

ECEC in the European Union: analysis and governance of ECEC systems of four Member States

L'ECEC nell'Unione Europea: analisi e governance dei sistemi di educazione e cura dell'infanzia di quattro Paesi membri

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Abstract

This paper explores Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Italy – with a focus on Tuscany – and in three EU Member States, namely Finland, France, and Germany. In order to better understand the ECEC systems, a snapshot of the regulatory framework related to ECEC in the EU is provided at the beginning. Then, the analysis of the ECEC systems is around five topics, accompanied by some socio-demographical data, especially on female employment. The topics are: the type of Early Childhood Education and Care system selected, with a focus on the administrative and political aspects; the articulation of Early Childhood Education and Care services; the percentage of use; roles, the tasks and training of professionals involved in ECEC; the services-family and local communities relationship.

Keywords: ECEC services; governance; context; educational professionals.

Abstract

Questo saggio esplora la *Early Childhood Education and Care* (ECEC) presente in Italia – con focus sul sistema di educazione e cura dell'infanzia toscano – e in tre Stati membri UE, quali Finlandia, Francia e Germania, scelti perché ritenuti particolarmente rappresentativi. L'analisi dell'ECEC nei Paesi selezionati è preceduta da una ricostruzione sintetica della cornice normativa UE che regola l'educazione e cura dell'infanzia, nell'ottica di permetterne un miglior inquadramento, ed è articolata in cinque punti tematici, introdotti da alcuni dati socio-demografici, relativi soprattutto all'occupazione femminile e utili a contestualizzare: tipologia del sistema ECEC analizzato, sotto il profilo politico-amministrativo; articolazione dei servizi; percentuali di fruizione; ruoli e formazione dei professionisti coinvolti nell'ECEC; relazione tra servizi educativi, famiglie e territorio.

Parole chiave: servizi per l'infanzia; governance; contesto; professionalità educative.

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1. Introduction

The choice to analyze Early Childhood Education and Care system in Italy – with a focus on Tuscany – and in three European Union Member Countries, namely Finland, France and Germany, is due to multiple reasons. First of all, it was intended to “put in dialogue” the Italian ECEC system – today particularly in ferment, both from a regulatory and governance point of view – with that of some extra-national contexts, in the belief that comparative research is an essential part, and today as particularly relevant, of Pedagogy. As for the Countries analyzed in comparison with the Italian case, they were chosen in light of the following considerations. Finland, selected as representative of the Scandinavian and Finnish areas, is one of the few remaining EU Members in which – since 2013 – there is a perfectly unitary ECEC 0-6 system; moreover, the accessibility, the percentage of use and the diffusion of the services are among the highest in Europe, and waiting lists are almost non-existent (OECD, 2000; Heinämäki, 2008; European Commission/Eacea/Eurydice/EUROSTAT, 2014). France, chosen to represent what we might call the neo-Latin European area of secular historical-political matrix, presents an ECEC (bipartite) system among the oldest in the world: the first kindergarten was opened in Paris in 1844 (Caroli, 2014). Germany, the economic “driving force” of the Union, is the most representative European example of a federal state, in which there is a particular ECEC system in terms of administrative responsibility: it is, in fact, a substantially unitary system 0-6 which, at the central level, depends and is supervised by the Ministry for the Family, the Elders, the Women and the Young, but whose management actually belongs to the Ministries – sometimes of Education, sometimes of Welfare, Labor, or Youth – of each *Länd* (Caselli, 2017).

Since Italy has been taken here as a reference Country, the analysis of ECEC is preceded by a reflection on the most recent regulations that, between 2015 and today, have been issued to regulate Early Childhood Education and Care – setting up a unitary ECEC 0-6 system which falls entirely under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education – and the professionals involved in ECEC as well. As regards the survey of ECEC present in Italy – and in particular in Tuscany – and in the Countries here selected, it was conducted on the basis of the following topics: the type of Early Childhood Education and Care system selected, on the administrative side (if unitary, 0-6, or split into 0-3 and 3-6; falling under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education or, instead, a different kind of Ministries); the articulation of ECEC services; the percentage of use; the roles, tasks and training of the professionals involved in ECEC; the services-family and local territories relationship.

2. The general legislative framework: the main EU legislation on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Over the years, and especially since 2000, the EU has paid increasing attention to the issue of pre-schooling, which is considered more and more a key tool for the development and education – cultural, cognitive, physical and emotional – of children and, at the same time, for the promotion of equal opportunities, the building of a democratic society and the fight against poverty (Caselli, 2016). Emblematic in this regard are the official documents produced on this subject by the EU, starting from the Communication to the Council and the European Parliament, entitled *Efficiency and Equity in European Education and Training Systems* published on September 8, 2006 (European Commission, COM(2006)481final). This is the first official document in which the EU explicitly correlates the need to tackle the social and economic challenges of the third millennium in

a winning way, ensuring greater inclusion and social justice, with the need to develop permanent learning strategies, starting from early childhood.

The Recommendation of April 23, 2008 (European Parliament and Council, C(2008)/C 111/01) reiterates the importance of quality lifelong learning, which starts from the earliest years of life, emphasizing that it is not possible to ensure ECEC services of high quality without caring the training of educators.

A further, relevant document on ECEC was issued by the EU in 2011 – in the “Europe 2020” Strategy contextual framework – and entitled “*Early Childhood Education and Care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow*” (European Commission, COM(2011)66final). This is a Communication entirely dedicated to early childhood and the services aimed at this. In this document a matter of no easy resolution is then highlighted, which is still unresolved in the majority of Member States, and significantly described as “a serious problem” (COM (2011)66final, p. 4), such as the urgent need for expansion of ECEC services for preschoolers. The document also points out the need to rethink education with a view to the educational continuity of an integrated and comprehensive approach, which aims for quality, as well as for the accessibility of the services. In the Report of May 29, 2013 on the *Barcelona Objectives. The development of early childhood care services in Europe for sustainable and inclusive growth*, it is stated explicitly that, “the availability of care services for children from 0 years until the age of compulsory education [...], financial sustainability and of quality is a priority of the European Union” (European Commission, COM(2013)322final, p. 4).

The characteristics and mode of financing of ECEC services in Europe were once again at the center of the recent report published by the European Commission on June 19, 2014 (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014). Here the following issues are considered: access and accessibility, governance and leadership, levels and implementation of quality, professionalism of educational staff, parents’ participation in the life of services and measures to support disadvantaged children. In terms of quality and accessibility to ECEC, this report shows how many EU Countries still struggle to make effective progress, mainly because of structural lack of economic resources and adequate national policies.

3. Italy: an overview of national Early Childhood Education and Care system, with a focus on Tuscany

Under the administrative profile, Italian ECEC is now officially unitary: thanks to the Law of July 13, 2015, n. 107 – concerning the Reform of the national education system – and to the Legislative Decree of April 13, 2017, n. 65, for the institution of ECEC system from birth to six years, both ECEC 0-3 and the 3-6 become a unitary cycle that passes under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, University and Research. Moreover, in continuity with the abovementioned Law 107 and the Decree 65, the recent approval – on December 13, 2017 – of the Bill n. 2443, on the Discipline of the professions of socio-pedagogical professional educator, socio-sanitary professional educator, and pedagogue, best known as “Iori”.

A brief focus on the abovementioned Laws: the Law 107/2015 establishes an integrated ECEC system, also promoting educational continuity through specific “poli per l’infanzia” (centers for children from three months to six years). This Law also replaces the definition of “nido d’infanzia” (crèches for 0-3 years old children) as a service by individual demand, with that one of social interest; it implements the quality of ECEC services through a

university level qualification of educators. The Decree 65 puts into effect the provisions of the Law 107, and further specific Decrees of Applications are going to be issued. As far as the so-called “Tori” Law, it states – among the various aspects – that socio-pedagogical professional educators are required to get a vocational junior degree belonging to the “L-19 degree class” (that one of Education), while pedagogists must obtain a master degree into the areas of Adults education, or Pedagogy, or Media Education, Management, or HR.

Moving from the regulatory perspective to the consideration of the diffusion and quality of Early Childhood Education and Care services, we notice that Italian ECEC is still uneven. Public pre-Primary schools are only present in 18% of Italian municipalities; 60% of the nurseries are concentrated in the North, 27% in the Center, and only the remaining 13% in the South of the Country (ISTAT², 2012). As for the usage rates, in 2014, 92% of children aged 3 years were attending a pre-Primary school (OECD, 2014); this percentage rises to 96% for children who have completed four years, and almost all those of 5. As for the nurseries, national usage rates drop dramatically: although, as we shall see, there are Regions where the fruition of ECEC 0-3 is next – or, as in Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany, even exceeds that percentage – the 33%, in Italy less than 19% of children is attending a nursery (ISTAT, 2013). Moreover, the fruition of nurseries prevails among children with mother occupied (26.8%), while it attends a nursery only 8.3% of children with mothers who do not work (ISTAT, 2013). In this regard, it is interesting to note that, in Italy, the percentage of mothers who work is quite low: if in the EU-28, in 2013, about 70% of mothers were working (EUROSTAT, 2013), in Italy, in the same year, it was professionally active only the 57.8% of women giving birth for the first time (ISTAT, 2013). Overall, low rates of fruition of nurseries and strong differences in the training (initial and ongoing) of educators are also because the regulation of nurseries pertains to individual Regions. From this point of view, the Italian context is heterogeneous and often incomplete: only some Regions – as Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna, Umbria and Liguria – represent some cases *sui generis* of optimal management of 0-3 and 3-6 ECEC services.

It is therefore not possible to offer a detailed overview of Italian ECEC: hence, we will focus on the main features that characterize the Tuscan ECEC, deepening the peculiarities of the so-called “Tuscany Approach” to Early Childhood Education and Care. Tuscany was among the first Italian Regions to have reached, and even exceeded, the Lisbon target, with 33.3% of children between 3 and 36 months received in its nursery (Tuscany Region, 2014). It is also important to emphasize that Tuscany has been among the first Regions in Italy to legislate on ECEC 0-3; and it is again this Region the first one to have enhanced through their own laws of the importance of an “integrated ECEC system”, almost 20 years ago (Regional Law n. 22 of April 14, 1999). The last significant regional lawmaking regarding ECEC goes back to the New Regional Regulation of July 30, 2013, n. 41. This Regulation formalizes two of the most important changes regarding Tuscany ECEC, that is, the pedagogical coordination and the continuity in education. Finally, it is interesting to note that this regulation defines professional profile and requirements of pedagogical coordinators and ECEC 0-3 educators. According to this Law, coordinators are required to obtain at least a junior degree in Pedagogy or Psychology. Therefore, it is not surprising that Tuscany has represented a “fertile ground” for the implementation of a system of good educational practices, which are going to outline a – flexible – framework for regional ECEC, represented by the so-called “Tuscany Approach” (Catarsi & Fortunati, 2012). As explained by Silva and Freschi (2015, pp. 15-16), this Approach is characterized by “the

² ISTAT is the Italian National Institute for Statistics.

great attention paid to space and to education to ‘beauty’; to documentation, integrated ECEC services, family education, continuity in education from 0 to 6 years, and [also] to the role of the pedagogical coordinator”.

4. Finland

From a socio-demographic point of view, there are three important data relating to Finland for the purposes of our discussion: the average fertility rate, which is 1.9%, and that rises in areas further north up to 2.3% (OECD, 2006, 2011; European Commission - Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, 2009); the very small number of economically and socially less privileged families, equal to less than 3% of the total population; the very high percentage – more than ten points higher than the EU average of 59.1% – of women active work-wise, in 2009 the female Finns engaged in the labor market were around 70%, of which more than 60% full-time (EUROSTAT, 2013). In light of these data, and despite the economic crisis that has long plagued Europe, it is not surprising that Finland is one of the most effectively democratic and welfare-conscious, politically stable and economically prosperous European Countries; aspects that have had – and still have – a positive impact on the level of dissemination, the quality and accessibility of ECEC services.

On the political-administrative side, Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care system is unitary: since January 1, 2013, ECEC 0-6 pertained entirely to the Ministry of Education and Culture.

In terms of its articulation, Finnish ECEC is divided into two main types:

- *päiväkoti* or *daghem*: day care centers (mainly public under municipal management, decentralized) for the education and care of children from 0 to 7 years to be reached;
- *perhepäivähoito* (or, if organized by associations or groups of parents, *familjedagvård*), home childcare services aimed at the same age group.

The services are used by 38% of children aged 0 to 3 years – reaching and exceeding by about 3 percentage points the Lisbon 2000 and Europe 2020 targets – and more than 98% of those from 4 to 7 years old (Eurydice, Eurostat, 2013). Pre-school education is not compulsory and unlike other EU Countries can be totally free of charge – in the case of families in need or due to welfare policies practiced in certain towns and areas of the Country, which have chosen to offer free public services for all; the last year of kindergarten is, however, always free of charge.

About the staff employed in ECEC services, educators must possess a degree in teaching methods, which gives the title of kindergarten teacher or of social pedagogue. The 1973 Decree on Children’s Day Care – still in force – established that in each center for children, at least one third of the staff employed should have a pedagogical qualification of post-secondary level. Specifically, in Finnish ECEC there are a number of professionals who work within the services:

- *lastenarhanopettaja* (“kindergarten teachers”), whose duties and functions are similar to Italian Pedagogical Coordinators and directors of services;
- *sosionomi* (“social pedagogues”), which is equivalent to our professional educators and can fill the role of educators in services, including home care, social workers, educators for parenting and parental support experts or even trainers and entertainers (for youth, adults, elderly);

- *lastenhoitaja* (childhood assistant/nurse): this professional has a nursing background and pertains to the sanitary field, rather than education and pedagogy;
- *lastenohjaaja* (“instructor/coordinator of activities in groups”): these particular figures – specific to the Finnish context – are involved in the conception and management of the group-playing in ECEC services, in after-school centers aimed at the age group 0-6;
- *erityislastentarhanopettaja*: they are infant teachers to support children with special needs).

In the Finnish ECEC system an important role is played by families and the local community, working together, giving rise to “networking”. The role of parents within the services is central; the value and necessity of their involvement in the daily life of the child-care centers are established and regulated by law. The 1995 Local Government Act, indeed, officialized and highlighted the importance of ensuring that all citizens actively participate in decision-making and the life of the municipality of residence. In this way the role of ECEC as privileged childhood education, but also family and parental support, is emphasized.

5. France

Demographically, it is important to note that France has high rates of female employment: in 2008, almost 61% of women were working, surpassing by one percentage point the European average. In the same year, 66% of women with children from 0 to 12 years of age were working full-time in almost 40% of cases (Eurostat 2013; OECD, 2013).

French ECEC system is split into two tracks: services 0-3 belong to different ministries of economic and social nature, while those for 3-6 (or rather 2-6, since children are already welcomed in kindergarten at 2 years of age) are centralized and belong solely to the Ministry of National Education.

In terms of ECEC articulation, France is probably the European Country with the most diversified types of early childhood education services, such as:

- *crèches collectives*: public facilities that depend on municipalities and which exclusively accept children between 2 and a half months and 3 years resident in the municipality where the structure is located and are open all week and for the entire day;
- *crèches familiales*: currently the most common type in France; today defined *Services d'accueil familial*, in which the emphasis is placed on the fact that the child's education takes place in a domestic-family context;
- *crèches parentales* or “nursery under parental management”: they welcome children from 3 months to 3 or 4 years old, and they are created and managed primarily by the children enrolled's parents, who choose and manage educators;
- *microcrèches*: aimed at children aged between 10 weeks and 6 years, they can accommodate up to 10-11 children, and can be set up in an apartment that meets certain standards of safety.

Regarding ECEC 3-6 services, they consist essentially of:

- *écoles maternelles* (for children between 2 or 3, and 6 years);

- *gardes/accueils périscolaires* (for children aged from 2 or 3 to 11 years). The most representative is the *école maternelle*, established in 1880, today officially inserted in the education system and national education and attended by 99% of French children. Therefore, the Ministry of Education establishes the educational plans and legislates with regard to teachers' training. However, direct management of the structures is down to municipalities. *École maternelle* is almost entirely a public (www.education.gouv.fr; Eurydice & Eurostat, 2012), secular and free services, divided into four cycles.

French ECEC is characterized by a multitude of professionals, many of them historically belonging to the sanitary area, although now the first signs of a gradual “turnaround” in favor of a more educational approach are appearing. Whereas the working team in an *école maternelle* consists of a teaching staff, institutionally recognized and with relevant training in pedagogy, the 0-3 service has a training that is more heterogeneous and often that comes from the ‘health’ sector. The general “medicalization” of services for early children seems to be justified by the very same history of French nurseries: only in recent years, along with nurses and pediatricians involved in the care of children outside the family of French children from 0-3 years has the figure of childhood educator been added. Therefore, currently we can find the following professionals:

- *éducateur/éducatrice des jeunes enfants*, who operate in services for the 0-3 age range (such as crèches collectives, d’entreprise, familiales, parentales – selected and employed, in this case, by the parents – minicrèches, halte-garderies and kindergarten, for children from 6 months to 6 years of age, children’s libraries specialized in early childhood, children’s hospitals, etc.);
- *puéricultrice or infirmière en puériculture*, essentially trained in health care, operating in services aimed at the 0-4 age range, such as crèches collectives, parentales and familiales, minicrèches and home based ECEC centres;
- *auxiliaire de puériculture*, i.e. an assistant paediatric nurse who works in the 0-3 services where there are paediatric nurses;
- *animateur*: a professional who works primarily in pre-school education centres, aimed at the age group 3-11 years, in the games rooms and centres, as well as extra-curricular services, provided in the various municipalities and departments before and after the opening hours of nursery and primary school;
- *assistantes maternelles agréées*: accredited maternal assistants who work at home – most of the time in their own, but sometimes also at families’ homes – of children between 0 and 18 years, although in most cases they are used for the age group 0-3;
- *éducateur de jeunes enfants*: who in some cases takes on the role of human resources manager and supervisor of educational services, similarly to Italian pedagogical coordinators. As for the nursery, also for what concerns écoles maternelles there are institutional professional figures, (partially) similar to pedagogical coordinators: these are the territorial agents specialized in école maternelle (Agents Territoriaux Spécialisés d’École Maternelle: ATSEM), who deal with supervision, control and coordination of nursery schools, considered integral parts of the educational community (cf. Oberhuemer, Schreyer & Neuman, 2010).

Both 0-3 and 3-6 ECEC services pay particular attention to building a good relationship with the families and the territory (Reyna, Bouve & Moisset, eds., 2014). In the case of 0-3 services many activities are cultivated in collaboration with families and local authorities

with an open and shared approach. Although the French ECEC system is placed inside a state-controlled framework, it is characterized by a great commitment to the promotion of activities involving families and territories, to the point of being an excellence at European level. There are several ways the school and the territory interrelate: one is the PEDT (the *Projet Éducatif Territorial*), through which, on a voluntary basis, the local community organize educational activities, to be presented to students of the *écoles maternelles* in timetables *peri-* and *extra-*curricular, that are consistent with the educational project of the institution and with the ministerial circulars.

6. Germany

On a socio-demographic side, in Germany female employment is definitely higher than the EU average (in 2016, equal to 61.4%): in the same year, in fact, almost 71% of women between 15 and 64 years were working (Caselli, 2017). In this regard, two data must be taken into account: on the one hand, the right to ECEC recognized, from 2013, to every child from one year of age; on the other, benefits for parents, who can accumulate between 46 and 70 weeks of leave, so as to promote gender equality; in Germany, in fact, the parental benefits are extended in case both the mother and the father care for the child equally (Eurydice & Eurostat, 2014).

German ECEC is essentially unitary, even presenting some peculiarities: at the central level, all 0-6 system comes under the federal Ministry of Welfare for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (and not under that one of Education), which provides the Ministries of each *Länd* with non-binding guidelines concerning ECEC. Moreover, in each *Länd*, Early Childhood Education and Care 0-6 falls under the responsibility of Ministries of Education, or of Ministries of Welfare, or, again, of Ministries Youth.

From a typological point of view, German ECEC is essentially organized into:

- *kinderkrippen* (or just *krippen*, “crèches”): aimed at children from 0 to 3 years and usually open all day, structured in sections that can accommodate between 8 and 13 children; they are used on average by 30% of children aged 0-2 and by over 86% of children aged 3 years, rising to around 96% in the case of children aged 4 and 5 years old (showing higher participation rates in the eastern areas);
- *kindertagespflegen*: daily home services officially recognized, aimed mainly at the 0-3 age range, which allow a lot of flexibility about the days (and sometimes nights) and times in which to leave the child;
- *kindergarten*: aimed at children from 3 to 6 years old and open part-time or full day, envisaging a kind of “registration fee” in proportion to income, they are attended by more than 90% of children;
- *vorklassen* or *schule-kindergarten*: present only in some *Länder*, they are made up of preparatory classes for primary school, whose name changes depending on the *Länder*; they are services aimed at children aged 6 who are not yet ready, physically and cognitively to go to Primary school, or children aged 5 whose parents wish to give a more thorough preparation in view of compulsory education;
- *kitas*: daycare services, widespread and aimed at the range 1-14 years, offering after-school educational and cultural activities (Destatis, 2013; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014).

In order to talk about the percentage of use, we must underline that German ECEC system, as it is today, is the result of a radical change that occurred in Germany after the Second

World War. It was between 1945 and 1990 that German ECEC developed, giving rise to many different types of services. In this context, the kindergarten was officially recognized as the first step in the national education system in 1973, even it remains under the responsibility of the Ministry of Welfare for Childhood and Youth. A major expansion of the kindergarten took place in the '90s, especially after unification in 1998, as far as kindergartens were concerned, there was almost 90% of available places. The number and accessibility of kindergartens gradually continued to rise by about 2 percentage points per year until 2002; the year in which there was an additional peak of 9%, while slightly slower, over these years, was the spread of services for the 0-3 age group. Abiding by what has been said, lastly, it is necessary to point out that, both in terms of 0-3 services and those for 3-6, there are still substantial differences between eastern and western *Länder*; both types of ECEC services (particularly those for 0-3) are – and is – the most widespread and used in the East.

About the educational staff, there are three main types of professionals working in childcare:

- *erzieherin*: this title is obtained by attending a three-year course at *fachschulen* or *fachakademien*;
- *kinderpflegerin*: a childcare assistant who got that title by attending a two-year course after secondary school;
- *sozialpädagogin*: a social pedagogue, with a four years-long teacher-training university title. Besides these professionals, the spectrum of roles and professional figures working in German ECEC centers is much wider and more varied. In childcare – both for 0-3 and 3-6 – it is possible to find, apart from educators, childhood assistants and pedagogues, trainees from degree programmes dedicated to children's education; "social collaborators" and social assistants; personnel with a secondary school diploma who have had practical experience in ECEC; psychologists and pedagogues specialized in special education, delinquency, or disability.

The school-family relationship and the one with the territory are well looked after in Germany, above all thanks to the *sozialpädagogin*, who deals with family education, as well as the coordination of staff, relationships with local governments and health and social services. A particularly interesting case of attention to school-family relationship is also represented by Nordrhein-Westfalen. In the guidelines issued by its Ministry of Education, parents are considered key players in children's education. Therefore, in the same guidelines it states that educational contents should be shared with families; educators must organize meetings with parents on a regular basis, working as "facilitators". Moreover, a new type of service has been spreading throughout Germany: the *kinder-und familienzentren* or *eltern-kind-zentren* ("centres for children and families"), often located inside services, where families can find information and parenting support opportunities.

7. Conclusions

We conclude with some reflections in a comparative perspective, adopting at the same time a broader look, which takes into account the heated debate on ECEC that, in Europe – for more than a decade – is diffusely living. As we have seen, for what concerns early childhood education, indeed, Europe is living a period of great "ferment". Especially in the last fifteen years, the European Union is devoting more and more attention, also from a normative point of view, to Early Childhood Education and Care. Its Member States –

including Italy – are demonstrating, albeit generally late and with relevant difficulties, to politically move in harmony with the EU, promoting unitary and integrated ECEC systems aimed at the age group 0-6 – possibly falling under the responsibility of Ministries of Education – and implementing accessibility but also quality of early childhood education services.

At the level of the individual Countries here considered, as we have seen, Finland presents a unitary ECEC system since 2013 and usage rates among the highest in Europe, without having a compulsory ECEC. In the Finnish case, it is clear how the diffusion of ECEC is strictly linked to a rooted and widespread culture of out-of-home education, and to particularly positive demographic, social, “gender-equality oriented”, economic and welfare conditions, which have allowed, and at the same time promoted, the spread of Early Childhood Education and Care services.

Even in France, where there is a split ECEC system, the diffusion of Early Childhood Education and Care services can be correlated with long-term educational policies for children, a history of ECEC among the oldest in the world, and a high percentage of women (and mothers) active in the labor market. Not accidentally, in France also the percentage of children who attend 0-3 services is definitely high. However, we highlight two aspects, related to the French ECEC. On the one hand, from a strictly pedagogical point of view, France is still characterized by the strong presence of professionals from the sanitary sector, which derive from the history of educational services; in fact, already in the very first services for early childhood, arose in France in the first half of the nineteenth century, the figure of the doctor and nurse took a key role (Caroli, 2014). Anyway, on the other, France it is one of the European Countries where greater attention is given to the quality of the relationship between services, families and the territory.

In this context, about Germany, we wish to point out an aspect, related to ECEC management: on this side, this Country actually represents a special case (Llorent 2013; Bock-Famulla & Lange 2014). Indeed, it is a Country with a federal nature, in which ECEC is unified at the level of central government – even not falling under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education – which issues general guidelines, but it is effectively regulated by the Ministries (of Education, or of Welfare, Youth, or Social affairs: it depends) of the single *Länder*. Analogously to France, also in Germany, especially in the North-Western *Länder* and in “Klax” Pedagogy ECEC services, special attention is given to the relationship between education services, families, and the local community.

In addition to what was said so far, we can trace some further common points among the selected Countries: the trend (as happening today in Italy, and already present in Finland) to progressively establish unitary and integrated ECEC 0-6 systems, even if not always falling under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education (as, i.e., in Germany); a constant increase in the use of ECEC services, including those ones addressed to the age group 0-3; a gradual but always greater attention, especially in Italy and France, to the training – both initial and ongoing – of professionals involved in ECEC, in harmony with the European recent policies on this topic. Finally yet importantly, a growing focus on the quality of the educational practices, and on the relationships among services, families and territories, in order to promote social and pedagogical “virtuous circles”.

In light of the foregoing, we wish to conclude our reflection with a final consideration, concerning the possibility of applying ECEC system of one of the Countries analyzed here, to another. Undoubtedly, over the years the number of early childhood education services has increased considerably in the Countries surveyed, and their quality has reached high levels, hence trying to effectively meet children and families’ changing – and challenging

– needs. This scenario has been favored by a greater awareness of the importance of educational interventions in children's first years of life; indeed, the interest towards the age group 0-6 has increased considerably, and the research on and in ECEC services has been carried out more and more often: recent studies highlighting the good practices and pedagogical activities carried out by the educational staff (Reyna, Bouve & Moisset, 2014; Bondioli & Savio, 2015; Moss, 2009; Pirard, 2011). However, as we underlined in the case of the so-called “Tuscan Approach”, ECEC must always be understood in a flexible, never dogmatic sense. The education and care systems analyzed should not be considered as “models” to be applied tout court, but rather the interpretation of some elements that, in the framework of a diversified experience. These educational systems should be considered a sort of “minimum common denominator” for a shared orientation, in order to promote and improve the quality of ECEC services. This is a commitment that demonstrates the will to promote democracy, also through the qualification of children's educational experience. This last aspect is confirmed by this fact: today, ECEC services represent a “system of opportunities” that meets a quantitatively significant number of children of the age group 0-6, and that is the result of a shared work involving many different subjects (i.e., Regions, Local Authorities, Universities, public and private bodies, etc.). It is not possible, either pedagogically and politically correct, to “mechanically” transfer the approach to childhood education and care of one Country, to another: as every human cultural product ECEC is in fact strongly linked to the context – cultural, political, social, geographical as well – in which it originates and develops. In light of the above, our comparative analysis aims essentially to link the different Countries, highlighting the strengths and also the possible criticalities of the ECEC systems considered, and looking at the European Union as a “common home”, in which also children's education could, and should, start a mutually enriching dialogue, thanks to the enlargement of our “pedagogical look” beyond the national borders.

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