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DEFINING A 0-6 YEARS FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

The new Italian legislative perspective on early childhood education and preschool services – as laid down in Law 107/2015 and Decree 65/2017 – provides for an “Integrated education and schooling system from birth to six years”, thereby introducing key changes to the existing system from both the organization/management and cultural/pedagogical points of view. The definition of educational continuity, professional development of educators and teachers, local coordination of services, and setting up of childhood service hubs [“Poli dell’infanzia”] are all new themes that need to be explored and translated into concrete reality on the ground. The new regulatory framework paves the way for a new wave of experimentation and innovation, but at the same time raises critical issues for early years education and preschool services, which if unaddressed, may impede the effective creation of novel and higher quality educational opportunities for children.

CHILDHOOD • EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION • PEDAGOGY • ITALY

DEFININDO UMA ESTRUTURA PARA 0 A 6 ANOS DE IDADE

Resumo

A nova perspectiva legislativa italiana sobre o atendimento da creche e pré-escola – conforme estabelecido pela Lei n. 107/2015 e pelo Decreto n. 65/2017 – prevê um “sistema integrado de educação e instrução, desde o nascimento até os seis anos”, introduzindo, assim, mudanças importantes no sistema existente, tanto do ponto de vista organizacional/administrativo quanto do ponto de vista cultural/pedagógico. A definição da continuidade educacional, do desenvolvimento profissional de educadores e professores, da coordenação local do atendimento e da criação de centros de atendimento à infância [“Poli dell’infanzia”] são temas novos, que precisam ser explorados e traduzidos em realidade concreta. A nova estrutura regulatória abre caminho para uma nova onda de experimentações e inovação, mas, ao mesmo tempo, levanta questões críticas para o atendimento de creche e pré-escola, as quais, se não forem abordadas, podem impedir a criação efetiva de oportunidades educacionais novas e de maior qualidade para as crianças.

INFÂNCIA • EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL • PEDAGOGIA • ITÁLIA

DÉFINIR UNE STRUCTURE POUR LES ENFANTS DE 0 À 6 ANS

Résumé

La nouvelle législation italienne, établie par la loi n.107/2015 et le décret n. 65/2017, concernant la prise en charge de la petite enfance et de l'éducation préscolaire, prévoit un "système intégré d'éducation et d'enseignement dès la naissance jusqu'à l'âge de six ans". Elle introduit des changements importants dans le système existant, aussi bien du point de vue organisationnel et administratif que du point de vue culturel et pédagogique. La définition de la continuité de l'éducation, du développement professionnel des éducateurs et des enseignants, de la coordination locale des centres d'accueil ["Poli dell'infanzia"], sont de nouveaux thèmes qui doivent être exploitées et se traduire dans le concret. Le nouveau cadre réglementaire ouvre la voie à une nouvelle vague d'expérimentations et d'innovations, tout en soulevant des questions cruciales pour les services à la petite enfance et à l'éducation préscolaire qui pourraient, si elles ne sont pas abordées, empêcher la mise en place efficace de nouvelles opportunités éducatives d'une plus grande qualité pour les petits.

ENFANCE • ÉDUCATION DE LA PETITE ENFANCE • PÉDAGOGIE • ITALIE

DEFINIENDO UN MARCO DE 0 A 6 AÑOS DE EDAD

Resumen

La nueva perspectiva legislativa italiana sobre educación infantil y preescolar, según lo establecido por la Ley no. 107/2015 y por el Decreto no. 65/2017 – prevé un "sistema integrado de educación y enseñanza desde el nacimiento hasta los seis años", introduciendo cambios importantes en el sistema existente, tanto desde el punto de vista organizativo / administrativo como desde el punto de vista cultural / pedagógico. La definición de la continuidad educativa, del desarrollo profesional de educadores y maestros, de la coordinación local de la atención y de la creación de centros de atención a la infancia ["Poli dell'infanzia"] son temas nuevos que deben explorarse y traducirse en una realidad concreta. El nuevo marco regulatorio allana el camino para una nueva ola de experimentación e innovación, pero al mismo tiempo plantea problemas críticos para el cuidado de la educación infantil y preescolar que, si no se abordan, pueden impedir la creación efectiva de oportunidades educativas nuevas y de mayor calidad para los niños.

INFANCIA • EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL • PEDAGOGÍA • ITALIA

THE CHANGES INTRODUCED BY THE NEW ITALIAN LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

For a long time now, education and school services for young children – following years of innovative ferment and investment in experimentation, which saw, for example, the launch of supplementary services for young children with the opening of the first *Tempo per le famiglie* [child and family education centres] in Milan in 1986 and, a decade later, a large number of projects undertaken with the funding provided under Law 285/97 – have been going through a period of stability and consolidation, without any major new developments. Although at both the Italian and European levels, there has been a constant drive to identify quality educational solutions, especially in light of contemporary social and cultural challenges, only with the recent legislative changes has the national debate truly reignited, both within the education services themselves and in academia. Discussion has focused on the theme, which is not without its critical and controversial aspects, of the new perspective inherent in the “Integrated education and schooling system from birth to six years” introduced via Law 107/2015 and the subsequent Decree 65/2017 (ITALIA, 2017). This new perspective implies changes to numerous aspects of the organization of early childhood education/care and pre-primary education services, basic and in-service training for educators and teachers, educational and curriculum design, and overall policy for the development of this sector. The main novelty concerns the fact that early childhood education and pre-primary schooling have distinct histories and to date have followed distinct patterns of development in our country, yet now have been

called together to define a joint future, in which they will be required to envisage and experiment with ways of connecting and working together that are deeper, more systematic, and more structural than the – albeit meaningful – existing initiatives designed to provide continuity between early childhood education/care for 0- to 3-year-olds and pre-primary schooling for 3- to 6-year-olds. By instituting an integrated system in which early childhood education/care becomes part of the educational offering supervised by the Ministry of Education, University and Research – which is the radical new departure – the new law in practice should prompt the development of a shared educational culture, whose specific field of intervention is the first six years of children’s lives, within an organic and coherent framework that is not the sum of, but an original and innovative synergy between the respective experience and knowledge of educating young children detained by the 0-3 years and 3-6 years education sectors. Indeed, in addition to calling for systematic collaboration and project-sharing between these educational contexts, the new legislative framework also provides for the setting up of “Poli per l’infanzia” or dedicated “early childhood and preschool education hubs”. These centres are intended to practically embody the desired continuity across the 0-6 years period, by offering early years education and pre-school services for children in this age range at a single site or group of nearby sites, thus facilitating concrete and effective cooperation in areas such as general services and professional resources, with a view to identifying and implementing a shared educational path. Decree 65/2017 defines the proposed hubs as “permanent laboratories of research, innovation, participation, and openness to the territory”. Article 1 of the Decree 65/2017 clearly expresses these aims, emphasizing the need to foster

[...] continuity in education and schooling [...] supporting children’s development across a unified process, in which the different parts of the integrated system of education and schooling work together through joint planning, coordination, and professional development activities.

This statement implicitly suggests that the new 0-6 years educational culture evoked by the legislative framework is in reality still largely to be developed, requiring to be built up over time through investment in joint planning, coordination and training, which in turn can be achieved by setting up permanent work groups formed by both pre-school and early childhood education staff. Even more deeply implicit is the idea – which also represents a challenge – that these two groups of education practitioners should progressively work more closely together, in an ongoing and systematic way, both in preparation for and alongside their educational work with the children. This is clearly a major change, which undoubtedly offers great potential but, at the same time, involves complexity and obstacles (at the organizational, managerial, contractual and cultural levels). While the Decree naturally does not refer to these difficulties, it

is widely acknowledged in the current debate within the education sector that the present situation in early childhood and preschool education services is far distant from these objectives. In other words, the new legislation provides a “0-6 years framework” for a series of prescribed innovations, which to become effective will require changes to be implemented by in-service education staff, head teachers, coordinators and all those who are involved in early years and preschool education, as a function of their different roles, expertise, and responsibilities. Meeting this challenge will entail initiating a key – mainly cultural – shift in terms of redefining and constructing the pedagogical meanings attributed to education and schooling for children in their first six years of life, a process that is currently only partly underway in selected settings, and which will undoubtedly require time and a considerable investment of energy and resources, including at the material level. The new law, in other words, does not reflect the present situation, as has often been throughout the history of the education sector, but pushes for the implementation of a new education and schooling project that will only be fully realized in the future.

In the next paragraphs, I describe and analyse the pedagogical implications of the complex process envisaged by the law, arguing that the new Italian regulatory framework prompts broader reflection on the political meaning and educational value of the overall set of services we offer to children, and assuming the principle that children’s quality of life is a powerful indicator of the general quality of life in our societies.

DEFINING CHILDHOOD IN THE 0-6 YEARS PERIOD

The new regulatory framework induces a train of reflection that leads us to re-examine some basic questions, which have always been salient to education services for young children, though perhaps remaining at a more hidden and implicit level.

Following Bondioli and Savio, we can identify two main domains of questions: “first, whether and in what terms we can speak of an education that is specifically designed for children aged 0-6 years; second, whether [...] it is possible to identify transversal principles and practices” (2018, p. 11). Indeed, the 0-6 years perspective forces us to inquire into and clarify the representations of childhood orienting the new unified framework, and thus to identify the key aspects of early childhood and preschool education that must be specifically designed to suit this specific life period with its unique and peculiar rhythms, themes, dynamics, and potentialities. At the same time, recognizing and respecting the peculiarities of the different stages of development across the long period of life from birth to six years, if viewed as a resource, should not prevent the identification of transversal and recurrent aspects of 0-6 years education, on the basis of which to design new educational offerings. These two domains of reflection – i.e., the specific and transversal aspects of education for 0- to 6-year-old children – are both essential, if we are to reaffirm and bring into clearer focus the educational and psychological

knowledge currently informing educational design and offerings and approaches to childhood in our education services. However, the zero-six perspective also raises other questions about childhood and about how the various institutional services for this age range have been organized to date. Specifically, services for young children have been divided into distinct categories: early years education, including infant-toddler centres and other supplementary educational services for children in the first three years of life and their families; socio-psycho-educational services, including residential care facilities and other prevention, welfare, and protection projects and services for children and parents; and finally, pre-primary schooling in the form of nursery schools.

These three distinct areas or categories into which services for young children have been structured over time in our country, correspond to three distinct cultures and three distinct views of childhood that in turn rely on highly differentiated disciplinary principles, theoretical foundations, sets of methodologies, languages and codes. These differences do not always facilitate fluid and constructive dialogue among the three different areas. Furthermore, this tripartite division of services and institutional settings for young children, into what might be summed up as “the worlds of education, welfare, and schooling” reflects a deeper division and segmentation in institutional representations of childhood, yielding at least three different definitions of the “child”: the child viewed from an educational perspective, the child whose welfare and protection needs must be met, and the child as a recipient of knowledge and learning.

Clearly, real children cannot be segmented in this way but express personal, family and cultural identities, such that each child’s unique history is the unified outcome of his or her experience, knowledge, affect and relationships. If anything, it is the child services and the professional cultures characterizing them that tend to reductively separate and classify that which in human life and phenomena is inextricably intertwined.

Some years ago, Riccardo Massa (1987) summed up this absurd paradox very effectively, arguing that it is impossible to conceptualize education without instruction and, conversely, instruction without education. Provocatively, in his well-known work “Educating or instructing? The end of pedagogy in contemporary culture”, Massa suggested that the way out of this impasse was to adopt a new and courageous pedagogical perspective. I do not know whether today’s new legislative measures implicitly call for a new departure in pedagogical terms. What is certain is that they prompt us to engage with a series of fundamental questions: What is our vision of childhood in the 0 to 6 years range referred to in the new legislation? Which children are we focusing on? On which aspects of their life? What professional knowledge will be required? Guidance in answering these questions may be found in Article 1 of Decree 65/2017 – on the law’s underlying principles and purposes – which states that:

[...] the integrated system of education and schooling: a)
promotes continuity of education and instruction [...];

b) helps to reduce cultural, social and relational disadvantage and promotes the inclusion of all children [...]; c) welcomes children with disabilities [...]; d) respects and welcomes diversity [...]; e) supports the primary educational function of families [...]; e) helps to match parents' working hours and types of work with care [...]; g) enhances the quality of the educational offering.

The idea is to define a trajectory in which, while pursuing these aims, it is possible to combine, and maintain continuity across, the education and instruction phases. This implies, as stated above, the need to transcend the division between education and instruction by developing a new pedagogical approach that organically caters for both. However, identifying our goals in these areas also means defining the vision of childhood underpinning the integrated 0-6 years system. What educational and school culture does it foster? Will it take on board individual differences (and not only those that are cultural or social in nature), and relational or psychological vulnerability (not only in cases of disability): in short, will it engage with difficult situations that depart from the 'norm', requiring targeted intervention in terms of preventive or reparative education? The Decree makes legal provision for developing a shared culture across the early childhood education and pre-primary school phases. However, this change risks being dangerously partial and reductive if it precludes the possibility of developing a broader and more comprehensive culture of childhood, omitting a socio-psycho-pedagogical focus on the child that: is open to all forms and expressions of difference; consciously fosters the wellbeing required for healthy, secure, and safe development; and offers every child the opportunity to actively engage with the self, others and the world, while receiving personalized attention from adult figures.

It seems, on the contrary, that the quest for continuity between the infant-toddler centre and the preschool will result in a notional boundary delimiting, no longer three, but two areas of intervention with children: namely, the educational-instructional and socio-psycho-educational domains. In other words, early childhood education and pre-primary schooling will be grouped together, but kept distinct from the world of prevention, protection and welfare services. It is always interesting to examine how intervention settings are organized, because this reveals broader meanings than those that are explicitly declared. Hence, it is useful to investigate the processes and new organizational structures characterizing the restructuring of services for young children, and the rethinking of the 0-6 years pedagogy, because this in turn leads us to examine the related meanings and representations of childhood. What will become in this new framework of the principle of, respect for, and valuing of difference? We know that throughout the history of education, accepting the difference of which each child is an expression, not only when he or she has a complex personal history, requires conscious investment in developing individualized relationships

and educational interventions. In the new 0-6 years framework, how will individualization be interpreted? What meanings will be attributed to it, and through what educational practices will it be embodied on the ground?

Philippe Merieu warns against a culture, which may be identified in a certain technocratic way of understanding and delivering schooling, that deploys individualization as a means of categorizing differences and eliminating them by positioning them outside the classroom, and outside the educational context. In relation to the French school system, Merieu (2018, p. 96) observes that “Individualization is not understood as a means of helping the individuals within a group to overcome their difficulties. On the contrary, it has become a technocratic means of managing differences among individuals, a means of social organization, a political model”. Individual attention, which has always represented a key theoretical and experimental focus for education, is not a valid principle in itself, if we fail to clearly define how it is interpreted and implemented on the ground, via the concrete actions and practices that alone can reveal the intentions and the values that are implicit in the education system and in the intervention of a teacher/educator. We thus need to recognize that there are different ways of interpreting and practicing individualized education and learning. When, to return to Merieu’s analysis, individualized approaches serve to “identify difficulties and refer individuals with problems to institutions or services that will take them into their care by applying standardized forms of treatment” then schools and educational services have abdicated from their educational role, turning away children with a clear need for personalized attention and specific intervention, in order to concentrate on working with those who are in line with or close to the “norm”, attending to the class or group as homogeneous sets of children. Such an approach undoubtedly penalizes (all) children, but also results in the educational and cultural impoverishment of teachers’ and educators’ professionalism, by restricting their range of action to “standard”, linear, and a-problematic situations, corresponding to an illusory ideal of the child that matches an adult reference model. Clearly, the risk incurred is that teachers/educators will fail to intervene, choosing to wait, and delegating responsibility for action to other specialists, in situations in which children in reality do not (only) require special intervention, but also the opportunity to be actively involved in meaningful relationships with an adult who takes responsibility for their individual educational needs and is open to engaging in authentic, non-standardized contact with them. Marking out a clear boundary between education/schooling on the one hand and prevention/protection/welfare on the other may lead to more rigidly specified and specialized roles for educational services and schools, but also to the more rigid taking for granted by educators and teachers of a non-existent “normality”, which uses individualization not as an educational principle but as a selection criterion that leads to specialized treatment (outside the educational/school setting) for children who, for various reasons, which may be more or less serious, have different life stories and development trajectories.

Thus, when Decree 65/2017 calls for a closer relationship between early childhood and preschool education within an integrated 0-6 years education service, without addressing cultural issues and the socio-psycho-educational dimension of prevention and protection, it risks generating an even greater distance among cultures of childhood and groups of practitioners who work with children, whereas only dialogue and cooperation can give rise to a more holistic and respectful understanding of childhood as a whole. If, therefore, childhood is a specific life stage, perhaps this is also because – more so than any other phase of human existence – it is characterized by a holistic dynamic, in which affect, knowledge, relations, and perceptions develop and foster one another in a flow of reciprocal connections. Only by deploying plural and complex forms of access can the adult world attempt to enter into contact with the world of children.

These considerations prompt close examination of another crucial question raised by Decree 65/2017: that of professional development and competences.

BASIC TRAINING, IN-SERVICE TRAINING, AND PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

To date, educators working with infants and toddlers have only been required to hold a secondary school diploma. Decree 65/2017 has brought all early childhood education and care services under the remit of the Ministry of Education, and states that, like teachers, early years educators must hold at least a bachelor's degree, specifically in the “child” stream of the degree course in Educational Sciences.

It is of interest to us here to quickly focus on the characteristics of the basic training pathways that currently exist, at the university level, for preschool teachers and early years educators. These are two separate paths, within two different courses of study, following different programs, that do not overlap at any point. They also have a different duration: teacher education lasts five years, with the opportunity (by earning a further 60 credits) to also obtain the license to work in early childhood education and care setting; training for educators in contrast lasts three years (there is currently no provision for direct access to courses allowing them to qualify as teachers). It follows that preschool teachers, by engaging in additional study, can also choose to work in the 0-3 years education sector, but the reverse is not possible.

Requiring all those who work with 0- to 6-year-old children to hold a third level qualification is a key step in the right direction, but the marked differentiation between the university training of 0-3 years and 3-6 years practitioners is not so positive. It is a real pity that this opportunity to complete rethink university training for professionals working with children has been wasted. If, as previously argued, childhood is now unanimously recognized as a specific and peculiar stage in a person's life and development, then the training of professional figures working in this field also deserves to be thematized by identifying the transversal dimensions and skills that come into play in the 0-6

years period and that need to be included in the basic training of both educators and teachers, possibly through shared learning modules.

From this point of view, the internship/teaching practice component of university training (INFANTINO, 2013, 2015; INFANTINO, ZUCCOLI, 2015), understood as student educators'/teachers' opportunity to acquire practical knowledge (INFANTINO, 2014) on the ground, offers a valuable opportunity to form mixed groups and to stimulate exchange and discussion based on live situations experienced by observing and interacting with the children at preschool and in early childhood education centres. Within the framework of a new culture of childhood, rethinking the ways in which basic training is carried out would be of great interest, as would responding to the need, today increasingly perceived as urgent, to reflect on models, paradigms and methodologies that have traditionally characterized education in all its forms, but that now require enhancement in light of changes in the education sector itself and of evolving educational needs. The connection between education and professionalism deserves to be fully explored to redefine the meanings previously assigned, for example, to the relationship between theory and practice, between action and reflection and not least between universities and the world of early years education and preschool services. In the education and teaching professions, the development of competence is seen as necessarily requiring hands-on experience and intervention: that is, as not exclusively resting on the theoretical, intellectual and conceptual knowledge that is transmitted at lectures, but as requiring active learning processes in which dynamic connections and interconnections between thoughts, perceptions, ideas, and the material dimension are set in motion. When we speak about child development, we emphasize the cognitive value of experience, which we understand as the opportunity to practice accessing the world (relational, symbolic, empirical, cultural) on the part of the unified mind-body system; this opportunity is progressively withdrawn from adults, as though we wished to reduce the power of experiential knowledge (JEDLOWSKI, 2008), interpreting learning in terms that are abstract and distant from the material life. Basic training could become more effective by developing more hybrid and fluid combinations of formal classroom learning and professional experience in the field, and by explicitly offering fluidity and continuity of training across 0-3 years and 3-6 years educational and preschool contexts (at both the material and conceptual levels). Students' university education could be interpreted and offered as intellectual and practical training in the exchange of views and cooperation that will prove crucial when they subsequently enter educational practice in early years and preschool services, but that will not immediately develop as full-blown professional abilities if they have not acquired the necessary skills and competences as students. It is difficult to imagine that separate and non-communicating basic training paths can form dialogical minds, oriented towards continuity across the 0-6 years period, open to plural perspectives and interdisciplinary exchange immediately on entry to educational practice. The law addresses the issue of how to develop shared knowledge bases,

shifting it from the basic training to the in-service training stage, and providing for educators and teachers to participate in common training courses, organized by local authorities and financed by a National Fund, which however is not exclusively dedicated to professional development activities but also intended to cover the construction or renovations of buildings and the management of early years education and preschool services.

Thus, as earlier pointed out in relation a 0-6 years culture of childhood, where training is concerned, the new legislative framework again provides for innovation, but at the same time does not fix clear criteria and organizational guidelines to ensure that the called-for experimentation and changes will be effective. It should be pointed out that in Italy, the management of the education system is divided up between central, regional and local government in a way that is highly complex, while to complicate the situation still further early childhood education and preschool services are delivered by multiple types of provider (public, private, officially recognised private, no-profit), who are often subject to different administrative constraints and contractual frameworks. Hence, the issue of funding the implementation of the “integrated 0-6 years system” is crucial, and at the same time controversial. The development of appropriate in-service training courses will rely on planning and cultural investment at the local level on the part of those responsible for managing 0-6 years educational services, but in terms of funding adequate resources will need to be assigned at the regional and national level.

In-service training can function as the “connective tissue” between the different cultures currently characterizing educational services for young children, but its inevitable limits mean that it will only facilitate the setting off of cultural processes, innovative educational design, professional exchanges, etc. which to be fully effective and long-lasting will necessarily demand other forms of ongoing everyday contact between early years educators and preschool teachers. Furthermore, joint in-service training can contribute to and revitalize educators’ and teachers’ culture of childhood, if it provides opportunities for practical sharing on the ground and not just classroom sessions in which the world of ideas and good intentions dominates, while the day-to-day reality of professional intervention unfolds along different lines, which can be far removed from, and even in contrast with, what is thought and expressed through verbal communication.

Such contradictions are frequently encountered by teacher educators. By way of illustration, we may draw an example from the documentation of a training course with a mixed group of educators and preschool teachers in a Northern Italian town, in which the gap between a public preschool teacher’s declared values and her actual educational practice clearly emerges.

First meeting. The group discusses the issue of autonomy on the part of the children. Educators and teachers are invited to express their point of view, and to share examples and situations from their everyday direct relationship with the children. A teacher states with conviction that it is of crucial importance to

her that the children be independent and that, with this value in mind, adults should lay out environments for children in which everything is not prepared and planned in advance, leaving room for creative and spontaneous intervention by the children, and thus showing that they have full confidence in the children's skills.

Second meeting. The group works on the ground in the school, but after hours, with the aim of examining and discussing the organization of spaces and materials from the standpoint of encouraging autonomy on the part of the children. The same teacher forcefully points out a sharp-edged item of furniture, which she perceives as a potential hazard for the children. She also invites her colleagues to move some pieces of furniture that she feels are dangerous because the children could overturn them and get hurt. Her co-workers listen without saying anything.

Third meeting: After examining the layout of the spaces, we go through the live re-enactment of an activity conducted with the children during their induction period, while their parents were present. The same teacher describes an activity conducted the previous day (the first day for the group of new children), during which she invited the children to sit around a table and offered them coloured dough to handle. She was satisfied because she had found the children ready to appropriately respond to her invitation. They had stayed at the table for almost half an hour.

These brief notes allow us to observe that the same teacher, who in the formal training setting declares unshakable faith in the principles of active education, displays on the ground the tendency to control the children's behaviour and to direct their experience from an adult-centric perspective.

How can professional development processes enter into contact with these deep underlying dimensions of educators' and teachers' professional approaches? The change and professional growth which training processes are intended to bring about concern above all helping teachers and educators to establish consistent connections and circular feedback between their declared theoretical beliefs and the practical knowledge implemented in their educational action, and thus to develop a more solid pedagogical awareness. This aspect seems even more important when it comes to dialogue and the sharing of cultures between early years educators and preschool teachers, in that a new 0-6 years perspective must necessarily be based on practitioners' real everyday experience of sharing educational responsibilities on the ground, in direct contact with children.

Even effective and consistent training processes cannot be the only means of supporting change; indeed, the legislation emphasizes the key role of local area coordination in the target integrated 0-6 years system.

THE CRUCIAL ISSUE OF COORDINATION

Coordination is defined as a particularly critical nodal function, meaning that it is needed to tie and weave together the multiple strands of early childhood and preschool education present in an area, which would otherwise remained disconnected or at best loosely connected. The first key purpose of coordination

is therefore to connect the different services, drawing them into an organic and coherent framework and development project. Even this first level of intervention should positively impact on the quality of services: it enhances the level of mutual knowledge among different agencies within the same system and expands the system's capacity to cater for demand by coordinating and optimizing the types of services offered. Furthermore, belonging to a network facilitates the pooling of energies, potentialities and resources, allowing investment to be channelled towards new areas not yet offered by the system. Clearly, coordination is also a valuable function from a strictly pedagogical point of view, insofar as it systematically incorporates the educational agendas of individual services into a holistic vision. It is no coincidence that Decree 65/2017 refers to coordination in terms of pedagogical coordination, suggesting that the administrative, management, organizational aspects of coordination, while equally intrinsic and pertinent to the function, are incomplete without the pedagogical aspect.

Coordination is therefore an extremely important and sensitive function that can play an influential pedagogical role in the definition and development of a new 0-6 years perspective and the relative professional development of educators and teachers. Pedagogical coordination can indeed be decisive in fostering, supporting and coordinating the creation of mixed professional groups made up of both early years educators and preschool teachers, thus helping to identify priority areas and issues for a new 0-6 years agenda. The legislation thus identifies pedagogical coordination as a strategic objective to be pursued in keeping with the more general guidelines laid down in European policies (LAZZARI, 2016). The specific task of setting up and promoting local-level pedagogical coordination bodies is the responsibility of the regional governments, but the legislation does not explicitly state what criteria, professional competences or qualifications coordinators should have. Once again, while the law avoids being excessively rigid and prescriptive and this is good, on the other hand, there is a risk that the scope for interpretation left by the legislation may translate into operational voids and a consequent state of immobility.

The various unclear points in the legislation correspond to critical areas that could impair or constrain the the integrated 0-6 years system from being defined and implemented to the full of its innovative and transformative potential.

These considerations lead us to conclude that, during this tricky and complex first stage in the implementation of the new legislative framework, it is essential to create cultural conditions that encourage early years and pre-primary practitioners to observe with new interest and professional curiosity the children they work with every day, and to begin to explore the challenges and possibilities associated with the 0-6 years framework. Aside from the possibilities and limitations that we have identified in the legislation, the introduction of a 0-6 years perspective is a key innovation that may be grasped by educators and teachers as a valuable opportunity to broaden their professional gaze, engage in experimentation, and undertake sustainable and immediately practicable

heuristic projects, as part of their everyday practice, and to the benefit of the children.

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