

Studi e Ricerche

How to form educators for children from 0-6 years old

Come formare educatori e educatrici di infanzia 0-6

Anna Bondioli

Ordinaria di Pedagogia Generale e Sociale / Università degli studi di Pavia

abstract

The contribution discusses the new regulatory guidelines for initial training of early childhood educators in Italy: the bill 2433 on School Professionals and the Law 107/2015, called "Good School", where, at point 182, letter 3, the integrated educational system from birth to six years is outlined.

In the light of what has been said in some European documents on early childhood education services, drafted by the European Commission ad by OECD, and considering a long standing reference literature on childhood and its developmental possibilities, it is stressed the need, for both day-care centers educators and for preschool teachers, of a peculiar and specific initial formation. Of this training, the contribution offers some suggestions both in terms of curricular content and of methodologies to be used.

Keywords: *italian initial training of ECEC educators, ECEC services, early childhood education*

Il contributo discute le nuove indicazioni normative che attualmente in Italia sono previste per la formazione degli educatori della prima infanzia: disegno di legge 2433 sulle professioni educative e legge della "buona scuola" ove si delinea il sistema integrato di educazione dalla nascita fino a sei anni. Alla luce di quanto affermato in alcuni documenti europei di indirizzo relativi ai servizi educativi per la prima infanzia, e a elementi assodati di una estesa letteratura di riferimento circa le caratteristiche dell'età infantile e le sue possibilità evolutive, viene sottolineata la necessità, sia per gli educatori di asilo nido sia per gli insegnanti della scuola dell'infanzia, di una formazione iniziale peculiare e specifica. Di tale formazione il contributo offre alcuni suggerimenti in termini sia di contenuti curriculari sia di metodologie da utilizzare.

Parole chiave: *formazione iniziale degli educatori della prima infanzia italiani, servizi per la prima infanzia, educazione infantile*

How to form educators for children from 0-6 years old

The theme of this contribution – the initial training of Italian early childhood educators for children from zero to six years – is at the center of a wide-ranging international debate that has followed the birth and growth of childcare services since the post-war period. In a number of education policy documents related to childcare services, drawn up by important institutions, such as the European Commission on Infancy, initial and in-service training of operators for the years 0-6 is considered a crucial element in the quality of such services, and therefore an indispensable guarantee to provide growth opportunities for children who attend them¹.

1. ECEC staff qualifications in some European documents

In the same OECD document, quoted in note 1, *Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)*, the importance of practitioner professional quality on child development and the risk that low levels of preparation can have a highly negative influence is highlighted:

Setting the minimum qualification level plays a key role in ensuring healthy child development. Most research claims that better educated preschool teachers with specialised ECEC training are more effective in providing stimulating staff-child interactions. It can lead to greater vocabularies and increased ability to solve problems in teaching staff. Besides this, qualified teachers are better able to engage children, elicit their ideas and monitor their progress (NIEER, 2006), and they tend to provide children with more stim-

1 An international comparison about ECEC job titles, qualifications and requirements can be found in OECD, *Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)*, (<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/49322268.pdf>) (consulted on 12 August, 2017).

ulating, warm and supportive interactions leading to longer term positive impacts [...] A clear indication of the impact of practitioner quality comes from EPPE (Effective Provision of Pre-School Education) research in England (United Kingdom). This study found that higher proportions of staff with low-level qualifications were associated with poorer child outcomes on social relationships with peers and children's co-operation and were associated with higher levels of anti-social behaviour. Practitioners with specialised training and higher education were linked to positive child-adult interactions including praising, comforting, questioning and responding to children (Elliott, 2006; Shonkoff and Philips, 2000). However, it is not the qualification per se that affects outcomes but the ability of the staff member to create a better pedagogic environment that makes the difference (Elliott, 2006) (OECD, s.d., p. 4)².

A recent document, drawn up by the European Commission, *Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* (2014)³ states, on the basis of qualified research, the need for initial training of childcare providers and their appropriate qualification, and also that the training has to be specific and specialized:

There is a broad consensus among researchers, practitioners and policymakers that the quality of ECEC and ultimately the outcome for children and families depends on well educated, experienced and competent staff [...] There is a substantial evidence that staff qualification matter: higher levels of initial preparation and specialised training are associated with better ECEC quality as well as better developmental outcomes for children [...] It is well documented that ECEC staff with more formal education as well as specialised early childhood training provide more stimulating, warm and supporting interactions with children which in turn support children's overall development and learning (ivi, pp. 31-32).

In the same document it is also stated that the content and the methods of acquiring the skills necessary to be a good educator depend not so much on the length of the study path as on the methodologies used,

2 See also OECD, 2006 (Chapter 7. Appropriate training and working conditions for ECEC staff)

3 http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/policy/strategicframework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf (consulted on 9 August 2017).

among which a period of traineeship which combines theory and practice and is characterized by reflection on educational practices:

research also shows that staff qualifications by themselves are not sufficient to predict the quality of ECEC provision: the content of the training and the methodologies adopted for delivery play a crucial role. In this sense it is the integration of training methodologies – lectures, small group project work, supervised practice in an ECEC setting and a collective analysis of practices – that produce the right interplay between theory and practice as these enhance the reflective competence of staff and have been found to be a major factor in successful initial training and education (ivi, p. 32).

It should be noted that the qualification of staff, proven by a university degree and above all through specific courses involving theory and practice and a period of internship in the services, was one of the objectives of the European Commission, indicated in 1996, to be achieved by 2006:

TARGET 26: A minimum of 60% of staff working directly with children in collective services should have a grant eligible basic training of at least three years at a post-18 level, which incorporates both the theory and practice of pedagogy and child development. All training should be modular. All staff in services (both collective and family day care) who are not trained to this level should have right of access to such training including on an in service basis (European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile the Employment and Family Responsibilities of Men and Women, *Quality Targets in Services for Young Children. Proposals for a Ten Year Action Programme*, January 1996, p. 3)⁴.

Over the past ten years, the university education of childcare staff has been considered a key indicator to ensure the quality of childcare services:

The indicator on the requirement for at least one staff member per group of children in ECEC to be qualified to a minimum of Bachelor level in the field of education (i.e. a minimum of three years at ISCED 6 according to the ISCED 2011 classification) aims to show

4 <http://www.childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/Qualitypaperthree.pdf> (consulted on 12 August 2017).

whether education staff in the sector are highly qualified (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2016, p. 14⁵),

satisfied, however, only by one-third of European countries (*ibidem*).

2. The Italian situation and the new legislative proposals

In Italy, ECEC teachers working with children aged 3 years and over are required to have at least five years of university education, which corresponds to ISCED 7 (Master's degree level)⁶. The minimum qualification requirement for educational staff working with younger children is set at upper secondary (ISCED 3), but some regions employ childhood educators with tertiary education degrees (*ivi*, p. 12)⁷.

At present, in Italy, the entire range of childcare services is under review and innovative proposals also cover the staff qualification of operators working with children under three years old. There are two legislative measures that are changing the framework for early childhood educational services. The first is the legislative decree establishing “an integrated system of education from birth up to six years old”, provided for in the so-called “good school” law (Law 107/2015) at paragraph 181, letter e); the second is the bill 2433 on education professions⁸, in which, art. 4, the profile and training of educational services providers for children from 0 to 3 years are identified.

These are major initiatives, the first because it recognizes day-care centers as the first segment of the education system and sanctions the need

5 https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/images/2/26/Early_Childhood_Education_and_Care.pdf (consulted on 10 August 2017).

6 Until the year 2000, the degree to teach children at preschool (for children from three to six years) was a high school diploma, obtained after three years (Scuola magistrale), or a high school diploma obtained after four years (Istituto magistrale); subsequently, and at present, a university degree in *Scienze della formazione* (five years) is required.

7 Since the services for children aged 0-3 are governed by the regions, the qualifications of educators are defined by regional laws, thus different from region to region: from secondary education degrees at university degrees in Scienze dell'Educazione or in Scienze della Formazione.

8 The bill governs the professions of socio-pedagogical professional educator, socio-educational educator, pedagogical coordinator, including the one for the 0-3 childcare provider (day-care centers, playgrounds, etc.) for which a university degree, achieved after three years, is required.

for continuity and coherence of the child's educational path from birth to six years old, to be guaranteed through a link between services, particular, between day-care center and preschool, the second as it standardizes and promotes initial training of 0-3 educators through a three-year university course.

The two normative perspectives, one already in force, the other still under discussion, referring to the same reality, must be considered interlaced but, as we will see in the course of the discussion, such interlacing cannot be taken for granted as further and targeted steps are needed to ensure their coherence and consistency. I will return to this point in the final part of this contribution.

I will therefore begin by illustrating the meaning of the integrated system proposal 0-6, and I will then consider, from this point of view, what guidance can be given to the training of 0-6 educators.

3. The integrated 0-6 system and the peculiarity of childcare services

In Italy – but not in all European countries – is the so-called split system, according to which services for children 0-3 years are separate, as regards legislation, organization and establishment, from preschools (for children 3-6 years). The reasons are more historical than pedagogical.

Childcare have a more recent history compared to that of the school for the 3-6 range. They were born in 1971 with the transformation of the services of the National Maternity and Childhood Institution into day-care centers for 0-3 years (Law 1044) with a mission aimed at reconciling women's working time and the need for child custody and care⁹. In some contexts, particularly the Emilian and Tuscan, the childcare center immediately takes the form of a reality with a clear educational purpose addressed not only to children but to the entire community. It should be remembered that these contexts have developed particularly significant ex-

9 The Italian instituting law for day-care centers 1044, in art. 1, demonstrates a vocation of assistance: "The day-care center is intended to provide temporary custody of an infant to facilitate the entry of women to work". Only thirty years after, the financial Law 448 of 2001, article 70, states the educational function of day-care centers: "Day-care centers, which are structures designed to ensure the formation and socialization of boys and girls between the ages of three months and three years and support families and parents, are among the key competences of the state, regions and local authorities".

periences with the launch of pedagogy for the very small, sustained and promoted in Italy in particular by Loris Malaguzzi and the *Gruppo Nazionale Nidi-Infanzia*¹⁰.

The tradition of preschools is more “ancient”. Although initially addressed to children of disadvantaged classes with philanthropic aims, it later acquired a more meaningful educational significance both through the theorizations of some important pedagogical thinking exponents starting from Rousseau through Pestalozzi, Froebel, and, in Italy, the sisters Agazzi and Montessori, and through the underlining, offered by psychopedagogical literature, of the contribution that early childhood education can give to the socialization of children before entering elementary school¹¹.

The differences between day-care centres and preschools were also influenced by the public opinion which, since the postwar period, has given credit and value to the preschool parallel to its development and branching on national territory currently reaching almost all children 3-6.

Day-care centers, on the other hand, has had a much lower development if one thinks that our country is unable to reach the goal that the European Union set down with the Barcelona Council of 2002, and reaffirmed in the EU 2020 Strategy, to ensure, by 2010, access to full-time infant education facilities to at least 33% of children under the age of 3¹².

Again, to the diversification of the two categories of services in Italy in the last few decades has contributed the fact that a large proportion of preschools, run by the state, have been included in Comprehensive Institutions, which embody schools for children from three to six years,

10 The National Day-care Center Group was born in 1980, thanks to the initiative of Loris Malaguzzi, who was president until his death in 1994, with the aim of establishing a network for co-ordination, exchange and impetus for the experiences that were being developed in the various areas of the country. It currently brings together day-care centers educators, operators of other childcare services, preschools teachers, administrators and service providers, coordinators, researchers and university professors working in several Italian cities.

A presentation of the most innovative experiences realized in the first fifteen years after Law 1044, which in 1971 established the day-care centers of new type, is in the final part of the *Manuale critico dell'asilo nido* (Bondioli, Mantovani, 1987, fifth section).

11 For a timely and up-to-date review of the history of day-care centers and preschools in Italy, see Ferrari M. (in press).

12 To date, in Italy, day-care centers receive about 23% of children in age, although with great differences from region to region (cfr. Istituto degli innocenti, 2014, p. 182). On the other hand, the objective set out in the same document that at least 90% of children between the ages of 3 and 6 were attending the preschool, was achieved.

elementary schools and lower secondary schools, thus proposing contiguity and a more straight forward and direct continuity of the preschool with primary school rather than with day-care center services.

In my opinion, the diversity between the institutions for children 0-3 and those for children 3-6, is more organizational, due to differences in history and tradition, than strictly pedagogical. The institutional differences between the two contexts – day-care center and preschool – do not in themselves correspond to a differentiation in terms of educational purposes and style. I would like to dwell briefly on this point.

It is now taken for granted from literature of reference and from research that childhood is a period of life that has its peculiarity and that children from 0 to 6 years therefore require specific educational attentions, pedagogical backgrounds different from those that distinguish the following school periods.

First, it is widely acknowledged that an evolutionary change takes place at the age of six/seven years, with the transition to that stage of development that Freud called “latency stage”. This is a phase of “tranquility” in which the conflicts and anxieties that the child has had to face in the previous period are attenuated, a phase marked by a state of emotional “dead calm” that allows the child to engage in intellectual tasks and to devote himself with continuity to formal learning. It begins the age of school education with all that it entails in terms of control, ability of perseverance, commitment to succeeding in intellectual tasks related to increasingly abstract de-contextualized situations. It is not therefore by chance that in most school systems primary schooling takes place around the age of 6/7, the age at which it is assumed that the problems of early childhood have been at least in part dealt with and resolved.

The same literature points out that the period ranging from 0 to 6 years has enormous evolutionary importance. The way in which children have been able to cope with the problems and needs of their childhood has a strong impact on the next period also with regard to school success. But not in a direct way, as is often believed. It is not by starting some learning that children will have the opportunity to develop later, a form of pre-preparedness for that they will learn more formally in primary school, that education from 0 to six years can contribute positively to future acquisition of the child, but recognizing the specificity of early childhood age, the characteristics of the small child, his specific needs, the characteristics of his mind and his psychic organization.

In the aforementioned document of the European Commission (2014), briefly called *Quality Framework*, the specificity of pre-elementary education is thus outlined:

Childhood is a time to be, to seek and to make meaning of the world. The early childhood years are not solely preparation for the future but also about the present. ECEC services need to be child-centred, acknowledge children's views and actively involve children in everyday decisions in the ECEC setting. Services should offer a nurturing and caring environment and provide a social, cultural and physical space with a range of possibilities for children to develop their present and future potential. ECEC is designed to offer a holistic approach based on the fundamental assumption that education and care are inseparable (p. 7).

The affirmation of the uniqueness of the educational pathway of a child from 0 to 6 years underscores the recognition of this specificity.

It should be recalled that the previously mentioned paragraph 181, letter e, of the law of the "good school", defining the integrated system 0-6, was preceded by the bill 1260 which, in more detail, outlines the meaning of the proposal: "0-6 childcare services aim at developing childhood potential of relationship, play, creativity, autonomy and learning in a cognitive, affective and play context, as well as recognizing the interplay between education and care"¹³.

These are "strong" statements, to be taken into account in the implementation of the integrated 0-6 system. The importance attached to play as an authentic voice of the child stands out as the most significant expression of its relational and learning potential, as a "digit" that should characterize the 0-6 unit path. The acknowledgment of intertwining between education and care should also be noted, which means that in this age range the aspects related to the child's well-being, the attention to the problems of affective attachment and progressive detachment, the regard to infant body experience, usually accrued under the "care" label, are also basic aspects of what we call education. Care and education in this age group can not be broken down and considered each on its own¹⁴.

In the just mentioned Law on "Good School" in which the proposals of Bill 1260 have been condensed, these pedagogical aspects are left aside. In particular, the law emphasizes the homogenization at a national level of

13 Draft Law 1260 "Provisions on Integrated Education and Education System from the Establishment Up to Six Years and the Right of Girls and Children to Equal Opportunities for Learning", announced to the Senate Presidency on January 27, 2014.

14 A consequence of many: the child's body care is a peculiar aspect of education that can not and should not be delegated to non-educational figures (eg auxiliary) (See Savio, 2017).

regional features, foreseeing “core levels on a national scale” and “national reference standards”, less than on the “educational” integration of childcare centers and preschools.

However, it is necessary to think about the 0-6 pathway as a pedagogical unit by researching those transversal lines that must characterize early childhood education even if this is provided in specific and particular institutions. This can be accomplished identifying pedagogical lines that are the guiding principles for all 0-6 educators in whatever context they act. The unity of the path does not mean that the different institutions which in Italy still care for children in this age group can not have specific declinations. It means, however, that the different institutions must marry the same basic pedagogical principles and that continuity between institutions should be rethought, also and above all, in this light. Unity of the path means that each educator, in any institution, who is to operate – childcare centers, preschools, play centers, “Spring sections” – whether public or private –, must have in mind the unity of the path, that is, its particular aims, its inspirational principles, its pedagogical characterization. It is no coincidence that in the conclusions of the European Symposium on Improving Early Childhood Education and Care – Early Matters (Bruxelles, 2008)¹⁵ it is stated:

There is a need to integrate childcare provision and pre-school education (and also other services to support child well-being) in a holistic way covering ages 0 to 6. The aim should be holistic (cognitive, social, physical and emotional child development and well-being) rather than early ‘scholarisation’ (p. 2).

4. The child and the skills of the 0-6 educators

From what has been said so far, it is evident that the skills required for a 0-6 childcare provider are peculiar and specific. This is because the 0-6 educator – and more specifically the 0-3 operator – is faced with a subject – the child – in some ways alien.

A child between 0 and 6 years has his own peculiar way of relating to the world and learning. He learns primarily through action and perception; he mentally represents objects and events in a concrete way; his way

¹⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/policy/school/doc/-symposium_en.pdf (consulted on 10 August 2017).

of communicating is predominantly non-verbal; his perspective is often self-centered. Emotions and affections strongly color his experience. His main activity is play through which his desires and fantasies are dramatically expressed and through which he begins to know the world. For these reasons the child appears to the adult as a subject difficult to understand. However, the promotion of growth, for which the adult is responsible, can count on the resources and skills the child, even if very small, has: he is a curious explorer of the world around him, open to social interaction, and able to communicate with a multitude of languages.

Starting from these briefly presented features that characterize the child before entering primary school, it is possible to delineate the professional profile of those who work in educational contexts for this age group.

Firstly, relational competence, the ability to align with the way of seeing, hearing and interpreting the world of the small child, and, starting from this type of understanding, to provide answers that help the child grow in a climate of respect for his “alterity” and trust in his potential for growth. This competence is the ability to take care of the child and to educate him in the sense of supporting him in growth. In this competence also comes the ability to communicate through a non-verbal channel in harmony with the infantile one.

A second competence concerns the management of the infantile group, the ability to support exchanges among children, to interact with more children at a time, to organize daily life so that children can enjoy the widespread sociality in which they are immersed without being overwhelmed, and use it also as a resource for learning. This is not a simple skill, and it is very different from those traditionally attributed to functions considered “maternal”.

A third skill, mostly neglected, but essential, is the ability to give value to the child’s play as the child’s “voice”, his mode of relating with the world, starting point for emotional and cognitive adventures that the adult must accompany and promote. Giving value to play means first of all knowing and recognizing it in its typical childhood characteristics, knowing how to use particular intervention strategies that allow children to develop, enrich and articulate play without forcing it into extraneous finalizations, sustaining it for its intrinsic value: freedom, divergence, definalization. It also means to think of it as a starting point for a specific 0-6 curriculum that sees play as a situation that promotes expression, communication, exploration and elaboration of meanings.

These skills, necessary when in direct contact with children, are also supported by others, indispensable in the 0-6 educational toolbox, which

deal with observational methodologies that can detect the children's point of view and capture their "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978); assessing methodologies capable of capturing child progress without placing them within predefined evolutionary standards (ie qualitative descriptions, log-books, etc.); abilities to document and evaluate activities and processes undertaken.

A further competence concerns the ability to dialogue with families, necessary to guarantee a real participation of parents in the sharing of the educational project and to offer them a support in the care and education of their children. In this regard, a series of knowledge concerning the characteristics and problems of families, especially the "new families", are essential to acquire that attitude of listening and appreciation necessary for the realization of a dialogue on an equal scale. It is also indispensable to be trained in specific communication skills such as Roger's non-directive interview or Gordon's "active listening" (See Rogers, 1945; Gordon and Burch, 2012). Finally, one must be capable of reflexive and self-analysis skills to enhance the ability to grasp the child's otherness, to develop a problematic behaviour regarding how to care for and educate children, and an attitude of constantly verifying own assumptions and actions.

5. The formation of educators for children from 0-6 years old

For what has been said so far, the training of childhood operators 0-6 has highly specific features. For a purely indicative purpose, I propose some courses that I find indispensable in a university curriculum that safeguards this specificity.

- Early Childhood Psycho-pedagogy (to have a picture of development theories, child pedagogy approaches, and best educational experiences).
- Pedagogy of play (which, starting from a clear definition of play in childhood, indicates how to safeguard the spontaneity and how to promote it in an evolutionary way).
- Family Pedagogy (to have a picture of the transformations in progress, the needs and the educational expectations of families and to establish appropriate approaches to the promotion of parenting).
- Pedagogy of verbal and non-verbal communication (to learn attitudes and techniques to interact with children).
- Management of infant groups (to create contexts favorable to child interaction and facilitate forms of cooperation and exchange).

- History of Childhood (to gain a critical and prospective look at childhood education).
- Ethics of teacher professionalism in educational work with children and families (indispensable to establishing and maintaining an educational pact with children and parents).
- An internship that combines theoretical perspectives and educational practices in the sense of a continuous feed-back between the first and the second led by reflexive methodologies and a qualified supervision.

6. Concerns and suggestions

I now return to what is stated in the first part of this report, that is the need for integration between the two different normative perspectives currently being discussed, that of the integrated system 0-6 and that of the formation of the figure of the professional educator.

Compared to the latter, from what has been said so far with regard to the specificity of the educational role with young children, the day-care center educator must have an equally specific university qualification. It is therefore of the utmost importance that a specific curriculum for the initial training of service operators for children from 0 to 3 years be provided within the three-year degree in Education Sciences. Without this curriculum, generic qualification is risky and incapable of supporting the development of an indispensable service for the future of the community¹⁶.

At this point I must expose a problem that deserves attention and the search for appropriate solutions. For preschool teachers, instead of a three-year training course it is five years and takes place within the university course in Primary Education Science, which prepares primary school teachers as well. This is a proven and consolidated course that should be coordinated with the specific one that will be developed for the 0-3 infant educator. This would allow better clarification of the two *curricula* in the direction of the desired integration between the two services.

But it is not just about making more homogeneous, at least as far as cross-skills are concerned, the initial training courses of 0-3 educators and 3-6 teachers. It is also about making them equivalent from the point of view of their formative meaning and their value.

16 In a commentary on seven studies in the United States on teacher training, Early et al. (2007) state that training programs are too “generalistic” as they are not sufficiently focused on expected practices at home and early childhood education (p. 35).

Treating and caring little kids in the day-care centres is not easier than treating and educating children from 3 to 6 years of age. The inequality of the two paths – three years the first, five the second – does not seem to go in this direction.

I therefore believe that the initial training for infants 0-6, in order to be effectively effective and to fulfill the aims of the childcare services defined in the new regulations, should provide, as far as educators 0-3 are concerned, not only a specific university curriculum within the three-year course for a professional educator but also the possibility to continue the university studies by accessing to the course in primary education science preparing for teaching at the nursery and primary school.

A last observation, which may seem obvious, but which is not at all: in order for the initial training to be really effective, it should be followed by regular and continuous training, carried out according to the reflexive and participatory modes that the childhood operators should have begun to acquire during the internship.

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