform between 2015 and 2017, marking a pivotal shift in the country's approach to early childhood development.¹ The reform introduced an integrated ECEC system for children aged 0 to 6 years to supersede the historically split structure that separated daycare services for children aged 0-3 [*nidi per l'infanzia*] - traditionally viewed as social welfare - from preschool services for children aged 3-6 [*scuola dell'infanzia*], long institutionalised within the formal education sector. While promoting pedagogical continuity and holistic child development across the 0-6 period [*zerosei*], the reform also sought to address persistent challenges in equal educational opportunities and regional disparities in access and quality. By strengthening the structural and pedagogical linkages between daycare and preschool, the integrated system would facilitate smoother transitions while simultaneously advancing two key objectives: formally recognising the educational role of daycare while preserving its critical function in enabling work-family life balance, and gradually expanding downward the universal entitlement framework - traditionally applied only to services for children over 3 - to include younger children and their families irrespective of parental employment status or household income. The reform's core principles - inclusivity, accessibility, and quality - were thus oriented toward an ambitious vision: a system capable of guaranteeing equitable access to education, care, and play for all children, regardless of socioeconomic, cultural, or geographical barriers. Strategic priority actions included increasing ECEC coverage to meet the Barcelona Targets,² improving workforce qualifications, and institutionalising coordination mechanisms to guide regional and local implementation.

However, the reform's ambitious objectives faced significant implementation challenges stemming from the fragmentation of Italy's ECEC governance model, wherein regional and municipal authorities maintain primary responsibility for daycare and complementary services [*servizi integrativi*], while

preschool education (whether in state-maintained or private institutions) remains under exclusive state jurisdiction. A further layer of fragmentation emerges in operational financing structures. For daycare (0-3), still classified as a on-demand service [*servizio a domanda individuale*], families incur direct costs through potentially substantial monthly fees - amounts that vary regionally, though typically calculated via staggered payment systems. Conversely, state preschools limit family contributions to ancillary services such as canteens and transportation, while private preschools operate through a cost-sharing model between families and state-regional co-financing mechanisms. This heterogeneous financing landscape, coupled with the governance divide, has engendered systemic inequities that disproportionately constrain access for low-income households and reinforce geographical disparities in early childhood development opportunities. Notwithstanding these complexities, the integrated *zerosei* system represented a paradigmatic shift in Italy's ECEC policy landscape, offering a potential blueprint for other nations confronting analogous structural and coordination challenges.

The reform's viability, from its inception, has hinged upon three interrelated factors: the mitigation of systemic disparities, the establishment of sustainable funding mechanisms, and the institutionalisation of effective multi-level governance — challenges that have been compounded by ambiguous timelines and inadequate fiscal commitments. A fundamental structural barrier lies in Italy's fragmented ECEC governance architecture, where regulatory authority over core policy domains— including infrastructure development, curricular frameworks, workforce training protocols, and minimum qualification standards — has been historically dispersed across national, regional, and local tiers. To address this fragmentation, the reform proposed a multi-tiered governance model predicated on ad hoc negotiations between regional administrations and the decentralised bodies of the Ministry of Education [*Uffici Scolastici Regionali*] and *Ambiti*

1 Law No. 107/2015 and its implementing decree, Legislative Decree No. 65/2017.

2 The Barcelona Targets, established by the European Council in 2002, set EU-wide participation goals for early childhood education and care: 90% of children aged 3 until mandatory school age and 33% of children under 3. In 2022, the Council Recommendation on Early Childhood Education and Care (2022/C 484/01) revised the under-3 target, introducing a tiered approach: while all Member States should aim for at least 33% participation, those that have already achieved this benchmark are encouraged to reach 45% by 2030.

Territoriali’], coupled with the formalisation of inter-institutional agreements to harmonize objectives and responsibilities.

Further complexity arises from the heterogeneous ecosystem of ECEC providers, often operating under slightly distinct regulatory frameworks. For children aged 0-3 years: (i) Municipal daycare centers, typically employing income-based fee structures, operated either through direct municipal management or outsourced to social cooperatives, Catholic organizations, or other non-profit entities; (ii) Complementary services, including home-based care [‘nido famiglia’], play spaces, and parent-child centers, variously managed by municipalities, cooperatives, or private educators under municipal accreditation systems; (iii) Transition classes [‘sezioni primavera’] serving children aged 24-36 months within preschool facilities. For children aged 3-6 years, the list would instead include: (i) State preschools [‘scuole dell’infanzia statali’], fully publicly funded and fee-exempt, (ii) Municipal preschools [‘scuole dell’infanzia comunali’] which may charge modest fees, (iii) Recognized private preschools [‘scuole dell’infanzia paritarie’], predominantly operated by Catholic non-profits, receive public subsidies while potentially charging additional fees, and (iv) Unrecognized private preschools (a marginal sector without systematic public funding).

While presenting opportunities for localized innovation, from the reform’s perspective, this institutional pluralism, compounded by the above-mentioned issues of governance fragmentation, posed a formidable barrier to uniform implementation of the 0-6 ECEC system. In this respect, central to the reform’s strategy for structural integration were two innovative policy instruments: Early Childhood Hubs [‘Poli per l’infanzia’], as physical and administrative vehicles for service integration and Pedagogical Territorial Coordination Groups [‘Coordinamenti Pedagogici Territoriali’] as mechanisms for alignment between the different types of ECEC provision in a geographic area. In addition to these, in 2018 the Ministry attributed another key role to regional joint discussion tables [‘Tavoli paritetici regionali’], platforms for inter-institutional discussion between local school administrations, regional agencies, local authorities, state, private and state-recognised educational services and institutions, universities - including informal ones.

With respect to the introduction of Early Childhood Hubs— these were unified ECEC facilities designed to combine daycare (0–3 years) and preschool (3-6) services either physically within shared premises or administratively under a cohesive pedagogical framework. To be implemented through a phased

approach – by regional governments in coordination with the Ministry of Education’s decentralised offices – the hubs represented a profound innovation within the national system. The 2015-2017 legislations defined these centres as integrated facilities aiming to “house multiple educational services for children up to 6 years within a single complex or proximate buildings, unified through a common educational program while respecting developmental differences in learning styles and paces” (Leg. Decree 65/2017). The legislation further characterized these hubs as permanent centres for pedagogical innovation, community engagement, and local partnership development, emphasizing their role in optimizing resource allocation through shared services, spaces, and professional expertise.

The reform’s approach to Early Childhood Hubs demonstrates a carefully calibrated balance between national integration objectives and regional implementation autonomy. While clearly establishing hubs as strategic instruments for achieving systemic integration, the legislative framework intentionally accommodated regional variations in conceptualization - permitting interpretations that range from purely physical configurations to comprehensive local educational ecosystems designed to ensure both accessibility and pedagogical coherence for surrounding communities. Subsequent regional legislation has revealed two primary conceptual approaches to hub implementation. The first approach has emphasized architectural and structural integration, envisioning hubs as physical spaces that facilitate interaction across age groups while combining educational and family support services within multifunctional complexes. The second approach has adopted a more process-oriented perspective that transcends physical space to focus on systemic integration. This paradigm highlights psycho-pedagogical alignment across developmental stages and emphasizes managerial coordination to ensure educational continuity. In this conceptualization, hubs may serve primarily as administrative and conceptual spaces for implementing the programs developed by Pedagogical Territorial Coordination Groups (PTCGs), with particular attention to harmonizing educational pathways from birth through six years of age.

Pedagogical Territorial Coordination is the second cornerstone of the reform’s structural integration strategy. Conceived as a mechanism to ensure systemic connections between diverse early childhood services - including nurseries, supplementary services, and kindergartens within a given territory - these coordination bodies are entrusted with multiple critical functions. These

include providing pedagogical guidance, supporting the development of integrated 0-6 service networks, planning continuous professional development for staff, and collaborating with universities on initial training programs for early childhood educators and teachers. Unlike Early Childhood Hubs, PTCGs have historical antecedents in Italy's ECEC landscape. During the 2000s, and in some regions even earlier, the role of educational coordinator began emerging as a quality assurance mechanism for multiple services, though implementation remained uneven nationwide due to varying regional regulations governing 0-3 services. Particularly in pioneering regions like Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna, practice demonstrated the need for meta-coordination at territorial levels to enhance training effectiveness and maximize the quality impact of coordinators' work across service networks.

The 2015-17 reform intentionally preserved significant regional flexibility in implementing PTCGs refraining from prescribing specific structural models. This decentralized approach has resulted in varied implementation timelines and configurations across Italy. By 2024, slightly more than half of Italian regions had established regional Pedagogical Territorial Coordination models, comprising over 300 active coordination groups nationwide. The geographical scope of these groups varies considerably, with some regions organizing them at provincial levels and others aligning them with local health or social service districts. Establishment protocols similarly demonstrate regional diversity, ranging from memoranda of understanding to formal regional resolutions or municipal decrees. While most coordination groups are based in individual or associated municipalities (often provincial capitals), which typically serve as both instituting and coordinating bodies, legislation in some regions remains ambiguous regarding leadership structures. Membership composition also varies significantly, generally including education professionals and service coordinators (with head teachers representing state kindergartens), though some regions incorporate political representatives as well. The functional emphasis of PTCGs constitutes another key differentiator across regional models. While some prioritize professional development for practitioners, others focus more on network development or combine these with broader mandates for service quality improvement and system integration. This functional variation reflects both the reform's intentional flexibility and the diverse historical trajectories of early childhood systems across Italian regions.

In conclusion, notwithstanding local variations in their implementation — aligned within a reform framework designed to respect rather than

diminish local autonomy—both the Early Childhood Hubs and Pedagogical Territorial Coordination Groups can be regarded as sharing a common developmental trajectory, in their placing emphasis on the departure from traditionally siloed and sector-specific organizational models toward new forms of cross-sectoral, coordinated governance. Beyond the generic objective of increasing ECEC participation, this inherent goal of the 2015-17 reform predicated the development of innovative local service ecosystems underpinned by notions of accessibility and sustainability. The emerging model emphasizes a notion of multidisciplinary integration that combines strong pedagogical foundations with broader institutional perspectives, but also embraces family-inclusive approaches that actively engage parents and caregivers and a community-responsive design attuned to local territorial needs.

This transformation requires developing intermediate territorial governance levels capable of forging strategic alliances among key stakeholders—particularly families and intersecting health/social services—while maintaining necessary institutional sensitivities. The reform envisions spaces that, while fundamentally educational in purpose, must adopt comprehensive perspectives to effectively bridge policy, practice, and community needs. The contributions in this dossier collectively explore this evolving landscape across Italian regions, analysing how the integrated system reform is fostering cultural integration processes essential for systemic development, service coordination networks that transcend institutional fragmentation, and innovative governance solutions addressing complexity stemming from multi-level administration (State, Regional, Municipal) and cross-sector collaboration (public, private social sector, academic). Through these lenses, the collection provides critical insights into the ongoing transformation of Italy's ECEC system — a transformation that seeks to balance local particularities with systemic coherence through innovative structural integration.

RAFFAELA MILANO (Save the Children Italia) draws attention to Italy's concerning child poverty statistics, noting that 1.3 million children lived in absolute poverty in 2023—the highest recorded level since 2014. Her analysis reveals systemic failures in early childhood service provision, where only 30% of children under three have access to daycare nationally, with stark regional disparities ranging from 13.2% coverage in Campania to 46.5% in Umbria. Current enrolment criteria that prioritize working parents inadvertently reinforce socioeconomic inequalities through a “Matthew Effect,” where public resources disproportionately benefit more advantaged families. Milano proposes a comprehensive policy agenda featuring: (1) targeted investments in underserved areas, (2) universal, tuition-free access to early childhood services, and (3) improved professional training and compensation for educators. She particularly emphasizes the need for paradigm shift—from conceptualizing daycare as merely an employment support service to recognizing its fundamental role in child development and social equity.

GIORGIO TAMBURLINI (Centro per la Salute delle Bambine e dei Bambini) expands this critique by advocating for a holistic transformation of early childhood policy frameworks. His article highlights the enhanced efficacy of combining material support (e.g., cash transfers) with parental capacity-building programs, noting significantly better developmental outcomes when these approaches are integrated. Tamburlini identifies persistent challenges in serving children with special needs due to fragmented service systems and proposes three strategic priorities: (1) implementing family-centred practices that foster continuous educator-parent collaboration, (2) diversifying service formats (including part-time options) to improve accessibility, and (3) reimagining ECEC centres as community hubs that bridge health, education, and social services. His recommendations further emphasize the importance of professional cross-training and home visiting programs to strengthen early intervention systems.

PAOLA MILANI'S (University of Padua) provides empirical grounding through her analysis of the P.I.P.P.I. program, *Programma di Intervento per la Prevenzione dell'Istituzionalizzazione*, an innovative intervention model developed through academic-government partnership since 2011. The program's success in addressing family vulnerability stems from its integrated methodology combining: (1) multidimensional family assessments, (2) customized intervention plans, and (3) coordinated service networks linking educational and social welfare institutions. Milani highlights the program's effectiveness in reducing stigmatization and building trust between marginalized families and service providers, offering a replicable model for intersectoral collaboration in early childhood development.

This foreword is based on the following articles:

Stringher, C., Sandre, U., & Donà, L. (2024); Lazzari, A., & Balduzzi, L. (2023); Stringher, C., Sandre, U., & Donà, L. (2023); Lazzari, A. (2022); Lazzari, A., Balduzzi, L., & Serapioni, M. (2022).

FROM FRAGMENTATION TO INTEGRATION: POLICY SOLUTIONS FOR ITALY'S EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION DISPARITIES

RAFFAELA MILANO
Save the Children Italia

The child population is the demographic segment most severely affected by poverty in Italy, exhibiting higher rates than all other age groups. In 2023, the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), estimated that 1,295,000 minors lived in absolute poverty, the highest figure on record since 2014 (13.8% of minors in absolute poverty out of the total number of minors). Among families with minor children living in absolute poverty, the most affected are those of foreign origin, those with a large number of children, and those residing in southern regions (ISTAT, 2024). For many children, material poverty translates into a condition of educational poverty, depriving them of the opportunity to learn, experience, develop, and allow their abilities, talents, and aspirations to flourish freely. Educational inequalities become entrenched long before entry into compulsory schooling, making the entire growth journey more challenging. We know, however, that in the first years of life, boys and girls have extraordinary developmental abilities and that access to quality educational services can be instrumental in reducing the skills gap linked to the family's socio-economic status (Save the Children, 2019).

A far-sighted policy aimed—according to Article 3 of the Italian Constitutional Charter—at “removing obstacles” that “impede the full development of the human person” should, therefore, prioritize providing access to early childhood education services for all children living in disadvantaged conditions. Unfortunately, an analysis of the territorial distribution of daycare services for children below 3 years of age, the so-called “Asili Nido”, reveals that, in many cases, these settings fail to reach the very children who need them most. At the national level, only 30 out of every 100 children between the ages of zero and two manage to access publicly or privately run daycare services. However, this already low national average masks significant territorial inequalities: a central Italian region such as Umbria achieves 46.5% coverage, while Campania—one of the southern regions with the highest rates of child poverty and early school leaving—stands at only 13.2% (Save the Children, 2024).

The 2022 Budget Act defined the target threshold of 33% of children aged 0–2 in early daycare services as a minimum essential level of services [*livello essenziale delle prestazioni*], or LEP,³ to be reached in all municipalities and/or Social Territorial Areas [*ambiti sociali territoriali*] by 2027. A significant share of resources from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) has been invested in the construction of new services (Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 2022). However, an analysis of these investments reveals critical issues concerning the feasibility of bridging existing territorial gaps and achieving the targets set for each province (Caravella, Ferrara & Petraglia, 2024). In fact, it is projected that the investments—totaling approximately €3.2 billion— could create 150,480 new daycare places for the 0-2 age group, resulting in a national coverage rate of 41.3%. Nevertheless, this would not eliminate existing territorial inequalities, as projections suggest that the regions of Campania and Sicily would still fall below the 33% threshold.

It should also be noted that, due to the limited availability of services, access criteria tend to prioritize families in which both parents are employed. This approach stems from the need to support the reconciliation of family life and work through daycare nurseries or crèches. However, it also creates a vicious cycle that disadvantages the poorest families (ISTAT, 2023), particularly mothers who are outside the labour market. Unlike the rest of the education system, daycare nurseries are still framed as On Demand Services [*Servizi a domanda individuale*]⁴ with fees varying across municipalities. Moreover, the cost of the service remains a significant barrier to access, only partially alleviated by the introduction of a national Daycare Allowance [*Bonus Nido*] which helps cover expenses. This situation reflects what is known in social sciences as the “Matthew Effect”⁵: public resources tend to benefit those who are already advantaged, rather than those in greater need.

The attendance situation is more favourable for preschools [*scuole dell'infanzia*], ECEC services for children between age 3 and school entry age.]. These are free and widely available across the

3 The concept of *livello essenziale delle prestazioni* essentially refers to the baseline or mandatory minimum standards for services that must be guaranteed by local providers in Italy. To apply the concept to the target threshold of 33% coverage of daycare services for children under 2, we would frame it as a legal and policy-driven obligation that local authorities must meet in terms of availability and accessibility of daycare services for this specific age group.

4 Since Law n. 131 of 1983, daycare for children under 2 has been categorized among “on-demand services”, *servizi a domanda individuale* — a typology of non-essential municipal services for which local authorities are required to charge fees in order to cover part of the operational costs.

5 The definition is derived from the Evangelist Matthew (25:29), which states “For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.”

country. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the attendance rate dropped by nearly 4%. The most recent data available, from 2022, show a slight recovery in attendance, reaching 92.7%, although it remains below the pre-pandemic rate of 94.8% (in 2019). The most excluded groups are, in particular, households with a migrant background (OpenPolis, 2023). To bridge the clear divide between educational services for zero-to-two and three-to-five-year-olds, Legislative Decree No. 65 of 2017 established an integrated education and training system aimed at accompanying all children as they enter primary school and 'developing — as Article 1 states — potential for relationships, autonomy, creativity, and learning in an appropriate affective, playful, and cognitive context'.

This visionary objective is to be achieved, according to Legislative Decree 65, through the creation of territorial Early Childhood Hubs [*Poli per l'Infanzia*]. These are integrated in early childhood education and care centres that bring together different services for children aged 0 to school entry age set up by the Regions. The goal is to permanently move away from a welfare-based approach, integrating the entire educational offer: crèches, micro-nurseries, Transition classes [*sezioni primavera*],⁶ preschools, and complementary services [*servizi integrativi*] such as centres for children and families. Responsibility for building the integrated system is entrusted to the Ministry of Education. However, five years later, despite the investments from the RRP, the implementation of this public policy remains extremely challenging due to fragmented responsibilities, territorial imbalances, insufficient resources, and gaps in the training pathways and job classifications of educators. In this difficult context, it is essential to begin by focusing on the rights of children living in the poorest and most marginalized areas. To overcome the 'Matthew Effect' and reduce inequalities, action must be taken on multiple levels.

First, investments should focus on the most deprived areas with the highest rates of child poverty. The work initiated by ISTAT to measure the risk of educational poverty, in terms of both resources and outcomes (Pratesi, 2024), will be instrumental in identifying these areas. These contexts include not only suburban and high-crime areas but also inland regions, should also be included, with flexible, tailored services. In any

case, the goal of achieving 33% service coverage in each area by 2027 should be maintained. To identify new spaces, as has long been proposed (Fortunati, 2022), consideration should be given to redeveloping many sections or entire preschools that were closed due to population decline. At the same time, the concept of the crèche as 'on-demand service' must be definitively abandoned, recognizing it as the first and fundamental component of the broad educational process. Universal and progressively free access must therefore be ensured, starting with economically disadvantaged families. An essential condition for quality education is the presence of adequately employed and compensated educational staff. On this matter, the Alliance for Childhood – a network of the main organizations committed to children's rights in Italy – following the European summit in La Hulpe on the Future of Social Europe, has emphasized the need to make pre-service training courses more attractive and to promote a profession currently marked by significant fragmentation in labour relations and collective agreements, with as many as 16 different types of contracts (Alleanza per l'Infanzia, 2024).

Early Childhood Hubs should integrate the entire network of territorial services for early childhood, ensuring educational continuity through pedagogical coordination. The governance system, led by the Ministry of Education, as mentioned earlier, must involve the active collaboration of the regions, municipalities, and the entire network of territorial services. At the same time, coordination cannot be limited to the institutional level alone but must also engage families, the third sector, cultural organizations, and all actors within the "educating community" [*comunità educante*] in a shared responsibility. Targeted investments, free access, professional quality, and national and territorial governance: each of these areas requires essential actions that demand commitment, alliances, and resources. The good news is that this transformation 'pays off.' The International Labour Organization (ILO) has calculated that, in European countries, every dollar invested in early childhood care generates a return of USD 3.44 on GDP (ILO, 2023).

During the aforementioned European summit in La Hulpe,⁷ a study was presented showing how increasing expenditure aimed at expanding early childhood education services not only does not

6 *Sezioni primavera* (lit. 'Spring classes') are transition classes designed for children aged 24-36 months, that are usually attached to preschools.

7 The Declaration of La Hulpe- adopted on April 16, 2024 by the EU Ministers of Labour and Social Affairs, the Commission, the European Parliament and the social partners - commits the signatories to strengthen the European social agenda and, in particular, emphasises the importance of investing in ensuring accessible and quality early childhood education services all children.

negatively affect debt but can also reduce it in the medium to long term, thanks to a significant return in terms of tax revenues, driven by greater economic growth and female employment (Darvas, Weslau, & Zettelmeyer, 2024). In a country like Italy, marked by demographic collapse and low employment rates for mothers, investing in early childhood is therefore not merely an essential right for children, but also an indispensable requirement for the country's resilience and growth. Alongside these investments, cultural habits must also be addressed. The perception of the crèche as merely a tool for reconciliation of family life and work must also be overcome. It is crucial to ensure that all families—especially those in marginalized conditions where many mothers do not work—can recognize the value of educational services in the early years of life for a child's healthy development.

Some active initiatives in Italy can offer useful guidance in this regard. One example is the “1000 Days Early Childhood Hubs” [*Poli Millegiorni*] program, promoted by Save the Children, in collaboration with numerous partner organizations. The 1000 Days Hubs are integrated educational spaces established in neighbourhoods facing severe socio-economic challenges. These spaces offer year-round, free-of-charge, active programs aimed at engaging families who are most likely to be excluded from accessing traditional services. The goal is to promote access to educational and care opportunities for very young children and their families, integrate the local educational offer, encourage the participation of children aged 0 to 6 in quality educational experiences, reduce the vulnerability factors of the most fragile families, and strengthen parenting skills. In welcoming and “child-friendly” spaces, the youngest children are supported in their cognitive and psycho-physical development, fostering creativity and social relationships. Specifically, the 1000 Days Hubs offer a morning educational service for children aged 0 to 3, as well as afternoon workshops for both parents and children aged 0 to 6, covering activities such as reading support, numeracy development, psychomotricity, sports, and outdoor education.

At the same time, the 1000 Days Hubs offer targeted services directly to parents and families, such as orientation activities to local service networks, in-depth meetings on topics suggested by the parents themselves, and personalized care for the most vulnerable families. Mothers are given the opportunity to acquire skills, strengthen professional capacities, promote family-work reconciliation, and access listening and legal support services. At the heart of all activities is the alliance with all actors in the local “educating community”: social services, obstetrics and gynaecology departments, advice centres, paediatricians, as well as libraries, sports

centres, cultural spaces, and more. Currently, there are six 1000 Days Hubs in Italy, promoted by Save the Children in collaboration with local partner organizations: Moncalieri (Turin), Tivoli (Rome), Caivano (Naples), Locri (Reggio Calabria), San Luca (Reggio Calabria), Bari, and Catania. Breaking down the educational inequalities that affect children in the early years of life is a goal that must be pursued by institutions at all levels, educational agencies, and civil society. Only a progressive combination of institutional and civic responsibility can ensure that all children have the opportunity to experience the formative early years in an environment rich in opportunities.

THE ROLE OF THE 0-6 YEARS EDUCATION SYSTEM IN PROMOTING A MULTI-SECTORAL, COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO PARENTING SUPPORT

GIORGIO TAMBURLINI

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Tougher times require greater investment in the earliest years

Mounting global challenges require that new generations grow capable, collaborative, and resilient. Science has shown that the neurobiological foundations of all essential life skills, including cognitive and socio-relational competencies, are built very early and are strongly influenced by the quality of interactions with the primary caregivers (Shonkoff, 2007; Black, 2017). To make these foundations stronger, all children should be given the opportunity of benefiting from quality early education *and* from a supportive home environment. (WHO, UNICEF and World Bank, 2018). However, despite compelling scientific evidence and recommendations by the scientific community and international agencies, societies have not yet understood the need to make greater and more focused investments in the early years. In most European countries, access to early education is still limited to a minority of children (Eurostat, 2022) and even the recently indicated targets for ECEC were posed at a remissive 45% (Council of European Union, 2022). With respect to policies and programs designed to support the home learning environment the state-of-the-art is even more discouraging: support is mainly provided only to families when harm to children has already become evident, thus excluding the large and increasing proportion of parents who, due to a variety of contextual and personal strains, are not able to ensure adequately responsive caregiving.

The implications of this important policy gap are both immediate and long term: too many children fail to receive the attention and affection that they are fully entitled to (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005); inequalities in development emerge early and increase over time (Walker, 2011; Save the Children, 2019); learning and behaviour difficulties at school age are more widespread than ever and mental health disorders in adolescence reach unprecedented peaks (Scattoni, 2023; Dykxhoorn, 2024). The evidence of the early origin of most of these problems is increasing and includes the effects of parental mental health on children (Rajyaguru, 2021; Rothwell, 2023) and more broadly the association between parent-child relationships and well-being in adulthood (Rothwell, 2024). While the evidence of a child and adolescent mental health crisis accumulates, the political agenda, at country as well as at EU level, is still missing the point that the fundamental need - and right - of the new generations is to grow healthy and thrive in a supportive home and community environment.

Towards universal, integrated and holistic parenting support policies and programs

Current policies in EU countries, although with wide inter-country diversity, provide support to material resources of families in vulnerable situations through financial cash transfers or fiscal benefits, ensure subsidies for early education services, allow parental leaves, and include efforts to ensure adequate nutrition and housing (Abela, 2021). These policies, recently strengthened by the European Child Guarantee in 9 countries (European Commission, 2021), reflect growing political commitment to these material supports. However, the need for providing support to personal parenting skills is mostly overlooked, despite consolidated evidence that programs that provide early socio-educational support to parents, when appropriately designed, are effective (Jeong, 2021; Ahun, 2024). A change of perspective is therefore urgently needed in the way our societies look at the earliest years: within a higher priority given to this crucial life period, stronger efforts should be made to develop and implement parenting support policies and programs that are universal, integrated and holistic (Serapioni, 2023; Canavan, 2024). Support to families should nowadays be viewed as a two-arm endeavor, with a first component devoted to ensuring sufficient material means and a second aimed at strengthening personal capacities of responsive caregiving (Tamburlini, 2023). The material and the immaterial components of family support yield each an independent set of benefits and values, with most benefits reciprocally conditional or even synergic (Black, 2021). For example, cash transfers to poor families with children produce greater value in terms of child development when combined with some kind of parental training and guidance on how to use them (Del Boca, 2016). Conversely, more generous parental leaves increase the opportunities for parents to engage in responsive caregiving (Rossin, 2011).

Synergies can also be produced by intra-sectoral and inter-sectoral collaboration. Children with special medical needs require a holistic approach not confined to treatment for the specific disease or disability, but comprehensive of their developmental needs, including for responsive caregiving, early learning, and social inclusion, which can only be ensured by a cross-sector collaboration (Limbrick, 2020; Miller, 2022;). The ultimate aim is providing nurturing care for the child as a whole and within their context, as conceived almost half a century ago (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). While theoretical and practical reasons indicate a cross-sector approach

as the most appropriate and effective, it is common experience that putting this into operation is not an easy endeavour. Academic disciplines, training curricula, budgetary architecture, organizational inertia and jealousies all contribute to promote silos thinking and segmentary, fragmented action. Multi-sectoral system thinking and policy proposals are frequently seen as a danger to everyday stability and predictability, or as a threat to conceptual rigor, quality and accountability. To promote a cross-sectoral approach to parenting support, the education sector, and particularly ECEC services, are uniquely placed, due to both a receptive cultural background and focus on holistic child development.

The role of the integrated 0-6 education system in promoting a cross-sectoral approach. Suggestions from recent developments in Italy.

Between 2015 and 2017, combined legislation (Law 107/2015 and Decree 65/2017) promoted in Italy the “integrated 0-6 years education system”, to overcome the long-established separation between the socially connotated 0-3-year daycare services, as services mainly aimed at allowing reconciliation between work and family life, and “pre-school” 3-5-year services, by fostering pedagogical continuity between the two types of services. This represented a revolutionary step, since the two types of services had for a long time belonged, at both national and local level, to different sectors of public administration, i.e. social policies and education, respectively. This legislation, recently accompanied by a set of guidelines (Ministero dell’Istruzione, 2021, 2022), introduced the concept of Early Childhood Hubs for children aged 0 to 6 years [*‘Poli per l’infanzia 0-6’*] to facilitate pedagogical continuity and integration, and promoted physical co-location of 0-3 and 3-5 services. Other typologies of services were recognized as part of the 0-6 system: parents and children centres, where groups of parents and their children experience shared reading, play and other activities capable of enhancing responsive caregiving (Tamburlini, 2020); children’s playrooms and smaller, home-based daycare settings [*‘micronidi’*]

The role of pedagogical coordinators (professionals tasked to support and supervise a small group of 0 to 3 and 3 to 5 services located in the same area) was introduced to supervise work in a small group of services belonging to the same area, promote shared 0 to 6 pedagogical planning, foster continuous professional development, and make development plans with peers within a predefined, larger area. Years after earlier experiences carried out in the Emilia-Romagna Region – traditionally at the forefront of early education in Italy – the role of pedagogical coordinators is now extended to promote collaborative interaction with other community services (social, health, libraries, museums). This concept of the 0-6 integrated education system as a possible hub for child and family services is now slowly finding its way through still robustly rooted silos thinking, also thanks to the opportunities offered by funds made available country-wide for continuous professional development triennial plans.

The health sector too is moving towards a more cross-sectoral approach to the first years. In 2019, Italy’s Ministry of Health produced the document “*Investire precocemente in salute: azioni nei primi 1000 giorni di vita*” (‘Early investment in health: actions during the first 1000 days’) (Ministero della Salute, 2020a). Based on the evidence and recommendations of this document, a “1000 days” component was included in the 2021-25 National Prevention Plan (Ministero della Salute, 2020b) and included in the regional prevention plans in most of the 20 Italian Regions. As a result, multi-professional/multi-sector training events are now taking place, with educators and pedagogical coordinators sitting side by side with social workers, midwives, paediatricians, and other health professionals in charge of children and their families. A nurturing care introductory course was developed in 2022 by a large multi-professional alliance led by the National Institute of Health [*‘Istituto Superiore di Sanità’*] and the *Centro per la Salute delle Bambine e dei Bambini*, a non-profit entity focusing on Early Childhood Development (ECD). The course is highly interactive, includes multi-professional discussion of case studies typically requiring multi-sector involvement and a shared identification of “touchpoints” during the first 1000 days, i.e., sensible periods when all services can contribute to provide social, emotional, and educational support to parents (Istituto Superiore di Sanità, 2022). Multidisciplinary teams have been established to support fragile families within the P.I.P.P.I. program (Milani, 2022). Despite being a risk-oriented, selective program, P.I.P.P.I. has fostered reciprocal knowledge among professionals belonging to diverse services and sectors, thus contributing to overcome the traditional fragmentation in social and educational interventions. At municipal level,

experiences of shared cross-sectoral programs to support parents-to-be and new parents are accumulating (Ciani, 2024).

Further steps towards a multisector parenting support system

The education and the health sector both provide unique opportunities for the common objective of reaching out to all families with quality parenting support: while the health sector ensures universality - as all parents-to-be and families with children have periodic access to family health centres, maternity hospitals, immunization centres and paediatric clinics -, the early education system can bring in a holistic socio-educational parenting support. To further develop and strengthen their role in universal parenting support, the early education services should consider three complementary directions.

First, the family-centred approach should be strengthened by dedicating a definite proportion of working hours to dialogue with parents, thus going beyond the well-established period of welcoming and settling and the periodic meetings with parents. All parents should be made aware that by enrolling their child in the service they also commit to be involved and to participate. Educators and teachers, in their turn, should strengthen their ability to have a constructive, non-judgmental dialogue with parents. These contents should be expanded in both pre-service curricula and continuous professional development (CPD) programs (Zegarac, 2021).

Second, ECEC services should be open to all parents with children. This is essential to at least partially compensate for the missed opportunities of early education that many children still suffer from, particularly in the first three years, in most European countries. Alternatively, or in combination, structured full-time ECEC services could be accompanied by less structured, part-time, free access services open to all children and their parents. Experiences showed that these services can strengthen parental personal resources and community cohesion (Tamburlini, 2020). Such spaces are particularly crucial in the first year, when parents can share their experiences, strengthen their social network, understand what early education is about and bring home practices such as shared reading and play, well established

vectors of responsive caregiving and early learning (Centro per la Salute del Bambino, 2023).

Third, the integrated 0-6 system can also play a role as a hub for community services, providing information and facilitating access to all opportunities for family support and early learning that the communities can offer. A greatly facilitating step in this direction is the physical co-location of health, education, and social services for families with children. An important role in providing early and place-based support to new parents and facilitating cross-sector collaboration can be played by home visiting services focusing on the pre and postnatal period and the first 1000 days (Kitzman, 2010; Kelly, 2011).

Clearly, terms of contract and tenders issued by national local public authorities should be increasingly informed by this new perspective. Pre-service and CPD activities, too, should incorporate the theory and practice of multi-professional work.

To help communities and public administrators to find their way towards universal and integrated programs for holistic parenting support, it is important that the evidence of their need and feasibility is made widely available at country and at EU level. Parents-to-be and new families with children need communities capable of fully supporting the increasingly challenging task of being a parent.

P.I.P.P.I. AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INTEGRATED WELFARE SYSTEM EMBRACING FAMILY VULNERABILITY: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL SERVICES

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The *Programma di Intervento per la Prevenzione dell'Istituzionalizzazione*, P.I.P.P.I. (lit. 'Intervention Program for the Prevention of Institutionalization') represents a comprehensive public initiative developed by the University of Padua's Laboratory for Research and Intervention in Family Education (LabRIEF) and formally adopted by the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies since 2011. Grounded in principles of equity and social justice, the program pursues three interrelated objectives: (1) enhancing children's cognitive, emotional and social competencies (primary objective), (2) strengthening parental capabilities (secondary objective), and (3) improving social services' capacity to deliver customized family support (tertiary objective). Through its emphasis on community-institutional collaboration, P.I.P.P.I. addresses social isolation while reinforcing local support networks and national parenting initiatives.

The program's policy significance was affirmed through its inclusion among Italy's first six *Livelli Essenziali di Prestazioni Sociali* (LEPS), in the 2021-2023 National Social Interventions Plan and 2022 Budget Law. Subsequent funding of €80 million from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) enabled nationwide implementation. P.I.P.P.I. targets vulnerable families with children aged 0-17, prioritizing early childhood (0-6 years), where parents experience difficulties in providing adequate developmental support despite retaining parental rights. This vulnerability manifests along a spectrum of parental challenges in meeting children's needs (Milani, 2022).

The P.I.P.P.I. methodology incorporates five core components (ibid.). First, the program employs the multidimensional model "The World of the Child" ['Il Mondo del Bambino'], adapted from the British Assessment Framework (Grey, 2001), which facilitates holistic child and family evaluations as well as an assessment of their needs, through

participatory methodologies (Serbati & Milani, 2013). Second, customized intervention plans address identified needs while building on existing family strengths and resources.⁸ Third, multidisciplinary teams place children and parents at the centre of decision-making processes. Fourth, four integrated intervention modalities provide intensive support: (a) home- and community-based education, (b) parent-child group activities, (c) institutional partnerships (daycare/schools/social services), and (d) community solidarity networks. Fifth, systematic documentation occurs through the RPMonline digital platform.⁹

This analysis examines P.I.P.P.I.'s innovative integration of social and educational services, focusing on its conceptual framework and practical strategies for disrupting intergenerational disadvantage (Council of the European Union, 2013).

Intersectoral Partnerships in P.I.P.P.I.: Daycare/Schools/Families/Social Services

The partnership model constitutes one of P.I.P.P.I.'s four core intervention strategies, specifically designed to counteract Italy's persistent service fragmentation. The program identifies families with children in the first thousand days of life, as one of its priority target groups, this developmental window as critical for preventive intervention (Milani, 2018; WHO, 2018). aims to promote equitable early childhood development and disrupt intergenerational disadvantage (Council of the European Union, 2013).¹⁰ The daycare/school-family-services partnership operates through three interconnected

8 In particular, Recommendation (2006)9 serves as a legislative bridge between the pursuit of the best interests of children and the enforceability of the right to exercise parental responsibility. It defines the positive exercise of parenting as "parental behaviour based on the best interests of the child and aimed at the child's development and empowerment, using non-violent methods, through recognition and support, and by defining the resources necessary for its successful implementation". Based on national and international legislation, the P.I.P.P.I. LEPS aims to make both of these rights enforceable without opposing them to each other. This is achieved through Plans of intervention that adopt a participatory perspective, involving both the families and the system of services responsible for implementing these interventions.

9 Developed by LabRIEF, in collaboration with the UniPD IT Services Area (ASIT), The RPMonline platform is currently available in version 2.0 and enables the collection and sharing of joint data. The platform is also in the process of achieving interoperability with the Sistema informativo unitario nazionale Servizi sociali, SIUSS ['Unified National Social Services Information System'].

10 Programme data (Milani et al., 2023) underscore the significant potential of early intervention. However, they also highlight a marginal presence of children aged 0-3 in the Programme, indicating the difficulties practitioners and caregivers face in identifying developmental needs and planning early interventions for this age group. To address this issue, an additional training and research initiative, called *Special 03*, was launched, resulting in an upward trend. The percentage of children aged 0-36 months involved in the implementation is now fairly close to the national average, which stands at 15% of the total 0-15 age group.

dimensions, aligned with the triangular “World of the Child” framework:

- A. Child-centred Interventions: focus on developing cognitive, social and emotional-affective capacities through structured educational activities. Educators assume specialized roles as “resilience tutors” [‘tutori di resilienza’], implementing tailored developmental support within group settings.
- B. Family-Professional Collaboration focus on providing parents with guidance and social support. Educational facilities (daycare centres, preschools, and primary education settings) become accessible where parents, educators and social workers (sharing responsibility for child development, albeit in different ways and at different times) engage in co-education activities. Drawing on Bondioli and Mantovani’s (1987) teachers and social workers serve as “daily life experts” [‘professionisti della vita quotidiana’] for parents, bridging formal systems with family contexts. (Bondioli, Mantovani, 1987).
- C. Community integration (formal and informal actions involving universities, social services, and the local community) establishes connections with local organisations (musical, sporting, cultural, and voluntary groups) to promote

Social service workers, daycare staff, and preschool teachers collaborate to develop customized Framework Projects [‘*Progetti Quadro*’] for each participating child and family, beginning before the tailored assistance plan [‘*percorso di accompagnamento*’] is implemented. These projects create learning pathways for social and emotional skills that benefit all children in classrooms where P.I.P.P.I. participants are enrolled.

This article focuses specifically on P.I.P.P.I.’s collaborative work with Pedagogical Territorial Coordination Groups [‘*Coordinamenti Pedagogici Territoriali*’] introduced by Legislative Decree 65/2017 (Balduzzi, Lazzari, 2024).¹¹ The decree’s nationwide implementation of these coordination groups pursued two primary objectives: ensuring vertical continuity in children’s educational trajectories from daycare

to preschool, and fostering horizontal continuity among various educational services within the same geographic area through a unified, coherent training framework (Balduzzi, Lazzari, 2024). P.I.P.P.I. extends this foundational structure by pursuing an even more ambitious integration - promoting continuity not merely within the educational sector, but across multiple service domains including: educational services, social welfare systems, socio-medical programs, socio-educational initiatives. This comprehensive approach to intersectoral collaboration constitutes the innovative core of P.I.P.P.I.’s intervention model.

P.I.P.P.I. employs two primary action streams to achieve its dual objectives of fostering intersectoral collaboration and ensuring continuity in children’s developmental pathways: (1) establishing connections with local entities, and (2) building professional-family partnerships.

(1) Establishing connections with local entities

1.1. Introduction and Mutual Acquaintance Process

P.I.P.P.I. enters the education sector through social services, specifically via Italy’s Territorial Social Areas (‘*Ambiti Territoriali Sociali*’, ATS), established under Framework Law 328/2000 on Social Services. While these social services districts facilitate coordinated service delivery, pedagogical coordination operates through regional zones with local authority governance. Notably, alignment between ATS boundaries and pedagogical coordination zones varies significantly across regions.

From the perspective of establishing connections with relevant local authorities, the connection-building process begins when P.I.P.P.I.’s local ATS representative [‘*referente*’] identifies their counterpart in the Pedagogical Territorial Coordination Groups,

11 Other important regulatory references for this work are: Law 104/1992, which regulates interventions in favour of children with disabilities and their families; Ministerial Decree 8/2012 for children with ‘special educational needs’; the *National Orientations for educational services for children 03 y.o.* and the *Pedagogical Guidelines for the integrated zerosix-school system*; the various protocols between the various institutions in the area, which explicitly provide for integrated work between educational services, schools, families and social services.

initiating a five-stage collaboration framework:

- *Mutual acquaintance*: Developing reciprocal understanding of organizational structures, key personnel, and respective objectives
- *Co-planning*: Formulating shared action plans aligned with P.I.P.P.I.'s goals
- *Implementation*: Executing jointly developed interventions
- *Monitoring*: Systematically tracking progress and outcomes
- *Redesign*: Refining strategies based on evaluation data

The LabRIEF research team participates primarily in this initial relationship-building phase through introductory events organized by Pedagogical Territorial Coordination Groups or ATSS, after which trained local Program coordinators assume implementation leadership. These collaborative efforts typically engage not only core social services but also specialized units including Child Protection Services ['Servizi Protezione e Tutela Minori'] and Child Neuropsychiatry Departments.

1.2 Formation of Interprofessional Working Groups

This preliminary phase enables the constitution of cross-sectoral working groups that integrate professionals from both educational and social service domains. These groups, formally designated as "multidisciplinary team" ['*équipe multidisciplinare*'], assume primary responsibility for implementing tailored Framework Projects with participating families. The team composition strategically combines education specialists, including teachers and pedagogical coordinators, with social service professionals, encompassing social workers and psychologists.

A critical implementation challenge emerges from the frequent absence of prior working relationships among these professionals, often accompanied by deeply entrenched mutual skepticism between sectors. The initial operational phase must therefore systematically address two key barriers to effective collaboration:

Professional Isolation and Institutional Distrust: Practitioners from both social services and educational settings frequently operate in organizational silos,

fostering mutual pessimism about cross-sector collaboration.

Educator Apprehension Regarding Family Engagement: Early childhood educators often demonstrate reluctance to involve social services due to concerns about potential negative reactions from families.

1.3 Adoption of Standardised Protocols

The intersectoral partnership achieves formalization at the institutional level through the development and implementation of standardized frameworks, including: common procedural protocols, evidence-based guidelines, formal inter-institutional agreements. These instruments serve three critical functions:

- Structuring reinforcement of collaborative mechanisms.
- Institutional legitimization of partnership models.
- Long-term stabilization of cooperative practices.

The Territorial Group ['*Gruppo Territoriale*'] assumes a pivotal governance role in this process, functioning as the coordinating body that establishes formal networks between individual practitioners and multidisciplinary teams. This group represents a strategic consortium of stakeholders operating within the same ATS, including: formal service providers (social services, educational institutions, healthcare organizations), local government entities, educational authorities, and community-based organizations

The Territorial Group executes two primary functions to systematize best practices and institutionalize collaborative relationships:

- *Facilitation of Interagency Collaboration*, including: (i) establishing formal agreements enabling teacher participation in multidisciplinary teams, and (ii) positioning schools as active partners in vulnerability prevention initiatives

Promotion of Preventive Practice Culture ['*cultura del lavoro preventivo*'], consisting in the organisation of awareness campaigns targeting frontline practitioners, educational coordinators, administrative

leaders, policy makers within the ATS framework.

1.4. Interprofessional Capacity Building through Joint Training Initiatives

The multidisciplinary teams initiate joint training programs [*percorsi di formazione congiunta*] within their respective ATSS. These capacity-building sessions feature social service professionals assuming instructional roles to enhance the competencies of daycare educators and preschool teachers. The sessions focus on three core components:

- Participatory and transformative evaluation methodologies
- Application of the *World of the Child* developmental framework
- Systematic observation and documentation of children's needs

The *World of the Child* framework provides a comprehensive structure for assessing children's developmental requirements, while evaluating familial capacity to meet these needs as well as for identifying appropriate interventions through dynamic planning processes. This framework operates according to seven foundational principles. First, it prioritizes child protection and the cultivation of conditions conducive to healthy development and well-being. Second, it adopts an ecological perspective that conceptualizes development as an interactive process between children and their social environments, where children actively shape their developmental trajectories through continuous exchanges with caregivers and community members. Third, the model positions both children and parents as collaborative partners in intervention processes. Fourth, it employs a balanced assessment approach that documents both challenges and strengths across relevant life domains. Fifth, it emphasizes the necessity of multi-stakeholder cooperation to adequately address familial and developmental needs. Sixth, the framework treats needs assessment as a continuous/

open process [*processo continuo*] that remains open to revision throughout the intervention period. Seventh, it mandates immediate service provision regardless of assessment completion status, ensuring timely support for vulnerable families.

Since 2023, the Special 0-3 (*Speciale 03*) training pathway has incorporated Maps to Explore 0-3 Years (*Mappe per Esplorare lo 0-3*) as an adjunct assessment tool to the *World of the Child* framework (Serbati et al., 2023). This instrument provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding early development and methodological guidance for needs assessment, alongside customized intervention planning protocols. The tool's implementation has been accompanied by specialized training activities designed to deepen professionals' knowledge of early childhood development, build practical skills in tool application, and generate empirical data to refine both the instrument and associated interventions

1.5 Developing Shared Professional Language and Perspectives

Through ongoing professional development initiatives, practitioners gradually develop a collective understanding of how language shapes professional practice and facilitates meaningful change. As one team member illustrated:

"The daycare centre has adopted more appropriate and useful language in conversations with families. The unexpected outcome was that discussing children's needs and parental responses to foster positive parenting [*genitorialità positiva*] led some parents to change how they communicate not only with staff but also within their families. One mother shared that she managed to talk about her concerns with her husband, and that had she not participated in this activity with us... she would never have spoken with her husband about it."¹²

This evolving professional discourse yields significant improvements in three interrelated domains. First, practitioners enhance their capacity to systematically observe children across settings—within families, at

¹² We report, in italics and in inverted commas, the translated version of an operator testimony. The original quote in Italian, for reference, is as follows: *"Il nido si è appropriato di linguaggi più appropriati e utili nei colloqui con le famiglie, l'esito inatteso è stato che parlare con le famiglie dei bisogni dei bambini e delle risposte dei genitori per costruire genitorialità positiva, è che alcuni genitori hanno modificato la loro comunicazione con gli operatori, ma anche in famiglia. Una mamma ha raccontato di essere riuscita a parlare delle sue preoccupazioni*

daycare centres, and through service interactions. Second, they develop stronger collaborative skills, enabling more effective coordination between daycare staff, families, and social services. This fosters a unified understanding of children's needs that can be translated into concrete, actionable objectives. Crucially, the focus of observation and intervention also shifts fundamentally. Rather than concentrating solely on the child, professionals examine the dynamic interplay between children's needs and parental responses. By framing challenges in terms of needs and achievable goals rather than deficiencies, practitioners replace potential blame with constructive collaboration. This approach cultivates authentic alliances between families and professionals. The focus and object of observation also shift: the emphasis is no longer confined to the child but extends to the dynamic interplay between children's needs and parents' responses. Framing parents' difficulties in terms of needs and objectives, rather than attributing blame, paves the way for constructive collaboration and a sense of alliance between parents and practitioners.

(2) Establishing Connections Between Professionals and Families: Communities of Practice ['Comunità di pratica'] and Shared Actions with Families

Joint training initiatives facilitate the co-design and implementation of collaborative family engagement practices, rooted in the principles of expansive learning (Engeström, 2014). This methodology encompasses several core components that foster professional alignment and family centred approaches.

2.1 Teamwork ['Lavoro di Équipe']

The use of structured tools - particularly *The World of the Child* and *Maps to Explore the 0-3 Years* - enhances interdisciplinary teamwork by deepening professionals' understanding of children's needs.

These resources encourage reflective practice, prompting team members to examine their own roles and responsibilities rather than attributing challenges externally. As one educator observed:

"The child and their family are truly at the center. While we had always aimed for this, we had never achieved such a comprehensive level of care. Additionally, doors that once seemed closed have now opened: a constructive dialogue has been established with social services and parents. When approached with benevolence and empathy, parents feel accepted and supported by the relationship being built. We have been intentional in using language that promotes integration among and within families, ensuring they do not feel marginalized."

Approximately a dozen Social Territorial Areas, predominantly in Northern Italy, have adopted these mapping tools. Practitioners report that the frameworks significantly improve:

- Parental responsiveness to children's developmental needs
- Professional observational capacities
- Systematic documentation practices that inform dialogue with families

By strengthening these competencies, daycare centres emerge as central nodes in local support networks, with educators assuming leadership roles in needs identification and intervention coordination.

A subset of Pedagogical Territorial Coordination Groups has introduced Community Maps [*Mappe di Comunità*] as an additional resource. These maps extend beyond physical geography to visualize relational ecosystems—capturing *"the visible and invisible threads that bind us together, the relationships in which we are embedded and from which we draw resources and support, and the communal spaces that define each community"* (Petrella, 2022). This tool enables professionals to identify and mobilize local assets in support of vulnerable families, reinforcing community-based approaches to early childhood development.

con il marito e che se non avesse partecipato a questa attività con noi... con il marito non ne avrebbe mai parlato."

2.2 Framework Projects: Collaborative Planning for Child Development

The Framework Project [‘Progetto Quadro’] represents a core mechanism for establishing shared understanding between educators and families regarding each child’s developmental needs and pathways. In the educational context, this collaborative planning tool takes institutional form through the Educational Co-Responsibility Pact [‘*Patto Educativo di Corresponsabilità*’], which operates across micro and meso systemic levels (Milani, 2018). This Pact involves signing a series of agreements between daycare centers and families that establish shared responsibility, with both parties committing to uphold its democratically agreed contents. Through these Pacts, services can promote innovative forms of participation and co-education between families and professionals. The approach aims to strengthen parents’ capacity to respond to their children’s developmental needs, enabling each parent to become an active resource for their children, teachers, and wider community. Importantly, this model does not seek to “educate” parents in a conventional top-down manner or simply provide support. Rather, it fosters an inclusive process of accompaniment for all parents in their educational role, consciously avoiding the imposition of standardized parenting practices.

The approach is grounded in several key principles:

- Recognizing and valuing families’ lived contexts
- Focusing on empowering each parent’s educational potential
- Acknowledging parents as individuals entitled to a central role
- Ensuring all parents receive respect and support regardless of circumstances

By centering parental agency and partnership, the Framework Project transforms traditional service relationships into collaborative educational alliances focused on child development and family wellbeing. The Pact’s signed agreements serve as both symbolic and practical commitments to this shared journey, creating structured yet flexible pathways for family engagement in children’s learning processes.

2.3 Parental Engagement Through Group Activities

Recognizing parents as central partners in the educational process, the program systematically implements structured group activities focused on parenting roles and responsibilities. These initiatives include two primary modalities of engagement:

First, facilitated discussion groups create spaces for dialogue between educators and parents to develop shared approaches to co-education. These sessions allow for the exchange of perspectives and collective problem-solving around child development and learning practices.

Second, the program incorporates various “open classroom” opportunities where parents—within the constraints of their availability—actively participate alongside their children in classroom activities. These sessions encompass diverse educational experiences including:

- Shared reading activities
- Artistic and craft projects
- Theater workshops
- Library organization initiatives
- Science experiments
- Cooking workshops

Beyond direct child-focused participation, the program further engages parents through mutual aid workshops [‘*atelier del mutuo aiuto*’]. In these rotating sessions, parents contribute their skills and time to support not only their own children but also other participating families. This reciprocal model strengthens community bonds while reinforcing parents’ roles as active contributors to the educational environment.

2.4 Restructured Parent-teacher meetings

The program reimagines traditional parent-teacher meetings by implementing a participatory framework centered on the newly developed assessment tools. Each family is guaranteed three personalized meetings annually: at the beginning, midpoint, and conclusion of the school year. These extended sessions, lasting 30-60 minutes (significantly longer than conventional 10-minute informational meetings), are designed as interactive dialogues rather than one-directional reports.

The restructured meetings serve multiple purposes: enabling parents to understand their child's school experiences, empowering them to actively support their child's educational journey, and fostering collaborative planning between home and school. Daycare staff facilitate this process through refined communication strategies that emphasize concrete behavioral observations rather than interpretations. This observational approach encourages reciprocal sharing, with parents similarly adopting descriptive language when discussing their child's home experiences.

2.5 Transforming Reporting Practices Through Collaborative Care

This context of proximity and partnership between educational institutions (daycare, preschools) and social services has reshaped conventional approaches to *“la segnalazione”* (‘reporting concerns about children/families’). Within this model, formal reporting becomes one option among several potential responses to emerging difficulties, with many situations addressed through preventative collaboration rather than institutional intervention. Educational settings now serve as hubs for supportive group meetings and relationship-building, functioning as crossroads where families, educators, and social services converge. This framework proves particularly valuable for families already involved with child welfare systems, as seen when childcare centers host supervised visits or other preventative measures.

The paradigm shift moves from reactive reporting to proactive support characterized by three core principles:

- Early collaborative intervention when challenges emerge
- Family empowerment through partnership
- Community solidarity and mutual respect

By centering care and prevention, this approach strengthens family capacity while creating more inclusive environments where children's needs are met through sustained cooperation rather than institutional escalation. The model demonstrates how educational settings can serve as both early warning systems and primary support networks for vulnerable families.

2.6 Community Educational Pacts: Fostering Collaborative Ecosystems

The Educational Community Pacts [*‘Patti educativi di Comunità’*] are a tool introduced by the Ministry of Education (*Ministero dell'Istruzione, Piano Scuola 2020-2021*) that enable local authorities, third-sector organizations (or NGOs), associations, and schools to enter into specific agreements. These pacts are effective not only in fostering the school-family alliance but also in promoting collaboration between schools and the broader local community. In alignment with the P.I.P.P.I. approach, the Educational Community Pacts operate at both exosystemic and macrosystemic levels (Mangione et al., 2024). They foster the creation of supportive communities through innovative forms of proximity-based welfare, the activation of engagement pathways for the educational community, and community design initiatives aimed at defining collaborations centered on several key areas.

First, the pacts encourage participation in terms of time and services provided by families to childcare centers and schools. This includes families with limited economic resources, guided by the principle that “no one is so poor they have nothing to give,” as seen in various *Banca del Tempo* (Time Bank) initiatives. This reciprocity also extends to schools offering support to families, such as facilitating work-life balance through self-help and mutual aid approaches, addressing issues like domestic violence prevention and peer education. Second, the pacts promote the design of educational activities where parents can become “helpers” for other parents, fostering solidarity and proximity. This includes creating small, specially trained parent groups that provide local leadership and work with and for the school within the local community. Third, the pacts activate literacy courses, language and writing workshops for parents, particularly those excluded from professional contexts or isolated in domestic environments (as is often the case for many women). This also includes Italian as a Second Language (L2) courses for parents with migrant backgrounds, as well as training in cultural mediation to enable professionals to better understand families' needs and support their empowerment. Fourth, the pacts engage the economic sector (e.g., supermarkets, businesses, services) to promote the economic and professional integration of parents, as well as involving cultural and sports entities such as museums, theaters, libraries, cinemas, and associations.

These pacts aim to create a holistic and inclusive ecosystem where schools, families, and the broader

community collaborate to address educational, social, and economic challenges, fostering a culture of shared responsibility and mutual support. The model exemplifies how educational settings can serve as catalysts for community-wide transformation by institutionalizing collaboration across multiple sectors and creating networks of care that extend beyond traditional school boundaries. Through these pacts, schools become hubs that connect families with local resources while empowering all community members to contribute to children's educational journeys.

While implementation challenges persist, these testimonies demonstrate P.I.P.P.I.'s success in repositioning early childhood settings as central nodes in integrated support systems. The model underscores how educational spaces can simultaneously serve children's developmental needs while strengthening family and community capacities—a dual focus essential for addressing vulnerability in all its complexity.

Conclusions

The P.I.P.P.I. approach represents a comprehensive model for integrating daycare centers, preschools, and social services to support families experiencing situations of vulnerability. By bridging the traditional divide between educational and social service sectors, the initiative works to counteract the medicalization of children's developmental challenges while promoting more holistic, context-sensitive interventions. Central to this transformation is the dual focus on:

- A. Strengthening educators' socio-educational competencies.
- B. Fostering an ecosystemic understanding of vulnerability that resists the "undue labeling" of children (Frances, 2013).

The formative and research activities conducted by LabRIEF researchers have facilitated a crucial paradigm shift—from initial relationships marked by mutual distrust to established partnerships grounded in both the principles and daily practice of authentic collaboration. This evolution is reflected in the observations of one daycare educator:

"The awareness of a positive relationship and mutual professional respect between the daycare center and social services forms the foundation for strong family engagement. We've observed that as vulnerable parents—facing multiple life challenges—develop trust in the daycare center, services, and ultimately in their own parenting capacities, their perception of the center transforms. It becomes recognized not just as an educational space for children, but as a family support hub that connects services and builds community networks."

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