Jordi
Collet-Sabé
Glòria
Olmos
& Alejandro
Paniagua (eds)

Towards a New Global

and Responsive Approach to Early Childhood Education and Care Services

Lessons from Barcelona, Milan and Tampere

PETER LANG

European and global early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems face a paradox. Although ECEC is widely recognised as crucial for children's development and for advancing equity—especially for disadvantaged families—major challenges remain. Access to ECEC remains unequal, with many children from low-income or migrant backgrounds facing exclusion. At the same time, ECEC professionals often work in poorer conditions than other education and care staff, and Europe faces a growing shortage of qualified workers. Debates about the role of gender in care sectors also remain unresolved.

This book is the result of the Erasmus+ KA2 project EDUFIRST, which responds to this situation by learning from innovative practices in Barcelona, Milan and Tampere. Coordinated by the University of Vic (Barcelona), the project promotes a responsive, global ECEC approach that intertwines policy, institutional and pedagogical dimensions. Its aim is to strengthen inclusion, equity, community participation and climate justice while supporting municipalities in improving local systems and advancing the EU Child Guarantee.

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Vol. 8

Jordi Collet-Sabé, Glòria Olmos and Alejandro Paniagua (eds)

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This book is dedicated to all children and families in Europe, because every child deserves the best possible education and care, which should be guaranteed for all (EU Child Guarantee).

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Foreword

Rethinking and reforming early childhood services

*Peter Moss**

At a time when early childhood services have come to be recognised as an important part of the welfare state, with countries wanting to boost the attendance of young children, it is problematic that these services (with a few notable exceptions) are deeply and adversely affected by the legacy of their origins more than a century ago. That legacy is dysfunctional systems, divided between 'education' and 'childcare' services, and often too between providing for children under and over 3 years of age. These split systems are manifested in separate services, separate workforces, separate funding and separate purposes; moreover, these systems are frequently too rigid to respond adequately and appropriately to the diverse needs of changing societies and diverse communities. This dysfunction is compounded by an employment model based on an unsustainable and unjust assumption: that there exists a bottomless pool of female labour for recruitment to low paid and low status work in early childhood services, a model whose failure is apparent in intractable staff shortages reported in an increasing number of countries, both in and beyond Europe.

This inherited systemic dysfunction and failure has been made worse by a generation of neoliberal hegemony, which has wreaked havoc on societies and on public services, not least education and care. Within early childhood systems, neoliberalism has led to policies of standardisation, marketisation and privatisation, especially but not only in the Anglophone world. More generally, it has led to a technical, economistic and managerial discourse coming to dominate early childhood and all other sectors of education.

* Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education

In early childhood education, this discourse has constructed images of young children as 'human capital', their parents as consumers, early childhood workers as technicians, and early childhood services as factories producing predetermined outcomes, all in the service of generating predictable returns on investment (for a fuller discussion of the impact of neoliberalism on early childhood services, see Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). It is a discourse I have described (Moss, 2014) as the 'Story of Quality and High Returns', with its narrative of applying correct human technology ('quality') at an early age to get huge paybacks on initial costs.

This book is about contesting this discourse and transforming this dysfunctionality, drawing in particular on the experience of three European cities that have sought to innovate policies, provisions and pedagogy. They are not alone. A few countries (notably the Nordic states) have shown it is possible to create integrated and comprehensive early childhood systems, which combine education, care and upbringing, and based on an integrated graduate early years' profession. Barcelona, Milan and Tampere are the featured cities here, but there are other examples of communities that have built exemplary systems: Reggio Emilia, also in Italy, is world-famous, but not alone.

There are also important pioneers whose work should not be forgotten, indeed can inspire our work today. One of these was Professor Jack Tizard, who founded the Thomas Coram Research Unit at London's Institute of Education in 1973. His priority for this new research centre was to explore the potential of an innovative early childhood provision: the Children's Centre. Existing provision in England at the time was not only inadequate in quantity but also hopelessly fragmented, with a fundamental split between 'educational' and 'social' provision reflected in government responsibility split between education and health ministries. What was called for, he argued, was a totally new type of provision: a Children's Centre, which should be open and free to all families with young children in its local catchment area (within 'pram-pushing distance' as Tizard put it), and offer a wide range of services. Some of these would be provided in all centres, in particular education and care including for children under three years ('the need for provision for these groups needs to be accepted') and child health ('a comprehensive service should include a strong paediatric component'); but others

would be responsive to the particular needs and demands of local families (Moss, 2023, p. 31).

Some demonstration projects were set up by Tizard and others at the time, only to be ignored by successive English governments, until in the 2000s the New Labour government took up the idea. It then opened 3,700 Children's Centres in a mere 7 years, an extraordinary achievement – only for this emerging system to wither away due to the disinterest and austerity of successor right-wing governments: a shocking act of political vandalism.

With an academic career that began immersed in such thinking and examples, it is perhaps not surprising that I have long argued the need for a system of early childhood services that is integrated, universal, public and education-based but multi-purpose. Services that are at the heart of and responsive to their local communities, services that are both inclusive and holistic, services such as this Children's Centre in England, situated in a materially deprived and highly diverse area of an English city, and which as well as early childhood education and leisure-time provision for school-age children provided a myriad of support services to its local community including: assistance with translation and interpretation; adult education; dance and other workshops; access to legal, health, housing and other services; counselling, advocacy and advice; home care and other domiciliary support workers; respite care for seriously ill parents; support for various other groups, including terminally ill children and their parents, adult survivors of child sexual abuse, domestic violence and female genital mutilation; and a range of intergenerational activities (Broadhead, Meleady and Delgado, 2008).

But more recently, I have added further features to my ideal system of early childhood services, in particular that it should be democratic, expressed in policy, provision and pedagogy, from governance to evaluation (for more on what a democratic early childhood system might mean, see Fielding and Moss, 2011; Sousa and Moss, 2023). Not only democratic but also working with an ethics of care: a relational ethics combining '*particular acts* of caring and a general "*habit of mind*" to care' (Tronto, 1993, p 128, original emphasis). Understanding 'care' in this way, I reject the language of 'childcare services', all too prevalent in the Anglophone world and focused on children with employed parents, in favour of 'education' services that acknowledge the

varying needs of all parents, including those who are employed, and recognise that all children (and adults) need caring relationships.

Following environmental campaigners George Monbiot and Peter Hutchison (2024, p. 138), when they argue that the 'only thing that can displace a story is a story', I have offered an alternative to 'The Story of Quality and High Returns'. This is 'The Story of Democracy, Experimentation and Potentiality' (Moss, 2014). This story is a deliberate attempt to re-politicise the field of early childhood (and indeed all) education, rejecting the primacy given by neoliberalism to technical practice and following Malaguzzi's advice that '[pedagogy is] always a political discourse whether we know it or not. It is about working with cultural choices, but it clearly also means working with political choices' (Malaguzzi, cited in Cagliari et al., 2016, p. 267). Such political choices respond to political questions, questions to which there is no one correct answer: questions such as what are the fundamental values of education (democracy and experimentation being two choices), what is the purpose of education, and what is your image of the child, the early childhood worker and the early childhood centre – to which my choices would include the child as unknowable potentiality; the worker as researcher, intellectual, and democratic professional; and the early childhood centre as a public space or forum.

What do I mean by 'public space or forum'? In the foreword to the second edition of the book *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*, Gunilla Dahlberg, Alan Pence and I put it this way:

> We believe, as a political and ethical choice, that the early childhood institution should be understood and developed as a public institution, a site for encounter and relating, where children and adults meet and commit to something, where they can dialogue, listen and discuss in order to share meanings. We think that as such, it has the potential for an infinite range of possibilities – cultural, linguistic, social, aesthetic, ethical, political and economic – some expected and predetermined, but many that are not; and that it can play an important role in the renewal of democracy through foregrounding democratic practice in all aspects of its life and work (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 2009, p.xiii).

This is an image that contests neoliberalism's image of the early childhood centre as a private business competing in a market to sell a product or commodity to parents deemed to be consumers. From this perspective, the current

book also makes a valuable contribution to the task of contesting and debating the image of the early childhood centre – and, indeed, the image of the school more generally. It offers examples of what that image of the centre as public space can mean in practice.

Here I would add a note of caution. Early childhood services, for children from birth to 6 or even 8 years, should, I believe, be seen and treated as the first sector of a public education system stretching from birth to adulthood. But neither this nor any other sector, should be treated in isolation; otherwise, the gravitational force of the system will drag an innovative sector back towards universal and hidebound conformity. We need to have an education system that has shared purposes, values, ethics, images and practices, co-constructed through dialogue and debate between all sectors, and applicable as much to 18-month-olds as to 18-year-olds: rethinking and reforming all education institutions and not just those for young children. This, indeed, was the task that Michael Fielding and I set ourselves in our book *Radical Education and the Common School: a Democratic Alternative*, in which we argued for a radical education with democracy as a fundamental value, care as a central ethic, a person-centred education that is education in the broadest sense and an image of the child rich in potential. Radical education should be practiced in the 'common school', a school for all children in its local catchment area, age-integrated, human scale, focused on depth of learning … a school understood as a public space for all citizens, a collective workshop of many purposes and possibilities (Fielding and Moss, 2011).

When I think of the future I would like to see for early childhood services, and indeed for all educational services for children and young people, my vision remains that of Jack Tizard's Children's Centre and of the 'common school' that Michael Fielding and I wrote about. Services that are public spaces for their local communities, a 'universal basic service' that is available and free for all families to attend, 'living centres of open and democratic culture' (Malaguzzi cited in Cagliari et al., 2016, p. 180). Services that have education at their heart, a holistic education-in-its-broadest-sense and inscribed with a pervasive ethics of care. Services that also meet many other purposes: supporting families, building solidarities, confronting injustices, sustaining culture, generating the local economy, strengthening democracy, etc. Vital services whose workers reflect the diversity of their communities (including

equal numbers of women and men), workers whose value is reflected in their education, conditions and status, with parity in all respects to teachers in other sectors of education, workers who are researchers, intellectuals and 'democratic professionals', 'foreground[ing] collaborative, cooperative action between professional colleagues and other stakeholders…[and] engaging and networking with the local community' (Oberhuemer, 2005, np).

My vision is not of 'quality' services, rejecting that managerial concept and tool of performativity, seeking conformity to universal expert-derived standards. Rather it is of 'democratic' services, with an ambition to be inclusive, participatory and responsive, and a willingness to name a defining political choice.

The early childhood service, also indeed the school, is contested terrain. Some fear these education institutions may be unreformable, always bound to end up instruments of conformity and control, 'a technology for population management' (Collet and Ball, 2024, p. 4). Others are more hopeful, believing them to be capable of creating an 'infinite range of possibilities', emancipatory and creative agents, given the right conditions to realise such potential. While being critical in my approach, I am a member of the hopeful brigade. If the conditions are right (and I recognise it is a very big 'if'), and as examples described in this book and elsewhere demonstrate, I believe another early childhood service, and indeed another school, is possible, one that is fit for, and supportive of, a more equitable, more caring, more sustainable and more democratic world. There is all to play for.

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We would like to thank the municipalities of Barcelona, Milan and Tampere for their valuable work in providing quality Early Childhood Education and Care services.

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Website and Tookit: https://edu-first.eu

Abbreviations

DAVOPSI	Device for the Analysis and Evaluation of the Pedagogical Organisation of Nursery Schools
DIGI	Digital education (Tampere)
DIGI-ECEC	Digital Education Coordinator (Tampere)
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EFCM	Municipal Family Parenting Spaces (Barcelona)
FRA	European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
IMEB	Municipal Institute of Education of Barcelona
INVALSI	National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System (Italy)
ITERS	Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale
KETU	Sustainable future (Tampere)
KETU-ECEC	Sustainable Future Coordinator (Tampere)
KUKA	Cultural education (Tampere)
KUKA-ECEC	Cultural Education Coordinator (Tampere)
NESET	Network of Experts working on the Social dimension of Education and Training
PANGI	The National Action Plan for the implementation of the European Child Guarantee (Italy)
PNRR	*Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza* - National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Italy)
RAV	*Rapporto di Autovalutazione* (Self-Assessment Report)
SALLI	Physical activity and food education (Tampere)
SALLI-ECEC	Physical Activity and Food Education Coordinator (Tampere)
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

Introduction

Alejandro Paniagua, Laura Farré and Berta Vila

European and global early childhood education and care (ECEC) services are facing a complex paradox. On the one hand, ECEC is recognised as critical to children's development, particularly for promoting equity for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Various international reports and meta-analyses highlight the significant role of ECEC in closing the learning gap between disadvantaged and advantaged children. More precisely, ECEC promotes cognitive and socio-emotional development, fosters resilience, and ensures equitable educational outcomes and long-term success for all children (OECD, 2020, 2022, 2025; UNICEF and UNESCO, 2024, etc.). The first 1,000 days of a child's life are widely regarded as crucial for their future development, and the EU's Child Guarantee strategy aims to address their needs throughout childhood.

However, data shows that many children, particularly those from disadvantaged and migrant backgrounds, continue to be excluded from ECEC services. These data also indicate that ECEC service professionals often work in worse conditions than their colleagues in other educational or care services. Furthermore, the 2025 World Teachers' Summit (UNESCO, 2025) revealed a growing global shortage of ECEC professionals, especially in Europe. The issue of women in care sectors remains a contentious topic, where a multitude of debates, approaches and proposals can ultimately harm vulnerable children and families, with the most disadvantaged being the most severely affected.

In an attempt to better understand the paradox and how to address it innovatively, the Erasmus+ KA2 project EDUFIRST: improving early childhood education and care services for inclusion, equity, community participation and climate justice sought to learn from the best practices of three of Europe's most innovative and leading cities in this field: Barcelona, Milan and Tampere. Coordinated by the University of Vic (Barcelona, Spain), the EDUFIRST

project proposes a new approach to shaping ECEC service policies in Europe, based on insights gained from these cities. Specifically, EDUFIRST aims to support municipalities in their collaborative efforts to improve their ECEC systems, institutional frameworks and practices. This book, which draws on the Erasmus+ project, leverages the extensive experience and knowledge of three major European cities (Barcelona, Milan and Tampere) and the research and policy expertise of the University of Vic to address a range of shared challenges concerning the availability, accessibility and quality of ECEC services.

The book's objectives and overall structure

The book's main objective is to contribute to the effective implementation of the European Union's Child Guarantee at the local and municipal levels, with a particular focus on the key role of local governments as strategic actors in the design and implementation of ECEC services. The European comparative analysis shows that education and care services for children aged 0–6 operate in highly diverse contexts, not only across countries but also within the same state, between cities and also between neighbourhoods within the same city. These differences and inequalities are shaped by factors such as local policies, models of provision, the initial and continuing training of educators, working conditions, and the specific social, cultural, and political contexts of each ECEC service.

The book identifies and examines a number of major challenges regarding ECEC services – which are considered in the next section – and then seeks to address them via a tripartite structure. First, in Chapter 1, it proposes a new, comprehensive model to rethink current and future ECEC services that covers three different levels: the public policy (macro) level; how these policies are implemented at the institutional (meso) level; and the (micro) level of actual educational and care practices. Second, in Chapter 2, it presents a new self-assessment and continuous improvement tool for ECEC services that is designed to promote collective processes of reflection, institutional learning, quality improvement and progress towards greater equity. Third, in the remaining chapters, it presents good practices drawn from the three cities studied – Barcelona, Milan and Tampere – that exemplify the

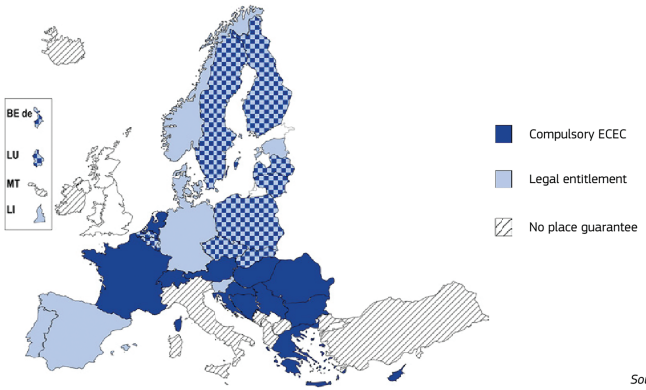
comprehensive model proposed in Chapter 1. This structure thus goes from a more theoretical and global vision to a specific applied contribution and onto an examination of concrete practices; and it constitutes, at the same time, the main objectives of the book.

Having provided the background context for the book and a broad overview of its main objectives and structure, the rest of this introduction will focus on a consideration of the main challenges that ECEC services face and will provide a more detailed outline of each chapter.

Challenges faced by ECEC services

In this section we identify three main challenges of ECEC services, which we organise around Katerina Tomasevski's 4-A scheme on human rights obligations in education (2006), proposed during her tenure as UNESCO Director: availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability. The first challenge, supply and access, is related to availability and accessibility; the second, quality assurance, is related to acceptability; and the third, the importance of local context and arrangements, is related to adaptability.

Starting with the first challenge, the supply of ECEC services is a critical factor in ensuring that all children and families have access to early education and care support. However, there are significant disparities in their availability across European countries. These disparities are influenced by various factors, including legal entitlements, compulsory attendance, and the age at which children are guaranteed a place in ECEC. There are two primary approaches to ensuring universal access to ECEC: legal entitlements and compulsory attendance (see Figure 0.1). Legal entitlements guarantee a place in ECEC for children whose parents request it, while compulsory attendance requires children to attend ECEC for a specified period before starting primary education. The age at which these guarantees begin varies widely across countries. For example, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Finland, and Sweden guarantee a place in ECEC from an early age (6–18 months), while other countries like Belgium, Czechia, Spain, France, Luxembourg, Hungary, Poland, and Portugal guarantee a place from around age 3.



Source: Eurydice.

Weekly ECEC hours, by type of guarantee, 2024/2025

	BE fr	BE de	BE nl	BG	CZ	DK	DE	EE	IE	EL	ES	FR	HR	IT	CY	LV	LT	LU	HU	MT
Legal entitlement	23	23	23	-	Δ												Δ	26	-	-
Compulsory ECEC	23	23	23	4–8.5													20	26	20	-
	NL	**AT**	**PL**	**PT**	**RO**	**SI**	**SK**	**FI**	**SE**		**AL**	**BA**	**CH**	**IS**	**LI**	**ME**	**MK**	**NO**	**RS**	**TR**
Legal entitlement	-	-	25	25	-	30–45	Δ	Δ	(15)		-	-	-	-	21	-	-	Δ	-	-
		20	25	-	25	-	20	20	(15)		-	(4–5)	10–20	-	-	-	-	-	20	-

⊗ No top-level regulations Δ No restrictions (full day)

Figure 0.1 Legal entitlement versus compulsory (2025) in Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe – 2025. European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice.

In Barcelona (Spain), despite the growth of municipal childcare, a substantial proportion of families with children under three do not use ECEC services, and cost remains a limiting factor. In Milan (Italy), the combination of parental leave and predominantly fee-based childcare creates a significant gap between entitlement and actual access, as availability of services varies considerably across regions. By contrast, in Tampere (Finland) a strong culture of educational commitment is coupled with universal entitlement to ECEC and significant public investment, ensuring both access and quality. These contrasting situations highlight the need to consider the interaction between legal rights, public funding, and social norms when assessing ECEC provision and equity. The current revised Barcelona targets for 2030 aim at reaching 45 % of children below the age of 3 and 96 % between 3 and the age for compulsory education must participate in ECEC by 2030, with children

participating in ECEC services for at least 25 hours per week (Council recommendation of 8 December 2022 on early childhood education and care: The Barcelona targets for 2030). Figure 0.2 shows that, on average, 37.5 % of children under 3 attended ECEC in the EU-27 in 2023.

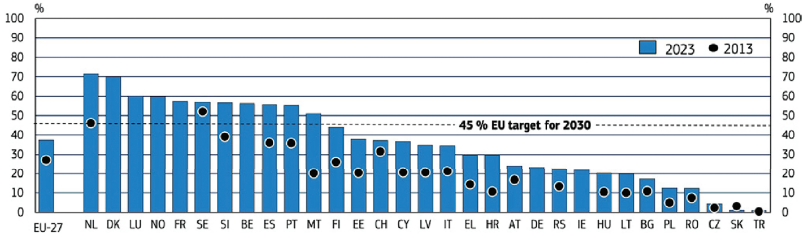
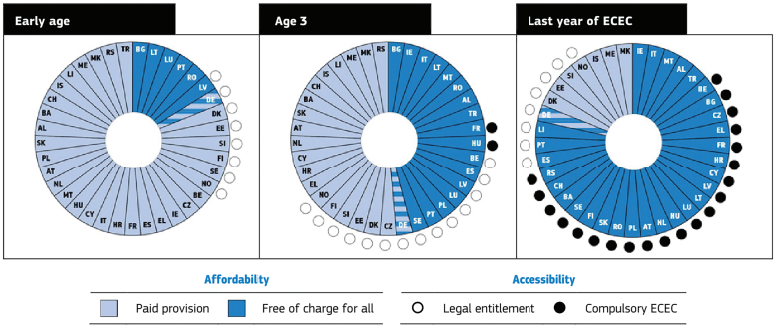


Figure 0.2 Participation rates in ECEC of children under age 3 (2025) in Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe – 2025. European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice.

Ten EU member states and Norway have already reached and surpassed the revised Barcelona target of 45 %. Denmark and the Netherlands stand out with the highest participation rates of children under the age of 3 in ECEC, reaching 70 % or over in 2023. The rates are between 50 % and 60 % in Belgium, Spain, France, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden and Norway. Over the last decade, the average participation rate in ECEC for children under 3 in the EU-27 has significantly improved, rising from 27.0 % to 37.5 %.

Affordability is crucial in ensuring that the maximum number of children can access ECEC. Figure 0.3 highlights the most effective measure to make ECEC affordable for all families: offering all places free of charge. However, affordability must be considered alongside availability, as free ECEC in public settings may be limited without a place guarantee, leading to long waiting lists and complex priority rules. Therefore, Figure 0.3 illustrates the availability of free ECEC in relation to guaranteed places for three broad age groups: early age (under 2); age 3 (over 2, under 4) and last year of ECEC (4–6, depending on the education system). In Europe, most families pay fees for ECEC for younger children.



Starting age of ECEC free of charge for all children and the number of free of charge hours per week

	BE fr	BE de	BE nl	BG	CZ	DK	DE	EE	IE	EL	ES	FR	HR	IT	CY	LV	LT	LU	HU	MT
Age (years)	2.5	2.5	2.5	0.3	5	-		-	2.7	4	3	3	6	3	4.5	1.5	0	1	3	2.75
Weekly hours																	20	20–26	Δ	30
	NL	**AT**	**PL**	**PT**	**RO**	**SI**	**SK**	**FI**	**SE**		**AL**	**BA**	**CH**	**IS**	**LI**	**ME**	**MK**	**NO**	**RS**	**TR**
Age (years)	4	5	3	0	0.5	-	5	6	3		3	5	4	-	4	-	-	-	5.5	3
Weekly hours	25	20	25	Δ	Δ	-	Δ	20	(15)		20	(4–5)	10–20	-	21	-	-	-	Δ	Δ

⊗ No top-level regulations Δ No restrictions (full day)

Figure 0.3 ECEC free of charge and guaranteed places (2025) in Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe – 2025. European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice.

The second challenge concerns quality in ECEC services, which matters because it shapes the experiences and outcomes of young children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Quality in ECEC services can be broadly categorised into two kinds: structural and process quality. Structural quality refers to the more tangible aspects of ECEC settings, such as child-staff ratios, group sizes, staff qualifications, and the physical environment, and it creates the conditions necessary for high-quality interactions and learning experiences. Smaller child-staff ratios and group sizes are associated with better outcomes for children. They allow for more individualised attention, responsive caregiving, and the development of secure attachments. Research indicates that lower ratios and smaller group sizes contribute to higher levels of emotional support and more effective teaching practices (Bendini and Devercelli, 2022; OECD, 2025; UNICEF and UNESCO, 2024; etc.). Not surprisingly, the work conditions, qualifications and ongoing professional development of ECEC staff are critical determinants of quality. Well-trained

and educated staff are better equipped to implement developmentally appropriate practices, engage in meaningful interactions with children, and create enriching learning environments. Continuous professional development ensures that staff stay updated with the latest research and best practices in early childhood education. Finally, a safe, clean, and stimulating physical environment is essential for children's well-being and learning. High-quality ECEC settings provide age-appropriate materials, outdoor play areas, and spaces that encourage exploration and creativity.

Process quality, on the other hand, refers to the nature of interactions between staff and children, the implementation of the 'curriculum', and the overall learning atmosphere, and it encompasses the day-to-day experiences of children in ECEC settings. Positive, responsive, and nurturing interactions between staff and children are the cornerstone of process quality. These interactions support children's emotional security, language development, and cognitive growth. Moreover, a positive learning environment encourages children to explore, take risks, and develop a love for learning. In such environments, a well-designed 'curriculum', activities, interactions … that is implemented effectively can enhance the quality of ECEC. The 'curriculum' should be child-centred, developmentally appropriate, and inclusive, promoting play-based learning, creativity, etc. For example, in terms of quality, it is misleading to assume that enrolments rates are alone. Instead, it is important to note that in many EU member states where the goal of 33 % attendance has been reached, most children are enrolled in less intensive programmes and are therefore offered a service of fewer than 30 hours a week (also undermining the work–life balance for parents). Consequently, access and quality should be taken into consideration together when evaluating if an education system complies with the EU Targets.

As showed in Figure 0.4, public funding is crucial to mitigate the reliance on private expenditure and ensure equitable access to ECEC services. Inadequate public funding can lead to higher costs for families, disincentivising enrolment among children who would benefit the most from ECEC participation. Countries with higher public investment in ECEC tend to have more equitable and higher-quality services. For example, countries like Germany and Norway combine high enrolment rates in private institutions with substantial public funding, ensuring that quality and access are maintained. In contrast, countries like the United Kingdom and the United States, which rely heavily on private funding, face challenges in affordability and quality.

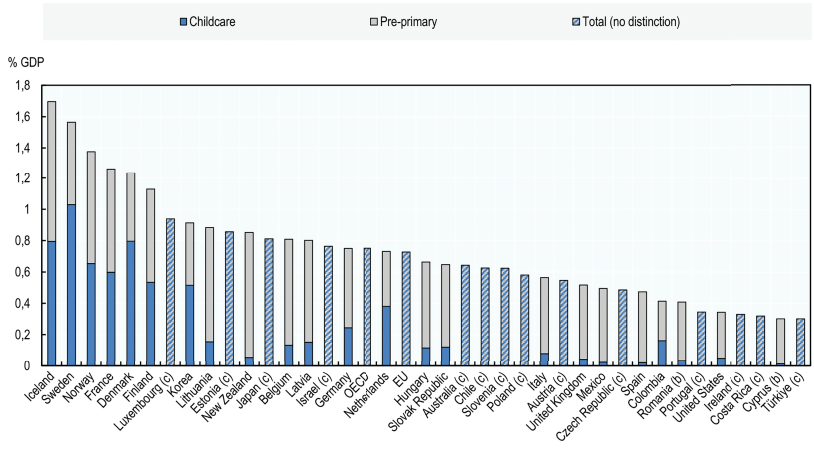


Figure 0.4 Public expenditure across the OECD (2024). Author's elaboration based on Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators. OECD.

The third challenge is related to adaptability and the importance of the local context and arrangements. The decentralisation and diversity that characterises ECEC services often exacerbates supply issues and poses governance challenges. In many countries, the responsibility for financing and delivering ECEC services is shared between central/regional and local governments. However, this decentralisation is not always accompanied by adequate fiscal transfers from central governments to local authorities. As a result, regions with lower financial capacities struggle to expand and maintain ECEC services, leading to significant territorial disparities in service availability.

Given this background, the third element that defines ECEC services is, paradoxically, its non-universal character. Since compulsory education does not start until year 5 of 6 in most countries, central, regional and local authorities simply do not have a legal obligation to provide with universal ECEC – hence they cannot request all parents to enrol their children in ECEC services. However, while the 3–6 range, or even year 2, has fully gained the recognition of its educational importance, the work with younger children, in many ways, still continues to fall into the category of 'babysitting' (*sic*) and all its euphemisms for larger sections of the society. Although the 0–6 age range is not mandatory, all EU countries have secured a universal, free provision of the 3–6 age range, where participation rates are almost the same

of primary education (93 %), while the 0–2 continues to show much lower participation rates – an average of 38 %, with significant variation among year 0, year 1 and year 2 (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2025).

The fact that in the majority of countries most families cannot access free of charge ECEC services – in developing countries, this number can reach more than 95 % of mothers (Staab, 2015) – poses a significant economic burden of parents, and those who cannot afford it have to look for other alternatives, including facing a trade-off between pursuing their values regarding their children's early care and education and the high costs for their professional careers and economic autonomy, or they simply cannot access them. Another major variable that explains the need for using ECEC services at the 0–2 age is the level of social security benefits and the overall social protection provided by the welfare state. The length of well-paid childcare leave – where 'well paid' means earnings-related payment of 66 % of earnings or more –, for example, is a very good indicator of how the need to use ECEC services varies greatly in the EU (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2025; OECD, 2025).

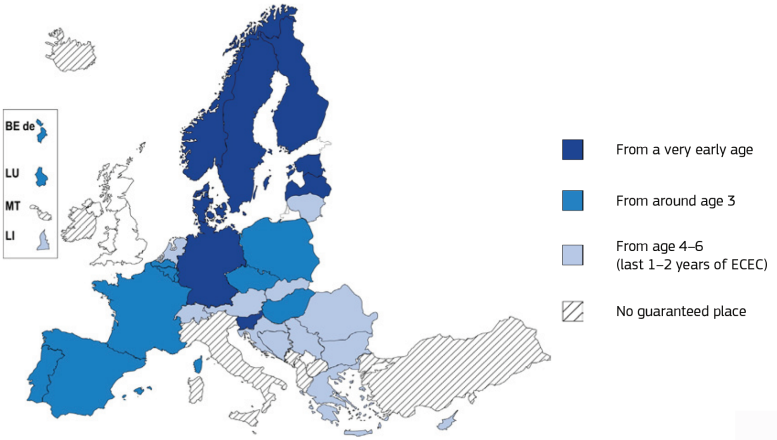


Figure 0.5 Age from which a place in ECEC is guaranteed (2025) in Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe – 2025. European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice.

As illustrated in Figure 0.5, data reveals that almost half of European countries provide an opportunity for families to stay off work and raise their children for around 1 year or more. Families may care for their children without facing financial risk for up to 2 years after the child's birth in Hungary and Romania. In

contrast, more than a quarter of European countries provide well-paid childcare leave for less than 5 months. In order to show the degree of separation between the policies, the ECEC gap indicates the amount of time a child is not covered by either well-paid childcare leave or a guaranteed place in publicly subsidised ECEC. This is the period when families with young children have to make difficult decisions about whether to stay at home (mainly adopted by women), whether to turn to informal care, or whether and how to pay for expensive, private ECEC services. Only seven countries have no gap between childcare leave and the ECEC place guarantee (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2025).

As we can see in Figure 0.6, even when the state provides significant funding for ECEC, it does not necessarily deliver the services. Private ECEC providers include large corporations; small, medium and large enterprises; self-employed child-minders providing services in their own homes; non-governmental or faith-based organisations; local community groups; and cooperatives. Services can vary widely in terms of programme length, ranging from part-day to full-day programmes, and can be provided by different types of institutions, including public, private, and non-profit organisations. Whether privately provided services are accessible, affordable, and of adequate quality depends on the degree of state funding and regulation. For example, private for-profit providers will often accommodate parental preferences, including with regards to opening hours and classroom activities. Yet, such higher-end services remain unaffordable for the majority of households.

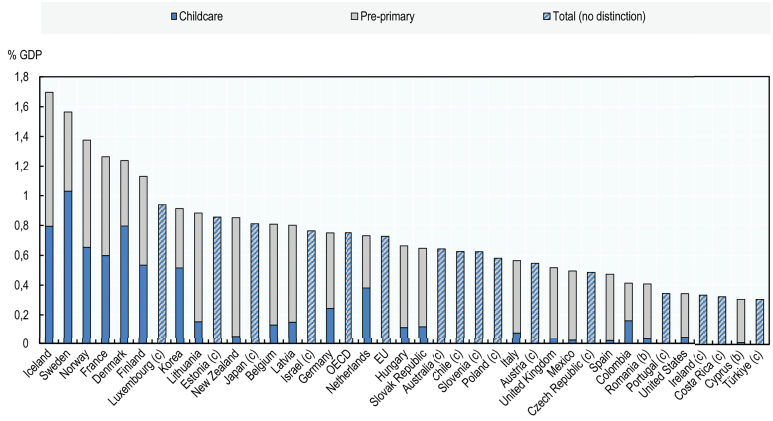


Figure 0.6 The ECEC gap (2025) in Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe – 2025. European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice.

Outline of the book chapters

These three major challenges, along with others that are examined in Chapter 1 and new emerging ones such as the growing diversity and inequality in European societies and cities, call for a thorough review of ECEC services. This book attempts to both answer this call and address the many challenges, proposing, in Chapter 1, a novel global and responsive approach that conceptualises Early Childhood Education and Care services for children and families as a common good, following UNESCO's recommendations (2015b, 2021). The EU Child Guarantee proposal and the UNESCO approach on education as a common good both suggest the necessity of a new social contract for ECEC services. This new social contract would acknowledge the public's role in ensuring children and families universal and quality well-being, care and education, which is both an excellent investment (Heckman, 2006; OECD, 2017) and would foster shared governance with the community, families, and professionals (Hayden and Wai, 2013). Moreover, it underscores the significance of advocating for responses that are contextualised, flexible, and coherent; that is, responsive. Chapter 1 proposes a proportional universalism approach, in which services are universal but with diverse intensities and supports adapted to the needs of each child and family. This approach is articulated through the global and responsive integration of three interdependent levels that should be coherent and strongly coordinated among them, namely:

1. The public policy level, which includes values, funding, governance and evaluation systems (Macro)
2. The institutional level, the organisation of services, leadership, infrastructure and professional teams are all relevant factors (Meso)
3. The educational and care practices, the relationship with families and the community, and pedagogical approaches oriented towards holistic development are all important considerations (Micro)

Chapter 2 constitutes an applied contribution in the form of a proposal for a new self-assessment and continuous improvement tool for ECEC services. The proposal is inspired by three internationally recognised instruments: the ITERS-R scale (2003), the Index for Inclusion (2006) and DAVOPSI (2011; Clemente, 2012). This novel instrument for self-assessment, observation and

analysis is not intended to be a means of control or scrutiny, but is designed to promote collective processes of reflection, institutional learning, quality improvement and progress towards greater equity. The pivotal concept in this context is that of 'process'. The term 'self-assessment' is understood to denote a dialogue process concerning professional awareness of the ECEC services situation and the will for continuous personal, collective and institutional improvement. The objective of this initiative is to furnish the managers of ECEC services; the ECEC services leaders and the teams themselves with a tool that facilitates self-management of the enhancement of the service. Consequently, professionals within educational services can assume the roles of both evaluators and agents of training and change. This is facilitated by the identification of needs that arise in the diverse realities of the centres and communities involved in educational services and of what kind of continually improved and responsive answers can be done by ECEC services.

Having proposed a global approach to rethink ECEC services and a self-assessment tool to encourage reflection and progress towards greater equity through ECEC services, the remaining chapters focus on concrete good practices that exemplify the proposed global approach – good practices that can inspire other cities and state/regional governments in order to improve their ECEC services. The first two chapters on good practices focus on Barcelona, the next on Italy as a whole followed by one on Milan, and the final two on Tampere, all drawing on the EDUFIRST project based on these three leading cities in the field of ECEC services.

Chapter 3, *ECEC services as nodes of a community and family network: The Barcelona case*, analyses the system of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in the city of Barcelona, focusing on its development over time, its current challenges, and the emerging role of early childhood centres as nodes within a community-based network. The Spanish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) model is distinguished by a decentralised governance structure, the non-compulsory nature of the initial cycle, and the substantial involvement of local authorities and private providers. This configuration gives rise to considerable territorial diversity with regard to coverage, quality, and provision. The city of Barcelona has an extensive network of municipal early childhood education centres, the expansion of which has been particularly significant since the early 2000s. Despite the fact that the total number of enrolled children has remained relatively stable in recent years, a gradual

shift from private to public provision can be observed. Enrolment rates have increased substantially and currently exceed the European targets set for 2030. Nevertheless, marked disparities persist between districts, closely linked to socio-economic factors and families' work–life balance needs. The City Council has developed a range of complementary services, including the Municipal Family Parenting Spaces, which are designed to provide educational guidance and to facilitate the establishment of support networks among families, with a particular focus on those with children under the age of three who are not enrolled in formal ECEC settings. These services have been demonstrated to enhance public support for parenting; however, they cannot yet fully address childcare requirements associated with employment conciliation. The final part of this study examines the community-based perspective, conceptualising infant schools and family spaces as 'houses of early childhood'. From this standpoint, municipal early childhood centres fulfil two functions: the first is educational, and the second is to try to facilitate a healthy work–life balance. The second function of these centres is to operate as 'social infrastructures', fostering relationships, support networks and shared activities among families, services, and local communities.

Chapter 4, *ECEC services for climate justice in Barcelona*, examines the municipal strategy *Bressols pel Clima* (nursery schools for the climate) promoted by the Barcelona City Council to integrate climate justice into municipal ECEC services for children aged 0–3. The chapter is grounded in the recognition of children and family's vulnerability to climate crisis. It positions ECEC services as key actors in ensuring the right to healthy, playful, and sustainable environments, as well as in promoting structural changes with community-level impact. The strategy is structured around three main objectives: firstly, to make children's needs visible in the context of the climate emergency; secondly, to reduce the environmental footprint of early childhood centres; and thirdly, to foster systemic transformations through coordinated network and community-based action. The chapter identifies several challenges associated with the prevailing urban model, including limited access to green spaces, reduced opportunities for active play, exposure to environmental risks, difficulties in accessing healthy food, and the persistence of unsustainable consumption patterns. These challenges are further compounded by social and territorial inequalities. The chapter goes on to explore debates related to the renaturalisation of educational environments,

adult perceptions of risk, and the need to support families in developing a positive relationship with nature. Finally, it emphasises the significance of ongoing evaluation and professional development for educational teams, as well as the necessity of robust institutional leadership in order to consolidate meaningful pedagogical transformation. It is therefore presented as an inseparable dimension of children's well-being, social equity, and the right to a healthier and more liveable city.

Moving now to Italy, Milan is a prime example of a city that has successfully implemented two noteworthy practices that have the potential to serve as a model for numerous other European and global cities: 0–6 years old as one continuous educational stage and European Child Guarantee. Chapter 5 examines educational continuity as a foundational principle of Italy's integrated 0–6 education system. Established through Law 107/2015 and Legislative Decree 65/2017, the system aims to overcome the historical divide between early childhood services (0–3) and pre-school (3–6), affirming early childhood as a unified developmental phase. However, integration remains an evolving process requiring cultural, professional, and organisational coherence. Continuity is framed first as a child's right: educational experiences should be coherent, meaningful, and respectful of children's identities. Rather than merely ensuring smooth transitions between services, continuity concerns the overall quality and consistency of children's experiences over time. Development is understood as dynamic and non-linear; therefore, continuity is not rigid uniformity but a productive tension between stability and change. Discontinuities can be positive when mediated and developmentally meaningful. The chapter analyses continuity across regulatory, pedagogical, and organisational dimensions. National Pedagogical and Early Childhood Guidelines provide a shared cultural framework, promoting a holistic view of the child as competent and active. Continuity is embedded in curriculum design, which includes both explicit elements (objectives, planning, documentation) and implicit aspects (relationships, environments, routines). Building a progressive 0–6 curriculum requires shared professional languages and intentional planning. Organizationally, continuity depends on pedagogical coordination, collegial work, joint training, structured transitions, and collaboration with families and local services. Tools such as observation, documentation, and reflective transition reports support narrative coherence across contexts. Ultimately, continuity is presented as a systemic responsibility

and a key indicator of quality. It reflects the capacity of the integrated system to provide equitable, coherent, and meaningful educational pathways that honour children's developmental complexity and rights.

Chapter 6 analyses the implementation of the European Child Guarantee in a metropolitan context, focusing on Milan as a case study. The Child Guarantee, adopted in 2021, aims to prevent and combat child poverty by ensuring effective access to essential services, including early childhood education and care services, education, healthcare, nutrition, and housing. It frames children as rights holders and positions ECEC as a strategic infrastructure for preventing structural inequalities from the earliest stages of life. The chapter first outlines the European policy framework and its emphasis on equity and effective access, particularly for children at risk of poverty, disability, migration-related vulnerability, or housing deprivation. It then examines Italy's National Action Plan (PANGI), which translates European principles into national priorities. PANGI prioritises the expansion and qualification of 0–6 services, especially for the 0–3 age group, promotes integrated governance across educational, social, and health sectors, and seeks to reduce educational poverty through both quantitative expansion and targeted measures. However, territorial disparities and socio-economic gaps in participation highlight persistent challenges. Against this background, Milan is presented as a metropolitan laboratory where European principles are operationalised within a complex urban environment marked by high density, migration, and socio-spatial polarisation. The municipal 0–6 system combines direct public management with accredited providers and is organised through local educational units to ensure pedagogical coherence and territorial responsiveness. Access is regulated through transparent criteria and income-based fee systems, complemented by measures to support vulnerable families. Particular attention is given to continuity from 0 to 6 as a lever for equity and to practices developed within the EDUFIRST project. These include facilitated access procedures, strengthened school-family relationships, recognition of family resources, and network-based collaboration. The chapter concludes that implementing the Child Guarantee in metropolitan contexts is an ongoing, negotiated process requiring reflexivity, multi-level coordination, and sustained investment in the quality and inclusiveness of early childhood services

The last two chapters focus on Tampere, which sets forth two good practices that have the potential to serve as a source of inspiration for a wide range

of other actors. Chapter 7 provides an overview of the capacity of Early Childhood Education and Care services to provide responsive responses in the face of rapidly evolving and diversifying linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and religious demographics. The presence of multicultural and multilingual challenges is a phenomenon that is observable throughout Europe. These challenges are of paramount importance in the pursuit of building inclusive and equitable societies. Chapter 8 explores the pivotal role of evaluation, quality, and professionalism in facilitating continuous improvement in the domain of ECEC services.

Chapter 7, *A Multicultural and Multilingual Approach in ECEC Services: Trajectory and Current Debates*, explores the development and current challenges of multicultural and multilingual ECEC services at the local level. Tampere illustrates how local governments can respond strategically to growing cultural and linguistic diversity. Contrary to the declining national birth rates, Tampere has been experiencing an influx of new residents, leading to a consistent augmentation in multicultural and multilingual families and an escalating proportion of children possessing diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds within ECEC services. A fundamental characteristic of the Tampere model is the assurance of access to ECEC as a universal right. It is an irrefutable fact that all children are entitled to education and care services, irrespective of factors such as family income, place of residence, or migration status. High participation rates are indicative of both the accessibility and the trustworthiness of the system. This is further reinforced by a sliding fee structure that serves to remove financial barriers for many families. The maintenance of high service quality is contingent upon consistent staff-to-child ratios, explicit qualification requirements, and the presence of competent municipal leadership. The city has introduced a range of practices to support multilingual development. It is recommended that children be encouraged to acquire Finnish while simultaneously valuing and sustaining their home languages. Tampere also employs translanguaging as an intentional pedagogical strategy, allowing multiple languages to be used flexibly in everyday interactions. Beyond language, the city addresses cultural, religious and worldview diversity through structured pedagogical planning. The integration of diversity-related themes into daily practice is facilitated by dedicated cultural education coordinators in each ECEC centre, who also encourage collaboration with families. The provision of ongoing professional

training, incorporating anti-racist education, has been demonstrated to facilitate reflective practice and challenge bias. In conclusion, Tampere establishes a correlation between inclusion and sustainability through the medium of eco-social education. In this manner, ECEC services are presented as a basis for social cohesion, environmental responsibility, and equal participation in an urban context characterised by increasing diversity.

Finally, Chapter 8 focuses on *Quality, evaluation and professionalism in ECEC services: debates and challenges.* In Finland, quality in ECEC is grounded in legislation and the national core curriculum, which highlight equality, inclusion, non-discrimination, and the promotion of children's holistic development and well-being. Evaluation is approached as an ongoing and multi-layered process that supports both pedagogical and care development and accountability. At the national level, responsibility for evaluating ECEC lies with the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC), which also oversees Valssi[1] a digital quality evaluation system implemented nationwide in 2023. Valssi provides research-informed tools that enable ECEC service providers to carry out systematic self-evaluation and plan development activities. In Tampere, these tools have been used particularly to assess practices related to play and the provision of support for children. Alongside national evaluation mechanisms, quality assurance is embedded in local structures through continuous developmental evaluation and unit-level self-assessment. Pedagogical documentation, reflective practice among staff, and the active involvement of children and families are key features of this process. This chapter situates ECEC services quality within broader political and social discussions, particularly those concerning the subjective right to ECEC and its significance for educational equality and social inclusion. Finally, Tampere faces staff shortages, increasing qualification requirements, and large-scale retirements. While national and local initiatives aim to strengthen recruitment, retention, and professional development, sustaining high-quality ECEC will require strong pedagogical leadership, coherent evaluation practices, and a sustained commitment to continuous learning in an evolving societal context.

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[1] https://www.karvi.fi/en/evaluations/early-childhood-education-and-care/valssi-national-quality-evaluation-system-ecec/background-and-development-valssi

1. Towards a new global and responsive ECEC services approach

Rethinking policies, institutions and pedagogical practices[1]

Jordi Collet-Sabé, Verónica Jimenez, Mila Naranjo and Glòria Olmos

1.1 Introduction: the political, institutional and practice dimensions of ECEC services

In the face of the current major difficulties, challenges and opportunities for services for children and families, the Erasmus+ EDUFIRST project proposes a new model to rethink current and future Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services, based on all its visits, learning activities, debates, meetings and training. The EDUFIRST model is based on a comprehensive and interconnected approach to the three key levels of early childhood and family services:

a. **Its dimension as a public policy,** incorporating values, ideology, guidelines, discourse, budgets, implementation and evaluation, connects these services with a vision of society and its needs.
b. **Its institutional dimension** concerning how these policies are implemented in the form of infant schools, family spaces, and other social, health, community services, with their respective buildings, schedules, leadership, cultures and professionals, including their initial and continuing training, development, and working conditions.

[1] We would like to express our gratitude to Profs. Peter Moss (Institute of Education – University College London) and Sílvia Blanch (Autonomous University of Barcelona) for their support improving the chapter.

c. **The dimension of pedagogical and care practices,** which includes all the different care and educational professional practices, materials, play, child development… and relationships with families and the community.

Five major shared challenges have emerged from the European and international literature on early childhood and family services. As will be seen later, the EDUFIRST model aims to address these challenges to contribute to reach the UN SGD 4.2, 'To ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and education', without resorting to technocratic or 'silver bullet' approaches.

1.2 Early childhood education and care services and families[2] in Europe: five shared challenges

1.2.1 The provision of services (supply)

The question of who is responsible for providing education and care for children and their families from 0 to 6 years of age, especially during the first 1,000 days, is crucial. Consequently, questions arise as to who designs, implements and evaluates public policies for this stage (local, regional and/or state administration; type of institution, whether nursery school – infant school, family space, community services, etc.); whether they are universal (Finland) or not (Spain and Italy); who finances them and how, and whether they are considered a subjective right of every child, especially the most disadvantaged (in line with the EU's Child Guarantee) or whether it is a complementary service to be paid for by families, which reproduces and increases existing inequalities (Navarro and León, 2024); what ages it is aimed at (0–3 as in Spain or 0–6 as in Italy and Finland, for example); what impact the type of education and care that can be chosen (parental, informal, formal private and formal public) has on parenting and the number of children people have or would like to have, at a time of declining birth rates across the continent (Judi et al., 2025); etc.

There are significant disparities in the answers to these questions about availability in different European countries. Several factors influence this diversity, such as legal rights, compulsory attendance and the age at which

[2] The 'European Charter for Family Carers' provided by COFACE highlights the key role of families in early childhood education. https://coface-eu.org/european-charter-for-family-carers

children are guaranteed a place in ECEC services. Thus, two main approaches to ensuring universal access coexist in the EU: legal rights and compulsory attendance. Legal rights guarantee a place in ECEC for children whose parents request it, while compulsory attendance requires children to attend such services for a certain period before starting primary education. The age at which these guarantees begin varies greatly from country to country. For example, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden guarantee a place from an early age (6–18 months), while other countries such as Belgium, the Czech Republic, Spain, France, Luxembourg, Hungary, Poland and Portugal guarantee a place from around the age of 3 (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2025).

Despite these guarantees, there are still significant gaps in ECEC services provision, particularly for children under the age of three. In many countries, enrolment rates in pre-school education (3–5 years) are relatively high, but coverage for younger children remains insufficient. For example, countries such as Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden have high enrolment rates for children under the age of three, while others such as Hungary, Poland and Austria have much lower rates.

This gap is often exacerbated by a lack of coordination between childcare leave policies and the availability of places in ECEC services. There are also other forms of provision for families who do not need or want full-day nursery services, but who could benefit from psychosocial and educational family spaces, or other options such as daily care and informal/community networks of care. As will become clear, these can play an important role in addressing the supply issue.

The existence and analysis of these tensions and challenges, together with the evaluation of the ways in which different systems address them, are key to rethinking the provision of these services as public policy within the framework of the different European welfare state models (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Saraceno, 1995; etc.) and the classic debates on the role of the state, the market, families and the community in this provision (Adelantado, 2000).

1.2.2 Access: growing diversity and inequality

In all the cities involved in the project, as well as in the international literature, growing diversity (in family models and practices, origin, language, culture and religion, special educational needs, etc.) and growing social inequality

are emerging as cross-cutting challenges for early childhood and family services. Historically, political, institutional and pedagogical approaches to early childhood education and care were developed in the context of more solid, homogeneous and equitable societies. Today, neoliberal globalisation generates and, above all, widens social inequalities, which in turn intersect with new diversities, migrations and changes of all kinds (Spyrou et al., 2019). In this context, it is not surprising that access to ECEC services is characterised by increasing diversity (family models, cultural backgrounds, special educational needs) and social inequalities. These disparities are exacerbated by the high fees charged in some countries, which make quality early childhood education unaffordable for low-income families. As the OCDE exposes (2029, 2015), in some countries such as Ireland and Greece, fees can be difficult to afford. In fact, in the EU, children from families in the highest income tertile participate in ECEC services almost twice as much as those in the lowest income tertile. Geographical disparities also play an important role in limiting access to ECEC services. In many countries, urban areas tend to have better ECEC coverage than rural areas. Within cities, socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods tend to have fewer services, further exacerbating inequalities. Overall, the availability of free ECEC services increases significantly at age 3 and continues to increase with each subsequent year, becoming almost universal across the EU in the last year before primary education. This trend is further explained by the growing provision of public services. In addition, many European education systems introduce a compulsory and free stage for the last year before primary education (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2025).

It is important to note that the balance between demand and supply of publicly subsidised ECEC services is a key factor in understanding the 'ECEC gap'. That is, the amount of time a child is not covered by either well-paid childcare leave or a guaranteed place in publicly subsidised ECEC (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2025). However, this indicator needs to be weighed against data on participation rates, as factors such as cultural norms and traditional family values may contribute to lower demand for some traditional ECEC services such as nursery schools, especially among very young children. Demand may also be affected by perceptions of service quality, as families who consider ECEC services to be of low quality may opt for other forms of childcare and therefore not even apply for a place. In addition to factors such as age and place of residence, there are other reasons

that contribute to variations in the supply and demand for places. Different types of ECEC services may experience different levels of demand, with public centres often being the most sought after.

1.2.3 The expansion and quality of services

The quality of ECEC is a central concern, encompassing both structural and process quality. Structural quality includes aspects such as the child-staff ratio, staff qualifications, and the physical environment. Process quality refers to interactions between professionals and children, the overall environment for development and learning, relationships with families, and the materials used. What we call pedagogical and care practices. High-quality ECEC programmes are associated with better development, future academic performance, social competence, and fewer behavioural problems in children. High-quality Early Childhood Education and Care services are developed gradually through simultaneous investments in various elements over time. Although conclusive results on the cost-effectiveness of system-wide interventions are still limited, several reports highlight crucial investments that improve children's overall development and learning: such as the ability to attract and retain qualified staff in services; focus on improving relationships between professionals and children; develop child-centred activities; invest in spaces that enable greater and more diverse opportunities; the implementation of evaluation systems; and good and wide-reaching relationships with families, family involvement in ECEC services, and family support, especially during the first 1,000 days.

Precisely, as we will see in the next chapter, some instruments have been proposed that seek to be a useful tool for both analysing the current quality of ECEC services in their different dimensions and promoting their continuous improvement (Rentzou and Slutsky, 2019). But quality is not something that is easy to evaluate, nor, above all, to capture, define, promote, implement and improve. It is not something that can be approached from abstract, supposedly neutral or depoliticised models. On the contrary, with Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2009), we affirm that it is essential to address quality from complex ethical and political debates and the shared construction of meaning. That is why the question of quality, both at the level of public policy and institutions, as well as pedagogical practices and professionals, is crucial (Sakr and O'Sullivan, 2022). Without a doubt, quality, continuous improvement and evaluation are a shared challenge for all the cities in the project.

1.2.4 The function and orientation of early childhood services

Closely linked to the question of provision is the question of the orientation and functions that we, as a society, want to ask of early childhood services and families. Thus, designing, implementing and evaluating these services as a cornerstone of family reconciliation, especially for women, to promote their (re)entry into the labour market and ensure that existing gender inequalities in our societies do not increase and can be reversed (León et al., 2022). Or doing so by understanding these services as a social investment to prevent future school failure and early school-leaving, especially among the most disadvantaged students. That is, designing ECEC services as a pre-school, from an educational-school perspective, understanding that their function is to prepare children, especially those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, for a good education that does not reproduce existing inequalities which implies very different educational institutions and practices (Hatch, 2026). Or they can be approached as a policy for the care and support of children and families, from a community perspective, promoting bonding, mutual support, the creation of relational capital, etc. (Gallego and Maestripieri, 2024). This is a key debate that must be addressed without fail in the design of policies, institutions, the training of professionals, ECEC evaluation, etc.

1.2.5 Dialogue and coherence between the dimensions of public policy, institutions and pedagogical and care practices

All public and institutional policy design ultimately results in specific educational and care practices. In the end, all these dimensions materialise in one form or another of establishing bonds, play, materials, spaces, times, food, care, professionals, etc. However, traditionally, the dimension of educational and care practices has remained invisible in public policy debates, which focus on questions of provision, price or positive discrimination for certain groups to facilitate their access. Once an ECEC service is up and running, what happens inside often remains quite unknown. On the contrary, pedagogical debates on early childhood educational practices (play, psychomotor skills, speech, environments, spaces, etc.) and their major references (Froebel, Montessori, Pikler, Malaguzzi, etc.) have sometimes remained isolated from their essential link with structural dimensions (Willan, 2024). Undoubtedly, the need for broad (re)cognition, dialogue and coherence between the actors and the different voices of the three dimensions (public policy, institutional

and pedagogical and care practices) is a central challenge for these services. This is something that Malaguzzi's work in Reggio Emilia has already brought to the table in the form of debates and challenges (Cagliari et al. 2016).

Precisely in view of these five challenges, we believe that the lessons we have learnt in the EDUFIRST project, both from international literature and, above all, from the cities participating in the project: Barcelona, Milan and Tampere, might be useful for the whole of Europe and, eventually, for the rest of the world.

1.3 Towards a new approach to early childhood and family services: comprehensive and responsive

1.3.1 New times, new challenges

Faced with the exposed challenges, the project aims to move towards proposals for ECEC services that are broad enough to become universal and, at the same time, flexible and inclusive in their structure. In other words, while covering all children and families in the city, they can respond to their different and changing needs and inequalities. In the words of Loris Malaguzzi, he proposed 'a type of pedagogy that does not seek to prescribe, but rather to bring about conceptual shifts or provocations in order to leave the door open to possible unthought-of solutions' (Cagliari et al., 2016, xii).

After decades of public administration governed by a logic of universality, of 'effective indifference', of applying the same policy (educational or social) in the same way and at the same time to everyone, since the 1980s, there has been a movement calling for the need to leave behind these hierarchical, centralised and homogeneous models of government, management and provision and move towards networked *governance* (Subirats, 2021). The crisis of traditional top-down government arose precisely because of its inability to adapt to increasingly diverse and unequal societies, to which it continued to provide rigid, pre-established, partial, distant and technocratic responses. The new proposals for governance or networked government conceptualised in the 1990s by authors such as Mayntz, Rhodes, Kooiman and Beck advocated transforming the working models of public administrations (Subirats, 2021; Ball and Collet, 2022). They did so by committing to the recognition, acceptance and integration of complexity and diversity as elements that shape the new social normality and not as 'difficulties' to be solved or eliminated from educational or social action;

proposing the recognition of the voice and participation of all actors involved in each policy; and advocating for a new role for public administration in power relations with other actors, understood as an actor in a multiple and complex network of actors. These debates took place before networked government was promoted, especially in education, by neoliberal logics that seek to delegitimise the role of democratic governments in educational decision-making and, above all, to transform educations into a business through dynamics such as philanthrocapitalism or public-private partnerships (Ball, 2021).

Barcelona, Milan and Tampere have already come a long way towards this comprehensive, global, flexible and responsive model, towards this networked government, in different ways, and we can therefore learn a lot from them. However, as we have seen before, there are still difficulties surrounding the provision, access, expansion, investment and quality of ECEC services that must be addressed at the political, institutional and pedagogical levels to move towards global, comprehensive, flexible and responsive proposals. These proposals must be universal for all children and their families, as well as flexible, adaptable and responsive in each context in terms of the type of institution, its educational approach, its schedules, objectives, and its care throughout the entire 0–6 stage. Also designed, implemented and evaluated from an inclusive and community-based approach that understands that the education and care of all children in the territory is not solely the responsibility of families and nursery schools, but of all stakeholders.

1.3.2 Towards a new approach to early childhood and family services: comprehensive and responsive

For decades, early childhood and family services, their professionals, their social value, etc. have experienced a constant duality. On the one hand, at the discursive level, all government bodies describe care at this stage as crucial. We have already seen the central importance that UNESCO attaches to the early years of life for example in the Tashkent declaration[3]. Or, for example, the European Union states that[4]:

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[3] https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2022/11/tashkent-declaration-ecce-2022.pdf

[4] https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/early-childhood-education-and-care/about-early-childhood-education-and-care

> High-quality early childhood education and care lay the foundations for later success in life in terms of education, well-being, employability and social integration. It is especially important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Ensuring the provision of high-quality early childhood education and care is, therefore, also an efficient and effective investment in education and training. Every child in the European Union (EU) has the right to affordable and high-quality early childhood education and care, as outlined in the European Pillar of Social Rights. Educational attainment should be decoupled from social, economic and cultural status.

For this reason, the EU is calling on each Member State to develop a priority line of action for the development of these services in its Child Guarantee strategy. State, regional and local governments all agree on the great importance of these ages. As Hoyuelos (2010) explains, no one now denies that this stage is crucial in neurological, cognitive, emotional, educational and social terms. Research is unanimous in showing that children who grow up in safe, friendly, loving and stimulating environments, with their basic needs met, are much more likely to have a good education and a good life than those who do not have this right fulfilled (UNICEF, 2018). So how is it possible that more than 50 % of children, especially those aged 0 to 3, do not have access to these services in different European countries? Why are professionals working with children of this age sometimes the lowest paid of all educational levels and why does their work receive less social recognition? Why do all discourses on education and care place children and families at the centre of all services, but they tend to have little or no say in their design and governance? Why are these services still socially viewed (and referred to) as 'childcare' (nurseries) aimed at facilitating family reconciliation (i.e. almost always for women), while the enormous advantages of services that promote inclusion, autonomy and are universal are highlighted? As we can see, the gap between discourse and policy, institutions and practice is still significant despite the enormous work that has been done. This gap reduces the capacity of ECEC services, understood as a subjective right, to provide quality educational opportunities for all children, especially the most disadvantaged.

Precisely in order to try to reduce this gap between discourses that recognise universal, quality education and professional care as critical at this stage and realities that do not always orient themselves towards this end, we propose a different view of early childhood services and families from a comprehensive and responsive approach. The pillars underpinning this proposal are:

Ensuring access to ECEC Services for all children and families, with a focus on ages 0 to 3

It is essential that all families and all children, especially those aged 0 to 3, have access to the various ECEC services in each city. This implies, first, recommending that, as already exists in different countries, ECEC services have to be established as a universal subjective right for every child from pregnancy to the age of 6. This means thinking about a pathway from pregnancy onwards so that, through health services, social services, community spaces, nursery schools, family spaces, etc., early childhood education, care and support for families becomes universal. Special attention should be paid to families and children with the greatest difficulties. It is probably not necessary for all children between the ages of 0 and 3 to be cared for in all-day nursery schools during these years. Thus, the proposal for universal ECEC services should not be confused with universal nursery schools. As we have seen, due to processes of mobility, migration, new values, new family and community relationship forms, special needs, etc., the important thing is that there is always, first and foremost, contact with all families to find out their needs and offer them the various ECEC service options (comprehensive). Secondly, these proposals can be improved and adapted in line with the changing realities of families (contextually and dynamically responsive).

In this universal and comprehensive approach, comprehensive, close, personalised, equitable and unbiased support for each family over time is the key to effectiveness and quality. Universal support that guides each family according to their preferences and needs for support in nutrition, care, hygiene, development, etc., to each educational, social, health, community resource, etc., without abandoning a continuous, comprehensive and close bond. Special attention is given to the most disadvantaged families and those with children with special needs. This always raises the question of who is the entity that accompanies, guides and supports families. We believe that the proposals from different cities and areas of action by *case managers,* health services, social services or comprehensive family centres are all relevant and have great potential. The most important thing is for each city to adopt a clear, stable and sustainable model that allows it to provide this universal and regular family support. Concretely, this means advancing the '4 As' framework proposed by Katerina Tomasevski during her tenure as UNESCO Director (2006) (a) *availability:* moving decisively towards universal services that focus

on the most disadvantaged and are understood as a pre-distributive policy to combat child poverty and promote equity (Ivàlua, 2024); (b) *accessibility*: that they are inclusive, i.e. for all children without exceptions, segregation or exclusion; (c) *acceptability*: with high quality standards, i.e. with the best trained, paid and recognised professionals; resources; adequate ratios; etc.; and (d) *adaptability:* that it is not a closed model, but rather guidelines that are necessarily open to adaptation, as we explain. Here, in large cities such as Barcelona, Milan and Tampere, the territorial and geographical dimension is key to ensuring that ECEC services are experienced as a comprehensive and equitable common good by all families, given the significant territorial inequalities that exist within large cities. Thus, it is important to highlight both the work done by these cities for territorial equity and equity in ECEC, as well as the significant new challenges that still need to be addressed in this regard.

ECEC services must be responsive to the different and changing needs and realities of children, families and communities

Migratory flows, different cultures, languages and religions, diverse conceptions of childhood, education and care, changes in family models, transformations in the world of work and lifespan, and scientific and educational innovations all mean that there is a constant need to improve and transform ECEC services (Spyrou et al., 2019). The perspective of 'responsive education' (Fletcher-Wood, 2018) emerged in the 1980s as 'responsive schools' and 'culturally responsive teaching' (Gay, 2018) to answer to the need to go beyond an existing education model and adapt it to changing realities (Hollie, 2011). Responsive education was born as an approach in which the culture and language of students are resources and assets for learning and teaching. Grounded in the assumption that educating is inherently complex and value-laden, our understanding of responsive education related to early children is that ECEC services should work with all diversities as a richness (inclusion), and eliminates all cultural, linguistical, institutional, economic… barriers to reach equity (Chang and Viesca, 2022). This challenge, related to contextual territorial, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity, has been addressed, for example, by the European network NESET in its report on 'Working with multilingual children and families in ECEC: guidelines for continuous professional development of ECEC professionals' (Bergeron-Morin, et al.,

2023). It highlights the need for responsive ECEC services in the face of the growing and changing multilingualism and multiculturalism of families and children in order to reach education and linguistic equity when all children start school. This challenge must be addressed not only by ECEC service professionals, but also in common with families and community stakeholders. Understanding that diversity of origin, language, territory, SEND or culture is the new normality and avoiding any segregation or discriminatory dynamics, responsive ECEC services focus on improving their everyday practices to achieve welcoming institutions and equitable practices for all, valuing and considering the unique linguistic, cultural, religious, territorial, historical family backgrounds of each child. Furthermore, the challenges and opportunities that these changing realities pose to the various ECEC services, which should be understood as a comprehensive and systemic network of services, actors and resources.

Finally, the developmental needs of children at each stage (from pregnancy to 6 years old) must be a key consideration in the design of ECEC services (institutions and practices). The significant progress made in neuroscience and brain research in recent decades provides valuable insights into the provision of appropriate ECEC services at each stage, addressing the various developmental needs in areas such as physiology, cognition, physical development, relationships, language, social skills, self-regulation, emotional well-being, learning, behaviour (Conkbayir, 2023). Avoiding, as Wasseman and Zambo (2013, i) exposes, 'the dangers of oversimplification and inappropriate extensions of neuroscience' in education. Neuroscience can be useful to educators and caregivers if applied ethically and with care.

ECEC services as a common good of the territory

For these ECEC services to be truly responsive and comprehensive, it is important that, in their design, institutional dynamics and educational practices, families are not conceived as individual 'customers' of a predefined service; but as participants in services that require participatory and collective adaptation to changing realities. That is, understanding ECEC services as a common good (Gallego and Vázquez, 2023). As the UNESCO put (2015, 78),

> The notion of common good goes beyond the instrumental concept of the public good in which human well-being is framed by individualistic socio-economic theory.

> From a 'common good' perspective, it is not only the 'good life' of individuals that matters, but also the goodness of the life that humans hold in common. It cannot be a personal or parochial good (…). The notion of education as a 'common good' reaffirms the collective dimension of education as a shared social endeavour (shared responsibility and commitment to solidarity)

In other words, ECEC services should be understood as part of the right to education from 0 to 100 years old, and it can only be accomplished by practicing ECEC services as a collective endeavour in which professionals, families and children are all active protagonists in a shared project. In order to provide truly responsive and comprehensive ECEC services that can address changing needs, realities and demands, particularly in diverse and super-diverse areas (Collet, 2025), the collective and participatory governance of all actors is required (Pechtelidis and Kioupkiolis, 2020). Each actor plays their part, but they are all co-constructing a collective service as a common good, far from technocratical, bureaucratical or for-profit approaches and simple solutions (UNESCO, 2015).

Working conditions, professional recognition and teachers' shortage

This universal, comprehensive and responsive response must be sustainable over time and guarantee good (initial and continuous) training, working and professional development conditions for educators and other professionals. All visits have shown that the resources allocated to early childhood at the national level are still insufficient. The same is true of the recognition of the tasks of education and care at these ages. This is leading to a growing shortage of professionals and their departure to other fields of work. Salaries, working conditions, the lack of social recognition for a key task, the possibility of working as a professional at this stage without a degree, a clear job development career … these are, among others, central issues that need to be rethought from a political, institutional and pedagogical perspective in order to reverse these structural dynamics that can undermine the quality of ECEC services.

Families (or caregivers) are the cornerstone of ECEC services

Sometimes, some cities have conceived ECEC services almost as if children had no family or carers (social care). This is, from our point of view, a mistake.

Families are key to children's well-being, development and education and require full support from public authorities. In times of inequality, difficulty accessing housing, migration, etc., public support for all families and their young children in all these structural dimensions, as well as in care and education, is fundamental. This is especially true for the most vulnerable, for whom parenting can become a very burdensome task. It is also relevant that this support for all families as the cornerstone of parenting is not only provided *for* families but also *with* families. That is, taking into account their voice, interests and perspective. In this regard, it is also important to consider those children who are under social protection (social care), their caregivers and their specific needs.

The axiological dimension

Finally, in a related way, we must not forget that early childhood and family education and care models also have values and ideologies and are linked to political, social and human ideals. It is also essential that this dimension is always explicit in the design, implementation and evaluation of these services in order to connect ECEC services with a broader project of moving towards a more just and equitable city and society. Following the UNESCO (2021) proposal, reimagining our ECEC services together also means to question: which ECEC services we want and for which society.

1.4 Contextualised and responsive ECEC services policy, institutions and pedagogical and care practices

1.4.1 Introduction

Precisely considering the challenges and the tenets posed, we propose some ideas for continuing to rethink and improve early childhood and family services in cities on three levels: policy (*macro level*), institutions (*meso level*) and practices (*micro level*). As we have said, all three are relevant, as are dialogue and overall coherence between them, since, to date, much of the research and proposals on early childhood have been exclusive in their perspectives. Some, from the fields of economics, political science or sociology, work at the macro level, analysing, with great success, the major challenges of these policies in the context of the dynamics of welfare states, labour markets, social

innovation or the risks of exclusion (Gallego et al., 2024; Ionescu et al., 2024). However, they have little or no connection with the institutional dimension, let alone pedagogical practices. Others, from the fields of pedagogy, psychology or early childhood education, address debates on play; space as a third educator; cognitive, emotional, linguistic or relational development; or relationships with families, all of which are central, but paying little attention to the political and institutional frameworks that recontextualise and (re) shape any action at the meso or micro level (Jana, 2017; Willan, 2024). On this occasion, thanks to a multidisciplinary team, we present a responsive, comprehensive and global approach that includes, in an interrelated manner, all three dimensions. Furthermore, it highlights the urgent need to ensure that debates on early childhood services and families are not addressed without the complexity, dialogue and richness of macro-politics, meso-institutions and micro-pedagogical and care practices. The whole approach is resumed in the following Figure 1.1.

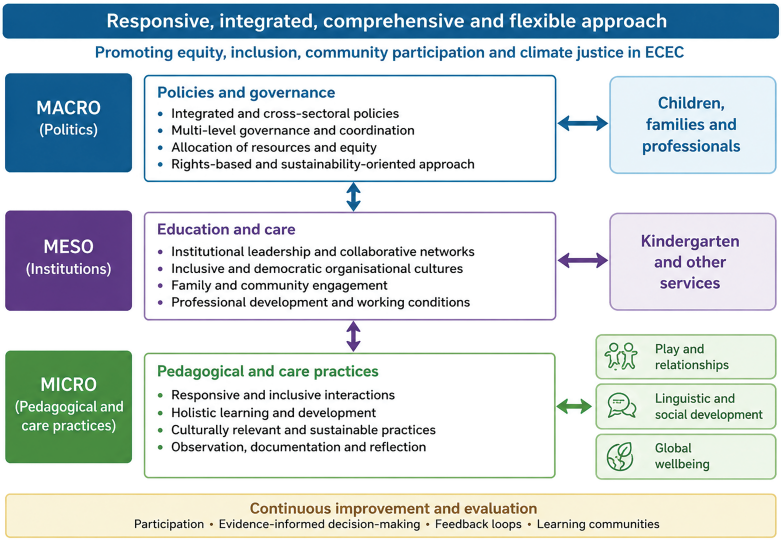


Figure 1.1 EDUFIRST ECEC services approach. Author's elaboration with AI support.

1.4.2 Early childhood services and families: the public policy dimension (*macro*)

As we explained, early childhood and family services are always framed within an ideal of society, relationships and the human person. Whether implicit or explicit, the axiological and ideological dimension is intrinsic to any social and educational debate and, even if only in general terms, it is important to be able to explain the values and postulates on which one or another model of early childhood services is based. Above all, it is significant to explain what needs it responds to (and what it does not) and what kind of society it aims to create. This frames and guides the various public policies that are structured in each area. Here, the first question for any public policy is: Why do we want early childhood services and families? What needs do we want to meet? In other words, if ECEC services are the answer, what is the question or questions that motivate them?

Of the possible functions for which services are organised, the most common, especially in the last forty years, is the reconciliation of family and working life. This is particularly true in the case of women, as a patriarchal society such as Europe's has given them the lead in caregiving, with the many inequalities that this entails. Thus, with Adelantado (2000) or Maestropieri and León (2023), we can understand early childhood and family services as a strategy for reconciling work and family life, promoting the (re)integration of women into the labour market and, at the same time, the nationalisation (and/or commodification in some cases) as well as the *defamilialisation* of care. This demand, which is usually met with more nurseries, raises fundamental debates that are worth considering. The first is that while in northern European countries, such as Finland, childcare is a subjective right of every child and, therefore, local governments guarantee a place for all those who require it, in other countries, such as Spain and Italy, more than half of children aged 0 to 3 still do not have a place in any early childhood service. Research (Navarro and León, 2024 in Spain or Colombarolli et al., 2024 in Italy) and global data (OECD, 2019, 2025), show the complexity of this reality and its link to the reproduction of social inequalities. The second issue concerns funding, especially in contexts where these services are not a subjective right of the child. In many countries, local authorities do not have sufficient funding, and early childhood services represent a significant economic 'burden' with co-payments for families. Once again, the design

and funding of ECEC services determine their functions and the effects they generate. Furthermore, thirdly, as stated in a report by Save the Children, in some regions of Spain (2024), the cost of raising a child has risen to almost €1,000 per month (Save the Children, 2024), according to, which often makes it cheaper for a family (usually women) to stop working and not pay for some of these services (nursery, school meals, possible babysitters, etc.), than to work and pay for them. The debate between the cost of raising children and the opportunity cost of work should be once again key in the design of ECEC services. And finally, fourthly, there are families who believe that children aged 0 to 2 or 3 should be with their family (parents, usually the woman and/or other childcare alternatives) and not yet in a 'school'. As we already explained, this suggests that the diversity of family values could be a cultural barrier to a universal and responsive system. Such a system should be able to overcome this barrier by either diversifying ECEC services to respond to many different realities, needs and demands, but without leaving any children or families behind (Turienzo et al., 2025). There is a lot to be done in terms of innovation, diversification, forming new alliances and developing new services within local ECEC services. We hope that the EDUFIRST comprehensive and responsive approach, tools and reflections will contribute towards this.

Another important issue that is typically on the political agenda is the importance of 'starting education earlier'. This is a cross-cutting issue across all European territories and stems from the growing importance of obtaining higher qualifications (professional or academic) that enable people to achieve a good social position. We know from research that attending nursery school protects against school failure, especially among the most disadvantaged families, and is a good investment in equity (Carbuccia et al., 2022; Council of Europe, 2018; Heckman and Mosso, 2014; Melhuish et al., 2008; Morabito, 2020; etc.). All of this is leading regions where early childhood services are not universal and free to invest in these services with focus on education and social functions aimed at preventing school failure and promoting equity. In this regard, a key public policy dilemma arises, which is, in non-universal contexts, which infants/families are prioritised, which are not, and according to what criteria. Carbuccia et al. (2022) summarise the four possible barriers to access to ECEC services for diverse and unequal families: i) spatial or residential proximity to any of these resources; ii) the tendency for disadvantaged areas to have fewer of these services; iii) criteria that may favour support

for working families (mothers) and exclude those with a parent at home; iv) 'office' hours, which, as we saw in various visits during the EDUFIRST project, easily exclude families with other work schedules (factory, cleaning, retail, etc.); or v) the growing bureaucratic complexities involved in accessing these services. At this crucial age, innovative, quality, diverse and responsive ECEC services should always clearly prioritise equity.

Another possible function, less widespread, is that which conceives ECEC services as a potential space for the comprehensive development of children. In many cities, public policies are proposed with a clear objective: to provide every child and their family with the conditions for comprehensive development, centred on the child themselves, respectful … A development not marked by the timescales of politics, the world of work or school (*Kronos*) but by the time of children (Hoyuelos, 2008) more linked to waiting, opportunity and significance (*Kairos*). This function of early childhood policies is often closely linked to another possible approach that conceives of infants aged 0 to 3 (at least) as an integral part of their families from which they should not be separated. These policies to support (positive) parenting should facilitate and promote both the minimum material conditions for family well-being (housing, food, etc.) and the shared development of time, experiences and stimuli (Nikiforidou et al., 2024). We regularly find experiences of this type occurring 'informally', within the community, in a horizontal and participatory manner (Gallego and Maestropieri, 2024), while in other cases they are promoted in various ways by local government.

These and other possible guiding functions of public policies for early childhood and families (such as the community dimension, adapting to and fighting against climate change, and tackling childhood obesity and health issues, etc.) can be complementary and not mutually exclusive. However, it seems essential that they can be made explicit in their design, implementation and evaluation, thus facilitating coherence and shared orientation with the institutional and pedagogical practice dimensions. We agree with Ionescu et al. (2024) on the need for each city or territory to have data, analysis, justification, discourse, a shared framework and clear guidelines on the functions and objectives it wishes to achieve with its universal and responsive early childhood and family policies. This is crucial for constructing a truly responsive ECEC services policy and robust comprehensive system. We believe it is essential that this orientation be shared by the entire local

administration and the whole city. Responses should be shared across local governments, truly involving the areas of education, health, social services, sport, urban planning, etc. Furthermore, these responses should be shared and co-constructed with families and the community, who are key actors in building good *participatory governance* of these policies and institutions (ECEC services as a common good). Families, professionals and the community are part of the solution to the challenges of early childhood (Collet and Tort, 2017) and universities can be key actors addressing these challenges. Remembering that, as it was previously mentioned, all policies for ECEC services must be focused to promote the global developmental needs and requirements of each child at each stage.

1.4.3 Early childhood and family services: institutional dimension (*meso*)

As stated by the OECD (2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019), once public policies on early childhood and families have been established, it is time to translate these commitments into universal, comprehensive, responsive and high-quality institutions as instruments for implementing these guidelines. This means making the *child guarantee* (EU[5]) a reality so that all children, especially the most disadvantaged, have the same opportunities and access to early childhood services (equity). All institutions should be oriented from its design until they everyday practices towards fulfilling the developmental, cognitive, emotional, physical, social… needs of children at each stage of their development. In our proposal, the most important thing is not the services themselves, but that they are universal and comprehensive; that they are truly relevant and appropriate to the realities and children and family's needs of each moment and context (responsive); and that they meet high quality standards. In this regard, we review the most common institutional responses to early childhood and family policies in Europe.

a) Nursery school – Kindergarten

Without a doubt, this has been and continues to be the most common response to early childhood needs. Although there are some previous examples, it was

[5] https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-strategy-rights-child-and-european-child-guarantee_en

throughout the nineteenth century that various European countries began to build childcare and/or educational facilities for young boys (and girls, though not in all cases). Owen, Brunszvik or Montesinos were pioneers in this field, but it was undoubtedly Fröbel who, with his kindergarten proposal in 1840, formulated a professionalised educational space and time that was welcoming, inclusive, respectful, playful, natural and connected to families and the community. Since then, all kindergartens – nursery schools, with their many names, have taken their first inspiration and model from this proposal. These are centres where, with different schedules, buildings, types and ratios of professionals, prices, etc., children from 0 to 3 years old, or in some cases, such as Italy or Finland, up to 6 years old, are cared for without the presence of their parents or carers. Today, there are almost 2 million children in Europe participating in early childhood services (0–3) and 13.6 million in pre-school services (3–6)[6]. Undoubtedly, the spread of this institutional form of early childhood policy, which responds to various approaches, functions and orientations (work–life balance, preparation for school, comprehensive development, etc.), is enormous and makes it the most common response across the continent. However, from our global and responsive perspective, we believe that nursery schools have important debates to continue improving. The first is, as it was explained, whether the response to ECEC service needs must always, or for the most part, be nursery schools. It is therefore essential that each territory asks itself whether, in the present circumstances, the best response to its realities and needs in early childhood, families and the community is to create or increase the number of nursery schools. The fact that it is the most common resource does not mean that it is always the best, most relevant, most useful or most effective in all contexts. It is therefore essential that the questions raised in the political dimension are transferred to the debate on what instruments/tools/institutions are necessary in relation to the debate in the next section: what institutions for what pedagogical practices? (Willan, 2024).

The second challenge is one of institutional design: are nursery schools in their current format the best response to the proposal for universality, globality and responsiveness? Various European forums are debating how

[6] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Early_childhood_education_statistics

nursery schools can be rethought beyond the logic of schooling. As Murray (2025, p. 4) states, 'premature *schoolification* shifts focus away from young children's optimal experiences [that] are attuned to young children's interests and needs, are purposeful for children and leverage children's participation, happiness, mastery, autonomy and intrinsic motivation'. This shift risks undermining curiosity, creativity, and social skill development (Bennet and Kaga, 2010) and can create confusion among stakeholders (Brown et al. 2023). Thus, a question for the institutional design of nursery schools is: how do they promote the growth of children and families in inclusive and democratic environments? How do they open to diverse ways of 'being' in nursery school in terms of schedules, the daily and ordinary presence of families, avoiding a client role for parents and moving towards effective co-responsibility in education? How are they designed so that, in a standardised way, they can respond to the different needs and wishes of families? Can we identify various initiatives, ranging from informal to structured, such as family groups, motor skills spaces, child health groups, ECEC services (described below), or integrated centres for families within a nursery school, and examine the synergies between them? However, to date, for example in Spain, nursery schools, due to their admission criteria, their fees in countries where care for 0–6 year olds is not (yet) a subjective right, and their focus on supporting work–life balance, facilitate inequality and can leave out the most disadvantaged (poor families, those without administrative regularisation, etc.) even in cities with social pricing (Saurí and González, 2022).

The third is the (initial and continuous) training, recruitment, retention and promotion of professionals with a relevant and motivating career: the debate on new professionalism in ECEC services**.** As stated by the Centre for Innovation in Early Years (Peeters, 2023, i):

> Across Europe, increased professionalisation in childcare is high on the agenda. There is a changing view on childcare, from 'taking care of' children, as a temporary replacement for the working mother, to childcare as an integral part of a broader educational sector. One of the signs here is the increased attention for co-educating, partnerships with parents. Today, we see changes in professions for the youngest children in many countries.

In addition, this is where the debate on multi-professionalism in ECEC services comes in, highlighting the need for inter-professional teams made

up of teachers, social educators, nurses, community facilitators, etc. Finally, the fourth debate is about inclusion and children with special needs (Collet et al. 2022). However, at the institutional level, this can be approached from a medical, deficit or normalising-inclusive perspective. Thus, there are multiple debates to be resolved on how to welcome families, how to develop a specific alliance with them, what ethical issues to consider, how to provide specific support without segregating, etc.

b) Family childcare spaces – family clubs – family activity centres

In many European countries, we can find institutions, with different names and orientations, which, unlike nursery schools, cater for both families and infants. They tend to be a much less widespread resource than kindergartens, but they have great potential (Ferrer and Riera, 2004; Blanch, et al., 2021). Many of them are based on the *La Maison Verte* project launched by Françoise Dolto in 1978. In many cases, they are linked to the most disadvantaged families (Capdevila and Longás, 2013) and constitute a resource linked to socio-educational programmes, positive parenting, welcoming families of foreign origin, community work and social services.[7] The most common areas of work are: Professional guidance and support for parenting, especially in areas such as care, feeding, affection, routines, etc.; Promotion of intra-family bonding; Providing a quality space for children to play and socialise; And providing a space for mutual support, exchange and connection with the community. To this end, these spaces usually offer routines, free play, emotional and relational work, bonding, guided play, individual attention and support for parents, mutual support between families, intercultural and community relations, positive parenting and guidance on care, feeding, hygiene, boundaries, behaviour, etc. The professionals who accompany them are often early childhood teachers and/or educators – social workers, with the institutionalised support of professionals in psychology, nursing and other fields of education, psychology, social and community work, health and parenting. It is not uncommon to find family spaces located in facilities shared with nursery schools, day centres for the elderly, community centres or sports clubs, with which synergies and shared activities are often generated.

[7] https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/educacio/ca/0-3-anys/xarxa-despais-familiars-de-crianca-municipals

Once again, the question of the institutional objectives of family spaces is crucial. What do we want family spaces for? In response to what context, children and family's needs and realities? For what purposes? For whom? These are questions that cannot be ignored under any circumstances, as is the type of orientation of each family space, which varies greatly from one territory to another. In our opinion, and especially in a European context of growing diversity (in terms of origin, special educational needs, family models, etc.) and inequalities, family spaces could be a flexible, adaptable and relevant response that complements and/or is linked to nursery schools. As exposed, stop thinking in classic institutions as something done but as something that can be innovative, reshaped, mixed and (re)created is relevant. Thus, family spaces could be a good alternative for achieving comprehensive, universal, flexible and responsive care for children aged 0 to 3 and their families, or for improving the care already provided in (universal) nursery schools. As explained above, a combined strategy of different institutions, intensities and resources is probably required, aimed at achieving greater and more response tension for the most disadvantaged families and less for those with more resources and capital, in order to reverse and not reproduce existing inequalities. Once again, in a contextual, comprehensive and responsive manner, each territory must ask itself the questions about the most relevant institutions and innovate in the answers.

c) Part-time nursery schools and mixed facilities

Due to family choices, the needs of infants and the resources available, the option of a nursery school where children can attend two or three days a week instead of the current five may be an innovative and efficient approach to be experimented, tested and evaluated. There is also the possibility of considering mixed facilities that are simultaneously nursery schools (full-time – high intensity), intermittent attendance (medium intensity) and family spaces (low intensity). Throughout childhood, families and professionals can determine the intensity and type of resource most relevant to children and parents based on their needs and circumstances. The aim of these mixed facilities/projects is to extend care to *all* children aged 1 to 3/6 and their families, especially those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and to mix diverse children and families and their development needs. As explained, this global approach to ECEC institutions and how to co-construct them could be developed from a perspective of the common good.

d) Intensive parenting support projects

With the explicit aim of tackling the intergenerational reproduction of poverty, there are various intensive parenting support projects in Europe[8] in which, mainly young mothers, live together with professionals for much of the day. There, the potential of mothers and children is developed, they are accompanied and prepared so that they can continue their education and obtain compulsory and post-compulsory official qualifications, they are supported with parenting (hygiene, nutrition, habits, health, etc.), housing and income, links with the community and family network, etc. In many cases, these are NGO projects that seek, through proactive, intensive, comprehensive and medium-term (6 years) intervention, to break with the traditional logic of social services intervention (partial, low-intensity and reactive) and to break the cycle of family poverty and social exclusion. In the absence of a consistent external evaluation here too, it is another possible institutional and innovative response relevant to different realities and needs in early childhood, something that, as Ionescu et al. (2024, block 3) explain, is key.

e) Community childcare spaces – informal care networks

As Maestripieri and Gallego (2024) explain in a study on Barcelona, many cities have community and/or informal childcare and parenting support networks. From different approaches, they all agree on (a) the desire for self-organisation of this peer support, and (b) a certain professionalisation of some of the people in the network (mostly women) who care for children and families in their own homes or in those of the 'professionals'. At the level of public policy and institutional approach, questions arise about whether or not to support these networks, which are usually organised among middle-class families; how to promote their greater diversity; how to contact them and link them with nurseries, family spaces and other resources; how to monitor the quality of the services they offer; how to listen to their voice as actors in the field with needs and proposals … We believe that these are key issues for building comprehensive and responsive ECEC systems. And they could be relevant for building a better and more powerful local ecosystem of support for early childhood and families.

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[8] https://blog.caritas.barcelona/familia-i-infancia/la-familia-del-paidos/

f) Other ECEC services supporting home-based parenting, home care, health services, etc.

All of these have in common the provision of support in matters of parenting, care or home health by professionals (whether registered or unregistered) (Bromer and Korfmacher, 2017). With Ionescu et al. (2024), we propose these services as complementary to the institutions mentioned above or others that may be created. Recognising their value, we pose the same questions as in the previous sections: what role should these home-based services (educational, care, health, etc.) play in the institutional architecture of each city or territory? How should they be coordinated and complemented with other services, and who should guarantee this coordination and integration and how? If the answer is these services, what is the question? Etc.

g) Cross-cutting institutional debates

Finally, there are key cross-cutting debates that both the institutional architecture of early childhood and family services and each institutional space must address. Firstly, the debate on the quality of their formal elements and practices, with all the complexity of defining quality at these stages in an inclusive, contextual, relational way, etc. (Azcona and Hoyuelos, 2011; Collet et al., 2024). And their evaluation for accountability and, above all, for learning and improvement. Secondly, the debate, in those contexts where it does not yet exist, on the continuity of the 0–3 stage with that of 3 to 6 years. This debate raises key questions about the schooling–deschooling of the early childhood stage with its pros and cons (Paniagua and Collet, 2026); about the leaps and (non) continuities between stages, care strategies and methodologies, orientations, etc. It also raises, with Sakr and O'Sullivan (2022), the issue of leadership in early childhood services and the importance of training, recognition and development to continue improving them. And finally, the issue already discussed of working conditions and new professionalism in ECEC services. Finally, remember that all institutional designs must focus on fulfilling children's developmental needs in all respects.

As a conclusion, we should point out that the new comprehensive and responsive approach does not imply opposing the different functions and orientations of ECEC services, as they are not contradictory, nor the different institutional solutions presented. On the contrary, moving towards a universal and responsive horizon requires complementarity and a global, coherent,

shared and community-based institutional architecture and governance with different proposals depending on the needs and situations of each context.

1.4.4 Early childhood services and families: pedagogical and care practices (micro)

As we explained, the political and institutional dimensions are reflected in various educational and care practices in early childhood services, and it is these practices that are received, in a practical and concrete way, by children and families. They only experience spaces, relationships, times, care and education provided by specific professionals in specific institutions. Everyday practices in ECEC services are, finally, the real and concrete way to provide the best possible response to children's developmental needs. It is therefore essential that public policy designs and institutional architecture bear in mind that these ultimately boil down to one fundamental thing: specific pedagogical and care practices, which must be of the highest quality and best orientation. In this regard, our proposal for debates and challenges for cities to continue advancing in the improvement of ECEC services is organised around three dimensions: (a) new professionalisation, i.e. professional identity and material working conditions; (b) leadership for quality and continuous improvement of ECEC services; and (c) an inclusive and responsive educational and care approach.

a) New professionalisation

As has been explained, there is a significant gap between the rhetoric and the resources invested in early childhood and families' services, especially in southern European countries. Probably the most striking gap and paradox is between a crucial stage in human development and, in some contexts, professionals with low salaries, long working hours, high ratios, no space for preparation and reflection, little social recognition… and, in relation to this, low qualifications and sometimes low professional standards. Throughout Europe, it is increasingly difficult to attract professionals to this stage and to retain them and develop a motivating career path in this 0–3/0–6 stage. Faced with this contradiction, which undermines the quality and continuous improvement of these services, we propose a new contract for ECEC services professionals based on two concepts: quality through recognition (UNESCO, 2021). On the one hand, at a critical stage, highly qualified,

well-selected and continuously trained professionals are required, as well as a high level of standards and evaluation (OECD, 2018b). On the other hand, society, through local and regional/state governments, must offer good salary conditions comparable to those of teachers at other stages or professionals in other fields, similar schedules, appropriate ratios, time-space for preparation and reflection (Robinson, 2020) and much higher social recognition. ECEC services professionals, if they carry out their job with quality, have a high capacity to prevent future inequalities or difficulties. This challenge implies a new pact between universities, local governments, families and society to move decisively towards a new professionalism in early childhood education and care that makes this desired quality possible in any institutional context (nursery school, family space, comprehensive family centres, etc.) (Willan, 2024). In addition, we propose an effort to defeminise the profession so that it is a little more balanced in terms of gender, in line with incorporating men into the tasks of education and care (Brody et al., 2021).

b) Leadership for quality and continuous improvement

Along with Sakr and O'Sullivan (2022) and Willan (2024), we believe that the role of leadership in early childhood and family services has been underdeveloped. Meanwhile, in primary and secondary education, there is a wealth of research highlighting the centrality of good cooperative, professional, democratic and quality-oriented leadership within the framework of a professional and collective community that learns and improves together (Day et al., 2011; Dogan and Adams, 2018; Dufour, 2004; Robinson, 2022), this is rarely the case in early childhood education. Leadership means framing practices within a co-constructed project; it means networking with other essential educational agents (families, local government, organisations, etc.); it means seeking the best response to the questions raised by the social, family and childhood context at any given moment (responsive); it is co-constructing quality and sustainability in terms of material, resources and staff in ECEC services; it is promoting the professional development of each teacher or educator within the framework of decent and recognised working conditions; it is building relationships that allow (logical) conflicts to be addressed from an inclusive 'we' perspective; it is promoting learning and continuous improvement at a personal, collective and institutional level … And all this in order to offer the best services to every child and family. In short, it is a key role that must

be developed and professionalised from a democratic perspective and for the common good (Sousa and Moss, 2023).

c) An inclusive and responsive approach to education and care

Given the context of liquid modernity in which we live, it is not enough to offer closed or preconceived quality services. As exposed, quality is not only an intrinsic concept in relation to how good and desirable the practices in an ECEC institution are. Quality is also a concept linked to responding well to the specific and changing needs of children and families in a specific context. Thus, comprehensive and responsive approaches (Gay, 2018) help us understand that each context poses different questions to early childhood services and that the answers cannot be static. If the context changes (origins, languages, family dynamics, needs, schedules, etc.) but our services remain the same, they are probably no longer of high quality. To give a simple but, we believe, highly relevant example. Historically, early childhood services received children and families whose mother tongue was the same as that of the territory. Today, we have nursery schools, family spaces, intensive parenting spaces … where (almost) all families have a mother tongue that is not native to the territory. This has given rise to services in contexts of superdiversity (Wessendorf, 2014) where dozens of languages can coexist, as well as different conceptions of childhood, family and socialisation, and different material, relational and linguistic needs. These new and complex contexts generate new questions, needs and challenges for ECEC services. This does not imply changing all practices, but rather understanding that each service should probably be different from the others depending on the type of families, children, context, needs, etc. And that these needs vary over time. As we have learnt from our visits to Barcelona, Milano and Tampere, we are talking about asking questions, for example, about opening hours; about the number of hours each child can be in the service; about the need to implement specific programmes, for example, language development for foreign infants and families; about new responses to support parenting; etc. Or, to give another example, depending on the context, the most disadvantaged families are given priority in terms of the most intensive resources and the most qualified professionals as a strategy for equity, inclusion and pre-distribution (Cornelissen et al., 2018; Maes et al., 2023). Thus, a responsive approach requires each service to face the complex challenge of providing the

best response at any given time depending on the type of children, families and context, and their needs and realities. It is possible to evaluate these responses and their impacts in a regular, participatory, agile and effective manner in order to analyse whether they meet the intended objectives and whether they are the appropriate response to the questions and needs of each moment. As we will see in the next chapter, (self-)evaluation aimed at co-constructing continuous adaptations and improvements can be key to achieving maximum quality in each ECEC service and as a system.

1.5 Conclusions: the challenge of moving towards a comprehensive, responsive and high-quality approach

This chapter aims to highlight challenges and debates that can encourage the continuous improvement of early childhood and families' services in European cities. In our view, in a rapidly changing context of growing diversity and inequality, with urgent challenges, it is crucial that European cities can ask questions and articulate debates, challenges and responses regarding their ECEC services in a comprehensive and responsive manner. In other words, in line with the needs of each child, families and the context. We believe it is essential to provide comprehensive, coherent and coordinated responses to these challenges at the political, institutional and pedagogical and care practices levels. It is also essential to be aware that no response from ECEC services is politically neutral and that the choices made must be made explicit. For example, by placing the responses of ECEC services within the four classic axes for analysing any public policy (Adelantado, 2000): (a) whether or not the market is reinforced (commodification vs. decommodification); (b) whether or not they are led by public administrations (nationalisation vs. denationalisation); (c) whether or not the burden of childcare falls on families (usually women) (*familialisation* vs. *defamilialisation*); and, (d) whether community ECEC services are promoted (*communitarisation* vs. *decommunitarisation*). We also consider relevant the debate on the different approaches to ECEC services in relation to the subjective right of children to care and education (child guarantee); and on how the networks of formal, non-formal and informal actors involved are articulated, building more open or more closed institutional architectures. It is also key to highlight

the importance of data, evidence-based knowledge and research to inform and enrich political, institutional and pedagogical decisions. And their indispensable link to evaluation, as proposed in the next chapter. Without data and knowledge, it is not possible to build evaluation systems that promote continuous improvement. Debates on the training, recruitment, retention and development of professionals in the field are emerging as critical in ECEC services, as is their model of emerging new professionalism. This debate is always linked to that of working conditions, ratios and resources.

In short, as Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2009) stated, it is urgent to revisit the question of quality in ECEC services policies, institutions and practices, taking it far beyond procedural, formal or technical aspects. In our opinion, quality today requires a comprehensive and responsive approach that broadens the perspective of quality by incorporating other dimensions, challenges and debates such as those outlined above. We hope this chapter, proposing a new approach to these services and the following chapter presenting a tool for (self-)assessment of quality and continuous improvement, and the rest of the book with contributions to good practices from the three cities involved, will contribute to these objectives.

2. Towards a tool for the constant evaluation and improvement of early childhood education and care services

Francesca Davoli, Mila Naranjo and Verónica Jiménez

2.1 Introduction: quality and evaluation of early childhood education and care services

This chapter will address three key aspects of early (very early) childhood education: what we mean by educational service, how we approach the concept of quality, and how we identify the indicators for assessing it. The first reflection leads us to describe the educational service as a space/time with an educational purpose, beyond schools for 0–3 (and/or 3–6) year olds. In this sense, we refer to nursery schools (*infant-toddler centres* or *nidi d'infanzia)*, but also to various educational contexts, such as play areas (*play groups* or *spazi gioco)*, family spaces (*centres for families* or *spazi per le famiglie)*; all of which are educational environments, spaces characterised by an important pedagogical component, designed and implemented by early childhood professionals (educators, pedagogues) with the complicity and support of policy makers and other agents (families, citizens) with a clear educational intent.

All these educational spaces – which may range from informal to formal, and from loosely to highly structured – offer opportunities for interaction and socialisation, as well as learning and development (social, cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor) for both children and adults involved (parents, families, and education professionals).

Thanks to this *intentional framework*, within a prepared space/time, the educational purpose of the service is realised: weaving relationships, creating experiences, experiencing emotions and developing those skills, abilities and

capacities within the paradigm *of learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be* (Delors, 1996).

The first cycle of early childhood education (0–3) and early childhood care models are still debated today between care and education (Sánchez-Vera, 2022), that is, between approaches linked, on the one hand, to family care *versus* care outside the family and, on the other hand, to the priority of work–life balance policies *versus* the right of every child to education from birth. The 'debate between care and education' (Sánchez-Vera, 2022, p. 105) has not yet been resolved; nor has the dispute between institutions with 'a socio-welfare approach, which care for children under the age of three whose parents work, and those with a more strictly educational approach […] until the start of primary school' (Egido, 2010, p. 395) been overcome.

2.2 Quality of early childhood education and care services: state of the art

As exposed previously the concept of quality in the field of education contains a high level of complexity that has been widely discussed by various authors (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999; Moss, 2017). Controversial positions, aimed at considering educational services beyond the concept of quality envisioned in economist neoliberal views, are widely developed in the work of Moss (2014; 2019), taking wise distance from current dominant discourses and offering alternative narratives for early childhood education and care nowadays.

Zabalza (2014, p. 15) warns that the same term (quality) can refer to different things, depending on the various agents involved in childcare and early childhood education (politicians, families, educators, children), depending on the geographical context and depending on the historical period.

The author indicates some variables to be considered when defining the concept of quality:

- The training of educational staff and the availability of experienced professionals.
- Warm interactions with children.
- An inclusive context where children with different personal and social characteristics live together.

- An educational model that views instruction and the development of creative thinking in children as complementary and equally important in terms of both education and social development.

The first point we emphasise is the importance of teacher training, which frames all other aspects of curricular practice. There is a direct relationship between the quality of training of professionals and their educational performance, within the educational contexts of the various stages, not only in early childhood. We agree with Egido (2010, p. 412) when he states that 'since the quality of early childhood education depends largely on the quality of its teachers, European countries, in addition to having adequate training systems, must take measures to make the working conditions of teachers at this stage attractive'.

It is therefore necessary to ensure the training of professionals, and, at the same time, their working conditions is a necessary condition for achieving the desired educational quality and, at the same time, an indication for policy makers, administrations and training agencies (universities, in particular) to improve education.

Galardini (2006, p. 7) links the notion of the reflective professional to the concept of quality and points out that quality 'is cultivated' and 'is interpreted not as an abstract entity, but as a reflection on practice, on contexts and on the customs of a service in order to investigate its significance in relation to objectives'. Following quality indicators for early childhood care that should be kept in mind to advance the reflection:

- The ways in which each child (and their family) is welcomed in their uniqueness.
- The listening and observation practices that the school adopts in everyday life.
- The relationships and interactions between peers and with adult educators.
- The organisation of spaces (careful) and time (respectful of children's rhythms of life).
- The selection of materials offered to children for their experiences of discovery, play and relationships within the educational context.
- The relationship with families and the promotion of a culture of childhood in the city (children as full citizens).

If the key factors for ensuring quality are the training of professionals, the pedagogical organisation, the grouping of children (adult/child ratio), spaces, time, the relationship with families and networking with the local area and other professionals, appropriate facilities, human and material resources, and links with the social/cultural environment, it will be necessary to have tools for reflection, evaluation and, if necessary, improvement of the elements identified as constituents of quality.

Based on the analysis of some of the existing tools for the evaluation and continuous improvement of early childhood education and care services, the challenge is to offer a new tool for self-evaluation of educational quality for all professionals, policy makers and administrators of educational services. To answer the question of how quality is assessed, there is broad international consensus on three tools considered to be impactful, which have been analysed in this study. We list them in chronological order of appearance so that the reader can situate them temporally, and then we will go into depth to explain each of them:

1. ITERS-R scale
2. Index for Inclusion
3. DAVOPSI

The first tool, the *ITERS-R scale* (Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale - Revised), is a revision of the well-known ITERS scale (Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, ITERS 1990), which was designed in the United States to assess the overall quality of programmes for children aged 0 to 3 years (Harms, Cryer and Clifford, 2003). To define and measure quality, the ITERS-R scale has drawn data from three main sources: research evidence from various relevant fields, such as health, development and education; professional opinions on best practices; and practical limitations of real life in the nursery school environment.

Four main sources of information were used during the review process:

1. Research on early childhood development and findings related to the effect of childcare environments on the health and development of children.

2. Comparison of the content of the original ITERS with assessment instruments designed for a similar age group and additional documents describing aspects of programme quality.
3. Comments from ITERS users obtained through a questionnaire.
4. Intensive use of the instrument for more than two years by the co-authors of ITERS and more than 25 assessors trained in ITERS.

This scale, widely used by researchers, school administrators and educators to identify areas for improvement and ensure that educational environments are optimal for children's development, consists of 39 items organised into the following seven subscales:

1. **Space and furniture**: Assesses the quality of the physical space, the organisation of the environments and the furniture available for the care, play and comfort of the children.
2. **Personal care routines**: Includes aspects such as welcoming and saying goodbye to children in their daily life at school, hygiene, rest, nutrition and safety.
3. **Listening and speaking**: Measures how language and communication development is encouraged, how children are supported in understanding language, and how language production and the use of books are promoted.
4. **Activities**: Assesses the variety and quality of activities offered to children (such as fine motor skills, active physical play, art, music and movement, building, dramatic play, sand and water play, nature and science, use of televisions, videos and/or computers, and finally, how acceptance of diversity is promoted).
5. **Interaction**: Considers the quality of interactions between peers, interactions between children and educators, supervision of play and learning, and how discipline is measured.
6. **Programme structure**: Assesses the overall organisation of the educational programme (timetable, free play, small group activities, special educational needs for children).
7. **Families and professionals** (**educational team**)**:** Measures family involvement, training of educational staff, interaction and cooperation

among professionals, personal and professional needs, continuity of educational staff, their supervision and evaluation, as well as opportunities for professional development (continuing education).

It is important to note that the above-mentioned tool does not only refer to the concept of *curriculum* but to a broader vision of early stages that includes all educational practices.

The second instrument cited, *Index for Inclusion: developing play, learning and participation in early years and childcare*, was created in the United Kingdom by professors Tony Booth, Mel Ainscow, and Denise Kingston to help schools move towards a more inclusive education (Booth, Ainscow, and Kingston, 2006).

The Index can be considered a guide that provides a framework for self-evaluation and continuous improvement in educational centres, focusing on three main dimensions:

1. **Creating inclusive cultures**: This dimension is about building a safe, welcoming and collaborative school community where all members feel valued. It includes aspects such as establishing inclusive values and fostering positive relationships among all members of the educational community (children and adults, professionals and families).
2. **Creation of inclusive policies**: The second dimension addresses the creation of school policies that promote inclusion and equity. The organisation of support for diversity and the promotion of a school for everyone, within a framework that includes all differences (cultural, social, economic, functional, etc.), is considered central.
3. **Development of inclusive practices**: This dimension focuses on the implementation of educational practices that encourage the participation and learning of all students, through the adaptation of the curriculum, teaching methodologies and learning assessment.

The Index for Inclusion is a flexible tool that can be adapted to different educational contexts and promotes the active participation of the entire school community (children and adults) in the process of improving education in their own educational centres. It is important to highlight the four key concepts of the Index that underpin the creation of a coherent approach to

inclusive development: *inclusion*; *barriers to play, learning and participation; resources for play, learning and participation; support for diversity*.

Finally, the third tool, *DAVOPSI* (Device for the Analysis and Evaluation of the Pedagogical Organisation of Nursery Schools), of Italian origin, was developed as an innovative tool to assess the quality of the pedagogical organisation of nursery schools (Bondioli and Nigito, 2011). The DAVOPSI tool, which began to be implemented some 15 years ago, takes into account three essential categories for creating an educational environment that promotes the comprehensive development of children in the early years: time, space and grouping of children, with special emphasis on the analysis and evaluation of the three fundamental aspects of the educational context mentioned above.

1. **Time:** Reflection on the concept of time, children's time and the pedagogical organisation of time at school. Consideration is given to how activities are distributed and organised throughout the day, including the balance between guided activities and free play time, as well as the flexibility to adapt to the needs of the children.
2. **Spaces**: From an ecological and organisational approach to educational spaces, the layout and use of spaces in nursery schools is assessed, considering both indoor and outdoor spaces, ensuring that they are safe, stimulating and suitable for different educational activities.
3. **Groups of children**: Groups of children and the relationships between them are assessed as an important educational resource that promotes the development of girls and boys; the tool associates peer relationships with their cognitive development and the maturation of their identity, valuing those characteristics of the context that promote educational relationships between children. DAVOPSI analyses the criteria for grouping, regarding the size of the groups, their composition and the dynamics of interactions between children, to foster an environment of collaboration and mutual learning.

From a pedagogical point of view, DAVOPSI is considered a training (and self-training) tool that allows reflection on one's own experience and considers meta-evaluation a resource for professional improvement both at the individual level and for the entire team at the educational centre. Although it will not be analysed in depth in this chapter, it is worth mentioning a

common working tool for all Italian schools, which allows educational centres to reflect on themselves and their own practices, identifying areas for improvement. The acronym for this newly incorporated tool is RAV = *Rapporto di Autovalutazione* (Self-Assessment Report). It was developed by INVALSI (National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education System) for compulsory schooling (6–16 years) and has a specific version for nursery schools (3–6 years)[1].

Continuing with the reflection on the concept of quality and on the right to *quality education and early childhood care* for all children, today, there is, at least in theory, a specific commitment at the level of each Member State's Action Plan, which must comply with European guidelines, until 2030. The *State Action Plan for the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee* (Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, 2022) specifically refers in its strategic Axis 2 to the universalisation of social rights through access to and enjoyment of essential, accessible and inclusive quality services in the field of early childhood education, care and primary care (0 to 6 years).

On the right to education, at this point in the discourse, it is important to mention how education systems – to guarantee this universal right – would have an obligation to respond to the 4 As (*availability*, *accessibility*, *acceptability*, *adaptability*). These dimensions, translated and interpreted, allow us to verify how educational systems are still far from ensuring:

1. The *availability* of educational provision
2. The *accessibility* for all citizens
3. The acceptable quality (*acceptability*)
4. The *adaptability* to people's needs

According to the author Tomasevski (2001 and 2006), a deficit in any of the dimensions (availability, access, adaptation and quality of the education system) always harms the most vulnerable children and families.

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[1] For more information, please visit the dedicated website https://www.invalsi.it and consult the document relating to the 3–6 age group. It is important to note that various Italian Regions have implemented their own versions, rigorously adapting the national guidelines to local contexts and complexities, making RAV a tool that responds to the specific needs identified in each region, even extending the age range to the 0–3 age group, where necessary.

On the issue of guaranteeing universal access to the first cycle of early childhood education and its free nature, the critical voice of Vicenç Arnaiz (Zafra, 2024) leads us to reflect on *the deceptive achievement of education from 0 to 3*, when free education from 0 to 3 is indeed a social achievement, but doing so without a commitment *from the public sector* and considering only funding for private schools entails risks. To begin with, according to the author, the distribution of these centres responds to market logic: they are disproportionately located in middle- and upper-class neighbourhoods, and those who live there are the ones who benefit most from free education. In poorer neighbourhoods, there are far fewer private schools and nurseries, *among other things because there has been no interest in opening them as there is no profit margin*.

Thanks to his critical eye, Arnaiz contextualises what could apparently be interpreted as a success for everyone: children, communities, parents, administrators, politicians, professionals, and so on. What he denounces in these statements is the lack (and the decision) of previous educational policies that have not provided for or defended an equitable distribution of educational services for the youngest children based on territorial criteria and the need for children to participate in the provision of places for those families with fewer resources in their neighbourhoods, villages or cities. There is clear talk of policies guided by economic interests, in those environments where early childhood education from 0 to 3 years of age is not understood as a *common good* or a *public good*, but rather as a commercial good.

2.3 A tool for evaluating early childhood education services

The assessment tool we present has been designed based on a conceptual and empirical framework that integrates various theoretical perspectives and international recommendations (Bronfenbrenner 2005; Mercer, 2001; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 2000; OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). The need to design this new tool arises from certain limitations identified in pre-existing instruments for assessing the quality of educational services and institutions, such as ITERS-R, the Index for Inclusion**:** developing play, learning and participation in early years and childcare and DAVOPSI. Although these tools have been fundamental in assessing educational quality, they have some

limitations. The ITERS-R, for example, focuses on structural aspects such as the physical environment and material conditions, but does not address in depth the interactions between educators and children or professional reflection in the educational process (Pianta et al., 2016). These structural assessment tools cannot capture the complexity of the social and emotional dynamics that occur in the classroom.

The instrument presented here below aims at taking a *picture* that, despite being static at a given moment, can identify aspects to be improved that may be transformed into specific actions to be developed over time.

On the other hand, the Index for Inclusion prioritises diversity and inclusion, but its effective implementation in the day-to-day running of educational centres can be hampered by a lack of adaptation and local understanding (Slee, 2011). Finally, DAVOPSI presents difficulties in adapting to the contextual diversity of different educational centres and does not facilitate the promotion of participatory self-evaluation as advocated by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), since for educational change to be effective, it is essential to involve all members of the educational system in the reflective and self-evaluation process to ensure sustained and contextualised improvement. These limitations justify the need for a new, more inclusive tool, capable of considering multiple dimensions, such as the quality of interactions, professional reflection, inclusion, diversity and the active participation of educational staff, thus promoting educational transformation.

The tool is structured according to the logic of ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), which identifies the influence of different contextual levels on human development: the *microsystem* (direct relationships in immediate contexts, such as the classroom and the family), the *mesosystem* (coordination between institutions, services and the community) and the *macrosystem* (educational policies and cultural norms).

As is also outlined in Chapter 1," this perspective has guided the design of the tool in three levels of assessment: the *macro level*, which analyses the coherence of educational policies, the allocation of resources and staff training; the *meso level*, which assesses the implementation of the educational project, leadership and institutional management; and the *micro level*, which focuses on classroom practices, the quality of interactions and professional reflection. In addition, the tool incorporates the principles of socio-constructivist

approaches (Brunner, 1996; Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 2000), highlighting the importance of social interaction in learning. This has led to the inclusion of dimensions that value the active participation of children, the co-construction of knowledge and collective reflection, aspects that are also found in the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2001).

The commitment to inclusion and diversity is another central pillar of the new tool. The principles of inclusion, taken from the Index for Inclusion**:** developing play, learning and participation in early years and childcare (Booth, Ainscow, and Kingston, 2006) and reinforced by recent international guidelines, ensure that the tool takes into account the diversity of children and promotes equitable environments. This approach is complemented by the perspective of reflective practice for educational improvement (Galardini, 2006; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Schön, 1998).

2.3.1 Use of the tool

The tool is designed to be used in a participatory and reflective manner by the entire educational community involved in early childhood services. Its application follows a structured process that can combine self-assessment, collective assessment and continuous feedback, thus ensuring progressive and sustained improvement.

First, a thorough and collective reading, together with prior training, is essential to ensure that the professionals who will use the tool understand its criteria, dimensions, and theoretical foundations, and that they share common meanings. Training should be promoted that fosters professional dialogue and collective reflection, which are key elements for educational transformation.

Secondly, the tool is designed so that educational teams can use it for both individual and institutional self-assessment. This process seeks to generate spaces for professional debate where the results obtained can be used to reflect on one's own practices and identify areas for improvement.

The third key element is continuous feedback. Assessment should not be a one-off event, but rather an ongoing cycle of reflection and improvement. The results obtained must be analysed periodically to define action plans and establish strategies that will subsequently be re-evaluated. Finally, the tool is specifically designed for ECEC services and can be complemented

by other existing assessment instruments, such as the ITERS-R, the Index for Inclusion**:** developing play, learning and participation in early years and childcare and DAVOPSI, so as to obtain a more holistic view of educational quality. This integration allows quantitative and qualitative perspectives to be combined, thus expanding the capacity for analysis and response to the needs of children and educational teams. In short, the assessment we propose is not limited to a control tool, but is configured as a *mechanism for reflection, learning and improvement.*

A tool intended to foster deep, multifaceted, and contextualised reflection on ECEC services, without the need to deploy multiple assessment instruments that are often unmanageable in the daily work of teams. Through an ecological and participatory approach, it seeks to promote a culture of evaluation that supports continuous improvement, the professionalisation of the sector, and the guarantee of the right to quality early childhood education (Child Guarantee).

Evaluation of early childhood policies (macro level)

At this macro level, relating to early childhood policies, four dimensions are included. Firstly, the legislation, regulation and funding of the structure on which early childhood is based. Secondly, the role that educational services should play in promoting individual and social development. Thirdly, the basic principles that govern (or should govern) the characterisation of early childhood education services. And fourthly and finally, the working conditions of professionals who carry out their work in the field of early childhood.

In view of the nature of the different dimensions that make up this macro level, the persons responsible for carrying out the evaluation would be those within the public administration in charge of planning, designing and making strategic decisions on policies related to early childhood. This idea is important because the frequent disconnection between the political, institutional, and educational and care practice domains often hinders such a holistic, coherent, and shared approach. To do so, it would be advisable to carry out a periodic annual assessment of each of these dimensions at the beginning and at the end of a political term (approximately four years) to promote any adjustments and improvements that are deemed appropriate.

Legislation, regulation and funding

This dimension (see Table 2.1) encompasses a comprehensive analysis of the legal, regulatory, and financial frameworks that underpin early childhood education. It assesses not only the internal consistency of legislation with national guidelines, but also with international standards, as established by recognised organisations (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Likewise, the capacity of these policies to guarantee universal, equitable and inclusive access is measured, while ensuring the sustainability of the economic resources allocated to the sector, transparency in their management and efficiency in the distribution of funds.

Table 2.1 Indicators for the assessment of legislation, regulation, and funding of early childhood services (macro level)
To be completed by policymakers, senior managers, and technical staff with responsibilities for planning and managing public policies.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Regulation and legislation	The legal framework is reviewed and updated annually with documented evidence demonstrating 95–100 % alignment with international standards. *For example*, annual reviews are published with explicit references to international frameworks (children's rights, ECEC quality), and decrees and guidelines are updated in a coherent manner.	The legal framework is reviewed every 1–2 years, with 80–90 % alignment with international standards. *For example*, regulations are updated periodically, but some instruments have not been adapted at the same pace.	The legal framework is updated irregularly (every 3 years or more) and alignment with international standards is 60–70 %. *For example*, existing regulations include general references to children's rights but lack operational specificity and regulatory implementation.	The legal framework is obsolete (no update in more than 5 years) or non-existent, with less than 50per cent alignment with international standards. *For example,* there is an absence of regulatory review or fragmented regulation that does not guarantee common criteria for quality and equity.

(Continued)

Table 2.1 (Continued)

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Funding	Comprehensive annual reports are available that reflect stable, transparent funding distributed according to established criteria, ensuring sustainability and equitable access (documentation accessible to all staff). *For example*, annual public budgets with clear distribution criteria by territory or by areas within the same municipality and population group, and accessible monitoring reports clearly showing the application of equity criteria.	Funding reports are available which, although regular, have minor shortcomings in terms of documentation or transparency in some areas. *For example,* budgetary information is available, but allocation criteria are not clearly specified.	Funding documentation is partial, with deviations that hinder uniform implementation and generate inequalities of access. *For example,* significant differences in funding between territories or areas within the same municipality without clear justification.	There is no reliable documentation of funding; management is unstable and periodic reviews are not carried out, seriously affecting equity of access. *For example*, a lack of public information on budgets and dependence on ad hoc or extraordinary decisions.

The role of early childhood education in individual and social development

Early childhood education is valued as an essential space for the overall development of the child, promoting their emotional, psychomotor, cognitive, and social well-being. Its educational function must enable comprehensive development through teaching and learning processes that promote social cohesion and equal opportunities. This perspective (see Table 2.2) considers that learning is constructed through interaction with the environment, a fact that reinforces the need for quality education from early childhood.

Table 2.2 Assessment of the role of early childhood education in individual and social development (macro level)
To be completed by policymakers, senior managers, and technical staff with responsibilities for planning and decision-making in early childhood policies.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Functions and orientation of early childhood policies	Early childhood policies explicitly define early childhood education as a children's right and as a core pillar of their holistic development. This orientation is clear, shared, and coherent across legislation, strategic plans, and planning instruments. *For example:* laws, national, regional, or municipal plans that explicitly recognise the right to early childhood education from birth and implement it through defined objectives, resources, and timelines.	Policies acknowledge the role of early childhood education in children's holistic development, but this orientation is not always consistently reflected across all documents or strategic decisions. *For example:* strategic plans that refer to holistic development but lack coherence between regulation, funding, and territorial planning.	Policies refer in general terms to children's holistic development, without clearly defining the specific role of early childhood education as a right or as a structural axis of public policy. *For example:* programmatic documents with declarative statements that are not translated into concrete measures or budgetary priorities.	Policies do not clearly define the function of early childhood education in relation to children's rights and holistic development or do so only in broad terms without specifying implementing actions. *For example:* absence of a specific early childhood strategy or consideration of this stage solely as a childcare service.

(Continued)

Table 2.2 (Continued)

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Equality of opportunity and social cohesion	Policies incorporate equality of opportunity and social cohesion as central criteria and translate them into measures that guarantee equitable access to early childhood education services, with particular attention to social, territorial, and economic inequalities. *For example:* prioritisation criteria for enrolment and reinforced funding in areas with higher social vulnerability.	Policies include measures aimed at promoting equality of opportunity, but these are not always sufficient or do not reach all territories or groups equitably. *For example:* existing financial support schemes that are insufficient or include eligibility requirements that exclude some vulnerable families.	Policies recognise the importance of equality of opportunity, but with limited specification of measures or uneven impact on access to services. *For example:* isolated programmes without continuity or without mechanisms to assess their actual impact.	Policies do not clearly incorporate equality of opportunity or social cohesion as guiding principles, contributing to the maintenance or widening of inequalities in access to early childhood education services and high financial costs for families. *For example:* predominant reliance on private provision, high fees, and insufficient public coverage.

Basic principles

This dimension (see Table 2.3) brings together the fundamental pillars that should guide the formulation, implementation and evaluation of early childhood education policies. It is structured into seven sub-dimensions: *childhood culture*, *the role of families*, *inclusion*, *universal access*, *child protagonism*, *children's rights* and *family voices*.

- **Culture of childhood and the role of families:** Early childhood education must recognise and respect the cultural diversity of children, integrating families as active agents in the educational process.
- **Inclusion:** Services must be accessible and sensitive to diversity (economic, cultural, functional, etc.), guaranteeing equal opportunities for participation in teaching and learning processes and their use as a driver of comprehensive development.
- **Universal access:** A service model that does not discriminate on the basis of socio-economic conditions is promoted, guaranteeing equitable access. It analyses measures that eliminate barriers and ensure that all children, regardless of their socio-economic context and characteristics, have access to quality education.
- **Children voices and protagonism:** Children's perspectives and voices should be incorporated into decision-making processes, recognising children as active agents in their own educational pathways through their interactions with adults and the development of their capacities.
- **Children's rights – Child Guarantee:** Early childhood education services must ensure the protection and promotion of children's rights as a fundamental principle of educational action, taking into account the specific characteristics of this developmental stage.
- **Family voices:** Early childhood education policies should recognise and promote family participation as an essential component of ECEC services. This entails ensuring meaningful spaces and mechanisms for information and participation that enable families to express their needs, perspectives, and expectations, as well as to take part in decisions affecting their children's well-being and education. Considering family voices contributes to the construction of shared, coherent, and inclusive educational action, respectful of social, cultural, and family diversity, and strengthens co-responsibility between educational services and the family environment.

Table 2.3 Assessment of the core principles of early childhood policies (macro level)

To be completed by policymakers, senior managers, and technical staff of the public administration with responsibilities for planning, regulation, and strategic decision-making in early childhood policies.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Culture of childhood	Policies fully recognise and respect the cultural diversity of children. Educational practices are promoted that value different forms of learning and development according to the cultural context of each child. *For example:* adaptation of services and materials to the diverse cultures, languages, and religions present within families and communities in the territory.	Policies consider cultural diversity, but with limitations in their practical application. Some adaptations are contemplated, but not systematically. *For example:* recognition of cultural diversity in strategic documents without clear criteria for implementation at service level.	Cultural diversity is recognised superficially in policies, but there are no clear strategies for integrating it into educational practice. The materials and methodologies proposed still follow a dominant model that does not reflect cultural plurality.	Policies do not take into account the cultural diversity of children. There are no measures to adapt education to different cultural contexts or to ensure the representation of diverse identities and traditions. *For example:* occasional references to diversity without changes to provision or quality criteria.
Role of families	Policies guarantee the active involvement of families in early childhood education. A relationship of shared responsibility between families and institutions is promoted, with participation mechanisms adapted to social and cultural diversity.	Families are recognised as key educational agents, but there are still barriers to equal participation. Some actions are being taken to promote dialogue between families and	The importance of the role of families is recognised, but effective policies are not being developed to facilitate their real involvement in the educational process.	Policies do not contemplate the participation of families in early childhood education. Collaboration is not encouraged, nor are there spaces for dialogue between families and services.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Role of families	*For example:* inclusive information channels; formal and informal participation spaces; and systematic consultation of families integrated into service planning.	educational services, but these are not always accessible to all families. *For example:* communication channels exist but are not sufficiently adapted to all family realities.	Communication between services and families is limited. *For example:* predominantly one-way communication from services to families.	*For example:* absence of meeting spaces or dialogue between families and services.
Inclusion	Early childhood policies fully guarantee inclusion, ensuring equitable and universal access to high-quality services for all children, regardless of their socio-economic, cultural, linguistic or functional situation. There is a structured strategy with adequate resources, an intersectoral approach and monitoring mechanisms to ensure equal opportunities and social cohesion.	Policies incorporate a solid inclusive framework, with specific measures to ensure access and participation for all children, but there may be shortcomings in implementation or funding. Inter-institutional collaboration is present but could be more effective in ensuring real equality of opportunity.	Policies recognise the importance of inclusion and incorporate some measures to promote it, but these are limited or do not have a real impact on reducing inequalities. There are structural barriers to accessing services, and diversity is not fully considered in policy planning and implementation.	Early childhood policies do not effectively guarantee inclusion. Significant barriers are identified that hinder equitable access to services for certain groups. There are no clear mechanisms for addressing diversity, and structural inequalities are perpetuated. *For example:* absence of specific measures for children with social or functional needs.

(Continued)

Table 2.3 (Continued)

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Inclusion	*For example:* prioritisation criteria and targeted support for children in vulnerable situations and/or with SEND.	*For example:* availability of diversity-support resources that do not reach all territories, children, or families.	*For example:* statements of intent without resources or monitoring mechanisms.	
Universal access	Policies guarantee equitable and universal access to early childhood education, eliminating economic, geographical and administrative barriers. There are specific measures to ensure the inclusion of vulnerable groups and guarantee educational quality for all children. Access is fully guaranteed, regardless of economic, social or territorial status. There are no waiting lists. *For example:* a robust public network covering the entire territory based on equity and inclusion criteria.	Measures are being implemented to ensure more equitable access to early childhood education services, but barriers still exist that hinder the full participation of some groups. Financial assistance is available, but it may be insufficient to reach the entire vulnerable population. Access is guaranteed for the majority, with some minor impediments that may slightly limit accessibility. *For example:* financial support schemes exist	Policies establish the right to universal access, but in practice there are significant inequalities. There are still families who cannot access services for financial or geographical reasons or due to a lack of available places. Access is partially guaranteed, with inequalities depending on location or economic status. There is a waiting list. *For example:* lack of public places in certain neighbourhoods or municipalities.	There are no effective measures to guarantee universal access to early childhood education. Socioeconomic, geographical and administrative barriers limit access for many children, especially those in vulnerable situations. Access is limited by economic, territorial or time barriers. There are long waiting lists and/or a lack of public places in various areas. *For example:* long waiting lists and reliance on private provision.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Universal access		but are insufficient to reach all families in need.		
Child's voice	Policies fully guarantee that child's voice is considered, promoting children's active participation in the learning process and decision-making. The development of teaching practices that respect their interests and needs is promoted and achieved to encourage meaningful learning. *For example:* regulatory criteria that guarantee time, spaces, and materials for free play, stimulation, and autonomous choice.	Child's perspective is integrated into policies, but there is still room for improvement in terms of children real participation in educational decision-making. The development of school practices that promote children's autonomy and expression is encouraged but not systematically achieved. *For example:* recommendations on free play without clear application criteria.	The importance of children's voices is recognised, but policies do not establish concrete mechanisms to guarantee them. The educational approach is still predominantly adult-centred, and opportunities for children's participation are limited. *For example:* rights-based discourse without changes to time or space organisation.	Policies do not consider children's voices as active agents in their learning. Early childhood education is based on directive and unidirectional models, where children have little or no ability to express their needs and preferences. *For example:* adult-centred service models with limited opportunities for children's choice.

(Continued)

Table 2.3 (Continued)

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Children's rights – Child Guarantee	Policies fully guarantee that ECEC services ensure the protection and promotion of all children's rights as a fundamental principle of educational action. Also taking into account the specific characteristics of this developmental stage and all intersectional diversities and inequalities (EU Child Guarantee)	Policies guarantee that ECEC services are oriented to the protection and promotion of all children's rights. Specific characteristics of this developmental stage and all diversities and inequalities are taking into account with difficulties.	Policies guarantees that *de iure* but not at *de facto* level hat ECEC services are oriented to the protection and promotion of all children's rights. Policies have difficulties to recognise specific characteristics of this developmental stage and all diversities and inequalities.	Policies do not guarantee that ECEC services are oriented to the protection and promotion of all children's rights. Specific characteristics of this developmental stage and all diversities and inequalities are not taken into account.
Family voices	Policies fully recognise and promote family participation and voice as an essential component of ECEC services.	Policies recognise and try to promote family participation and voice as an essential component of ECEC services.	Policies partially recognise and promote family participation and voice in ECEC services.	Policies fail to recognise and promote family participation and voice in ECEC services.

Working conditions

The working conditions of early childhood education professionals are also assessed as a key element in the quality of the service. This dimension (see Table 2.4) analyses the labour and training factors that directly affect the quality of early childhood education.

- **Resources and ratios**: The availability of resources and materials, adequate infrastructure, and an optimal teacher-child ratio (Espinosa, 2018,

2018a) have an impact on the safety experience and the quality of the educational response.

- **Networking**: Networking between educational, health and social services is essential to ensure comprehensive care. Adequate coordination between different services is required.
- **Spaces and times**: Planning and organisation of diverse and flexible learning situations.
- **Initial training and induction:** High-quality initial and ongoing training for professionals contributes to reflective and improvement-oriented practice.
- **Staff training**: Continuous professional development, with a focus on reflection and constant improvement in educational practice.
- **Working conditions**: focusing on adequate salaries and calendar, and time to prepare activities and for training.

Table 2.4 Assessment of working conditions of early childhood education professionals (macro level)

To be completed by policymakers, senior managers, and technical staff of the public administration with responsibilities for planning, regulation, and decision-making in early childhood policies.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Ratios	The teacher-child ratio is optimal (1:4 for 0–3-year-olds and 1:8 for 3–6-year-olds), allowing for attention tailored to each child's needs.	The teacher-child ratio is good (1:6 for 0–3-year-olds and 1:10 for 3–6-year-olds), but at times of high demand this can slightly affect the quality of care.	The teacher-child ratio is higher than the recommended parameters (1:8 for 0–3-year-olds and 1:12 for 3–6-year-olds), making it difficult to attend to all children.	The teacher-child ratio is unfavourable (more than 1:10 for 0–3-year-olds and 1:15 for 3–6-year-olds), negatively affecting the quality of care provided to children.

(Continued)

Table 2.4 (Continued)

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Ratios	Working conditions are excellent, as professionals can attend to each child's needs with adequate time and resources. *For example:* all classrooms maintain the required ratio throughout the day, including peak periods.	Working conditions are adequate, but some situations can generate a certain level of pressure. *For example:* temporary increase in ratios during drop-off/pick-up times.	Working conditions can be difficult due to excessive workload. *For example:* one professional attending a large group for most of the day.	Working conditions are precarious and do not allow for the proper performance of educational tasks. *For example:* systematic lack of support staff or substitutes.
Resources	The resources and materials available are more than adequate and of sufficient quality to carry out high-quality educational work. This is documented in internal reports.	The resources and materials are adequate but are not always available in the necessary quantity or quality. Working conditions are good, but there are times when the availability of resources can cause difficulties. Shortcomings documented in periodic reports.	Resources and materials are limited, with some shortcomings in terms of quality or availability. Working conditions may be affected by the lack of adequate materials and resources to carry out educational tasks effectively.	Resources and materials are scarce or inadequate, negatively affecting the educational task. Working conditions are precarious, with a shortage of materials and resources, making the work of professionals difficult. *For example:* absence of basic materials or minimally equipped spaces.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Resources	*For example:* guaranteed annual budget for materials, regularly renewed and documented.	*For example:* shared materials between classrooms or delayed renewals.	*For example:* reuse of worn materials due to budget constraints.	
Networking	There is smooth and structured coordination between educational, health and social services, facilitating a collaborative working environment. Professionals have the time and resources to work in a network and develop effective coordination. Existence of well-defined intervention plans. *For example:* periodic intersectoral meetings with shared protocols.	Coordination between services is good, with regular interaction between the agents involved. Professionals have time to coordinate, but with some difficulties or workloads that limit this collaboration. Existence of generic or insufficiently comprehensive protocols or intervention plans. *For example:* occasional contacts without systematic follow-up.	Coordination is irregular, with moments of overlap between services. Professionals have little time or support for coordination, which hinders networking. Protocols or intervention plans are insufficient and/or unknown to the services involved. *For example:* lack of awareness of existing protocols.	There is no effective coordination between services. Professionals work in isolation and working conditions are precarious, with a lack of time and resources to coordinate with other agents. There are no protocols or intervention plans. *For example:* each service operates in isolation.

(Continued)

Table 2.4 (Continued)

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Spaces	The spaces are designed, maintained and reviewed periodically (at least annually), complying with 90–100 % of the established safety criteria (certifications and regular inspections).	The spaces are functional and generally safe, with periodic reviews (every 1–2 years) that comply with 80–90 % of the safety criteria, although occasional shortcomings are detected in the updating of equipment. *For example:* minor deficiencies in equipment updates.	The spaces fulfil basic safety functions but only meet 60–70 % of the criteria; deficiencies are detected in the inspection and updating of equipment. *For example:* outdated equipment pending renewal.	The spaces are inadequate or unsafe, without regular inspection or maintenance processes, meeting less than 50 % of the minimum safety criteria. *For example:* lack of certifications or serious accessibility deficiencies.
Time	Flexible hours that meet the needs of children and families, according to internal evaluation reports and user feedback. *For example:* drop-off and pick-up times adapted to family needs.	There are some minor aspects to be improved in terms of organisation and flexible hours to better meet the needs of children and their families. *For example:* occasional rigidity in specific time slots.	Shortcomings have been detected in the flexibility of working hours, with irregular reports highlighting the need for improvement. *For example:* schedules poorly adapted to diverse family situations.	Timetables are unstructured and inflexible, with a lack of periodic review, negatively affecting the learning environment. They do not respond to the needs of children and their families. *For example:* fixed schedules that do not meet children's real needs.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Initial training	It is essential that early childhood education professionals have specific, high-quality vocational training or university training. The training is comprehensive and covers all aspects necessary for reflective, high-quality practice. *For example:* specific university degrees mandatory for employment, excluding lower qualifications.	Early childhood education professionals are required to have initial university training or vocational training. There is no guarantee that the training covers all areas comprehensively, and there are some shortcomings. *For example:* some children are supervised by staff without specific early childhood content.	It is recommended but not required that early childhood education professionals have initial university training or vocational training. There is no guarantee that the training adequately covers certain pedagogical and psychoeducational areas. *For example:* hiring staff without specific qualifications.	Early childhood education professionals are not required to have initial university training or vocational training. *For example:* employment without minimum educational requirements.
Induction	The induction process is comprehensive and well structured, providing professionals with all the support	The induction is adequate, with good initial support, but may be lacking in some areas that hinder rapid adaptation.	The induction is insufficient, with little support for professionals to integrate into their role.	Induction is almost non-existent or very limited. Professionals do not receive adequate support to start working, and working conditions are precarious.

(Continued)

Table 2.4 (Continued)

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Induction	they need to successfully integrate into their role. Working conditions are very good, with a focus on enabling them to adapt quickly. *For example:* induction plans with personal and collective mentorship.	Working conditions are good, but support could be improved. *For example:* partial initial information.	Working conditions can be difficult due to a lack of adequate support and guidance. *For example:* direct entry without prior training.	*For example:* no support during workplace integration.
Continuing education	Professionals have access to quality continuing education, with regular opportunities for professional development. Working conditions are conducive to continuing education and professional development. *For example:* annual training plan with hours included in working time.	Continuing education is adequate, but not very regular or accessible. Working conditions are good, although they do not always allow for the time necessary for continuing professional development. *For example:* training outside working hours.	There are few opportunities for continuing education and/or they are not very accessible. Working conditions limit opportunities for professional development. *For example:* scarce, unplanned training offers.	There are no opportunities for continuing training. Working conditions are precarious and do not favour opportunities for professional development. *For example:* no budget or time allocated for professional development.
Working conditions	Professionals enjoy working conditions	Professionals have working conditions with	Professionals have working conditions far	Professionals have working conditions much

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Working conditions	(salary, calendar, hours, holidays) comparable to those in primary education.	some deficiencies compared to primary education.	below those in primary education.	lower than in other stages.

Evaluation of institutional dynamics in early childhood (meso level)

At this meso level, referring to institutional dynamics in early childhood, and following the structure proposed by the Index for Inclusion, three dimensions are identified. Firstly, cultures, which refer to the concepts and beliefs that underlie the educational service in question. Secondly, policies constitute all the decisions that enable the organisation and functioning of the context in question. And thirdly and finally, practices, which involve the deployment of the curriculum in more formal contexts, or of content, knowledge and skills from the perspective of contexts that are not so regulated.

Considering the nature of the different dimensions that make up this meso level, those responsible for carrying out the evaluation would be the direct managers of early childhood education services. It would be advisable that, both at the beginning and at the end of an academic year, or of an educational process with a defined beginning and end, an evaluation of each of these dimensions be carried out to identify areas for improvement and to be able to plan actions to promote it.

Given the idiosyncrasies of each educational centre and its internal and external context, it is understood that institutional dynamics will, by definition, necessarily differ.

Cultures

This dimension (see Table 2.5) examines the values and beliefs that shape the internal identity of an educational service. Analysing cultures within a context allows us to identify the degree of inclusion and respect for diversity, as well as their ability to adapt to the changing needs of children and families. The participation of the entire community, a democratic stance, collaboration between professionals, and the concept of childhood and its implications

for the organisation of the service's daily life are fundamental elements for quality early childhood education.

- **Participation of the entire community**: assesses how the community (families, teachers, external professionals) is involved in decision-making and in the day-to-day running of the service. Active and inclusive participation is fundamental to educational quality.
- **Democratic positioning**: assesses the extent to which the service adopts a democratic model, where decisions are made collectively, with space for dialogue and the active participation of all members of the educational community.
- **Collaboration between professionals involved**: considers the synergy between the different educational and support agents (teachers, psychologists, social workers, etc.), their ability to work in a coordinated manner and in line with common educational objectives.
- Concept of child and family and implications for the organisation of the daily life of the service, nursery school, family space, and so on: assess how the educational service deals with the diversity of children and families, and how these influences are reflected in daily life. The concept of children and families must be considered holistically, adapting to the specific needs of everyone.

Table 2.5 Assessment of institutional cultures in early childhood education services (meso level)

To be completed by management teams or those responsible for early childhood education services, with the participation of the educational staff and, where appropriate, other stakeholders associated with the service.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Community participation	The educational community (families, teachers, external agents) actively participates in	The educational community has opportunities for participation, although key decisions	Community participation is limited. Some opportunities for participation are offered, but	The educational community has no opportunities to participate in

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Community participation	decision-making and school management. Participatory processes are inclusive and transparent, and the contributions of all members are valued. *For example:* stable participation spaces (councils, committees) with real influence on organisational decisions.	are made by a smaller group. Collaboration is encouraged, but some voices may be more marginalised. *For example:* consultative meetings with families without clear feedback on how contributions are integrated.	they are not regular or well structured. Families and other members may feel little involvement in the decision-making process. *For example:* one-off surveys with no follow-up or continuity.	decision-making. There is little exchange of information and the community's contributions are not valued. *For example:* decisions made exclusively by management without consultation spaces.
Democratic positioning	The service promotes a democratic model where decisions are made collectively, and the inclusion and mutual respect of all members is encouraged. Democracy is an integral part of the daily life of the service. *For example:* regular collective deliberation spaces with staff and	The service promotes democracy in decision-making, but there may be times when hierarchy or authority take precedence over dialogue. The opinions of families and professionals are listened to, but decision-making can be more centralised. *For example:* prior consultation	The service shows signs of democratic positioning, but in practice decisions are made in limited spaces and the active participation of all those involved is not sufficiently encouraged. *For example:* information shared after decisions without opportunity for influence.	The service does not promote a democratic model, with decisions taken unilaterally. Communication between members is limited and opportunities for democratic participation are almost non-existent. *For example:* complete absence of dialogue or

(Continued)

Table 2.5 (Continued)

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Democratic positioning	other actors, with shared decision-making criteria.	with staff and stakeholders without real decision-making power.		collective debate spaces.
Collaboration between professionals	There is close collaboration between all professionals (educators, psychologists, social workers, other specialists), with regular meetings, exchange of strategies and mutual support. The work teams are fully aligned in their educational objectives. *For example:* interdisciplinary coordination spaces with shared planning.	Collaboration between professionals is good, although it may not be entirely systematic or structured. There are good practices in teamwork, but some areas could be improved. *For example:* occasional coordination depending on specific needs.	Collaboration between professionals exists but is sporadic or superficial. There may be a lack of effective coordination and fluid communication, with some difficulties in coordinating educational strategies. *For example:* informal information exchange without established spaces.	Collaboration between professionals is almost non-existent. The various educational agents work in isolation, without a coordinated system and with a lack of communication and mutual support. *For example:* absence of team meetings or coordination.
Concept of child and family and implications for the organisation of the daily life	The service has an inclusive approach and respects the diversity of concepts of children and families. Its educational work is based on a holistic vision that	The service works in a manner consistent with the concept of children and families, with spaces and activities that consider family needs and characteristics.	The concept of children and families is considered, but the educational task is carried out in a more homogeneous manner, with little recognition of family	The service has a limited or stereotypical concept of children and families, which is not reflected in the organisation of activities or in the way spaces are designed.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Concept of child and family and implications for the organisation of the daily life	recognises the individual needs of children and their families. The spaces and activities are adapted to encourage the active participation of families. *For example:* organisational flexibility and inclusive spaces designed to welcome families with diverse realities.	However, there may be a lack of full integration or flexibility in some areas. *For example:* occasional adaptations without overall review of organisation.	and child diversity. The spaces or activities may not be fully adapted to the specific needs of families. *For example:* rigid daily organisation for all families.	Families play a minor role in the daily life of the service. *For example:* absence of spaces designed for family presence or participation.

Policies

This dimension (see Table 2.6) refers to the clarity, consistency and application of internal policies that guide the functioning of educational centres. Institutional policies, such as the service's educational project and pedagogical leadership, must reflect a clear orientation towards improving educational practices.

- **Educational project**: Clarity and consistency of pedagogical objectives with the service's educational proposal and the rules of organisation and operation, internal regulations, among others. And, at the same time, with the development of educational practices.
- **Leadership:** Management and leadership skills for the implementation of quality early childhood education. Need for specific training and experience requirements.

Table 2.6 Assessment of institutional policies of early childhood education services (meso level)

To be completed by management teams or those responsible for early childhood education services, with the participation of the educational staff.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Educational project	The educational project is clear and coherent, with well-defined pedagogical objectives that are fully aligned with the educational proposal of the service and with the Organisation and Functioning Regulations (NOF), as well as with the Internal Regulations. The pedagogical objectives are and are effectively translated into daily educational practices, and there is constant supervision to ensure that they are applied consistently and reflectively. *For example:* the educational project explicitly guides daily organisation (time, spaces, and activities) and is reviewed periodically with the team and stakeholders.	The educational project is generally clear, and the pedagogical objectives are consistent with the service's educational proposal. However, there may be some areas that are not fully aligned with the Organisation and Functioning Regulations or the Internal Regulations. The educational objectives are reflected in educational practice, but only partially or with some inconsistencies. *For example:* shared pedagogical criteria applied unevenly across groups or staff.	The educational project is generally understandable, but there are shortcomings in its consistency with the pedagogical objectives, the Organisation and Functioning Regulations and the Internal Regulations. This can lead to inconsistent application of the objectives in educational practices. Educational practice is partially aligned with the objectives. *For example:* institutional documents exist but are rarely used as a practical reference.	The educational project is unclear or incoherent, with poorly defined pedagogical objectives that are not aligned with the service's educational proposal, the Organisation and Operating Rules or the Internal Regulations. Educational practices do not coherently reflect the established objectives, with a lack of adequate monitoring and implementation. *For example:* absence of shared pedagogical criteria or a project disconnected from actual service functioning.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Leadership	Leadership is clear and shared. Management promotes a horizontal and shared leadership model, where professionals play an active role in decision-making and service management. There is an equitable distribution of responsibilities, and the work team is perceived as an organised and cohesive unit. Management has specific training and extensive experience and encourages the active participation and accountability of all members of the service. Management and supervision processes are well structured, and quality early childhood education is guaranteed. *For example:* work teams with defined roles, regular coordination meetings, and shared decision-making.	Leadership is adequate, with management that promotes collaboration and a shared leadership model, although the distribution of responsibilities may not be completely equitable or may vary depending on the circumstances. The management team has adequate training and some management experience and seeks to involve professionals in decision-making. Educational quality is generally guaranteed, although perhaps not all members of the service are always given the same degree of participation. *For example:* consultation with staff before decisions, but final resolutions remain centralised.	Leadership is functional, but participation in decision-making and the distribution of responsibilities are limited. Management exercises a more vertical leadership style, with little involvement of professionals in strategic decisions. There is a lack of consistent horizontal leadership, with centralised management and little focus on teamwork. Management training is partial and experience may be insufficient in some areas. *For example:* organisational decisions primarily taken by management, with minimal collective deliberation.	Leadership is unclear or centralised. Management does not promote shared leadership or active collaboration among team members, and responsibilities are not distributed equitably. Management has no specific training in early childhood education or minimal experience, which affects educational quality. Decisions are made unilaterally and the participation of professionals in the management or development of the educational project is not encouraged. *For example:* absence of coordination spaces and imposition of decisions without dialogue processes.

Practices

The analysis of pedagogical practices includes the implementation of the curriculum and/or the development of content, knowledge and the promotion of skills, strategies for welcoming families and children, the organisation of spaces and time, and the coherence of educational intervention. Assessing these aspects allows for the identification of good practices and promotes professional reflection.

- **Implementation of the curriculum/content/skills**: Implementation of a curricular framework, or development of content and knowledge, or promotion of adapted and flexible skills. This necessarily requires planning and specification approached jointly and consensually between the educational community and the various agents of the educational services (see Table 2.7).
- **Welcoming children**: Strategies to ensure a smooth transition and adaptation to educational services. Support and monitoring of children at different times of the day (daily life and play). Support for families referred by the child.
- **Welcoming families and caregivers** (**Foster care children**): framework and strategies to offer to all families and caregivers a personalised welcoming and continuous support and guidance (meetings, interviews, communication, etc.)
- **Organisation of spaces and time**: this sub-dimension refers to the quality and suitability of the physical spaces within the educational service, which must be designed and organised to promote the well-being and development of children. It includes aspects such as safety, accessibility, diversity of educational materials and resources, and the suitability of spaces to the specific needs of children. The organisation of time refers to how activity and rest times are distributed and managed within the educational service.
- **Orientation and coherence of the educational intervention proposal:** this sub-dimension covers the way in which learning situations are designed and implemented within the service, as well as the coherence between educational activities and care practices. Coherence implies that educational approaches and support strategies are consistent,

ensuring that children receive a comprehensive and balanced education that respects both cognitive and emotional aspects.

- **Assessment of the organisation and functioning of the service**. This sub-dimension refers to the way in which the service reviews, evaluates and improves its internal processes. Self-evaluation allows strengths and areas for improvement to be identified, with the aim of ensuring that the service operates efficiently and that educational practices are of high quality. This sub-dimension includes both the self-evaluation of professionals and the participation of families and children in the process, to ensure that the service is aligned with the educational objectives and needs of the children.

Table 2.7 Assessment of educational practices in early childhood education services (meso level)
To be completed by educational and management teams of early childhood education services as a tool for collective reflection and improvement of practice.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Implementation of curriculum / content / skills	Curriculum/ content/skills are fully adapted to the needs of the children, with detailed and flexible planning that is regularly reviewed and adjusted. Planning is carried out jointly and by consensus among all the professionals, with the clear involvement of all those involved in educational services. It is geared towards	Curriculum/ content/skills are adapted and flexible, with good planning involving the professional community, although there may be some room for improvement in terms of review and consensus among all those involved in educational services. The curriculum is implemented	Curriculum/ content/skills have undergone some adaptations, but the planning and implementation are not fully agreed upon by all educational agents. Flexibility is limited and is not reviewed frequently enough to adapt to the changing needs of	Curriculum/ content/skills are not flexible enough or adapted to the needs of the children. Planning is rigid and is not done jointly or by consensus among the group of professionals. There is no process for reviewing or adapting educational practices, and there is

(Continued)

Table 2.7 (Continued)

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Implementation of curriculum / content / skills	inclusive education, which allows for flexible implementation according to the individual needs of the children. *For example:* team-shared planning adjusted periodically based on observation and changing needs of children and families.	appropriately, with adjustments based on the needs of the children, but it could be more flexible in some cases. *For example:* occasional adaptations of educational proposals according to children and families.	children. Adaptations/ adjustments are made partially or irregularly. *For example:* rigid programmes that are only occasionally modified.	no effective response to the individual needs of children. *For example:* repetitive and fixed activities that do not respond to group diversity.
Welcoming children	The reception of children is individualised, with a smooth transition adapted to individual needs. The educational team offers a careful and constant reception at all times of the day, respecting the emotional, affective and educational needs of the children. *For example:* flexible adaptation periods agreed and carried out with families.	The reception is well structured and organised, ensuring a smooth transition. Adjustments are made according to the children's needs, although some improvements could be made in the transition. *For example:* temporary adjustment of schedules during the first days.	The welcome is general, without specific adaptations. The transition is not entirely smooth and may present difficulties in the inclusion of all children, as the welcome strategy is not fluid. *For example:* identical adaptation periods for all children.	The reception strategies are not very effective and do not guarantee a smooth transition. The individual needs of the children are not taken into account, and inclusion is difficult. *For example:* immediate integration without support process.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Welcoming families and caregivers (Foster's care)	The family or caregivers' reception process is fully personalised and offers constant support throughout the transition process. Resources, guidance and information are provided proactively and regularly. The service establishes fluid communication with families, adapting to their specific needs. *For example:* initial interviews and regular follow-up throughout the year.	The family or caregivers' reception is adequate and the support is regular. Families receive guidance and resources for the transition, although there may be a lack of personalisation or continuity in communication and support. *For example:* initial information meetings without systematic follow-up.	The welcome given to families or caregivers is superficial, with little follow-up or support. Families have limited access to resources and guidance in the transition process. Communication is infrequent and not always tailored to specific needs. *For example:* written information provided without dialogue opportunities.	Family and caregivers Streception strategies are non-existent or very limited. No resources or guidance are provided, and communication is minimal or non-existent. *For example:* no meetings with families.
Organisation of spaces	Educational spaces are optimally designed for children's development. The spaces are suitable for activities and promote children's emotional and social well-being, with accessible, high-quality	The spaces are suitable and functionally organised. Although they are appropriate for the activities, they could benefit from improvements in the layout or availability of resources to promote a	The spaces are generally adequate but have limitations that may affect the well-being or development of children. There is a poor layout and a lack of accessibility to some resources and materials.	The spaces are inadequate or poorly organised. The layout of the spaces does not promote learning or the children's coexistence. *For example:* overcrowded or unsafe

(Continued)

Table 2.7 (Continued)

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Organisation of spaces	resources and materials. *For example:* differentiated spaces allowing diverse functions: free play, quiet time, interaction, stimulation.	more stimulating environment adapted to the diversity of children. *For example:* adequate spaces and materials but little renewal or diversity.	*For example:* spaces and materials stored out of children's reach.	spaces and materials.
Organisation of time	The distribution of time is flexible and adapted to the children's needs. There is an adequate balance between activity and rest times, and interaction times are balanced. *For example:* daily rhythms adjusted according to group needs and status.	The distribution of time is adequate, although it could be more flexible or tailored to the needs of all children. The activities are varied and rest periods are taken into account, but perhaps some adjustments are needed in the transition between activities. *For example:* stable routines with limited flexibility at specific times.	The distribution of time is rigid and inflexible. Rest periods and activities do not always respond to the individual needs of the children, and the transition between different activities is not very smooth. *For example:* abrupt transitions between activities without adaptation time.	The distribution of time is inappropriate for children, with few moments of rest or variation between activities. *For example:* long days without sufficient breaks.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Orientation and coherence of educational and care intervention	The learning situations are very varied and adapted to the needs and interests of the children. The educational and care proposal is fully integrated, and the professionals work together to promote the overall development of the children. The activities are planned in a flexible manner and in line with the educational and care objectives. *For example:* coherence between care routines and educational proposals.	Learning situations are appropriate and varied, although they could be more dynamic or adapted to certain specific needs. There is good consistency between education and care, but deeper integration between the two may be lacking. *For example:* good general coordination with minor inconsistencies.	Learning situations are limited and not very diverse, with little flexibility in planning. The consistency between the educational programme and care is partial, with moments of disconnection between the two aspects. *For example:* educational activities disconnected from daily routines.	Learning situations are monotonous and poorly adapted to children's needs. The educational proposal and care are separate, and there is no effective coordination between the two aspects. *For example:* care-focused practices without integration with educational activities.
Assessment of the organisation and functioning of the service	The evaluation of the organisation and functioning of the service is continuous, participatory and reflective. The team uses self-assessment	The evaluation is regular and participatory, but there are areas where the review processes could be improved. Adjustments are made, but	The service is evaluated sporadically and without a structured process. Data collection is limited and there is no rigorous	Evaluation is almost non-existent. There is no adequate monitoring of the organisation and functioning of the service,

(Continued)

Table 2.7 (Continued)

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Assessment of the organisation and functioning of the service	methods and rigorously monitors all processes to identify areas for improvement. Data is collected systematically and immediate adjustments are made to improve the functioning of the service.	less immediately and perhaps not all the data necessary for a complete diagnosis is collected.	monitoring of the quality of operations, which makes it difficult to implement immediate improvements.	which prevents the identification and implementation of improvements in processes.

Evaluation of psycho-pedagogical practices in ECEC services (micro level)

At this micro level, with regard to psycho-pedagogical practices in early childhood education services, four dimensions are identified. Firstly, the curricular/competency context, which refers to planned and developed learning situations. Secondly, the physical context, which includes spaces, times and materials. Thirdly, the relational and joint activity context encapsulates much of the essence that should characterise quality early childhood education based on interaction. And fourthly and finally, assessment, quality and reflective professionalism capture the essence of the professional profile that should characterise those who carry out their professional work in early childhood education services.

With respect to the nature of the different dimensions that make up this micro level, the people responsible for carrying out the assessment would be directly those who act as educational agents in practice. It would be advisable that, both at the beginning and at the end of the school year -or of any educational process (*learning situation*) with a defined beginning and end-, an assessment of each of these dimensions is carried out with a view to identify improvements and incorporate them into subsequent educational proposals. In order not to lose the overall perspective of the educational service, this assessment should, as far as possible, be collegial with shared responsibility, between all the professionals involved.

Curricular/competency context

Consistency between the educational project and daily practice, the type of learning situations and reflection on educational practice are key elements in assessing the impact of teaching on child development (see Table 2.8).

- **Implementation of the educational project and the curriculum and/or the competences to be developed**: Consistency between the centre's educational project and its development in educational practice.
- **Types of learning situations**: Analysis of educational proposals, with special attention to daily teaching and learning activities.
- **Evaluation of educational practice**: Continuous reflection on the effectiveness of the pedagogical strategies used and the level of learning achieved by the children.

Table 2.8 Assessment of the curricular/competency-based context in early childhood education services (micro level)
To be completed by educational professionals as a tool for self-assessment and reflection on pedagogical practice.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Implementation of the educational project and curriculum and/or skills to be developed	The educational project is fully aligned with daily practice. The objectives and principles of the educational project are clearly and coherently reflected in all educational activities, with planning adapted to the needs of the children. The educational	The educational project is largely aligned with educational practices, with some minor discrepancies in its implementation. Educational activities are in line with the general objectives of the educational	There are some disconnections between the educational project and daily practices. The objectives and principles of the educational project are partially reflected in the	The educational project is not adequately reflected in educational practice. There is a lack of consistency between the established educational objectives and daily activities, with a lack of reference to the project in

(Continued)

Table 2.8 (Continued)

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Implementation of the educational project and curriculum and/or skills to be developed	project is used as a reference for pedagogical decision-making at all levels. *For example:* Decisions about activities, materials, and daily organisation are based on the criteria established in the educational project and align with the service and municipal objectives.	project, although some areas could benefit from greater consistency between the educational project and daily activities. *For example:* The project guides practice but is not always explicitly used as a reference in daily planning.	educational activities, and at times it is difficult to apply them to the dynamics of everyday life. *For example:* The project is known but rarely reviewed or considered in practice.	the planning and execution of activities. *For example:* Activities are improvised or disconnected from the pedagogical criteria of the service.
Types of learning situations	The learning situations are designed to encourage collaboration, dialogue and negotiation among children. The activities involve social interaction and joint problem-solving, with a strong focus on active	The learning situations do little to encourage interaction between the children and the educational agent. The activities allow for some collaboration and exchange of ideas, but the role of children as active builders	The learning situations do not encourage interaction or the shared construction of knowledge among children. The activities promote some social interaction, but opportunities for	The learning situations do not encourage interaction or collaboration among the children. Knowledge is transmitted in a unidirectional manner from the educational agent to the children, with little or no space for

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Types of learning situations	learning and critical thinking. The educational agent acts as a facilitator, offering support and guidance. *For example:* Diverse activities such as open-ended tasks and free play areas encourage shared play and decision-making among children.	of their own knowledge could be more prominent. The educational agent intervenes little. *For example:* Activities allow collaboration but have fairly rigid instructions, limiting children's choice.	group work and building knowledge together are limited. The educational agent does not intervene. *For example:* Individual activities with occasional unplanned interactions.	the collective construction of knowledge. The activities do not allow children to interact, and the role of the educational agent is solely that of an observer. *For example:* Repetitive, directive activities with children in a passive role.
Assessment of educational practice	Professionals carry out a continuous and reflective evaluation of the effectiveness of pedagogical strategies, using various tools and sources of information. They regularly identify the strengths and areas for improvement in educational practices and	Professionals carry out a reflective assessment of pedagogical strategies, but less consistently or with less depth. Periodic tools and observations are used to measure children's learning levels, but strategies may not always be adjusted in a timely manner. Reflection	Professionals carry out an assessment of educational practice on an irregular basis. Reflection on pedagogical strategies and children's learning takes place at specific moments or in a superficial manner, without systematic monitoring.	Professionals do not carry out continuous or reflective assessment of educational practice. There is no effective monitoring of the level of learning achieved by children or the effectiveness of teaching strategies. The lack of reflection and review of practices prevents

(Continued)

Table 2.8 (Continued)

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Assessment of educational practice	proactively adjust strategies to optimise children's learning. Reflection is thorough, detailed and based on concrete data, and involves critical and constant analysis of the educational process. *For example:* Recorded observations, team meetings, external mentoring, immediate adjustments of educational proposals.	is adequate, but there may be a lack of detail in the analysis of results and in the implementation of immediate changes. *For example:* Quarterly assessments that lead to gradual changes.	The identification of weak and strong points in practice is partial, and modifications to strategies are infrequent or limited. *For example:* Informal reflections without records or continuity.	the coherent improvement of teaching and learning. *For example:* No spaces for reflection or review of practice.

Physical context

Spaces and time must be flexible and adapted to the needs of children and promote meaningful learning experiences. The selection of play materials must meet criteria of quality and diversity so as to promote comprehensive development (see Table 2.9).

- **Spaces**: Adaptation of spaces to the needs of children and suitability for the educational proposal. What (disciplinary) knowledge is used to prepare the spaces and materials?
- **Time**: Flexible and diversified timetable organisation.
- **Selection of play materials**: Use of appropriate materials to promote learning that ensures the child's overall development.

Table 2.9 Assessment of the physical context in psycho-pedagogical practices (micro level)
To be completed by educational professionals as a tool for self-assessment of everyday practice.

	Level			
Descriptor	Excellent	Good	Sufficient	To be improved
Spaces	The spaces are designed to be flexible and adapted to the needs of children, promoting different types of activities (free play, guided activities, rest periods, etc.). The layout of the spaces facilitates social interaction and the progressive and the autonomy of children. The spaces are prepared considering the educational and emotional needs of each child, and their design is based on a deep understanding of the stages of child development and the educational proposal.	The spaces are suitably adapted to the needs of the children, with a good layout for educational activities. Although the diversity of activities is reflected in the design, the spaces could be more flexible or adapted to certain aspects of the children's individual development. The selection and layout of the spaces is based on general knowledge about the educational needs of children.	The spaces are adequate for the general needs of children, but the layout does not always encourage diverse activities or interaction. The spaces are functionally useful, but their organisation does not always facilitate a rich learning experience. The design of the spaces is not fully aligned with the educational proposal and is not very well thought out. *For example:* Adequate spaces always organised in the same way.	The spaces are not adequately adapted to the children's needs and do not respond adequately to the centre's educational proposal. The layout of the space is rigid and inflexible, limiting the possibilities for learning and progressive autonomy and interaction among children. The spaces are prepared without any clear rationale criteria.

(Continued)

Table 2.9 (Continued)

	Level			
Descriptor	Excellent	Good	Sufficient	To be improved
Spaces	*For example:* Accessible spaces that allow children to freely choose where to play, move, or rest, designed from an inclusive, multisensory, and welcoming perspective.	*For example:* Differentiated spaces with limited possibilities for transformation.		*For example:* Fixed furniture arrangement preventing free play or movement.
Time	The organisation of time is flexible, with a timetable that allows for alternating periods of structured learning, free play, rest and social interaction. Schedules can be adapted to the individual needs of children, and their needs are considered. *For example:* Flexible rest and play times according to children's individual rhythms.	The organisation of time is quite flexible, with a good distribution of activities and moments of interaction. Although most children have sufficient time for various activities, in some cases the timetable could be better organised to respond to individual needs. Learning and rest times are balanced. *For example:* Stable routines with some scope for adaptation.	The distribution of time is rigid and inflexible. Although activity and rest times are respected, the timetable does not always allow for adaptation to the individual needs of children. *For example:* Clock-driven transitions without considering the group's condition.	The timetable is very rigid and does not consider the diversity and needs of the children. The timetables are inflexible and there is no room for personal choice, interaction or adequate rest. *For example:* Overly structured days without enough time for free play.

	Level			
Descriptor	Excellent	Good	Sufficient	To be improved
Selection of play materials	Play materials are of high quality, diverse and adapted to the interests, abilities and needs of children. They are used to promote children's cognitive, emotional, social and physical development, with a careful selection based on a thorough understanding of the stages of child development. Materials enable symbolic play, exploration, creation, psychomotor and problem-solving activities. *For example:* Diverse, unstructured materials that allow multiple uses and interpretations.	Play materials are appropriate and sufficient to promote children's development, although they could be more varied or better adapted to some specific needs. The materials are used to encourage learning and play, but perhaps their potential for children's overall development is not always maximised. *For example:* Adequate materials, but little renewed or combined.	Play materials are functional but limited in quality or variety. Although they encourage certain types of activities, they do not always respond optimally to children's developmental needs. The use of materials is limited to basic activities, without promoting overall development or full creativity. *For example:* Predominance of commercial toys with limited creative potential.	Play materials are not very suitable for children's development. Their selection is limited in variety, quality and pedagogical application, and they do not encourage children's overall development. Activities are restricted to the use of materials that are inadequate or not very stimulating for children. *For example:* Poorly stimulating, worn-out, or inaccessible materials.

Relational context and joint activities

The relational environment and joint activities are essential for quality early childhood education. An inclusive environment, educational interaction, the quality of the adult-child relationship and the social organisation of the

activity, promoting interaction between peers, form the basis of meaningful learning. Observation and listening practices should encourage constant improvement, based on analysis and reflection on practice (see Table 2.10).

- **Inclusion**: Creation of a safe and welcoming environment that allows for the presence, participation, and learning of all children.
- **Educational interaction and joint activity**: Processes and intervention in teaching and learning processes between educator and child, as well as between children.
- **Adult-child relationship**: Quality of interaction and type and degree of help provided. Use of discursive strategies during the educational process.
- **Social organisation of activities among children**: diversified proposals (individual, in pairs, in small groups, in large groups).
- **Type and quality of interaction between peers:** type of relationships (support and help, collaboration, cooperation, competition, etc.).
- **Assessment:** aligned with teaching and learning, continuous, formative and educational.

Table 2.10 Assessment of the relational context and joint activities (micro level)

To be completed by educational professionals as a tool for self-assessment and reflection on the quality of interactions and the relational life of the service.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Inclusion	The environment is completely inclusive and welcoming, where every child is valued and has opportunities to learn according to their needs.	The environment is inclusive and welcoming for most children, although it could be improved in terms of the diversity of adapted	The environment is welcoming but not always inclusive for all children. The activities offered are not always adapted to the diverse needs	The environment is not sufficiently inclusive or welcoming for all children. The activities are not adapted to diverse needs and there are

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Inclusion	There is a wide variety of adapted activities, and children receive the support they need to participate. Educational practices promote equal opportunities for all children. *For example:* Proposals are adapted so that all children can participate regardless of their abilities or pace, with specialised support guiding individualised assistance and overcoming barriers.	activities or in responding to individual needs. Situations of active participation are encouraged, although some specific needs could be better addressed. *For example:* Occasional adaptations are made only when a difficulty arises.	of children, and there may be difficulties in ensuring everyone's participation. *For example:* Proposals designed for the 'average' group without specific adjustments.	barriers that hinder the participation of some children. *For example:* Children are left out of activities without alternatives, with significant difficulties in adaptation or lack of resources.
Educational interaction and joint activity	There is constant and enriching interaction between educator and children, as well as among peers (children). Proposed activities promote active	Interactions between educator and children, as well as between children themselves, are good and allow for active participation. Although there are moments of	Interactions between the educator and children or between children are limited. Although some interaction is encouraged, there is no constant active or	Interactions are minimal or ineffective. Most of the time, children are on their own, and interactions between them or with the educator are not sufficient to

(Continued)

Table 2.10 (Continued)

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Educational interaction and joint activity	cooperation, joint problem-solving and the exchange of ideas. Educator provides adequate support to promote children's psychomotor, cognitive, social and emotional development. *For example:* Adults accompany shared play or other activities, asking scaffolded questions and providing support without directing the activity.	cooperation, the exchange of knowledge could be more intense or structured. Educator intervenes, when necessary, but interactions could be more dynamic. *For example:* Shared activities with occasional adult interventions, mostly for classroom management.	collaborative participation. Educator intervenes little and opportunities for cooperation and joint learning are limited. *For example:* Parallel play without relational intentionality, or adult present but only physically, providing minimal guidance.	promote meaningful learning. *For example:* Children dispersed with no activities promoting interaction, peer relations, or adult engagement.
Adult-child relationship	The interaction between the adult and the children is of high quality, with respectful and thoughtful communication.	Interactions are of high quality, and adults use appropriate discursive strategies, although these could be more varied or better	Interactions between the adult and the children are adequate but not very consistent. The adult uses some discourse strategies to	Interactions between the adult and the children are not of high quality. The adult uses inappropriate discursive strategies or does not use

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Adult-child relationship	The adult uses appropriate discursive strategies. Situations of assistance provided according to the needs of each child are very clear. *For example:* Adults verbalise emotions and accompany children's actions with meaningful words, supporting verbally without interference.	adapted to the specific needs of the children. Adult intervention is effective, although there is space to be improved. *For example:* Appropriate language, but limited or sporadic, depending on the child.	promote learning, but these are limited or not very diverse. The assistance provided is basic and not always tailored to individual needs. *For example:* General classroom management responses; adults mainly observe and guide physically with minimal verbal support.	any at all, and the assistance provided is scarce or ineffective in promoting the children's development. *For example:* Minimal or purely instrumental communication focused on management.
Social organisation of the activity	The activities are designed to promote social interaction in various formats (individual, in pairs, small groups, large groups). Children have the opportunity to learn in different ways, promoting cooperation, shared thinking and autonomy.	The activities allow for certain types of social interaction, although the diversity of social organisation could be more significant. Children learn in groups of different sizes, but the potential of the activities to encourage cooperation and learning may	Activities are mostly individual or in very large groups, with few opportunities for learning in pairs or small groups. Interaction between children is limited and does not always encourage collaboration or development.	The activities are largely individual and do not encourage social interaction or peer learning. The activities do not promote cooperation or the development of children's social skills. *For example:* Children working alone

(Continued)

Table 2.10 (Continued)

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Social organisation of the activity	*For example:* Proposals allow children to decide how and with whom to participate.	not always be maximised. *For example:* Occasional alternation between individual and group activities.	*For example:* Activities always directed to the whole group.	without meeting spaces or whole-group reflection moments.
Type and quality of peer interaction	Positive peer relationships are promoted through strategies and dynamics that encourage mutual support, collaboration, and cooperation. Educator facilitates an environment where children can help and learn from each other to achieve common goals. *For example:* Conflict resolution with respectful adult mediation.	Positive peer relationships are promoted through activities that encourage collaboration and support among peers, although in some cases inclusion and relationship management need to be reinforced. *For example:* Free play activities where cooperation appears but peer relationships are not systematically monitored.	Positive peer relationships are rarely promoted, and activities and interventions do not encourage effective collaboration among children. There are occasions when competition or rivalry hinders cooperation. *For example:* Conflicts not addressed educationally; adults do not acknowledge all emotions positively.	Educator's strategies do not promote the creation of a collaborative or supportive environment, and opportunities to develop social skills are limited. *For example:* No adult intervention in children's relationships.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Assessment	Professionals carry out continuous, formative and educational assessment using a variety of assessment tools. This is aligned with the teaching and learning processes. The data obtained is used on an ongoing basis to adjust teaching practices and ensure the inclusion of all learners (children). Feedback is detailed and individualised, fostering an inclusive and flexible learning environment. *For example:* Recorded observations inform individual and collective improvements in educational proposals and family relationships.	Professionals carry out continuous and formative assessment using a variety of tools. It is well aligned with teaching and learning processes, but there may be room for improvement in the consistent use of data to adjust teaching practices. Feedback is useful and appropriately individualised, with a focus on improvement. *For example:* Periodic evaluations with progressive adjustments, e.g. twice per year.	Professionals carry out assessments irregularly or with few assessment tools. There is some alignment with teaching and learning processes, but detailed monitoring is not always carried out. Feedback is general and sporadic, without continuous or individualised monitoring. *For example:* Occasional evaluations at the end of the year without continuity.	Professionals do not carry out continuous or formative assessment. Assessment tools are limited or non-existent and are not adequately aligned with teaching and learning processes. Feedback is almost non-existent or very superficial, with no impact on the adjustment of teaching practices. *For example:* No systematic observation or reflection.

(Continued)

Assessment, quality and reflective professionalism

Finally, assessment is conceived as an essential element for quality and reflective professionalism in early childhood education. The role of educators as agents of change and co-constructors of knowledge is key to ensuring the constant improvement of early childhood educational services. Reflective practical experience allows for the development of early childhood education aligned with socio-constructivist principles, where assessment must be continuous, formative and educational (see Table 2.11).

- **Educators as intellectuals:** Concept of teaching staff as agents of change and continuous improvement, co-constructors of knowledge.
- **Reflective practical experience**: Incorporation of reflection and assessment practices to improve psycho-pedagogical and didactic performance.
- **Observation and listening practices**: Focus on observation as a practice that promotes reflection and constant improvement of the teaching and learning process.

Table 2.11 Assessment, quality, and reflective professionalism (micro level)

To be completed by educational professionals as a tool for self-assessment and professional development.

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Educators as intellectuals	Educator is perceived as an active agent of change, with a reflective attitude and committed to continuous improvement. Educational practice is based on knowledge co-constructed with children,	Educator demonstrates an attitude of continuous improvement and reflection on her practice. Pedagogical interventions are consistent with socio-constructivist principles, although her/his	Educator has a partial view of herself/himself as an agent of change, with room for improvement in the co-construction of knowledge and reflection on her/his practice. Although she/he applies	Educator does not perceive herself/himself as an agent of change nor does she/he reflect on her educational practice. Pedagogical practices are limited and are not based on socio-constructivist

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Educators as intellectuals	and up to date with the latest pedagogical research. Practices are consistent with socio-constructivist principles and promote children's autonomy. *For example:* The educator reviews practice individually, in small groups, and collectively, based on readings, professional development, and child observations, introducing well-founded changes.	participation in knowledge co-construction processes could be more proactive or structured. *For example:* Incorporates new elements into practice without a structured reflection process or team discussion.	some quality teaching techniques, she/he may not always be aligned with socio-constructivist principles or actively contribute to continuous improvement. *For example:* Applies interesting proposals without reviewing their impact, changes strategies by imitation or aesthetics, or experiments randomly.	principles or a vision of continuous improvement. *For example:* Repeats routines and activities without questioning or adapting them, simply because 'they've always done it this way'.
Reflective practical experience	Educator systematically incorporates reflection on her/his practice into the teaching-learning process. Assessment practices are continuous, reflective and	Educator reflects on her/his practice on a regular basis, although perhaps not always systematically. She/he uses some assessment strategies to improve	Educator reflects sporadically on her/his practice, with some self-assessment or reflection, but these are not continuous or sufficiently integrated into	Reflection on educational practice is minimal or absent. The educator does not incorporate reflection or self-assessment into her/his educational process, and

(Continued)

Table 2.11 (Continued)

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Reflective practical experience	aligned with the needs of each child, with a clear formative and educational orientation. The educator uses reflections to adjust her/his pedagogical interventions and improve psycho-pedagogical skills. *For example:* Regularly reviews educational proposals based on observation and team discussion.	teaching practices but perhaps does not explore them in sufficient depth to continuously optimise the teaching-learning process. *For example:* Occasional reflections after significant or challenging classroom situations.	educational practice. Her/his interventions are not always tailored to the needs of the children or adequately geared towards improvement. *For example:* Informal reflections without records or continuity, e.g. hallway conversations.	she/he does not make changes or adjustments to her/his methodology to improve the teaching-learning process. *For example:* No spaces or opportunities for reviewing practice.
Observation and listening practices	Educator makes regular and detailed observations of the children, using this information to reflect on their development and improve her/his educational practice. Active listening is essential to her/his	Educator makes regular observations and uses the data to adjust her/his teaching practices. Although the observations are effective, their application in the teaching-learning process could be more	Educator makes observations, but these are not very systematic and do not always translate into concrete changes in teaching practices. Active listening is practiced, but it does not always have	Observations are infrequent or non-existent. Listening to children is neither active nor reflective, and the information gathered is not used to adjust or improve the educational process. *For example:*

	Level			
Descriptor	**Excellent**	**Good**	**Sufficient**	**To be improved**
Observation and listening practices	pedagogical approach, and her/his observations have a significant influence on the adjustment of teaching activities. *For example:* Observation records of all children at different times of the year lead to concrete changes in scheduling, space organisation, or educational activities.	consistent and in depth. *For example:* Useful but occasional observations, with limited connection to real classroom changes or structured written adaptations.	a substantial influence on the development of educational activities. *For example:* Sporadic observations made for procedural compliance rather than educational impact, not translated into meaningful changes.	Educational practice is disconnected from what children express or need.

3. ECEC services as nodes in a community and family network

The Barcelona case

Alicia Aguilera, Bet Bàrbara, Loida Sala and Elisa Stinus

3.1 A brief presentation of Barcelona's ECEC services

As stated in the report 'Analysis of early childhood education and care in Barcelona and growth alternatives' prepared by Jaume Blasco (2024) on behalf of the Municipal Institute of Education of Barcelona (IMEB), early childhood education and care in Spain – similarly to most European countries – operates as a subsystem that is relatively independent from the rest of the education system. Provision is not compulsory for public administrations, and there is neither a legal obligation nor an enforceable right for children to enrol at this stage. The system is also characterised by a high degree of decentralisation, with the local administration and the private sector playing a central role in service delivery. While this model allows for responsiveness to territorial preferences and local needs, it also results in significant variability in service characteristics, quality, coverage, forms of provision and pricing – both between autonomous communities and across municipalities.

In 2009, the Education Act of Catalonia established that 'the Government must define the educational content of the first cycle of infant education[1], establish the characteristics of the centres providing this cycle and must determine, in agreement with local councils, the requirements concerning

[1] Infant education is a voluntary stage of education. It is organised into two cycles: the first from 0 to 3 years old and the second from 3 to 6 years old. While the first cycle (led by local councils) is not universal and takes place in nursery schools (*escoles bressol*), the second cycle (led by the regional administration) is eminently universal and is integrated into infant and primary schools

facilities and the training to be accredited by teaching staff working within them'. Local administrations are the owners of the vast majority of public nursery schools in Catalonia, with a small number remaining under the Generalitat of Catalonia – primarily those created by the Spanish State during the final years of the Franco regime and the subsequent democratic transition.

The city of Barcelona has a network of public nursery schools with deep historical roots in both the pedagogical renewal movements – from Noucentisme to the Second Republic – and, most notably, in the schools established under the auspices of civic organisations, trade unions, and neighbourhood movements during the 1960s and 1970s. These grassroots initiatives were later brought together in 1973 under the *Coordinadora de Escuelas Infantiles de Barcelona* and were subsequently incorporated into the municipal system following the creation of the Municipal Nursery School Board in 1977.

As illustrated in Figure 3.1, the network of municipal nursery schools in Barcelona (EBM: *escoles bressol municipals*) expanded gradually until the mid-2000s, when growth accelerated. This expansion coincided with a reform of the organisational model of municipal nursery schools and with funding linked to Law 5/2004 on the creation of quality nursery schools – commonly referred to as the of '30,000 places' law – which was implemented between the 2004/05 and the 2012/13 academic years. Since then, the network has continued to grow steadily but moderately, reaching 8,891 places across 105 schools in the 2023/24 academic year.

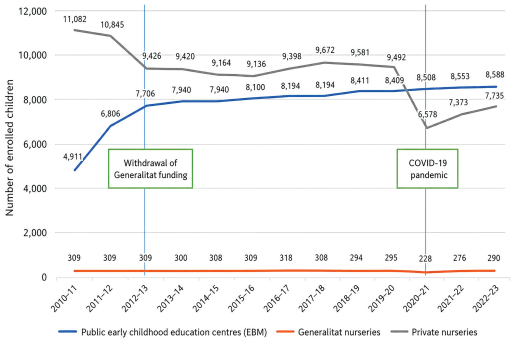


Figure 3.1 Evolution of the number of children enrolled by type of centre (2024) in Analysis of early childhood education and care in Barcelona and growth alternatives. IMEB, Jaume Blasco.

The expansion of the public network has produced a marked substitution effect in relation to the private sector. Although the number of publicly funded places has increased, the total number of children enrolled in the first cycle of early education in Barcelona (across both public and private centres) has remained relatively stable between the 2010/11 and 2022/23 academic years, rising only marginally from 16,308 to 16,613 children. However, the distribution between sectors has changed substantially. In 2010/11, 68.0 % of enrolled children attended private centres, whereas by 2022/23 this proportion had fallen to 46.6 %.

In absolute terms, municipal nursery schools gained 3,671 enrolled children over this period, while private nursery schools lost 3,347. A similar shift can be observed in the number of educational centres: municipal nursery schools increased from 72 to 103, whereas private nursery schools decreased from 223 to 166.

Despite the relative stability in total enrolment, overall coverage (or enrolment rate) in the first cycle of early childhood education has risen notably – from 37.3 % in 2010/11 to 48.3 % in 2022/23. This increase is largely attributable to the sustained decline in the population aged 0–2 years registered in the city, which fell from 43,761 to 34,361 over the same period. As a result, Barcelona has already surpassed the 45 % coverage target established in the 'Recommendation of the Council of the European Commission (2022) on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona targets for 2030'.

As shown in Figure 3.2, coverage for the 2022/23 academic year varied significantly by age group: 72.9 % among children aged 2–3 years, 57.1 % among those aged 1–2 years and 13.9 % among infants aged 0–1-year. In relation to the benchmarks set out in the 'State Action Plan for the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee (2020–2030)', Barcelona has already met the milestone of 55 % enrolment for children aged 1–2 years. However, it remains approximately 12 percentage points below the target of 85 % for the 2–3-year-old cohort.

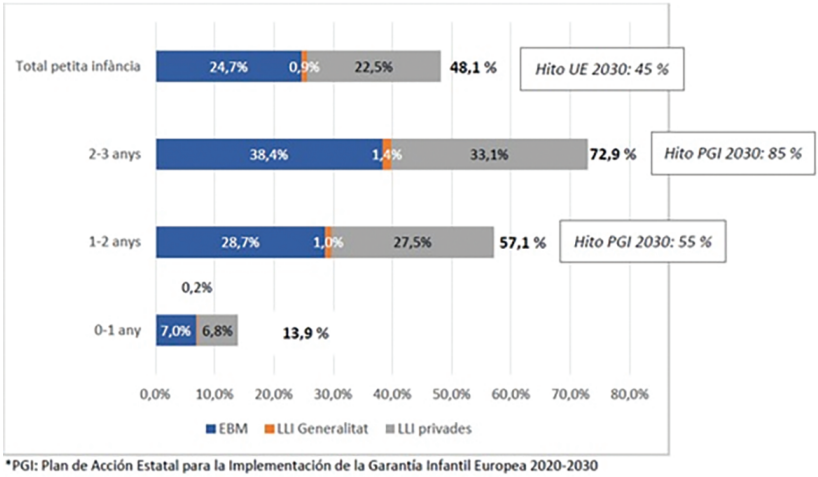


Figure 3.2 Pre-school coverage by age group and type of centre (2022–23 academic year, with respect to the census as of 1/1/2022) (2024) in Analysis of early childhood education and care in Barcelona and growth alternatives. IMEB, Jaume Blasco.

The coverage data also show a great deal of regional disparity: total coverage (in public and private centres) reaches a maximum of 64.3 % in Sarrià-Sant Gervasi and 61.2 % in Les Corts, which are, in turn, the districts of Barcelona with the highest proportion of private nursery schools, accounting for 78.7 % and 68.9 % of enrolled children, respectively. At the other extreme, the district of Ciutat Vella enrols only 25.6 % of registered children, 96.3 % of whom are enrolled in municipal nursery schools. In this sense, the main determinant of the early childhood schooling rate seems to be the need for work–life balance which, combined with the greater economic capacity of families in which both parents work, explains both the higher schooling rates and the greater development of private provision in higher-income districts.

Despite the diversification of families' needs and demands, early childhood care policies in Barcelona (and, in general, in Catalonia as a whole) have had an eminently educational vocation, with the public provision of nursery school services as the hegemonic instrument and recognised as a promoter of an educational model of early childhood care, where professionals accompany families in child-rearing.

Barcelona City Council has tried to respond to emerging needs and demands by developing new educational and parenting services, particularly the Municipal Family Parenting Spaces (hereinafter, EFCM). The EFCM are a service for children under 3 years of age and their families. The objective of the EFCMs is to provide an educational and parenting environment in which the learning, socialisation and autonomy of children are stimulated and developed, as well as the positive bond between adults and children, the trust and parenting skills of the adults of reference, and the development of informal community networks that help to prevent parenting in isolation. They consist of group sessions of between 12 and 16 children who meet on a regular basis and must be accompanied by a reference adult (it is not, therefore, a service that facilitates work–life balance).

The network has grown considerably in recent years, from the 8 spaces in operation in the 2015–16 academic year to the 28 planned for the 2024–25 academic year, thanks to the efforts of the IMEB and the growing interest of the districts in incorporating this service into the civic centres. The combined capacity of the EFCM network is 1,377 children and families, representing 4.0 % of registered young children and, therefore, increasing from 25.6 % to 29.6 % the number of children aged 0–2 years who receive continuous public support for parenting, whether in an EBM or an EFCM.

3.2 Challenges of the current model: SWOT analysis

In general terms, the alignment of the city's early childhood education and care policy with the European agenda is strong. The principal strengths may be summarised as follows:

- School enrolment rates already meet the European Commission's targets for 2030. The enrolment rate for the 2022–23 academic year, including public and private schools, was 48.3 %, exceeding the 45 % benchmark.
- The territorial distribution of public nursery schools tends to favour relatively low-income neighbourhoods rather than middle- and higher-income neighbourhoods.
- The priority criteria governing the admission process in situations of excess demand do not consider the family's employment situation, which is key to facilitating access for vulnerable families.

- Barcelona's social pricing system, which also includes meal provision, has proved effective in supporting demand and enrolment among lower-income households while preserving the heterogeneity of families and the social transversality of the nursery school service.
- The social composition of early childhood, contrary to what usually happens in other cities and countries, seems to adequately represent the population of families with young children in Barcelona.
- Staff qualifications in Barcelona are situated at a high-average range within the European context, and salary conditions are close to those of teachers in the second cycle of pre-primary and primary education in Catalonia.
- The educational model of Barcelona's municipal nursery schools is unequivocal and is set out in several framework documents that establish the principles of action to guarantee the educational objectives of the service.
- Support for inclusive education to adequately serve and attend to all children in nursery schools, highlighted in the 2022 European recommendation, is highly developed.
- The demand for municipal nursery schools has increased significantly over the past decade reflecting both growing recognition of the educational value of early childhood education and the prestige acquired by the municipal network.
- The network of Family Fostering Spaces developed in recent years now provides support to an additional 4 % of the city's young children, enabling for greater responsiveness to the diversification of family needs and demands.
- A strategic line of cross-cutting work based on community action that progressively incorporates a model of facilities with a community perspective into municipal nursery schools, with support for pilot schemes and an action plan that favours the construction of social links and support networks among families.
- The *Bressols pel clima* (Nurseries for the Climate) strategy to raise the profile of early childhood and ensure its right to a healthy environment, to systematically promote concrete and structural changes and commitments based on changes in each nursery school, and to reduce negative impacts and the ecological footprint.

- The BBB (*Bressols i Biblioteques del Barri*) programmer, which promotes cooperation between nurseries and libraries, with the aim of encouraging reading among children and adults from the age of one, promoting communication and relationships, the development of language and reading comprehension and the use and presence of families in libraries.

Notwithstanding these strengths, the city's ECEC system faces significant difficulties and challenges:

- Barcelona remains some distance from the 85 % enrolment target for two-year-olds established in the State Plan for Child Guarantee. In the 2022–23 coverage stood at 72.9 %, which indicates the need to reconfigure provision and prioritise expansion in the 2–3 age group.
- The increase in public provision over the last decade has not led to an overall increase in public participation, as expansion in the municipal sector has largely displaced private provision.
- Despite demographic decline among the 0–2 population, unmet demand in municipal nursery schools remains high, with more than 40 % of applicants unable to secure a place.
- Although the distribution of public provision generally favours lower-income neighbourhoods, some areas in the lowest income quintile also exhibit low enrolment rates.
- Group sizes and child-educator ratios are situated at the upper end of the European range: for two-year-olds, Barcelona averages 18–19 children per group, compared with a common European range of 12–16.

Several structural threats also merit attention:

- The continued growth in per-child costs within the municipal network – a rise of 43.7 % over the last decade (20.7 % in real terms) – constrains the possibilities for qualitative expansion, notwithstanding the recent recovery of funding from the Generalitat.
- The private sector, in which almost half of Barcelona's children are educated, is suffering a persistent crisis, with a continuous drop in the number of nursery schools and enrolments. This crisis constitutes a

threat to the capacity for schooling, since the private sector continues to educate 46.6 % of the city's children.

Finally, important opportunities are emerging:

- Study of growth alternatives by Barcelona City Council and the Government of Catalonia.
- The favourable context at a European level with the 'Recommendation of the Council of the European Commission (2022) on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona objectives for 2030', or at a state level with the 'State Action Plan for the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee (2020–2030)'.

3.3 Community action: debates, challenges and responses

Having outlined the general context of ECEC services in Barcelona, this chapter focuses on the incorporation of the community perspective within the city's municipal nursery schools. It draws in particular on the report 'Community nursery schools, early childhood centres', produced by the Municipal Institute of Education of Barcelona (2023) through a dedicated steering group. The report aims to generate shared knowledge and to articulate a common vision of nursery schools as early childhood centres, with the aim to promote and expand the incorporation of the community perspective within the municipal nursery schools of Barcelona City Council.

This vision of nursery schools as homes for young children aims to add a third key dimension to the educational and work–life balance dimensions they already have as schools: the construction of social ties and support networks between families within the school and, more broadly, among families in the surrounding neighbourhoods, including those whose children do not attend the centre. The objective is to create opportunities for young children to grow up in educational environments and participate in community life.

The concept of community nurseries as early childhood 'homes' is inspired by Eric Klinenberg's (2021) idea of social infrastructure. Klinenberg uses this term to refer to the physical spaces – such as schools, libraries, parks

and other public facilities – that enable and sustain civic participation and social interaction, both within communities themselves and among diverse groups. These environments provide the material foundations of social life, facilitating both structured and recurring encounters, typical of educational settings, and more informal or incidental interactions, which may nonetheless generate durable bonds. Klinenberg illustrates this dynamic through the example of a kindergarten that actively encourages parental presence and participation: the simple act of waiting together in a shared space can stimulate interaction and foster supportive relationships across social groups.

All educational centres, in this perspective, construct and sustain social worlds that shape entire communities. They constitute some of the most important public institutions we have for consolidating democratic value, functioning as contemporary *agoras* in which individuals are socialised, relationships are forged and senses of belonging are cultivated. Within these spaces, students, teachers and families alike can nurture – or conversely, inhibit – trust, solidarity and shared commitment to the common good. In a context marked by increasing social fragmentation, the promotion of co-responsibility through community action becomes key to strengthen the interrelationships between the educational centre, families and the community (Tort and Collet, 2017).

3.4 Political, institutional and pedagogical dimensions of the community network in relation to the EDUFIRST debates

With regard to the political dimension – that is, the underlying rationale and normative orientation of policy – Barcelona's 'Plan for early childhood education and upbringing 2021–2024' explicitly affirms the progressive incorporation of a community perspective within municipal nursery schools. As the Plan states, 'municipal nursery schools have been incorporating a community perspective, creating opportunities for families to meet, sometimes with the support of educators, to share experiences and concerns and create a network of community links that facilitates access to information and resources and prevents parenting in isolation.'

In practice, some initiatives have been developed at the request of, and with the support of, the IMEB, while others have emerged from the bottom up, initiated by families or by educational teams. Examples include family playgrounds,

playgrounds open to the neighbourhood, and the temporary use of school facilities by neighbourhood organisations or groups in order to provide community infrastructure and extend the availability of shared spaces beyond school hours.

The Plan seeks strengthening the role of municipal nursery schools as reference facilities for early childhood education, open to their environment and grounded in a community approach. It identifies a twofold challenge. First, to develop these community initiatives in a more systemic manner, respecting the autonomy and specificities of each school and neighbourhood. Second, to ensure that opportunities for meeting and support extend beyond families enrolled in the schools. The ambition is that any family with a young child in the neighbourhood perceives the nursery school as a 'house of early childhood' and knows that it is a recognised local institution where they can find support, guidance and opportunities for participation.

The report on community nursery schools further elaborates this vision by defining Barcelona's municipal nursery schools as early childhood centres conceived as public facilities, services and spaces that create a community around the education and upbringing of young children (see Table 3.1). Specifically, they are characterised in three interrelated ways:

- As open public facilities that incorporate community action into their institutional vision in order to foster social ties and support networks among families.
- As services that collaborate with other public institutions, social organisations and associations with the shared objective of ex opportunities for young children and their families.
- As meeting places and support hubs for local families, enabling them to share experiences and provide mutual support in the upbringing and education of young children, thereby counteracting isolation – particularly among women and families in situations of heightened social vulnerability.

Turning to the institutional dimension – that is, the concrete practices through which this political orientation is operationalised – research carried out across the municipal nursery schools reveals a wide range of community-oriented educational activities embedded in everyday practice. Approximately 1,000 distinct actions have been identified across the network. When identifying

these actions, they have been conceptualised and defined around three strategic lines of action: 1) families in community, 2) engagement in the neighbourhood, and 3) community infrastructure (See Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Strategies and actions of community nursery schools as early childhood centres

Strategy	Dimension	Actions identified
1) **Families in community** (9 out of 10 nursery schools, 75 % of all identified actions) The nursery school fosters social bonds and support networks among enrolled families. It provides meeting spaces and educational activities that respond to families' needs, both collectively and autonomously.	Initiatives led by the educational team.	School celebrations and festive events. 'Family corner' (welcoming areas designed to facilitate contact among families and the school; shared care of the vegetable garden and outdoor spaces). Opening of the school library for families. Informative talks addressing early childhood concerns and parental needs.
	Initiatives organised by families.	Work–life balance measures (e.g. summer nursery provision during the second half of July and during selected weeks in August; extended hours in July and/or September from 15:00 to 17:00) School celebrations and festive events. Family playground sessions fostering peer community-building. Afternoon family activities (e.g. yoga, music, dance or shared playtime). Exchange or mutual-support initiatives (clothes and toy exchange lending of materials among families).

(Continued)

Table 3.1 (Continued)

Strategy	Dimension	Actions identified
2) **Engagement in the neighbourhood** (5 out of 10 nursery schools, 14 % of all actions) The nursery school extends its activity beyond its physical boundaries, building connections with the local community and collaborating with neighbourhood institutions and public services.	Outward-facing initiatives.	Mapping and discovering local resources (e.g. neighbourhood 'treasure hunts' introducing families to services and facilities). Participation in neighbourhood festivals and celebrations (e.g. local festival, carnival or Sant Jordi). Use of public spaces and facilities such as community centres and libraries.
3) **Community infrastructure** (3 out of 10 nursery schools, 11 % of total actions) The nursery opens the facilities and reaches out to other families in the neighbourhood to generate links and relationships between them and with other agents in the area. The nursery enables the transfer, collaboration and shared use of the facility's spaces and resources to groups, associations, organisations and services in the neighbourhood. This generates a place of relationship and connection that offers resources and opportunities for collective organisation and at the same time makes it possible to reach as many families in the neighbourhood as possible.	The school opens the space in the neighbourhood.	Collaboration with public health services. Playgrounds open to the neighbourhood, integrating outdoor play and cultural activities. Parenting support projects (e.g. *Concilia, Temps per tu*). Provision of space to associations, neighbourhood organisations and informal citizen groups.

Source: Community nursery schools, early childhood centres (IMEB, 2023).

To further consolidate the community perspective within the municipal nursery school network, it is essential to ensure that all educational teams progressively integrate this orientation into their practice. The objective is that each nursery school develops initiatives across the three strategic lines identified: strengthening bonds among enrolled families, engaging actively with the neighbourhood and opening school facilities to the wither community. To this end, the Municipal Institute of Education of Barcelona has initiated several measures:

First, a system-wide training programme on early childhood centre model is being implemented across all municipal nursery schools. This includes a training module incorporating the community perspective in nursery schools entitled 'Mapping and connecting'. This module is conceived as a starting point for territorial engagement, encouraging schools to identify key local actors and services and to develop synergies that enable joint responses to shared needs.

Second, IMEB is supporting, implementing and systematising a series of pilot projects designed to respond to specific early childhood needs identified within local territories. These initiatives aim progressively to extend community processes across the wider network of nursery schools and family spaces. With the support of the local department responsible for community action within Barcelona City Council and local experts, four pilot projects are currently being carried out, involving eight educational spaces (six nursery schools and two family spaces). The diversity of their approaches allows for the identification of effective strategies to guide the broader deployment of the community action model.

Third, mechanisms have been established to consolidate learning and assess impact. These include the creation of a repository of experiences, opportunities for exchange among professionals, and ongoing professional development. In order to evaluate the degree to which the community perspective has been successfully embedded, it is proposed that a further study be commissioned to evaluate the impact of the actions implemented and identify emerging challenges in advancing the model of nursery schools as early childhood centres serving the widest possible number of children and families.

From a pedagogical standpoint – that is, concerning how the community perspective is operationalised – a number of enabling conditions to have been identified:

- Shared vision: Educational teams require training and shared commitment to the community approach. Community agreements and actions should be incorporated into each centre's educational project (CEP) and collaboration with other schools should be encouraged.
- Co-responsibility: Families should be supported in taking an active role in proposing and leading initiatives that foster mutual support and neighbourhood engagement. Leadership and guidance from management teams and relevant municipal services are essential.
- Reference figure: Each centre should identify a designated community reference person (for example, a member of the teaching staff or a social educator) responsible for coordinating and sustaining community-oriented initiatives.
- Inclusivity: Community initiatives must actively promote diversity and intercultural exchange, ensuring accessibility for families from different linguistic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Outreach efforts should aim to reach families beyond the immediate school community.
- Infrastructure: Physical spaces should be designed or adapted to facilitate shared use and collaboration with other. Proximity to other community facilities enhances the viability of joint initiatives.
- Leadership: Schools must cultivate knowledge of their local context and maintain active relationships with key neighbourhood actors, participating in shared programming and collaborative activities.
- Embeddedness in networks: Active participation in existing community networks and early childhood forums is crucial to ensuring coordination and sustainability.
- Connection with the neighbourhood: Schools should identify shared needs and objectives with local services and associations, co-creating initiatives that respond to these priorities.

Community organisation: Collaboration with social services, primary and community health providers, district-level community action teams, family

support centres and other early childhood services is essential to building coherent local ecosystems of care.

3.5 Conclusions, evaluation, quality and future challenges

Early childhood education centres in Barcelona have a long-maintained tradition of being open schools, where families enter the school daily and spontaneously to accompany their children and share their upbringing with professional educators. This cultural foundation has provided fertile ground for the development of a more explicit community perspective.

The joint evaluation of the pilot programmers deployed by the IMEB in the field of community action highlights the degree of openness already present in municipal nursery schools. Families are increasingly recognised as active agents in shaping new uses of school facilities. Through the training module 'Mapping and connecting' and the work undertaken throughout 2024, schools have begun to recognise the opportunities that emerge from sustained connection with the agents of the neighbourhood. Rather than focusing exclusively on their traditional recipients, they are progressively extending their gaze outwards towards the surrounding community. For some schools, this has entailed rethinking the very function of the nursery schools as a neighbourhood facility. Establishing and strengthening links within local networks has generated tangible benefits for educational teams, young children and their families alike.

A key lesson emerging from the pilot phase is that embedding a community perspective does not depend on the introduction of a new professional figure. Rather, it requires that the entire educational team internalise this orientation. Significantly, the initial pilot schemes did not select schools that had incorporated a social educator in order to avoid delegating responsibility for community action to a specialised role. The aim has instead been to ensure that the community permeates the institutional culture municipal nursery schools as a whole.

Progress towards the second and third strategic lines of action – engagement in the neighbourhood and the development of community infrastructure – has often generated greater hesitation than initiatives centred on

families within the school community, Nevertheless, the pilot experience has revealed unexpected transformations. Schools have initiated new with local actors with whom they had previously had little or no contact, while existing collaborations – particularly with social services – have been strengthened and reoriented around shared projects. In many cases, the process of mutual recognition has proved more significant than the immediate outcomes. For example, some schools have contributed to making local adolescents more visible within the community ecosystem, while simultaneously enhancing recognition of the work undertaken both in nursery and secondary schools. Even centres that were already working with a community orientation have advanced further, stimulated by the pilot framework and the opportunity to design and implement a concrete project. In these contexts, the visibility of the 0–3 age group within the neighbourhood has increased, together with awareness of the services and resources dedicated to early childhood.

The pace and trajectory of change vary according to each school's starting point, needs and social reality. The three strategic lines of action are conceived as sequential. Rather, two underlying dynamics appear to shape their development. The first is the necessity: in more socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the construction of a supportive 'tribe' or local network is experienced as essential, given its direct impact on families' capacity to respond collectively to individual changes. The second is opportunity: in more advantaged areas, where social networks may be more stable, the question becomes what additional contributions schools and families can make to strengthen community life. In both cases, effective implementation requires close collaboration with local community action technicians and careful attention to the specific configuration of networks in each neighbourhood.

Institutional innovation has also been a notable outcome of the process. For the first time, IMEB has worked closely with the department responsible for community action at Barcelona City Council. This partnership has made it possible to combine the knowledge and experience of both municipal departments to design a project capable of permeating the current model of municipal nursery schools across the city.

Pilot project leaders have particularly appreciated the structured opportunities to share experiences and collective learning, both among themselves and with representatives of IMEB and the Community Action Department. They have highlighted the importance of external support in sustaining and

refining this type of process. Community-oriented work requires a sustained effort: engaging other local actors demonstrating the medium- and long-term benefits of collaboration and building trust all demand time and persistence. In this context, institutional backing and shared reflection spaces help prevent professional isolation and support strategic focus.

Having described the most relevant advantages and lessons learnt, the next challenge lies in moving beyond the initial four pilot projects and extending the outward-looking orientation to the broader network of municipal nursery schools. This expansion must recognise that many centres were already undertaking community-based actions, as identified during the diagnostic phase. The community nursery school model demonstrates strong scalability within the city, as it addresses needs not fully covered by traditional EBMs and does not require significant additional infrastructure or resources for its extension (unlike other programmes that reach only a limited proportion of the target population).

At its core, the model responds to the need to develop informal community networks that help to prevent single parenting, beyond the educational and reconciliation function of schools, building social ties and support networks among families – both within the school and across the neighbourhood. In this respect, the first strategic line of action, focused on families within the community, assumes relevance. It mobilises the daily pedagogical work of educators in EBMs and the EFCMs, especially through everyday interactions, class meetings and individual interviews with families.

A further step involves broadening the community perspective beyond school leadership teams. While management figures have often driven the process, embedding the approach across entire staff teams is essential. Looking outward should not come at the expense of internal coherence; educators need a contextualised understanding of families' environments in order to enrich relational and pedagogical work. At the same time, it is also necessary to incorporate families more substantively into the design of community actions, recognising the knowledge and capacities they bring. Action oriented towards the territory must therefore be co-constructed with both educational teams and families.

Another key challenge, without a doubt, is to involve not only the families of municipal nursery schools but also non-schooled children aged 0–3, who represent approximately half of the city's families in this age group.

Connecting and strengthening relationships with the network of agents in the territory (such as social or health services) will be key in this process.

This expansion also raises a strategic question: should existing coordination spaces be leveraged, or should new collaborative dynamics be created? Neighbourhood realities differ significantly. Some have well-established networks, while others are more anarchic. Coordination platforms may be primarily technical in nature, yet meaningful community participation remains essential. In this regard, district-level community action technicians constitute a key reference point for aligning strategies with local dynamics.

Finally, as all schools become progressively involved through training, implementation and shared analysis the pilot projects, a new challenge emerges: the systematic evaluation of impact. It will be necessary to assess how the incorporation of the community perspective affects the schools themselves and their surrounding environments – how it facilitates the creation of support networks among families, reduces unwanted loneliness and enhances early childhood well-being across the city, beyond those children formally enrolled. Ultimately, the broader aim is to contribute to the construction of a more just and caring society through early childhood policy and practice.

4. ECEC services for climate justice in Barcelona

Alicia Aguilera, Emma Cortés and Judit Cucala

4.1 A brief presentation of the strategy for climate justice

Living in a sustainable and healthy city, both now and in the future, is not only desirable, but urgent and essential, for the general public as well as for children, who are especially vulnerable to climate change and, moreover, are the least responsible for the environmental and climate crisis. A crisis that is already having an impact today and will affect them for the rest of their lives. This is reflected in the document 'Bressols pel Clima' (*Nursery schools for the climate*), the municipal strategy of the city of Barcelona for climate justice in municipal nurseries (0–3 years). In this context, these public early childhood facilities do not want to and cannot stand aside, especially considering that their educational community – educators, children and families – are receptive, proactive, involved and eager to improve the quality of life of children and their environment.

Climate change unfairly affects young children. As UNICEF (2021) warns, children are being unfairly and disproportionately affected all over the world, especially where there is more poverty. In 2023, following a long tradition of the More Sustainable Schools (MSS) programme that began in 2001, and also taking into account the declaration of 15 January 2020 of Barcelona as a city in a climate emergency situation, Barcelona City Council presented its strategy for climate justice in nursery schools, which is committed to improving the environmental management of these facilities and also to reinforce the educational projects of the schools in aspects of environmental education for children and families. And, if possible, to raise the awareness of educators even more and to give them tools and resources to develop sustainable projects in the centres. With the approval of this plan, there has been a shift from individual actions in each nursery school to coordinated

action: replicating experiences, sharing good practices, transferring knowledge and with a common roadmap. Aligned and shared work that maximises the potential for transformation of schools and amplifies their benefits, not only for the educational community, but for all citizens.

The strategic mission of the *Bressols pel clima* focuses on three main aspects. Firstly, to make early childhood visible, ensuring its needs and its right to a healthy and playable environment, both now and in the future. Secondly, to promote concrete and structural changes and commitments in a systemic way, as a network, based on changes in each and every one of the nursery schools. Thirdly, to reduce the environmental impacts and the ecological footprint of these municipal educational centres.

4.2 Challenges of the current model: SWOT analysis

The aspects that have a direct or collateral negative impact on the healthy development of children and that must be addressed in this area focus on the following six deficits.

Firstly, the lack of contact with greenery and nature in early childhood, especially relevant for the population aged 0 to 6 years living in large cities. In Barcelona, only 4.7 % of the population fulfils the three precepts of the green space rule (ISGLOBAL, 2022), the 3-30-300 rule – having 3 trees in sight, living in a neighbourhood with 30 % vegetation cover and being less than 300 metres from a park – proposed by urban forester Cecil Konijnendijk to create healthier cities.

Secondly, the emergence of screens as an activity from infancy (Ruiz-Mariscal et al., 2025) has led to a reduction in active play[1]. There is also a decreasing amount of play involving natural elements. This is partly a consequence of living in cities that are insufficiently naturalised. Cities in which there are environmental pressures that affect health, such as atmospheric pollution, the heat associated with rising temperatures due to climate change and the heat island effect, noise or urban congestion. The average annual temperature in Barcelona has already increased by 1.8 °C, at a rate of +0.08 °C per decade since 1780. Therefore, we must prepare to face increasing heat. Fourthly, it should be emphasised that, despite the evidence, climate

[1] https://ciudadesamigas.org/deficit-naturaleza-infancia/

awareness and love of nature are not sufficiently widespread among all individuals, organisations and institutions for each to assume their own responsibility and, jointly, to assume it at the level of citizenship.

Second to last, there are difficulties, especially among the urban population, in accessing healthy and sustainable food[2]. There is limited access to local or organic products, foods that are of great importance in the diets of young children, thereby exacerbating the problem of food waste. Finally, we have an unsustainable consumption model, also based on fossil fuels and waste generation, which accounts for around 10 % of greenhouse gas emissions.

On a global scale – national and worldwide – the threats are enormous; the whole planet is in a climate emergency and the increase in extreme weather events is evident. But also, and on a more local scale, the housing crisis[3] affecting our country and the high rate of child poverty aggravate the main weaknesses exposed. In Barcelona, the at-risk-of-poverty[4] rate after social transfers is 28.0 % (2021–2022), in Catalonia and Spain it is 27.5 % and 27.7 % respectively (2022), well above the EU average of 19.0 % (Institut Metròpoli, 2024). There is also the added difficulty of access to housing because, as highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic, the need for green, healthy and quality public space and facilities is greater when private space is at its worst. It should also be borne in mind that some groups, such as the elderly, children, dependents or people with disabilities, are more vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic and its consequences.

Chronic illnesses are more susceptible to the effects of energy poverty, as their individual vulnerability is often compounded by the fact that they spend more time at home and are therefore more exposed to the effects of energy poverty (Realp and Gómez, 2022). And in reference to child poverty, the repercussions it has on children are widely known. Among other consequences is the inability of families with limited financial resources to leave the city during the holidays or even to travel beyond their own neighbourhood

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2 https://www.barcelona.cat/barcelona-pel-clima/es/declaracion-emergencia-climatica-de-barcelona

3 https://www.unicef.es/publicacion/yo-tambien-vivo-aqui-vivienda-pobreza-derechos-infancia

4 https://www.unicef.es/blog/pobreza/pobreza-infantil-en-espana

in their leisure time. As a result, opportunities for contact with natural environments are significantly restricted.

The very existence of Barcelona's *Bressols pel clima* strategy constitutes one of its main strengths in facing these challenges. It builds on an already well-established network of municipal nursery schools, now strategically aligned with climate-related objectives. In fact, the 'Escola Bressol' (Nursery School) model itself is a strength in addressing the weaknesses outlined above. In 2022, before the implementation of the strategy, there were 25 municipal nursery schools with gardens, and now 90 % of them have their own green spaces that function as the backbone and connectors of the existing urban green space, and some of them open their playgrounds to the community.

Play, experimentation and exploration constitute the pedagogical and methodological foundations of educational intervention in early childhood, environments that are inherently screen-free. The model is grounded in full confidence in the abilities and developmental potential of each child, as well as in the careful organisation of space, the thoughtful selection of materials and the structuring of time so as to facilitate play in a natural and spontaneous manner. It also relies on adults who respect the uniqueness, curiosity and choices of every child within a framework of clear, reasonable and flexible boundaries. Furthermore, it promotes an educational service that invites families to share in the daily care and education of their children, recognising their competences and empowering them in their parental role.

Indoor air conditioning is available in all the centres, although the strategy highlights the need to assess its efficiency. Barcelona has developed a network of More Sustainable Schools[5](in 2022, 28 nursery schools were part of this network, and the number has since increased considerably). At the outset, there were approximately 68 examples of good practices related to climate awareness and sustainability, including exchange markets, the elimination of plastic, the collection of materials for heuristic play, the repurposing of furniture and the naturalisation of certain playgrounds. This number has

[5] A Barcelona City Council programme that offers guidance and support to educational centres that are members of the Barcelona Sustainable Network and want to face the challenges of sustainability. https://www.barcelona.cat/barcelonasostenible/es/centros-educativos/quienes-somos/el-programa-escuelas-sostenibles

grown substantially; however, the initial position was already strong, as groundwork had been laid in fostering awareness and sensitisation.

As of 2022, 90 % of the food products offered in municipal nurseries are organic; locally sourced produce is prioritised, and all schools are equipped with on-site kitchens. In this respect, the priority to maintain these positive indicators and, where possible, to improve them further. Energy consumption data are also encouraging, as there is already experience in the installation of photovoltaic panels or solar thermal systems, although there is room for improvement.

The commitment of municipal early childhood centres to climate justice and sustainability is not only reinforced but fully justified when considering that, in the new Climate Plan (Barcelona City Council, 2024), children aged 0 to 5 are listed as one of the most vulnerable groups. Moreover, the climate emergency features prominently on both national and European political agendas and constitutes a growing social demand, increasingly voiced by children and young people themselves.

At the local level, within the field of education, the framework of the Charter of the Educating City movement[6], to which Barcelona subscribes and in whose development it plays a leading role, recognises space as an educational agent – not only in reference to school buildings but to the city as a whole. Principle 14 explicitly affirms the commitment to fulfilling the rights and material conditions necessary for a dignified life, including access to a safe and healthy environment, and establishes that the city must be organised with due regard for the interdependence between human life and planet's physical limits.

The health sector likewise supports this need to strengthen connections between schools and natural environments. The Catalan Paediatric Society[7] specifically recommends the greening of playgrounds and the relocation of certain classroom activities to outdoor natural settings, given the significant benefits these measures offer for young children.

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6 https://www.edcities.org/carta-de-ciudades-educadoras/

7 https://www.scpediatria.cat/?p=page/html/detallnoticia/id/4758-pas-endavant-per-crear-entorns-escolars-segurs-i-saludables-per-a-la-infancia-i-adolescencia

4.3 Climate justice. Debates, challenges and responses

The great underlying debate concerns the extent to which humanity has distanced itself from nature and the way in which the association between the city – paved streets, motorised vehicles, buildings and concrete – and the idea of progress has overshadowed any positive relationship urban environments may sustain with the natural world.

Several years ago, Barcelona began to implement policies aimed at promoting a healthier and fairer city. These include strategies to reduce motorised traffic, such as the *Superillas programme* or the Play in Public Space Plan[8], both of which emphasised, among other objectives, the renaturalisation of play spaces. Within the municipal technical teams responsible for urban greenery, discussions have addressed not only how to sustain vegetation in a dense city increasingly affected by episodes of severe drought, but also how to respond to public perceptions of urban naturalisation as untidy, inconvenient or uncomfortable. While nature for ornamental purposes is highly valued, approaches that conceive of urban greenery as green infrastructure – respecting the wilderness of nature – tend to encounter greater resistance. Numerous complaints submitted through the City Council's online 'Information, Queries, Complaints and Suggestions' system refer, for example, to the presence of insects near sandpits in playgrounds or to fallen leaves from evergreen trees perceived as creating an untidy urban appearance.

Nature is hardly present in the daily life of cities. Experiences such as hearing birdsong, observing seasonal changes in plants and trees, or smelling damp earth when it rains are increasingly rare. This lack of contact together with the perception of nature as synonymous with imperfection, uncertainty and lack of control, inevitably shapes the experiences that adults allow children to have. In some cases, the management of greenery within nursery schools themselves becomes highly controlled, aimed at minimising unpredictability. Maintenance practices may resemble those of decorative garden designed for contemplation rather than a more forest-like environment intended for play and interaction, characterised by irregular forms, and spontaneous growth. Even the upkeep of wooden furniture and

[8] https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/ecologiaurbana/es/que-hacemos-y-porque/espacio-publico-de-calidad/barcelona-da-mucho-juego

toys – which darkens and weather more visibly than any plastic or iron element – can generate debate.

Allowing children to explore natural environments involves accepting a degree of unpredictability, disorder and the possibility of getting dirty. Activities such as playing with sand, climbing, collecting leaves and twigs or attempting to catch insects often trigger adult concerns linked to perceptions of 'dirt' and 'risk'. In contemporary adult-centred societies, many parents experience difficulty in allowing their children to engage with situations that entail a degree of 'risk' or to take on physical and exploratory challenges. This may condition the implementation of renaturalisation projects in municipal nursery schools.

When referring to risk, however, this is not understood as children to danger. Nursery schools must remain safe environments. Rather, the challenges they offer are fundamental to healthy development. When linked to physical activity and movement, such experiences not only enhance motor skills, but also contribute to building their self-esteem, self-confidence and their ability to manage frustration (Hueso, 2019). Similarly, opportunities to explore new materials, textures and smells – often accessible only through engagement with naturalised materials or environments – constitute essential learning experiences in early childhood.

Supporting families in these matters from within the educational world is essential. Parents and society more broadly must be aware of the significant benefits that such experiences bring to children, and of the fact that these benefits outweigh any possible drawbacks. The impact of occasionally ingesting a small amount of sand, splinters or prickling oneself with a plant is negligible when compared to the long-term consequences of failing to develop self-confidence or the capacity to navigate risk and uncertainty. At the heart of the response to the climate emergency must lie love, care and a meaningful connection with nature. Only by getting to know and experiencing plants, trees, little bugs, flowers and the richness of biodiversity in depth can children learn to value and protect them.

Public authorities bear the responsibility of taking necessary measures to build a fair city for all, including young children. This involves making public facilities more sustainable, ensuring thermal comfort, and providing green infrastructure and access to healthy food, as outlined in the climate justice strategy for Barcelona's municipal early childhood education centres.

At the same time, educational teams must implement pedagogical plans capable of accompanying and enabling these processes, especially through raising awareness among families and the wider community, strengthening the training of educators, and embedding sustainability within everyday educational practice. Promoting a culture of climate responsibility and sustainability is an unavoidable duty of public service.

Young children require a more sustainable and healthy school, but also a city characterised by greater contact with nature, reduced pollution and safe, accessible public spaces that allow them to move freely and confidently. Equally, they need a society willing to recognise the realities of natural processes and to assume co-responsibility for environment care.

4.4 Political, institutional and pedagogical dimensions of nursery schools by climate in relation to the EDUFIRST debates

The benefits associated with urban[9] nature for citizenship as a whole – and particularly for children in their years – are manifold. In compact cities such as Barcelona, there is a clear need to increase tree planting expand green spaces; however, the availability of public land is extremely limited. One potential avenue for introducing this much-needed greenery lies in the development of green roofs and the renaturalisation of courtyards, where these are recognised as public space. Investment in the public sphere must guarantee to maximise social impact. The benefits of playing, climbing, touching and smelling plants and trees, or experimenting with sand should not be confined solely to the educational community of individual municipal schools but should extend to the widest possible segment of the population.

> For this reason, these play areas should be open to the public beyond school hours, functioning both as educational environments that foster development through play and contact with nature and as spaces that promote well-being. Ideally, these centres should become climate refuges for the most vulnerable members of the population, with particular attention to young children and their families.

[9] https://escolasalut.sjdhospitalbarcelona.org/es/consejos-salud/sociedad-ambiente/beneficios-contacto-naturaleza

An increase in vegetation must be accompanied by a robust care and maintenance plan. This requires a framework of co-responsibility in which the administration, the educational community and the neighbourhood residents coordinate and complement one other to ensure the well-being of a living, naturalised playground.

In Barcelona, children's play has long been a matter of public policy. Beyond being an essential and intrinsically valuable aspect of childhood, associated with pleasure and well-being, ensuring space for play and fostering its recognition among families contributes to addressing several pressing challenges affecting children today. The reduction of play – particularly outdoor play has a short, medium and long-term impact on child development (Hueso, 2019). In fact, it is both a cause and a consequence of situations such as a sedentary lifestyle, obesity and, more recently, screen use. These are highly worrying issues, as the World Health Organisation warns. Schools can function as protective environments that mitigate and fight against these phenomena, but they cannot act alone. Good practices must be extended into family life and society more broadly. In this sense, a strategy based on climate justice is also a strategy for healthy development in its a broadest sense – encompassing physical, cognitive, social and affective dimensions.

Education, communication and the promotion of civic engagement are fundamental instruments for moving towards a more conscious, sustainable and liveable city. Nurseries are educational settings where children aged between four months and three years spend their earliest years alongside peers and educators. The learning that takes place during this period is foundational to their personal, physical, emotional, cognitive and social development. Such learning extends beyond the acquisition of habits of care, social interaction, eating, movement, community life and play; it also encompasses the development of more sustainable and healthy lifestyles.

Another key dimension of health – affecting not only young children but the planet itself – is diet. The sustainability of the food system constitutes one of the central challenges that must be addressed in response to the current climate, ecological and public health emergency (Healthy and Sustainable Food Strategy 2030[10]). Additional challenges include harnessing the potential of

[10] https://www.alimentaciosostenible.barcelona/es/estrategia-de-alimentacion-saludable-y-sostenible-barcelona-2030

strategic and coordinated local authorities' action to guarantee and promote a green and circular economic model, encourage responsible consumption, move towards a zero-waste framework and strengthen food sovereignty. Waste reduction, closely linked to reducing consumption, also carries a significant dimension, enabling the transmission of clear and powerful messages such as 'buy less, waste less and reuse more'.

The *Bressols pel clima* strategy is structured around six strategic axes, sixteen lines of action and forty-seven specific measures, with a target horizon of 2030. Table 4.1 presents a summary of the strategy, and the following section outlines some of its most significant components in greater detail.

Table 4.1 Actions and activities of the Bressols pel clima strategy

Axis	Areas Of Action	Actions
Axis 1. Nature. Green and open playgrounds and green roofs	1) Renaturalisation of playgrounds	1. Prepare school playgrounds for vegetation and ecological naturalisation. 2. Plant trees and diverse vegetation in nursery playgrounds.
	2) Open nursery playgrounds	3. Consolidate the programme 'Daycare playgrounds open to the neighbourhood'. 4. Promote 'Family Playgrounds' in the afternoons, organised by Family Associations. 5. Promote the naturalisation of outdoor playground spaces as an opportunity for environmental education and outdoor play in contact with nature.
	3) Green roofs	6. Install and maintain ten green roofs.
	4) Garden care	7. Establish a new gardening service to complement the care provided by the educational community, collaborating with social and solidarity economy companies. 8. Maintain and design playground gardens with specialised vocational training centres. 9. Coordinate with other municipal green maintenance programmes in collaboration with the local community.

Axis	Areas Of Action	Actions
Axis 2. Energy. Energy transition towards renewable energy production and consumption	5) Renewable energy generation and energy communities	10. Install renewable energy generation systems on nursery roofs. 11. Promote the creation of energy communities. 12. Conduct an audit of existing solar thermal installations. 13. Pilot the use of textile photovoltaic generation systems.
	6) More sustainable energy consumption	14. Expand the contracting of renewable energy through the municipal public energy company. 15. Reduce energy consumption by installing monitoring systems and awareness-raising actions for efficiency and savings. 16. Study pathways for the progressive reduction of natural gas consumption.
Axis 3. Temperature. Thermal comfort and climatic refuges	7) Thermal comfort and climate refuges	17. Carry out a climate audit. 18. Develop a maintenance plan for air-conditioning equipment.
	8) Nurseries as part of the climate refuge network	19. Conduct a study to prioritise which municipal nurseries can be incorporated into the city's climate refuge network. 20. Incorporate the playgrounds of open nurseries into the climate refuge network.
Axis 4. Waste. Reduction, reuse and recycling	9) Exchange and reuse markets	21. Promote exchange markets for clothing, toys and other early childhood materials. 22. Establish permanent spaces for the exchange of educational and parenting materials. 23. Pilot the programme 'Renueva tu ropa' (Renew your clothes)[11], adapted to early childhood. 24. Reuse packaging and various materials as resources for play, creativity and decoration.

(Continued)

[11] 'Renueva tu ropa' (*Renew your clothes*) is a network for the exchange of clothes that are no longer used but are in good condition. It takes place in spring and autumn in different facilities and organisations in the city, and anyone can take part.

Table 4.1 (Continued)

Axis	Areas Of Action	Actions
Axis 4. Waste. Reduction, reuse and recycling	10) More sustainable nappies	25. Provide reusable cloth nappies to all families who request them. 26. Raise awareness in the educational community about the impact of using disposable nappies. 27. Study mechanisms to progressively incorporate reusable nappies into nursery practice.
	11) Zero plastic	28. Use reusable cups and tableware at celebrations and events. 29. Promote the use of reusable bags for dirty clothes and reduce single-use towels among families. 30. Incorporate clauses in food service contracts to reduce waste generation and improve environmental management. 31. Review selective waste collection circuits.
Axis 5. Food. More sustainable and healthier food	12) Healthy and sustainable menus	32. Ensure that at least 90 % of menu products are seasonal, organic and locally sourced. 33. Increase the proportion of plant-based protein in menus. 34. Provide sample menus to guide families in planning other daily meals at home.
	13) Zero food waste	35. Adapt food management practices to comply with the obligations and recommendations of the Public Health Agency. 36. Organise workshops for families to preventing food waste. 37. Use leftover food to produce compost in the neighbourhood composters and reuse it in school gardens distribute it to interested families.
Axis 6. Education. Environmental awareness and sustainable habits	14) Raising awareness within the educational community	38. Incorporate sustainability commitments into the educational projects of municipal nurseries and increase participation in the *More Sustainable Schools* programme. 39. Communicate ongoing environmental actions to the educational community.

Axis	Areas Of Action	Actions
Axis 6. Education. Environmental awareness and sustainable habits	15) Professional training	42. Present the strategy to the educational community and wider public and organise an annual meeting to share good practices. 43. Provide climate and environmental training for head teachers and educational teams. 44. Appoint a sustainability reference person in each centre. 45. Document and disseminate good practices.
	16) Sustainable mobility for the educational community and families	46. Ensure all nurseries provide parking facilities for bicycles, scooters and other small personal mobility vehicles. 47. Encourage the entire educational community to use sustainable modes of transport to travel to the nursery.

Source: IMEB, 2023, Bressols pel clima, estrategia de las escuelas infantiles municipales para la justicia climática.

The principal line of action aimed at increasing vegetation is the renaturalisation of playgrounds, with the objective of reaching all municipal nursery schools. At the same time, the long-term maintenance and care of these spaces is ensured through collaboration with local organisations – such as day centres for the elderly and occupational centres – as well as through the co-responsibility of the educational community and broader citizen participation. Green projects must incorporate a strong community dimension based on shared civic responsibility, as this is what ultimately guarantees their sustainability and durability over time. In this sense, such initiatives can foster meaningful changes in behaviour, contributing to deeper transformations in both attitudes and everyday practices.

In order to extend the benefits of these practices to a greater number of children, plans are also in place to open the playgrounds through two complementary mechanisms. The first is the City Council programme '*Patios de bressol abiertos en el barrio: juego y cultura al aire libre para la pequeña infancia*' (Playgrounds in the neighbourhood open: outdoor play and culture for young children). The second involves promoting and expanding the 'Patios en familia' (Family playgrounds) initiatives, which are organised and self-managed by families in some schools during afternoon hours.

Opening the naturalised playgrounds of nursery schools to the wider community requires compliance with specific criteria and, where applicable, their incorporation into the city's Climate Refugees network[12], provided that they meet the requirements for designation as climate refuges. Priority is given to neighbourhoods facing greater social vulnerability – characterised by higher child populations, more precarious housing conditions, limited green space and fewer air-conditioned facilities. When playgrounds are opened to the neighbourhood, their management is organised to ensure compatibility with the functioning of the educational, taking into account the school timetable, calendar and pedagogical uses. In parallel, and in order to promote sustainable mobility, all municipal nurseries will be equipped with designated parking areas for both adult and child bicycles, as well as scooters and other small personal mobility devices, located either within the premises or in their immediate surroundings, so as to facilitate their use by families and educational staff.

Currently, 100 % of municipal nurseries operate at an on-site kitchen in which meals are prepared daily. This organisational model facilitates the use of fresh, seasonal, locally sourced and organic products. In parallel, the nurseries will comply with the obligations and recommendations established to achieve zero food waste – an aera that is currently less consolidated but of equal importance. They will also maintain a direct relationship with the neighbourhood composting facilities. Part of the compost produced will be reused for the maintenance of green areas within playgrounds, with the remainder made available to families who wish to use it.

Actions are also being implemented to minimise the need to buy new purchases by maximising the use of existing materials. To this end, a guidance document[13] has been developed to promote exchange markets within nurseries. The strategy also facilitates access to reusable cloth nappies for all families who request them and advances a zero-plastic policy across centres.

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[12] The Network of Climate Refuge Areas makes various municipal facilities and green spaces available to the public to provide shelter from high temperatures. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZP8Rycaw00&t=1s

[13] https://www.barcelona.cat/barcelonasostenible/ca/centres-educatius/recursos/renova-la-teva-roba-lescola

Collectively, these actions possess significant pedagogical value for the educational community, as they translate environmental principles into everyday practices and tangible learning experiences.

At a pedagogical level, the main actions planned include training, the generation and sharing knowledge, and the systematisation of good practices. A further objective is for 100 % of municipal nurseries to incorporate the *Citizen Commitment for a More Sustainable Barcelona* into their educational projects and annual plans, through concrete and measurable actions, supported by the technical secretariat of the municipal programme *More Sustainable Schools*. Finally, each centre will designate a climate lead who will act as a reference person of environmental and sustainability-related matters.

The educational model of Barcelona's municipal nurseries already provides a solid foundation for promoting projects grounded in climate justice and in fostering children's connection and care with nature. What is required is a more deliberate and intentional approach to these dimensions. The document published by the Municipal Institute of Education of Barcelona (Barcelona City Council, 2019) makes clear that the pedagogical project is rooted in the context of the child's development and in the value of everyday life within the nursery setting. In the field of climate justice, this implies that contact with nature, together with sustainable and healthy values and habits, must form part of children's daily lives. All the situations they encounter in their everyday lives influence their growth and contribute to specific ways of perceiving and acting in the world.

Educating and accompanying children entails creating contexts that enhance all their abilities so that they can progress in a balanced and harmonious manner, grounded in confidence in their potential. Nature constitutes a unique and powerful developmental context. If children are unable to access nature directly, then nature must, in some form, be bought to them.

Within this framework, space is conceived as a 'third educator,' following the pedagogical principles associated with Loris Malaguzzi and widely referenced in Barcelona's nursery school model. Particular attention must therefore be paid to the aesthetic dimension of environments, ensuring the presence of high-quality materials – both specific and non-specific – that support personal affirmation, self-discovery and self-esteem, which are fundamental pillars of children's psychological and physical well-being. In this sense, the playground can be understood as a large 'treasure basket,' analogous to the treasure baskets used in indoor nursery practice. This resource – based on the use of natural, every day,

specific and non-specific materials – encourages exploration, sensory discovery and experimentation among young children, as proposed by the English educationalist Elinor Goldschmied in her work on Italian early childhood education.

The nursery school offers a rich and carefully prepared educational environment in which children learn through play and interaction with others, supported by spaces and materials adapted to their developmental needs. The educational team ensures a caring and safe setting that fosters stability and security and, thereby, promoting healthy habits development. However, healthy habits, active play and exploration cannot be relegated to school hours alone. They extend beyond the walls of the nursery, particularly for children whose family or social contexts offer fewer opportunities to reconnect with nature and with the fundamental experiences of childhood, such as active outdoor play and exploration beyond the sphere of screens.

Within the municipal nursery school model, family participation is considered essential. This participation takes place both through informal daily interactions and through more structured involvement in specific school projects, activities and events. Such engagement offers families the opportunity to observe their children in a different context, interacting with peers and adults interacting in many different ways. The daily relationship with families, together with the close collaboration family associations (AFAs) is crucial for extending many of the lessons learnt at school into the home sphere – whether through everyday example or through targeted workshops and training sessions on health, outdoor play and sustainability.

Family Associations also play a pivotal role in promoting initiatives that would be difficult to sustain without their involvement. These include exchange markets for toys, books, clothing and other childcare-related items; community celebrations; and improvements to the playground spaces and thermal comfort. Exchange markets, in particular, offer multiple benefits: they strengthen mutual support among families while simultaneously reducing waste. The *Bressols pel Clima* strategy seeks to enhance the organisation and quality of these markets and to expand their reach. One concrete measure involves promoting permanent spaces for the exchange of early childhood materials – such as books, clothing and toys – both within the educational community and as donations to neighbourhood social organisations.

With regard to awareness-raising among families, additional actions are planned, including the display of environmental guidance materials throughout

nursery spaces, linked to the various axes of the strategy. Another mechanism for transferring nursery practices into the home environment is the provision of indicative menus that are healthy and sustainable, enabling families to complement school meals with appropriate food for the remainder of the day.

Reducing consumption also entails making the most of existing resources and minimising environmental impact. This involves limiting the use of single-use materials and promoting the reuse and recycling of items generated both at school and at home. Central to this approach is the idea of giving discarded materials a second life by incorporating them into play, with attention to both functionality and aesthetic quality. For example, cardboard boxes may be painted by the children and repurposed as decorative elements or used in psychomotor activities. Similarly, empty water bottles from the kitchen can be transformed into decorative or play objects, either cut into different shapes or filled with seasonal natural materials, such as leaves, stones or small branches.

Beyond providing access to natural environment and materials, the strategy also seeks to involve children directly in everyday sustainable practices. For instance, after meals, children may water plants using leftover drinking water or help collect organic waste to be deposited in the school or community compost bin. The compost produced is subsequently used as fertiliser for the school garden, thereby closing the cycle and making ecological processes visible and tangible in children's daily experience.

4.5 Conclusions, evaluation, quality and future challenges

The *Bressols pel Clima* strategy compromises approximately fifty actions, whose monitoring makes it possible to assess progress towards its core qualitative objectives. In order to advance its principal lines of action, the creation of a dedicated *Bressols pel Clima* working group is proposed, with the direct involvement of selected educational teams and representatives of the *More Sustainable Schools* programme. The objective is to identify and promote those actions that can be driven from within each nursery, fostering knowledge exchange and empowering the educational community to move forward in the face of the climate emergency while placing the needs of young children at the centre of decision-making.

To evaluate the implementation of the measures included in the strategy – as well as those emerging from the working group – annual monitoring of the status of actions is envisaged. The results would be presented within existing governance structures, such as the plenary meeting of the city's early childhood education management or the Early Childhood Board, thereby ensuring institutional accountability and continuity.

The naturalisation of educational environments must be understood not only as an environmental imperative but also an essential pedagogical commitment. The transformation sought must be genuine – pedagogical, cultural, practical and effective – not merely aesthetic. At times, however, the use of naturalised playgrounds risks being reduced to a simple relocation of classroom activities outdoors, without fully harnessing the educational potential of the space itself. While painting in the open air may have positive effects, the most meaningful impact arises from engaging directly with the intrinsic qualities of the outdoor environment: uneven terrain, sand and soil, an insect wandering among the plants, the possibility of hiding behind a tree, or handling leaves and flower petals. The educational opportunity lies in these lived, sensory and exploratory encounters. Continued efforts are therefore required to deepen and expand nature-based pedagogical practices.

There are also some limitations and forms of resistance. For example, the effective implementation of reusable nappies or the elimination of disposable wipes entails changes in deeply embedded family habits and may not always be straightforward or equally feasible across diverse socio-economic contexts. Nonetheless, significant progress has been made in awareness-raising. This evidenced by the increase in the number of schools joining the *More Sustainable Schools* Network during the 2024 academic year and by their active participation in the programme's training initiatives. As highlighted during the welcome event for Sustainable Schools for the 2024/2025 academic year, there is a solid foundation upon which to build: municipal nurseries are advancing in climate justice and in strengthening children's contact with nature, even as important challenges remain.

As tow municipal nursery head teachers explained:

> We know we still have a long way to go, but every action we are able to promote in schools helps to empower the educational community to respond to the climate emergency and to improve the lives of children and their families. (Directors of two municipal nursery schools)

5. Continuity in the integrated 0–6 system

Right, tension and practice[1]

Mattia Lambert, Franca Locati and Elisabetta Dodi

Introduction

In Italy, educational continuity is a declared and pursued feature of the integrated early childhood education and care (ECEC) system from birth to age six. The establishment of the 0–6 system marked an attempt to overcome the historical separation between educational services and preschool, affirming the unity of the educational path in the early years of life. However, integration cannot be considered a completed outcome, but rather an evolving process that requires cultural, organisational, and professional consistency. In this context, continuity becomes a privileged category through which to assess the degree of effective integration of the system and its ability to offer children consistent and meaningful educational experiences.

Strengthening the integrated 0–6 system is now one of the strategic axes of education policies, including in the European context. The Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee calls on Member States to guarantee effective access to key services for children in need, including ECEC. In this sense, access to quality ECEC services becomes part of a wider strategy to combat child poverty, reduce early inequalities, and promote equal opportunities, while also recognising the broader role of early childhood education in fostering social cohesion (Chevalier et al.,

[1] This chapter is the result of shared reflection and collaborative work by the authors. Solely for the purposes of academic career evaluation, the Introduction and Sections 5.1, 5.2.1, 5.3, and 5.5 are attributable to Mattia Lamberti; Section 5.2 is attributable to Elisabetta Dodi; and sections 5.4 and 5.6 are attributable to Franca Locati. The conclusions are attributable to all the authors.

2006; Heckman, 2006; Esping-Andersen, 2008). However, formal access to services does not exhaust the question of quality: what is at stake is the system's ability to build progressive, legible, and non-fragmented educational pathways throughout the entire 0–6 age range.

From this perspective, the chapter analyses continuity as a pedagogical principle and as an organisational condition of the integrated system. It will be explored in its regulatory, cultural, and managerial dimensions, not as a simple link between institutional segments, but as a criterion through which to assess the overall quality and consistency of the educational experience in the early years of life.

The chapter is structured in six parts. The first section frames continuity through the three key terms that guide the chapter's argument: right, tension, and practice. Continuity is first understood as a child's right, then as a generative tension between stability and change, and finally as a professional, organisational, and institutional practice that must be sustained over time. The second section examines the regulatory architecture of the integrated system, including the national pedagogical guidelines that give it cultural coherence. The third section addresses the pedagogical dimension of continuity, from curriculum design to the safeguarding of equity. The fourth and fifth sections turn to its organisational conditions and to the concrete tools and practices – documentation, observation, joint training, professional networks – through which continuity is enacted. The sixth section considers governance and system-level responsibility for continuity. The chapter closes with a set of concluding reflections that situate the chapter's argument within the wider trajectory of the volume.

5.1 Continuity as a right, a tension and a practice

Talking about educational continuity in the 0–6 system means, first and foremost, recognising it as a child's right. The Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms the right to full and harmonious development, in respect of personal dignity and identity throughout the different stages of growth. In the European context, this rights-based perspective is reinforced by the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee, which calls on Member States to ensure effective access to key services for children in need, including ECEC. From this perspective, continuity is not merely a

matter of pedagogical coherence, but also a condition for ensuring effective access: children's right to ECEC is weakened when educational pathways are fragmented, contradictory, or unable to support transitions over time. This principle implies that educational experiences should be structured according to an underlying coherence that allows children to recognise themselves in the contexts they encounter. Continuity, therefore, is not merely an organisational option: it can also be understood as a condition of educational justice.

When considered a right, continuity cannot be reduced to the mere transition between services. It concerns the overall quality of the experience over time. Children and their families do not perceive the educational journey as a sequence of administrative segments; rather, they experience a web of relationships, environments, languages, and expectations that contribute to shaping a shared sense of growth, belonging, and continuity (Bondioli and Savio, 2018). Ensuring continuity therefore means guaranteeing that this intertwining is not broken by misaligned logics, divergent representations of childhood, or abrupt symbolic breaks.

Educational continuity does not coincide with linear development. Developmental processes do not follow uniform cumulative trajectories, but are complex dynamics characterised by qualitative reorganisations and transformative leaps (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006; Thelen and Smith, 1994). In early childhood, such reorganisations can also manifest themselves in the form of apparent regressions, which are in fact structuring developmental junctures, as highlighted by Brazelton's 'touchpoints' theory (Brazelton, 1992). Thinking of continuity in an overly linear way risks betraying the very nature of growth. In this sense, continuity should be understood as a generative tension between stability and change, between permanence and openness to the new.

In this context, discontinuity also acquires pedagogical value when it takes the form of an evolutionary experience rather than a fracture. Positive discontinuity introduces elements of novelty that broaden the child's horizons, stimulate new skills, and promote processes of cognitive and emotional reorganisation. What needs to be avoided is not change, but unmediated rupture, unaccompanied discontinuity, and the introduction of expectations that ignore past experiences. Authentic continuity does not eliminate the new, but integrates it into a web of meaning, in which each experience connects to previous ones and prepares for subsequent ones, according to a

logic of continuity of experience that constitutes the core of Dewey's thinking (Dewey, 2014).

This perspective allows continuity to be removed from an exclusively organisational reading. As Moss (2014) points out, early childhood education is not a neutral technical device or a mere functional service, but a public and political space in which visions of democracy, citizenship, and social justice are constructed. From this perspective, continuity becomes a pedagogical category that questions conceptions of the child, learning, and relationships, even before governance structures.

Amadini (2020) also refers to the need to view childcare services as contexts in which shared meanings are constructed and forms of early citizenship are generated. Continuity, then, is not only curricular consistency, but recognition of the dignity of the child's journey, respect for their relational history, and adult responsibility in safeguarding and relaunching what has been built. It implies a professional attitude capable of 'holding the other within', modulating expectations, and recognising that the thread of experience is primarily in the hands of the child themselves.

Read through the triad of right, tension, and practice, continuity is therefore configured as a normative principle and a concrete responsibility of the entire integrated system. As a right, it protects the child's educational history from fragmentation; as a tension, it holds together stability and change without reducing development to linear progression; as a practice, it requires pedagogical intentionality, professional reflexivity, and institutional consistency. Above all, it presupposes a vision of childhood that recognises the early years of life not as a preview of future schooling, but as a time full of meaning, in which every experience contributes to building identity, trust, and belonging.

5.2 Regulatory architecture of the integrated system 0–6

The current configuration of the integrated education and training system from birth to six years of age is the result of a layered regulatory process that has progressively redefined the relationship between early childhood education services and preschool. A first decisive turning point was Law No. 107 of 13 July 2015, which, as part of the overall reform of the education system,

delegated the government to build an integrated 0–6 system, recognising the need to overcome the historical separation between the 0–3 and 3–6 segments.

This delegation was implemented by Legislative Decree No. 65 of 13 April 2017, which formally established the integrated education and instruction system from birth to six years of age. The decree is not limited to organisational reorganisation, but affirms a cultural principle: early childhood is a unified period of development and learning. The integrated system is thus conceived as a pedagogical and institutional infrastructure capable of guaranteeing equal educational opportunities, reducing territorial inequalities, and promoting the quality of provision on a national scale.

The governance of the integrated system is multi-level and segment-differentiated. The 3–6 segment is directly managed and regulated by the state as part of the national education system, which defines curricula, staffing, and essential levels of provision. The 0–3 segment, by contrast, falls primarily under regional and municipal competence: regions exercise planning, regulatory, and operational requirements functions, while municipalities remain central actors in the organisation, management, accreditation, and authorisation of services.

A further element of complexity concerns educational qualifications and professional skills. Educational qualifications for the two segments rest on two distinct degree paths: access to the 3–6 segment requires the single-cycle Master's degree in Primary Education Sciences (Scienze della Formazione Primaria), while access to the 0–3 segment requires a specific degree in Education and Training Sciences with a dedicated early childhood curriculum – a requirement raised precisely by the reform, representing an important step towards the qualification of the system. However, this process has been grafted onto a pre-existing reality characterised by a plurality of qualifying degrees, recognised at different times and regulated at the regional level. Maintaining the validity of degrees obtained before the reform came into force, while necessary to protect the professional skills of those already in service, has led to the coexistence of heterogeneous training paths and diversified professional profiles. This stratification, which is unevenly distributed across the country, makes it more difficult to build a shared professional identity, sometimes fuelling hierarchical representations or mutual misunderstandings between educators with specific university training and staff from previous or regionally differentiated backgrounds – a divide that also

reflects training and contractual paths not completely overlapping between 0–3 and 3–6 personnel.

The main critical issue lies not so much in the absence of legal and regulatory provisions as in their stratification. The 0–6 system is shaped by legislative acts, regulatory measures, administrative arrangements, and pedagogical guidelines that operate at different levels and sometimes retain traces of the previous separation between segments. There remains a tension between the aspiration for unity and the persistence of distinct institutional structures, especially with regard to funding, contracts, professional profiles, and administrative placement. The construction of real continuity therefore does not depend exclusively on the enactment of new norms or regulations, but on the ability to translate the principle of integration into consistent practices, shared languages, and converging responsibilities.

In this sense, the regulatory architecture of the integrated system can be seen as an enabling but not self-sufficient framework. It offers conditions for educational continuity, but does not automatically guarantee its realisation. The gap between legal principle and daily practice remains an area of professional and institutional work that requires coordination, training, and constant reflection.

5.2.1 Pedagogical Guidelines, National Curriculum Indications, and National Guidelines: the cultural framework of the integrated system

Within this enabling but not self-sufficient framework, three documents specify the cultural and pedagogical coordinates of the integrated system. The Pedagogical Guidelines for the integrated 0–6 system (*Linee pedagogiche per il sistema integrato zerosei; Ministerial Decree No. 334 of 22 November 2021*) consolidate the framework outlined by Legislative Decree 65/2017, presenting themselves as a 'cultural and pedagogical reference framework for the integrated education and instruction system from birth to six years of age'. The document does not assume a regulatory function in the strict sense, but aims to 'guide and support' services in building a shared vision capable of overcoming the historical dichotomy between the 0–3 segment and preschool.

The Guidelines take a specific pedagogical anthropology as their starting point. The child is described as a *'subject of rights, competent, active, curious, capable of building meaningful relationships'*, a bearer of potential that is

expressed through experience, play, physicality, and language. This definition is not neutral: it bases the idea of continuity on a unified conception of development, which crosses different educational contexts without being fragmented by institutional breaks.

The unity of the 0–6 pathway is explicitly referred to as an objective of the integrated system, which is called upon to *'guarantee boys and girls equal opportunities for education, instruction, care, relationships, and play'* while respecting the specific characteristics of the services. Continuity is not reduced to an administrative transition, but is understood as the construction of coherence between educational environments, times, professional languages, and methods of observation. The Guidelines emphasise the need to *'build a unified educational pathway while respecting the specific characteristics of the services'*, clarifying that integration does not mean standardisation, but rather the sharing of common cultural references.

A further qualifying element concerns the role of planning and documentation. The Guidelines insist on the importance of 'intentional educational planning', based on the systematic observation of growth processes and documentation as a tool for professional reflection. From this perspective, continuity is achieved not only through the coordination of services, but also through the consistency of adult attitudes and the ability to build environments that support children's experiences throughout their entire development.

While the Pedagogical Guidelines provide the common cultural frame, the two segments of the system continue to refer to distinct programmatic documents for their specific educational provision. For the 3–6 segment, the reference remains the National Curriculum Indications for Infant school and the First Cycle of Education (*Indicazioni Nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo di istruzione*, 2012, updated with the 2018 New Scenarios). Unlike the Pedagogical Guidelines and the Orientamenti, which are conceived as cultural and non-prescriptive frameworks, the National Curriculum Indications have a curricular and operational nature: they organise educational provision into experiential fields for infant school and disciplinary areas for the first cycle, setting out specific competence targets that guide planning and assessment. The document extends beyond the 0–6 age range, covering continuity through the first cycle of instruction up to age fourteen; for the purposes of the present discussion, however, it is considered only in its bearing on the 3–6 segment, as the relevant reference alongside

the Pedagogical Guidelines and the Orientamenti. As with the Orientamenti, the Pedagogical Guidelines explicitly state that they do not replace the existing programmatic documents for infant school, but rather offer a general framework within which segment-specific documents are to be situated.

The National Guidelines for Early Childhood Education Services (Orientamenti nazionali per i servizi educativi per l'infanzia; Ministerial Decree No. 43 of 24 February 2022) further reinforce this approach, placing pedagogical quality at the centre of the system. Unlike the Pedagogical Guidelines, which address the 0–6 continuum as a whole, the Orientamenti focus specifically on the 0–3 segment of educational services – a segment that, as noted above, remains regulated at the regional level rather than falling under the national education system. The document states that educational services are 'places of relationships, learning, and growth', in which the dimension of care is intertwined with that of education. Observation is identified as an essential professional practice for 'recognising, accompanying, and enhancing children's development processes', while documentation serves to make educational work visible, supporting discussion among professionals and dialogue with families.

Particularly significant is the emphasis placed on collegiality and pedagogical coordination. The *Orientamenti* refer to the need for mechanisms capable of supporting teamwork and ensuring 'consistency and continuity between different educational contexts'. In this way, the regulatory dimension is not limited to defining institutional structures, but intervenes directly at the level of practices and professionalism, recognising that integration is played out in the quality of daily interactions and in the system's ability to build common languages.

Taken together, the Pedagogical Guidelines, the National Curriculum Indications, and the National Guidelines therefore outline a vision of the integrated system as a cultural project rather than an organisational one, in which a common frame of reference is combined with segment-specific programmatic documents. Continuity from 0 to 6 emerges as a structural principle that cuts across governance, training, and everyday education, serving as a criterion of quality and a condition for building a coherent and meaningful experience for children.

Alongside the national framework outlined above, the case of the Municipality of Milan offers an illustrative example of how the principle of

0–6 continuity can be translated into local pedagogical practice. The *Linee di indirizzo pedagogiche dei servizi all'infanzia 0/6* (Municipality of Milan, Central Directorate for Education and Instruction) can be read as a local pedagogical charter of the municipal ECEC system. The document is the outcome of a participatory process begun in 2012, involving nurseries, preschools, the municipal education administration, the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, the Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca, and a working group composed of managers and educators. It articulates a local declination of the integrated system around four thematic axes – rights, well-being, identity/pluralism/cultures, and 0–6 continuity – before turning, in its second part, to the organisational dimension of professional roles, planning, environments, observation, documentation, and the relationship with families and the city. Notably, the document traces the municipality's commitment to 0–6 continuity back to 1981, when Milan's infant schools were formally incorporated into the education sector, thus anticipating by more than three decades the national reform later enacted through Law 107/2015 and Legislative Decree 65/2017. A distinctive feature of the Milan model is the municipality's choice to maintain a significant role in the direct management of educational services and in the valorisation of its professional staff, while also working to ensure broad territorial coverage through public–private collaboration, including directly run services, services under agreement (*in convenzione*), and contracted-out services (*in appalto)* The Milan case thus shows how, well ahead of the national regulatory architecture, a local administration had already developed a coherent pedagogical model of integration, one that today continues to function as a local specification within – rather than a substitute for – the national framework discussed above.

5.3 The pedagogical dimension of continuity

Educational continuity finds its deepest foundation in a holistic view of the child. The integrated 0–6 system views childhood as a time of full experience, in which cognitive, emotional, physical, relational, and linguistic dimensions develop in an intertwined manner and not as a preparatory phase for the next school (Zaninelli, 2021). Any artificial fragmentation between care and learning, between assistance and instruction, risks betraying this complexity. Pedagogical continuity therefore arises from the recognition of the unity of

development and the consequent need to build educational environments that do not separate what is integrated in the childhood experience.

From this perspective, the historical distinction between 0–3 services and 3–6 preschool can no longer be interpreted as a distinction between a care context and a learning context. Both are places of education, where the relational and cognitive dimensions feed into each other. The integrated system is not limited to coordinating two pre-existing segments but aims to overcome a cultural dichotomy that has long influenced professional practices and representations. Continuity, therefore, does not only concern the transition between institutions, but also a rethinking of the very meaning of early childhood education.

Vertical continuity is one of its most obvious expressions. The transitions between nursery, preschool, and primary school are delicate moments, in which the risk of disruption is real. However, these transitions should not be conceived as breaks, but rather as progressive evolutions of a path already underway. In this sense, the construction of a progressive and non-fragmented curriculum becomes an essential condition. Progressive does not mean anticipatory or accelerated, but capable of recognising what the child has already built and relaunching it in new forms, avoiding starting from scratch or introducing expectations that are misaligned with the previous educational history.

Educational continuity finds one of its most significant expressions in the construction of the 0–6 curriculum. Talking about curriculum in relation to early childhood services means overcoming a reductive conception that identifies it exclusively with a sequence of content or activities (Perucca Paparella, 2011). In the integrated system, the curriculum takes on a broader meaning: it includes the planned experiences, relationships, times, spaces, routines, and organisational devices that structure children's daily lives.

In this perspective, it is useful to distinguish between explicit and implicit curriculum. The explicit curriculum concerns declared choices: educational objectives, fields of experience, planning documents, observation criteria, and documentation practices. It makes educational intentionality visible, not as rigid programming, but as the capacity to attribute meaning to educational experiences and to place them within a shared vision of development and learning.

The implicit curriculum, by contrast, concerns what structures experience in a less visible but no less decisive way: the organisation of spaces, the quality of adult relationships, time management, routines, and modes of reception and transition. It is at this level that representations of childhood, expectations of children, and ideas of autonomy and participation are enacted. Many discontinuities between the 0–3 and 3–6 segments do not occur at the formal level of documents, but precisely within this implicit layer, where adult attitudes and educational environments may convey divergent messages.

While the notion of implicit curriculum names this undeclared educational level, Massa's (1986) concept of pedagogical latency allows it to be interrogated in greater depth. Latency does not simply designate what remains unspoken, but what is sedimented and enacted, structuring the formative experience on a referential, affective, cognitive, and procedural plane. Read in this light, discontinuities between segments are not only a matter of diverging explicit or implicit messages, but of the deeper representations, affective codes, and symbolic devices that sustain them dimensions that a properly clinical attention to educational practice can help bring to light.

The construction of a truly integrated 0–6 curriculum therefore involves a process of clarification and negotiation between professionals. It is not a question of standardising different practices, but of making the underlying intentions more coherent. In this sense, planning takes on strategic value: it means building flexible frameworks capable of accompanying developmental processes without rigidifying them, maintaining a balance between stability and openness.

The 0–6 curriculum can thus be understood as a dynamic device for continuity. It allows nursery experiences not to be archived as a preparatory phase, but recognised as a constitutive part of the child's educational history. Curricular continuity does not eliminate differences between services; rather, it places them within a shared trajectory, supported by common professional languages, horizontal dialogue among services, and observation and documentation practices that accompany transitions between contexts.

For this reason, tools such as systematic observation, pedagogical documentation, and professional discussion become fundamental devices for ensuring consistency over time, preventing each segment from constructing autonomous and disconnected narratives.

Alongside the vertical dimension, continuity takes on an equally important horizontal dimension. Children do not grow up exclusively within the educational service: family, social and health services, and local networks are an integral part of their developmental ecosystem. An integrated concept of continuity therefore implies the ability to forge stable and structured relationships with these actors, preventing the different contexts from operating according to parallel or even conflicting logics. The construction of educational alliances is not an accessory element, but a structural component of the quality of the system.

From this perspective, continuity can also act as a safeguard of equity. Children living in situations of social, cultural, or linguistic vulnerability may be more exposed to the effects of unaccompanied transitions, especially when changes between contexts are not supported by shared information, consistent practices, and careful mediation. In such cases, misalignments between services do not necessarily produce disadvantage in themselves, but they can contribute, over time, to reinforcing existing inequalities. Consistent practices, information sharing, and the early recognition of emerging needs are therefore important tools for reducing this risk and for making transitions more legible and supportive for children and families.

As already noted, discontinuity is not in itself a deficit to be corrected, but a developmental resource whose value depends on how it is accompanied. Within the pedagogical dimension of continuity, this translates into a professional responsibility: recognising when a transition can be left to unfold as an opportunity for growth, and when – particularly for children in situations of vulnerability, it requires more deliberate mediation, so that unaccompanied rupture does not turn into cumulative disadvantage.

Ultimately, the pedagogical dimension of continuity questions the integrated system's ability to maintain consistency between stated principles and daily practices. Ensuring this coherence requires more than shared procedures: it calls for a continuous work of reflection on the meaning of one's own professional action, together with an attentive listening to the emotional experience that accompanies it, capable of bringing implicit assumptions to light and safeguarding the alignment between what is declared and what is actually enacted (Riva, 2004). It requires a shared professional culture, capable of overcoming segmented affiliations and building a common language around childhood. Only in this way can the 0–6 system realise its original

ambition: not simply to coordinate services, but to offer children a unified, progressive path that respects the complexity of their growth.

5.4 The organisational dimension

While continuity is based on a unified pedagogical vision of childhood, it nevertheless requires adequate organisational conditions in order to be put into practice. Educational consistency between principles and actions is never automatic: it requires structural mechanisms, spaces for discussion, and clearly assumed responsibilities. In the absence of such conditions, continuity risks remaining a normative statement or cultural aspiration not fully supported by the system.

One of the most important mechanisms is pedagogical coordination. In the integrated 0–6 system, it cannot be considered an ancillary or merely technical function. Rather, coordination represents a cultural infrastructure capable of connecting services, professionals, and decision-making levels. Through coordination, common languages are built, implicit meanings are made explicit, and processes of observation and shared documentation are supported. Its function is not only to ensure procedural uniformity, but also to foster professional reflection and project consistency over time.

Alongside pedagogical coordination, there are intermediate mechanisms that make continuity a reality: cross-disciplinary working groups, opportunities for collaboration between nurseries and preschools, joint training opportunities, and extended teams that include educators and, when necessary, social and health service workers. These spaces do not produce continuity through simple institutional contiguity, but through structured processes of discussion. Collegiality, in fact, does not coincide with the mere coexistence of professionals; it requires dedicated time, organisational recognition, and formal legitimisation.

Continuity thus takes on a managerial dimension that involves specific choices in terms of resource allocation, schedule organisation, workload definition, and recognition of time for discussion. Its implementation depends on the willingness of the managing body to consider it a strategic priority and not a residual element. In this sense, local governance plays a decisive role in translating the principle of integration into effective operating conditions.

A further organisational possibility is represented by childcare centres, which are provided for by law as contexts in which services for children aged 0–3 and preschool coexist in a single structure or in close proximity. These centres can promote the development of a common culture and facilitate shared planning, but they do not in themselves guarantee continuity. Simple spatial proximity does not eliminate differences in contracts, institutional affiliation, or professional tradition. The effectiveness of these centres depends on the quality of the integration processes they are able to activate and their ability to prevent coexistence from translating into internal segmentation.

The organisational dimension of continuity also concerns managerial responsibility in overseeing moments of transition. Transitions between services cannot be entrusted solely to the goodwill of individual professionals. They require shared protocols, information exchange, structured meetings between educators and teachers, and the informed involvement of families. The development of procedures should not be interpreted as bureaucratic rigidity, but as a guarantee of protection for the child, who finds in these mechanisms a symbolic and relational safety net.

Furthermore, organisational continuity implies the ability to read data and monitor processes. Indicators relating to attendance, transitions, and any situations of fragility, if used critically and not merely quantitatively, can support more informed decisions and prevent misalignments between planning and reality. The systematic analysis of practices is a form of institutional responsibility that strengthens the overall quality of the service.

Ultimately, continuity cannot be delegated exclusively to the individual pedagogical dimension. It is a systemic responsibility and requires a coherent organisational infrastructure capable of sustaining processes of integration, reflection, and collaboration over time. Only when management recognises continuity as a strategic priority, allocating resources, time, and tools to it, can the principle be translated into concrete experience for children and families.

At this point, it is useful to clarify that the expression pedagogical coordination may refer to different, although interconnected, functions. In the Milanese system, at least three levels can be distinguished. The first is the internal technical-pedagogical coordination of the municipality, specifically linked to directly managed services and aimed at supporting coherence across the municipal 0–6 network. The second refers to the pedagogical coordination function within nursery services, connected to the coordination of educational

and didactic activities as required by the regulatory framework governing early childhood services. The third is the Territorial Pedagogical Coordination (*Coordinamento Pedagogico Territoriale*, *CPT*), which operates at city level as a stable body of local governance for the integrated 0–6 system. Supported by the Local Committee 0–6, the CPT promotes shared planning, continuity between services and schools of different types and management, in-service training, and the exchange of practices across the whole city system. This distinction helps to show that pedagogical coordination is not a single role or office, but a layered organisational architecture that connects service-level pedagogical responsibility, municipal management, and territorial governance.

5.5 Tools and practices for continuity

Educational continuity is not achieved exclusively through regulatory principles or organisational structures: it takes shape in everyday professional practices. It is in concrete measures that consistency between segments becomes visible and verifiable. Among these, pedagogical documentation occupies a central place. Documenting does not simply mean recording activities carried out, but making the child's journey over time legible, reflecting their processes, interests, relational modes, and learning trajectories. When documentation is shared between services, it becomes a tool for narrative continuity: it allows the next context to recognise the history already built, avoiding arbitrary restarts or unanchored interpretations.

This is the perspective of transition forms and skills maps, which can serve as a link between nursery, preschool, and, in the future, primary school. However, these tools must be used with pedagogical caution. If reduced to standardised grids or lists of skills, they risk crystallising the child into a static profile. If, on the other hand, they are constructed as reflective and dynamic syntheses, capable of integrating cognitive, emotional, and relational dimensions, they become tools for qualitative continuity. Their effectiveness depends less on their format and more on the professional culture that supports them.

Systematic observation is a further safeguard. Observing in a shared way means building a common view of childhood, recognising developmental signs, identifying any difficulties early on, and valuing emerging skills. When observation is accompanied by moments of feedback between professionals, it becomes a tool for organisational learning, not just individual learning.

Furthermore, feedback does not only concern the transition between services, but can also involve families, making them part of the educational process and supporting the construction of a shared narrative of growth.

Joint training between educators working with children aged 0–3 and preschool teachers is a strategic lever for consolidating continuity. Through common training courses, it is possible to overcome segmented representations, compare methodological approaches, negotiate meanings, and build a shared professional lexicon. Training should not be seen as episodic refresher courses, but as a permanent space for critical reflection on practices. In this sense, it helps to transform continuity from a formal requirement into a stable cultural stance.

Communities of practice and professional networks further expand this perspective. When professionals recognise themselves as part of a network that crosses services, municipalities, or territories, continuity takes on a systemic dimension. The exchange of experiences, the circulation of materials, and the sharing of problems and solutions promote collective learning that reduces the risk of isolation and self-referentiality. Networks do not automatically guarantee quality, but they create favourable conditions for the emergence of more consistent and informed practices.

This theoretical understanding of professional networks also resonates with the empirical work conducted within the EDUFIRST project itself, of which this volume is one of the outputs. Focus groups with teachers and school managers in the Milanese 0–6 system showed that professionals rarely described reflexivity as an individual cognitive exercise, but rather as a practice sustained by pedagogical coordination, shared observation, and thematic working groups – the same organisational conditions discussed above. Participants characterised this disposition as a 'mobile gaze': the capacity to remain attentive to children's and families' changing circumstances, adapting educational responses accordingly rather than relying on fixed interpretations. This finding lends concrete, field-based support to the claim that continuity depends not only on structures and tools, but on professionals' sustained capacity to interpret complexity collectively.

Finally, the structural relationship with families is an essential element. Families are not simply recipients of information, but co-protagonists in the educational process. Continuity between contexts is strengthened when families are actively involved in moments of transition, when they receive clear

information, and when they find services that are capable of listening and mediating. Building stable educational alliances helps reduce the uncertainty of transitions and supports the child's sense of security.

Ultimately, the tools and practices for continuity cannot be considered isolated technical devices. They only acquire meaning within a professional culture oriented towards consistency, reflectiveness, and shared responsibility. Their effectiveness depends on the system's ability to integrate them into an overall vision, preventing them from becoming bureaucratic procedures detached from pedagogical intent. When they are included in a coherent framework, however, they become the concrete infrastructure of a 0–6 pathway capable of accompanying children in a progressive manner that respects their history.

5.6 Governance and system-level responsibility for continuity

Educational continuity in the integrated 0–6 system cannot be attributed exclusively to the sensitivity of individual professionals, nor can it be reduced to a practice of linking segments. It is a multi-level process involving pedagogical, organisational, regulatory, and political dimensions. Its implementation depends on the interaction between these levels and on the capacity of the system to keep them coherent over time.

From this perspective, continuity can be taken as an indicator of the quality of the 0–6 system. Quality is not measured solely by the richness of the activities offered, but by the ability to maintain a recognisable narrative thread throughout the child's entire journey: accompanied transitions, consistency between principles and practices, structured alliances with families, and shared professional languages.

This requires governance mechanisms capable of supporting continuity beyond the boundaries of individual services. The integrated 0–6 system is based on a plurality of institutional responsibilities: the state defines the general framework and allocates resources; regions contribute to planning, regulation, and quality standards; municipalities play a decisive role in organising services, coordinating local networks, and translating national principles into territorial practices. Continuity therefore depends on the capacity of

these different levels to act not as separate administrative layers, but as parts of a shared educational infrastructure.

At the territorial level, pedagogical coordination assumes particular importance. It is the place where regulatory principles, organisational choices, and daily practices can be connected. Through coordination, services can build shared criteria for observation, documentation, transition practices, and dialogue with families. In this sense, governance is not only a matter of formal responsibility, but also of creating the conditions that allow professionals to work together, compare interpretations, and sustain a common pedagogical culture over time.

System-level responsibility also implies the allocation of adequate resources. Continuity requires time for meetings, joint training, documentation, exchange between services, and dialogue with families. If these activities are not recognised within working time and organisational planning, they risk depending on individual goodwill rather than on institutional commitment. A coherent governance of continuity must therefore make visible, legitimate, and sustainable the professional work that allows transitions to be accompanied and educational pathways to remain legible.

A further dimension concerns monitoring and evaluation. Attendance data, transition processes, situations of vulnerability, and the effectiveness of support measures can offer important information for local planning, provided they are not used merely in a quantitative or bureaucratic way. Data become pedagogically meaningful when they help services to identify discontinuities, understand inequalities, and adjust organisational choices. In this perspective, monitoring is not external control, but a form of collective responsibility for the quality and equity of the system.

Continuity is also linked to the framework of children's rights, but governance is the level at which this recognition can become effective. Educational policies that invest in coordination, training, shared tools, territorial alliances, and reflective monitoring help translate the right to non-fragmented educational experiences into concrete conditions of quality. In this sense, continuity is not a limited technical objective, but a public responsibility.

Governance, therefore, is not external to pedagogical continuity. It is one of the conditions that makes it possible. When institutional frameworks, territorial coordination, adequate resources, and reflective monitoring are coherently aligned, continuity becomes a shared responsibility of the system:

a way of ensuring that each child's educational history is recognised, accompanied, and relaunched across the different contexts of early childhood.

Conclusions

This chapter has examined educational continuity in the integrated 0–6 system through the triad of right, tension, and practice. Continuity is first of all a child's right to a non-fragmented educational experience: a right that does not concern only access to services, but the possibility of inhabiting a coherent, recognisable, and meaningful educational pathway over time. It is also a generative tension, because it does not coincide with linearity or with the elimination of change. On the contrary, continuity makes it possible for discontinuity to become educationally significant rather than fragmenting. Finally, continuity is a practice: it must be enacted through curriculum design, observation, documentation, pedagogical coordination, professional dialogue, alliances with families, and system-level governance.

Across these different levels, one conclusion recurs: continuity is never a status to be declared once and for all, nor an automatic outcome of regulatory reform. It is an achievement that must be continuously renewed through shared professional culture, organisational conditions, and institutional responsibility. The integrated 0–6 system offers a decisive framework for this work, but its effectiveness depends on the capacity of local systems to translate its principles into daily educational experiences that are legible for children, families, and professionals.

In this perspective, the value of continuity lies precisely in its ability to hold together what might otherwise remain separate: care and education, stability and change, rights and practices, individual histories and collective responsibility. The chapter has argued that continuity is not the opposite of discontinuity, but the condition that makes discontinuity pedagogically generative rather than fragmenting. This is particularly relevant for children living in situations of social, cultural, or linguistic vulnerability, for whom unaccompanied transitions can reinforce inequalities, while well-mediated transitions can become opportunities for recognition, trust, and participation.

These reflections have implications beyond the conceptual and regulatory framework discussed in this chapter. If continuity must be constructed within situated organisational and professional contexts, then its realisation

inevitably varies according to local conditions, institutional arrangements, and territorial cultures. The following chapter takes up this challenge directly, examining how the principles discussed here are negotiated and enacted within the metropolitan context of Milan, where continuity intersects with the structural demands of urban density, social heterogeneity, and the implementation of the European Child Guarantee.

6. Implementing the European Child Guarantee in a metropolitan social context[1]

Mattia Lamberti, Franca Locati and Elisabetta Dodi

Introduction

The European Child Guarantee represents a significant commitment at European level to prevent and combat child poverty and social exclusion. By promoting effective access to essential services – including early childhood education and care, education, healthcare, adequate nutrition, and housing – the Recommendation considers children not only as beneficiaries of social policies, but as rights holders whose opportunities for development must be safeguarded from the earliest stages of life. In this context, ECEC emerges as a strategic lever for addressing structural inequalities and preventing their cumulative effects over time.

This chapter examines how the principles of the European Child Guarantee are translated into practice in a large metropolitan context. Rather than viewing implementation as a linear process, the analysis approaches it as a dynamic negotiation between regulatory frameworks, organisational choices, and concrete social conditions. From this perspective, the effectiveness of equity-oriented policies does not depend solely on the enunciation of principles or the expansion of supply, but on the ability to connect public policies, institutional decisions, and daily professional practices, ensuring consistency between levels of government, organisational mechanisms, and educational actions. Metropolitan areas,

[1] This chapter is the result of shared reflection and collaborative work by the authors. Solely for the purposes of academic career evaluation, the Introduction and Sections 6.1.3, 6.1.4, 6.2.2, 6.3.4, and 6.3.5 are attributable to Mattia Lamberti; sections 6.2.3 and 6.3.2 are attributable to Elisabetta Dodi; and Sections 6.1.1, 6.1.2, 6.2, 6.2.1, 6.3, 6.3.1, and 6.3.3 are attributable to Franca Locati. The conclusions are attributable to all the authors.

characterised by demographic mobility, socioeconomic polarisation, and cultural plurality, are a particularly revealing terrain for observing both the potential and the tensions inherent in policies that aim to reduce structural inequalities.

The chapter is structured in three main parts. The first section outlines the policy architecture of the European Child Guarantee, clarifying its objectives, target groups, and guiding principles, with particular focus on the centrality of ECEC and the role of equity and effective access. The second section analyses the Italian National Action Plan (PANGI), focusing on measures related to early childhood services, governance arrangements, and challenges related to access, inclusion, and educational poverty.

The third section places the Milanese ECEC system within this broader framework, interpreting it as a metropolitan case through which it is possible to explore how the principles of the Child Guarantee take shape at local level. Particular attention is paid to the integrated 0–6 system – from nurseries to preschools – as one lever among others for promoting equity; to the governance configuration of the municipal system, articulated through its network of educational units; and to the practices that emerged from the EDUFIRST project. These include the recognition and enhancement of families, facilitation and accompaniment in access and participation, the strengthening of networks among families and territorial actors, and educational practices capable of responding to linguistic, cultural, and communicative plurality. Taken together, these dimensions show how the Child Guarantee is translated not only into organisational arrangements, but also into pedagogical practices through which early childhood services become places of recognition, citizenship, and community.

The chapter concludes with a reflection on the structural tensions and learning processes that accompany the implementation of the Child Guarantee in metropolitan contexts. It emphasises the need for continuous contextual analysis, reflective practice, sustained investment in the quality of early childhood services, and stronger alignment between local innovation and broader public responsibility across institutional levels.

6.1 The European Child Guarantee: policy framework and objectives

This section outlines the policy framework of the European Child Guarantee. It provides the normative and conceptual references necessary to understand

how the initiative frames access to essential services, with particular focus on early childhood education and care. By defining its scope and priorities, this section lays the groundwork for the analysis of implementation at national and local level presented in the following sections.

6.1.1 Origins and rationale of the European Child Guarantee

The European Child Guarantee was adopted by the Council of the European Union in June 2021 as a recommendation to prevent and combat child poverty and social exclusion across the European Union (Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004). It is part of the European Pillar of Social Rights and reflects the recognition that child poverty remains a persistent and structural challenge within the Union (OECD, 2022). The initiative builds on previous European guidelines, in particular the Commission Recommendation 'Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage' (2013/112/EU), which promoted integrated strategies combining income support, access to quality services, and the participation of children.

The programme's evolution followed a three-stage research-action trajectory: an initial consultation phase (2015–2017), followed by feasibility studies to define the scope of the intervention (Frazer, Guio, and Marlier, 2020), and finally a field-testing phase (2020–2022) coordinated by UNICEF in collaboration with the governments of seven member countries. In Italy, the implementation of the pilot project saw the synergistic involvement of the Ministry of Labour, the Department for Family Policies, and UNICEF through a Deep Dive Analysis (UNICEF, 2022), aimed at mapping existing interventions and defining scalable operating models. Among the pillars of the Italian experiment are the strengthening of foster care, support for *care leavers* through *social housing* solutions, and the enhancement of Family Centres, with a view to participatory governance that actively involves young people in decision-making processes.

In line with this approach, the Child Guarantee establishes a coordinated European framework, while implementation remains the responsibility of national and local authorities through dedicated national action plans. This orientation is consistent with the broader social investment paradigm that has shaped European social policy over the last two decades, emphasising early intervention as a strategic means of strengthening social cohesion and long-term sustainability (Hemerijck, 2018).

6.1.2 Target groups and areas of intervention

The Child Guarantee focuses on children at risk of poverty or social exclusion and calls on Member States to prioritise those who face the most significant barriers in accessing essential services. In particular, it refers to girls and boys living in low-income families, children with disabilities, children from migrant or minority backgrounds, children in foster care, and those living in severe housing deprivation (Council of the European Union, 2021). The recommendation recognises the multidimensional nature of child poverty, which affects not only income but also access to education, health, housing, and social participation. Consequently, it identifies five priority areas in which effective and free access should be guaranteed: early childhood education and care, education and school activities, healthcare, healthy nutrition, and adequate housing. The emphasis is on effective participation rather than formal entitlement, encouraging the removal of financial and non-financial barriers such as service costs, administrative complexity, territorial disparities, and limited availability of information. In this way, the Child Guarantee provides a common operational framework for implementation at national and local level.

6.1.3 The central role of early childhood education and care

Within the European Child Guarantee, early childhood education and care is not simply one of the priority services, but constitutes the infrastructure through which the goal of preventing inequalities can be pursued in a structural way. Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 explicitly refers to the need to ensure effective and free access to quality ECEC services for children in need, recognising that early disparities tend to have cumulative effects throughout life.

The centrality of ECEC can be understood, first and foremost, from a legal perspective. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) recognises children as rights holders from birth, and General Comment No. 7 (2005) emphasises that early childhood is a distinct and crucial stage for the implementation of these rights. It follows that early childhood services are not merely tools to support families, but contexts through which states give effect to the right to development, non-discrimination, and participation of children (Correia et al., 2019).

Secondly, the literature on child development highlights how early educational experiences significantly influence cognitive, social, and emotional development (Campbell et al., 2002; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; Bakken et al.,

2017). From this perspective, ECEC plays a preventive role in the reproduction of inequalities by intervening at a stage when trajectories are not yet consolidated.

Finally, the centrality of ECEC in the Child Guarantee must also be understood in systemic terms: investing in services for 0–6 year olds means intervening not only on individual children, but also on the capacity of local systems to build inclusive and cohesive contexts.

6.1.4 Equity and access as guiding principles

Equity and effective access are the guiding principles of the Child Guarantee. The recommendation emphasises that public authorities should ensure not only the formal right, but also the real possibility for vulnerable children to benefit from essential services. This requires addressing the financial and non-financial barriers that may limit participation. The principle of equity recognises that children do not start from a level playing field. Socioeconomic disadvantage, disability, migrant background, or housing instability can significantly affect opportunities for participation and development (Bellani and Bia, 2017). In line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular the principle of non-discrimination (Article 2), the Child Guarantee promotes targeted measures within a universal framework of benefits. Under this approach, targeted support addresses the specific barriers faced by the most vulnerable children, going well beyond the simple principle of universal access.

Read together, these dimensions can be understood as facets of a broader social justice framework. Fraser's (2009) account of justice as encompassing redistribution, recognition, and representation offers a useful lens for making explicit what is often left implicit in the equity language of the Child Guarantee: ensuring effective access to ECEC addresses the *redistributive* dimension of justice, correcting for unequal starting conditions; the rights-based grounding in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), discussed above, corresponds to the dimension of *recognition*, affirming children as rights holders regardless of background; and, as the analysis of the Milanese case will show (section 6.3.5), the involvement of children and families as active participants in educational settings anticipates the dimension of *representation*, or voice, within services. Understood in this way, equity in the Child Guarantee is inseparable from a social justice perspective in which access, rights, and participation are three interdependent conditions for children's development, rather than three separate policy objectives.

6.2 The Italian National Action Plan (PANGI) and ECEC priorities

The National Action Plan for the implementation of the European Child Guarantee (PANGI) is the instrument through which Italy has transposed Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004, translating its objectives into operational priorities and programmatic measures. The Plan is part of national policies for children and social inclusion, coordinating and strengthening measures already partially in place.

The structure of the PANGI is divided into strategic axes, among which Axis 1, dedicated to prevention and the quality of childcare services, is of particular importance. In this perspective, the focus is on the early diagnosis of conditions of fragility and the promotion of integrated interventions in favour of children and families, with particular reference to the first thousand days of life.

Overall, PANGI does not introduce a new protection system, but aims to systematise and make existing tools more coherent, strengthening the preventive approach and integration between educational, social, and health services. The effectiveness of the strategy is therefore closely linked to the ability of local authorities to translate these guidelines into effective and coordinated measures.

6.2.1 Measures relating to early childhood education and care

Within the PANGI, educational services for children aged 0 to 6 are a strategic priority in the context of policies to prevent social exclusion. Action 1 is explicitly dedicated to the development and extension of full-time places in early childhood education services, with the aim of ensuring equitable and sustainable accessibility throughout the country.

The PANGI aims to structurally and progressively extend the provision of educational services for 0–3 year olds, exceeding the 33 % target and moving towards a national average coverage of 50 %, to be taken as the essential level of provision, in parallel with the achievement of 100 % coverage for nursery schools.

This expansion is not limited to a quantitative increase in full-time places, but also involves the provision of innovative services, including educational facilities for parents and children together, with particular attention to areas at greater risk of educational poverty and to vulnerable families. It is essential

to define uniform criteria for access to and quality of public and accredited private services, through graduated fee systems based on household income, maximum contribution thresholds, and the progressive extension of free services, as well as shared monitoring and supervision tools consistent with the pedagogical guidelines for the integrated 0–6 system. With this in mind, the Plan promotes targeted actions to guide, raise awareness, and support families, particularly those who do not have access to services and who are in conditions of social, migratory, or health vulnerability, recognising early access to educational services as a lever for equity. At the same time, the active participation of parents is encouraged, in line with the logic of co-education between families and services, and multi-level governance and the national information system are strengthened in order to ensure integrated planning, monitoring of interventions – also in connection with the PNRR – and consistency with the objectives of the Child Guarantee.

The planned measures are part of a framework of infrastructure and management investments, also supported by resources from the PNRR, which allocates substantial funding to expanding the range of services for children aged 0–3 years. In addition to the quantitative dimension, the Plan emphasises the need to improve the quality of services and strengthen coordination between educational, social, and health services, in line with the preventive approach focused on the early years of life. Taken together, these measures outline a strategy aimed primarily at expanding access and reducing economic barriers, making early childhood education services one of the main tools for implementing the Child Guarantee in Italy.

6.2.2 Access, inclusion, and reduction of educational poverty

The PANGI adopts a broad view of child poverty, recognising its multidimensional nature: not only insufficient income, but also limited access to educational, relational, and cultural opportunities. In the socio-pedagogical field, educational poverty is understood as a reduction in the conditions for the development of children's skills and participation, with cumulative effects throughout their lives (Sen, 1999; Save the Children Italia, 2014). This perspective recalls the idea that early inequalities influence the possibility of exercising rights and building paths to inclusion, making the role of educational services central to the promotion of the skills essential for training and development (Checchi, 1998).

In this context, the extension of early childhood education services is considered a tool for preventing inequalities. However, monitoring data highlight the persistence of significant gaps. In preschool, attendance drops to 84 % among children from families living in poverty, compared to 96 % among families with greater economic resources. This indicates that barriers to access are not exclusively financial, but also relate to cultural, informational, and territorial factors. These barriers, moreover, do not operate in isolation, but intersect with other axes of disadvantage – migration background, disability, family composition, territorial marginality – producing compounded and non-additive forms of exclusion that a single-factor reading of poverty cannot fully capture (Crenshaw, 1989).

In this context, the effectiveness of the Child Guarantee depends on the ability to integrate policies to expand provision with measures aimed at identifying the most vulnerable situations, ensuring that the formal universality of services does not translate into unequal access in practice.

6.2.3 Institutional framework and governance structure

The implementation of the Child Guarantee in Italy is part of a multi-level governance system involving the state, the regions, and local authorities. The national level defines the strategic guidelines and coordinates monitoring, while the planning and organisation of early childhood education services are largely entrusted to the regions and municipalities.

The 0–3 service system has a mixed configuration: approximately 48.8 % of places are managed directly by municipalities, while the remaining 51.2 % are offered by private or granted entities. Municipal spending on educational services is growing, but family contributions continue to represent a significant share of the overall cost.

In this context, instruments such as the National Fund for the Integrated 0–6 System and local educational coordination bodies are important levers for supporting the quality and equity of provision. However, the effective achievement of the PANGI objectives depends on the ability of local authorities to integrate resources, skills, and institutional levels in a coherent and continuous manner.

Nonetheless, data from the first monitoring report highlight a significant gap between the targets set and the current situation. Coverage of services for children aged 0–2 stands at 27 %, still far from the European target of 45 % by 2030. There are also significant regional disparities: while the central and

northern regions exceed 36 % coverage, in the south the percentage stands at around 16 %. There are also socioeconomic differences in access to preschool (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 2024). These factors show that the implementation of the Child Guarantee takes on a strongly territorial configuration, making urban contexts a privileged observatory for understanding the potential and limitations of policies to expand services for children aged 0 to 6.

6.3 Milan, a metropolitan European city within the Child Guarantee Framework

The implementation of the European Child Guarantee cannot be fully understood without considering the territorial dimension in which the guidelines take shape. After outlining the European framework and the Italian national strategy, this section focuses on the urban level, taking Milan as a case study within a European metropolitan context characterised by high social complexity, population density, and territorial heterogeneity. The analysis does not intend to present Milan as a normative model, but rather as a metropolitan laboratory in which the principles of the Child Guarantee – effective access, equity, integration of services, and the centrality of ECEC – are translated into pedagogical and organisational choices, confronting the structural constraints and social dynamics typical of large contemporary cities, an element that unites the different realities involved in EDUFIRST.

The section is divided into five steps. First, the socio-demographic and urban context of the city is outlined (6.3.1), as the framework within which educational policies are set. Next, the structure and governance of the municipal ECEC system are analysed (6.3.2), highlighting its institutional and organisational structure. The third paragraph explores the methods of regulating access and issues of territorial equity (6.3.3). The fourth focuses on inclusive policies and the 0–6 continuity model as a structural device for pedagogical coherence and equity (6.3.4). Finally, it presents some organisational practices that have emerged from EDUFIRST actions (6.3.5), intended as examples of the operational translation of European principles at the service level.

Through this articulation, the section aims to show how the implementation of the Child Guarantee in a metropolitan context is the result of a dynamic balance between regulatory guidelines, institutional capacities, and the social characteristics of the territory.

6.3.1 Milan as a metropolitan context: socio-demographic and urban challenges

Milan is an intermediate European metropolis characterised by high population density and a compact urban structure. With a resident population of 1.4 million inhabitants over an area of approximately 182 km^2, the city records a density of approximately 7,500 inhabitants per km^2, placing it among the most concentrated urban areas in the country (Municipality of Milan, 2025). The functional metropolitan area extends well beyond the municipal administrative boundaries, affecting over five million inhabitants and forming an integrated territorial system in which mobility, work, and services are organised on a supra-municipal scale. Within this broader area, population density falls to approximately 2,066 inhabitants per km^2, reflecting the lower-density municipalities that surround the city core.

This structure places Milan within the network of European metropolises that concentrate advanced economic functions, skilled human capital, and migratory flows, but which at the same time experience forms of social polarisation (Sassen, 2001). This dynamic contributes to redefining the internal socio-demographic composition and expanding the effective metropolitan dimension (Municipality of Milan, 2025).

Another structural element concerns the presence of a population with a migrant background, accounting for approximately 21 % of the total resident population, with a particularly significant incidence in the younger age groups (Municipality of Milan, 2024). Linguistic and cultural diversity is a structural component of the urban context, directly affecting the configuration of educational services and modes of access.

This heterogeneous configuration reflects processes of territorial differentiation observable in many European cities, where the concentration of opportunities and investments coexists with persistent socio-spatial segmentation (OECD, 2018; Tammaru et al., 2016). In this context, polarisation is not only expressed in economic terms, but also translates into differentiated access to social infrastructure and welfare services.

The combination of urban density, international appeal, housing pressure, and socioeconomic polarisation therefore places Milan within the typical dynamics of contemporary European metropolises. In this context, early childhood education services take on a strategic role not only as an educational offering, but also as a social infrastructure capable of contributing

to urban cohesion and mitigating early inequalities. The Milanese ECEC system must therefore be viewed within this metropolitan framework, which significantly influences how the principles of the European Child Guarantee are implemented.

6.3.2 Structure and governance of municipal services for 0–6

The system of early childhood education services in the Municipality of Milan is structured as a network composed of services managed directly by the municipality and associations or foundations accredited by or affiliated to the government, which contribute to the overall coverage of the city's provision. The internal organisation of municipal services is divided into sixty-seven local educational units. In the 2025/26 school year, 104 nurseries, 44 spring sections, 167 infant schools, 3 SPACESZEROSIX and one LABZEROSIX are directly managed by the municipality. These are complemented by contracted services and places purchased from accredited private facilities.

The educational units constitute the organisational level through which several 0–6 facilities located in the same area are coordinated. Each Unit is entrusted to a Manager who is responsible for integrated pedagogical, organisational, and administrative coordination, with the support of secretarial staff. This structure avoids fragmented management of individual services by introducing an intermediate level that connects central decisions with local educational practices and promotes shared planning between nurseries, spring sections, and preschools.

Governance is developed within a multi-level framework in which the municipal administration exercises pedagogical guidance, access regulation, direct management of a significant part of the services, and administrative oversight. The ECEC Services Area is structured into units dedicated to both pedagogical coordination and legal, economic, and organisational aspects, in order to integrate the educational and managerial dimensions. Alongside this formal structure, there are regular meetings between municipal managers and opportunities for liaison with the central technical-pedagogical coordination team, which allow for the harmonisation of guidelines and the addressing of emerging critical issues.

The territorial distribution of services allows for direct dialogue with local contexts and with actors in the educational and social network – primary schools, social and health services, libraries, associations – promoting a

situational understanding of needs and the construction of stable collaborations. In this sense, the educational units act as a link between the city and the local area, supporting both the vertical continuity of the 0–6 pathway and the horizontal connection with the community.

Overall, the Milanese organisational model is characterised by a significant public presence in direct management and a structured internal organisation, aimed at ensuring pedagogical consistency, procedural uniformity, and the ability to respond to a complex and socially diverse urban context.

6.3.3 Accessibility and territorial equity

The planning of provision is therefore required to address differentiated demographic and social dynamics, which affect the sustainability and equity of the system. Policies to cap fees and the articulation of contribution bands are complementary tools aimed at reducing economic barriers, in line with the principles of the European Child Guarantee. However, effective equity does not depend solely on the cost of fees, but also on the ability to reach families who are less close to services, preventing a lack of information, complex administrative procedures, or a lack of support at the outset from translating into actual forms of exclusion (Brodkin and Majmundar, 2010, p. 830).

In the 3–6 age group, the availability of preschools in the municipal area is extensive and widespread. The provision guarantees sufficient coverage so that, under normal circumstances, there are no significant problems in accessing the service. The widespread presence of preschools helps to ensure the right to attend school in this age group, reducing the tensions between supply and demand that are more characteristic of the 0–3 age group.

Access to early childhood education services in the Municipality of Milan is regulated through formalised criteria and public rankings, with the aim of ensuring transparency and consistency in the management of demand. The system does not provide for economic selection at entry: income status only affects the determination of the financial contribution of families, but does not constitute a discriminating factor for access.

The admission criteria are based mainly on functional and territorial elements. In particular, the proximity between the place of residence and the service requested is important, with a view to protecting educational continuity and promoting stability. In addition to the territorial and functional aspects, the need to reconcile parents' work and family life is also taken into account in the ranking.

Specific places are reserved exclusively for formally recognised vulnerable situations: children with disabilities certified by the competent health authority, and minors in the care or child protection of the Municipality of Milan following a court order, including cases of temporary foster care or placement in a community. Alongside formalised reservations, a periodic commission evaluates cases flagged by social workers with a preventive rationale: rather than addressing situations already subject to a formal child-protection measure, it authorises access on request, outside the ordinary ranking, for children and family units who are not yet the object of such measures, but for whom timely access to educational services may help prevent the escalation of vulnerability. Outside of these cases, access is regulated according to the ordinary criteria set out in the public notice, which is drawn up annually, indicating the availability of places and characteristics for each educational service.

Over time, the Education Department has also invested in the professionalisation of administrative staff and the Enrolment Office, promoting increasingly structured procedures geared towards supporting families. Collaboration with the Welfare Department has been strengthened through the construction of a network with social services – including refugee assistance services, mother-and-child community services, local networks, and Ngo's – aimed at facilitating enrolment for families in conditions of particular fragility. Ahead of each new enrolment period, joint training sessions and dedicated meetings bring together early childhood professionals and operators or volunteers from this network, ensuring targeted enrolment support for each family in such conditions – a central lever enabling the most vulnerable to access services. This organisational integration allows for the combination of administrative regulation and social attention, promoting a more timely understanding of needs and coordinated care in cases that require it.

The establishment, within the ECEC Service Department itself, of a service dedicated to child protection has further strengthened the system's ability to identify and manage situations of particular vulnerability. Beyond offering direct support to school managers facing complex situations, the service coordinates training from a preventive perspective: dedicated training for staff specifically assigned to child protection, alongside broader training extended to all staff in the area on how to respond to complex situations. This training is explicitly connected to reflective practices around educational action, supporting professionals in recognising early signs of vulnerability,

questioning everyday routines, and identifying the conditions that may unintentionally limit children's well-being, participation, or access to educational opportunities. Strengthening educators' ability to read such dynamics in everyday practice illustrates how this training activity, more broadly, can also be understood as a form of prevention against educational poverty.

From this perspective, the accessibility of the Milanese system can be seen as the result of a combination of municipal provision and administrative regulation of access, rather than simply the effect of an increase in the number of places.

6.3.4 Continuity from 0 to 6 as a lever for overcoming inequalities

As mentioned in the previous chapter, educational continuity has been discussed as the child's right to coherent and meaningful experiences, as a dynamic process that cannot be reduced to mere linearity, and as an intertwining of pedagogical, managerial-organisational, and regulatory dimensions. In the Milanese context, this theoretical framework takes on a concrete form, aiming to act as a structural mechanism for equity in a metropolitan environment characterised by high mobility and social heterogeneity.

The integrated 0–6 system in Milan constitutes the infrastructure through which continuity is operationally pursued. The integration between nurseries, spring sections, and preschools is not limited to the chronological sequence of paths, but translates into practices of pedagogical coordination, discussion between educational teams, professionals, and families, training courses, and the definition of shared guidelines. Coordination between services, at the higher territorial level, together with the structuring into educational units, promotes the circulation of common professional languages and the construction of consistent educational criteria throughout the entire 0–6 age range, reducing the risk of fragmentation between different services and contexts.

From this perspective, continuity takes on a role that goes beyond mere educational consistency. One of the concrete forms this takes is initial and in-service training for educational staff, which is designed to be consistent across the city regardless of the socioeconomic profile of the neighbourhood – ensuring that professional quality in more central areas does not differ from that in peripheral ones, and thereby functioning as a lever for both quality and equity. It acts as a support for educational trajectories, counteracting the cumulative effects of forced discontinuities – changes of

neighbourhood, parental job insecurity, housing instability – that can affect participation in services. In this sense, continuity helps to ensure not only formal access, but also meaningful permanence and progressive inclusion in the local education system'.

This configuration calls for a conception of childcare services as public infrastructures geared towards building democratic and inclusive contexts, rather than simply as reconciliation mechanisms. As Moss (2014) observes, early childhood services can be understood as places for building public meaning and collective responsibility, where organisational choices reflect visions of citizenship and social justice. From this perspective, continuity from 0 to 6 appears to be a structural choice that intertwines the pedagogical dimension and the governance structure, translating the principles of the Child Guarantee into organisational practices aimed at reducing early inequalities.

Among the concrete devices through which the municipal system translates this prevention-oriented approach into practice are the SPAZIZEROSEI and LABZEROSEI, already introduced in quantitative terms above (Municipality of Milan, n.d.). These are free-access educational spaces for children aged 0–6 accompanied by an adult, in which play, family workshops, and peer exchange between children and adults are combined with orientation support and guidance towards local services. Their activities are co-designed with third-sector organisations, exemplifying the kind of 'educational facilities for parents and children together' envisaged by the PANGI as part of its innovative service offer. LABZEROSEI, located in a dedicated municipal space within Parco Trotter, extends this logic further, functioning as a hub for educational research, training, and cultural programming addressed not only to children and families but also to professionals working in early childhood education across the city. Both are co-financed through the European Social Fund Plus, within the National Metro Plus and Medium-Sized Southern Cities Programme 2021–2027 – a funding channel distinct from the PNRR resources described earlier, which further illustrates the plurality of financial instruments sustaining the integrated 0–6 system in Milan. In this sense, SPAZIZEROSEI and LABZEROSEI give operational form to the municipality's role not merely as an administrator of services, but as an active promoter of co-education and pedagogical experimentation aligned with the preventive logic of the Child Guarantee.

SPAZIZEROSEI and LABZEROSEI also work in close connection with networks operating in contexts of particular vulnerability, extending to specific families a mode of access markedly different from the spontaneous, drop-in participation that otherwise characterises these spaces. For families referred through mother-and-child community services – already discussed in relation to the enrolment network – as well as through agreements with local advice, support, and counselling centres and the QuBì network[2], participation is reconfigured as a constructed, continuous pathway rather than occasional access: specific days and activities are jointly designed with these realities, and children's educational pathways are monitored over time with the support of observation and assessment tools. In this sense, the same infrastructure that offers universal, free-access participation to the general population is also mobilised, for the most vulnerable families, as a deliberately structured and continuous form of support – illustrating, at the level of a single municipal device, the same principle of proportionate universalism that underpins the Child Guarantee as a whole. This does not eliminate tensions. Demand pressure, intra-urban mobility, and territorial differences between neighbourhoods require continuous adaptation and negotiation.

6.3.5 Practices emerging from EDUFIRST

The practices that emerged can be traced back to five main areas: facilitating access, rethinking school-family relationships, recognising and enhancing families' resources, developing educational practices capable of responding to linguistic and cultural plurality, and strengthening the permeability of services within local networks. Taken together, these areas show that the implementation of the European Child Guarantee does not depend only on the expansion of provision or on the regulation of access, but also on the everyday educational practices through which services become places of recognition, participation, citizenship, and community. Read together, these five areas also lend themselves to a broader interpretation in terms of children's citizenship, developed at the end of this section.

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[2] QuBì is Milan's citywide network against child poverty, promoted by the Municipality of Milan as part of an integrated public–private welfare system. Active across the city's nine districts, it connects public services, third-sector organisations, and community actors to support children and families in vulnerable situations.

The first area concerns the strengthening of access practices, understood as a dimension of proximity and accompaniment within a complex metropolitan system. In cities marked by demographic mobility, cultural and linguistic diversity, and differentiated levels of familiarity with public services, access to early childhood provision cannot be reduced to the formal availability of places. As the literature on public service implementation has shown, even formally universalistic systems can inadvertently generate implicit forms of selectivity when administrative procedures are complex or unevenly legible to different families (Brodkin and Majmundar, 2010). Aware of this risk, the municipality has invested in enrolment facilitation desks, with an accompanying and mediating function, designed to make access more legible, welcoming, and responsive to the plurality of family situations. From this perspective, facilitation practices contribute to making the right of access more effective, not by compensating for a deficit of the system, but by strengthening its capacity to reach and accompany families in different starting conditions.

The second area concerns the evolution of the school-family relationship, which has been the subject of progressive rethinking within the service network in recent years. School managers described an ongoing process of expanding the ways in which families are involved, supported both by training initiatives for staff and by the reorganisation of meetings and opportunities for participation. In addition to traditional tools, multilingual materials, video supports, and differentiated communication channels have been used with the aim of recognising the plurality of cultural and linguistic codes present in the urban context. This framework also includes concrete initiatives such as educational weeks and days and other experiences designed to engage families, co-construct educational meaning, and open services to the local area. From this perspective, the diversification of participation tools is not a compensatory measure, but an intentional choice aimed at making participation truly accessible and meaningful.

The third area concerns the recognition and enhancement of families' resources and talents through shared workshops and opportunities for active participation in the life of the service. This perspective is part of an enabling logic that recognises families not as passive recipients of compensatory interventions, but as bearers of skills, knowledge, cultural repertoires, and relational resources. In line with the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999), the

goal is not only to guarantee access to a service, but to expand actual opportunities for participation, contribution, and social recognition. In this sense, the Child Guarantee is translated not only into protection from disadvantage, but also into the possibility for families to become active participants in educational communities.

The fourth area, which deserves specific emphasis, concerns the educational practices through which the principles of the European Child Guarantee become embedded in the everyday life of services. The workshops highlighted a range of practices designed to respond to linguistic, cultural, and communicative plurality: reading activities in different languages, the use of multilingual books and narrative materials, experiences connected to the Languages Library[3] (*Biblioteca dei Linguaggi*), the intercultural rethinking of symbolic play spaces, the use of music in contexts marked by high linguistic and communicative complexity, and practices of participatory settling-in that involve families as active partners from the very first stages of attendance. These practices are not merely didactic enrichments. They are ways of recognising children's and families' linguistic, cultural, affective, and symbolic worlds, while creating shared spaces in which different forms of expression become resources for the whole group. In this sense, educational practices constitute a central axis of the local implementation of the European Child Guarantee: they help services move beyond formal access, making participation, recognition, belonging, and community part of children's and families' daily experience.

The fifth area concerns the permeability of services, understood as the ability to operate in relation to formal and informal actors in local networks. Building connections with schools, associations, libraries, private social entities, social and health services, and family networks reinforces the ecosystemic nature of educational intervention. As Edwards (2010) points out, effective interprofessional work is not limited to mere cooperation between services, but requires the development of 'relational agency', that is, the ability of professionals to recognise the skills of other actors, jointly expand

[3] The 'Library of Languages' (*Biblioteca dei Linguaggi*) is conceived as a pedagogical environment in which narration is supported not only by words, but also by images, music, gesture, movement, theatre, and other artistic languages. It aims to encourage children's symbolic and narrative expression beyond verbal language.

the definition of the problem, and share responsibility for action. From this perspective, continuity from 0 to 6 is not only an organisational outcome, nor is the Child Guarantee only a policy framework for access: both become concrete through professional practices capable of crossing institutional boundaries and sustaining dense relationships among services, families, and local communities.

This professional and educational dimension can also be read in terms of children's citizenship. Since the seminal contributions of Corsaro (1997) and James and Prout (1997), the sociology of childhood has reframed children not as passive recipients of care and socialisation, but as social actors who actively participate in constructing their own experience. In the Milan ECEC system, this reframing is visible in the practices described across the five areas above, which are not only tools to reduce barriers or enrich the curriculum, but everyday occasions through which children and families are treated as competent interlocutors and co-participants in the life of the service.

A more direct illustration of children's active role can be found in the urban exploration paths promoted across the city's sixty-seven educational units, which involve children in participatory itineraries through their immediate neighbourhoods as well as the city's cultural, artistic, and natural heritage. Designed to foster encounters with different expressive languages and the active involvement of families, these explorations are explicitly framed, within the initiative itself, as early experiences of citizenship. From a theoretical standpoint, this practice resonates with Guerra's (2019, 2023) understanding of exploration as a questioning, autonomy-based educational disposition, in which children are recognised as active investigators of their environment, whose choices and interpretations drive the educational process rather than simply following adult-defined activities. Applied to the urban context, this disposition allows children to encounter the city itself as a legitimate object of exploration and, in doing so, as a space in which citizenship is experienced rather than merely explained.

This resonates with a broader pedagogical tradition that identifies educational contexts, from the earliest years, as privileged spaces for citizenship education (Santerini, 2010): places where participation, voice, belonging, and community are learned through daily practice, well before they are formally taught. Read in this light, EDUFIRST facilitation, mediation, educational, and exploration practices are not only technical devices for improving access

or enrichment, but embryonic forms of civic and community experience, embedded in the ordinary routines of Milan's early childhood services.

Conclusions: Metropolitan tensions and shared learning for policies

The analysis of the Milan case confirms that the implementation of the European Child Guarantee in a metropolitan context cannot be interpreted in linear or definitive terms. In cities characterised by high density, socio-economic polarisation, demographic mobility, and cultural plurality, the translation of European principles – equity, effective access, the centrality of ECEC, and integrated service provision – inevitably encounters structural tensions. Persistent pressure on demand for services, intra-urban heterogeneity, and the growing complexity of family pathways make equity a continuously negotiated goal rather than a stable condition.

In this context, the relationship between universalism and differentiated interventions is not an alternative, but a balance to be built over time. Universal access constitutes the normative framework of equity; however, the effectiveness of the right requires organisational practices capable of reading contexts and activating forms of mediation proportionate to different starting conditions. The Milan case shows that such differentiation can take shape within a single, permeable system, rather than through separate circuits for vulnerable families. Diversified opportunities, such as the SPAZIZEROSEI, can function as accessible thresholds: they help services reach families who might otherwise remain distant from the formal educational offer, accompany them towards the system, and make access to early childhood services more effective.

Similarly, the quantitative expansion of provision and the reduction of fees payable by parents must be reconciled with financial sustainability and the safeguarding of pedagogical quality. The Milan case shows that municipalities can play a decisive role in investing their own resources, organising services, and developing differentiated practices to make access more effective. Yet a city cannot bear this responsibility alone. If ECEC, especially for the 0–3 age group, is to become an effective right rather than an uneven opportunity, municipal action must be supported by stable national investment, clear public responsibilities, and stronger alignment between state policies, regional planning, and local implementation.

This tension points to a broader issue that extends beyond the Milanese case. At the European level, the funding mechanisms and monitoring frameworks associated with the Child Guarantee remain, on the whole, more attuned to capturing children's social and economic vulnerability than to assessing the pedagogical quality of the services through which access is provided. The common monitoring framework developed to track the Recommendation's implementation relies primarily on indicators such as poverty risk, parental education, disability, and household composition, rather than on measures of curriculum, professional qualification, or pedagogical practice. This is not to say that quality has been absent from the European policy agenda: the 2019 Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems explicitly articulates a Quality Framework encompassing access, workforce, curriculum, and governance. However, this framework operates, to a significant extent, in parallel to the funding and monitoring architecture of the Child Guarantee, rather than being systematically integrated into it. The result is a persistent asymmetry, in which resources tend to follow indicators of social need more readily than indicators of educational quality, even though the two are complementary dimensions of the same equity objective. Echoing a long-standing critique of narrowly technical understandings of quality in early childhood services (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, 2013), a more consistent alignment between funding criteria and informed, context-sensitive assessments of educational quality would strengthen the Child Guarantee's ambition to combine access with genuine developmental opportunity.

The Milan case highlights how structural agreements alone are not enough. The 0–6 continuity model and the municipal governance architecture create the conditions for equity, but their effectiveness depends on continuous processes of contextual reading, analysis of emerging needs, and reflective review of practices. The practices that emerged from EDUFIRST illustrate how equity is implemented not only through policy design, but also through organisational and relational mechanisms: mediation in access procedures, the maintenance of school-family relationships, the recognition of family resources, the strengthening of networks among families, and collaboration between families, services, and territorial actors. These practices help prevent both explicit and implicit forms of exclusion by making the system more permeable and capable of accompanying families towards educational opportunities, rather than simply waiting for them to access services autonomously.

These dynamics are not unique to Milan. Comparative dialogue within the EDUFIRST partnership suggests that metropolitan areas across Europe face similar challenges: territorial inequalities, barriers to effective participation, and the need to balance expansion with quality. In this sense, transnational exchange operates not only as a platform for comparison, but also as a mechanism for institutional learning and recalibration.

The European Child Guarantee should therefore be understood not so much as a definitive solution, but rather as a regulatory and strategic framework that pushes urban systems to cultivate reflexivity, coherence, and sustainability. As the Milan case illustrates, its translation into practice is inherently systemic in nature: it depends on the capacity to hold together different services and professional figures – and public, accredited, and third-sector provision alike – within a coherent architecture of care, rather than treating them as separate or competing spheres.

7. Multicultural and multilingual approach in ECEC services Trajectory and current debates in Tampere

Tanja Moisala, Ulla Niskanen, Pia Kuisma

7.1 Short presentation of the Tampere ECEC services

Tampere is the third-largest city in Finland. In 2024, Tampere's population increased by 2.08 %, with most of the growth resulting from internal migration within the country (Tampere City Region Unit, 2024). The population growth in Tampere has nearly doubled over the past three years, with an increase of 1.3 % in 2021, 2.0 % in 2022, and 2.4 % in 2023 (Statistics Finland, 2025). However, the number of children aged 1–5 in the Tampere metropolitan area has started to decline. Since 2016, the number of 1–5-year-olds in Tampere and its nearby cities has decreased by approximately 3,300 children. Nevertheless, the number of children in early childhood education and care services in the Tampere region has grown. In 2023, 64 % of children under three years old were enrolled in early childhood education and care services, while the participation rate for children over three years old was 94 % (Tampere City Region Unit, 2023).

All children under school age in Finland have a subjective right to early childhood education and care. Parents have the right to enrol their children in early childhood education and care regardless of the family's socio-economic status or place of residence. The subjective right to early childhood education and care was introduced in 1985 as part of the reform of the Daycare Act (Act Amending the Daycare Act, 28/1985). In 1996, the right was extended to include all children under school age. The right starts at the beginning of the month in which the child turns nine months.

The Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) prepares the national core curricula for early childhood education and care and the national core curriculum for pre-primary education. Municipalities can prepare their local curricula based on the national core curricula. The City of Tampere Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care is based on the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care and the national core curriculum for early childhood education and care. The City of Tampere Curriculum for ECEC is based on the Tampere City Strategy 2030 – The City of Action. Other documents complementing Tampere's plan include the Carbon Neutral Tampere 2030 Roadmap, the Child and Youth Well-being Plan, and the Plan for Support in Early Childhood and Pre-primary Education (The City of Tampere Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2022).

The City of Tampere aims to be carbon neutral by 2030. This means that the city's greenhouse gas emissions will be reduced by 80 % compared to 1990 levels, and the remaining 20 % will be compensated. To achieve this goal, the city has implemented measures across various sectors, including early childhood education and care. The goals for early childhood education and care include sustainable practices, energy efficiency, promotion of eco-social education, and the engagement of families and communities (Carbon Neutral Tampere Roadmap, 2024).

In 2024, the City of Tampere was awarded UNICEF's Child-Friendly Municipality recognition. The initiative aims to ensure the realisation of children's rights in daily life, focusing on identifying and improving the well-being of the most vulnerable children.

In Tampere, early childhood education and care is provided in both public and private ECEC centres. Early childhood education and care is provided as a group activity in ECEC centres, family-based childcare, as well as open activities in early childhood education and care, i.e. children's activity clubs and open family clubs. In 2025, there are 77 municipal ECEC centres and 49 private ones in Tampere. As of August 2024, the number of children in early childhood education and care in Tampere was 5,850 in public ECEC centres and 1,806 in private ECEC centres.

The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) defines the staff-child ratios to be followed in early childhood education and care. For children under the age of three, there must be one adult for every four

children. For children over three years old, the ratio is one adult for every seven children when the child's ECEC day exceeds five hours. If the child's ECEC day is less than five hours, the ratio is one adult for every thirteen children (e.g. in pre-primary education).

Early childhood education and care staff in Tampere include: teachers (ECEC), child carers (ECEC), and social pedagogues (ECEC), as well as managers and assistant managers of ECEC centres. Special educational needs teachers (ECEC), assistants, and Finnish as a second language (S2) teachers also work in early childhood education and care in Tampere. In 2024, Tampere had over 2,000 staff members working in ECEC, as well as over forty managers of ECEC centres and fifty assistant managers. Facility maintenance and catering in ECEC centres are handled by facility cleaners and service workers. The staffing structure of ECEC centres in Finland will change in 2030 with the implementation of an amendment to the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018), which entails raising the educational level of staff. From 2030 onwards, two-thirds of ECEC staff must have a degree in early childhood education and care or in social pedagogy (ECEC). At least half of the staff must have the qualification of a teacher (ECEC). Managers of ECEC centres must have at least a master's degree in education (The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018).

In Tampere, it is possible to study to become an early childhood education and care teacher, and since spring 2024, also a special education teacher. Thus, from a recruitment perspective, Tampere has a supply of newly graduated teachers. In Finland, the degrees in ECEC are also available at the universities of Helsinki, Turku, Oulu, and Jyväskylä, as well as at the university of Eastern Finland and Åbo Akademi university.

The national core curricula for early childhood education and care and pre-primary education emphasise children's participation. In Tampere and throughout Finland, the participation and involvement of children are crucial aspects of early childhood education and care and pre-primary education. Supporting the child's gradually developing skills for participation and involvement encourages children to take initiative. Children's views are heard and implemented into the activities planned throughout the day together with the personnel. Children's transversal competences are promoted in ECEC and pre-primary education, both in terms of their current participation and their future paths for growing and learning (Kangas and Lastikka, 2019).

Moderation, responsibility, and interpersonal relationships guide the activities and services of early childhood education and care and pre-primary education, as well as their development. In Tampere, emphasis is placed on individual equality, a diverse community, the importance of eco-social education, and the development of quality and competence. In Tampere, play is a fundamental starting point for early childhood education and care activities (The City of Tampere Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2022).

The online eVaka customer information and resource planning system is used by municipal ECEC centres and pre-primary education units in Tampere. Guardians use eVaka to register their child's attendance, as well as any absences due to illness or another reason. ECEC personnel and guardians also use eVaka for communicating and reserving appointments to discuss children's individual ECEC plans. The cost of early childhood education and care for a family is determined by the family's income level. If the family's income is low, early childhood education and care is free for the family. In Tampere, nearly half of the families do not pay for the service. Meals provided in early childhood education and care (breakfast, lunch, and snack, as well as dinner and evening snack in shift care) are tax-paid.

In Tampere, evening and weekend care, as well as round-the-clock care (in one ECEC centre), are also offered. Round-the-clock care is available for families whose children need shift care. Evening, shift, and weekend care include planned pedagogical activities. Full-day pedagogy is also implemented in shift care during the evenings. Full-day pedagogy enables all children to learn, regardless of their care arrangements, and does not restrict learning to specific times or moments. Children benefit from creative and calm play in the evenings, as this helps them to process the events of the day.

Some ECEC centres in Tampere implement the home area model. Home areas consist of two child groups that share common spaces, and adults from both child groups work in the same home area. The spaces must allow for small group activities with 7–10 children and larger groups with a maximum of 24 children (City of Tampere, 2020). In the city of Tampere curriculum for early childhood education and care, (2022) the home area is presented as a learning environment. When implementing and evaluating early childhood education and care in Tampere, special attention is paid to the functionality of the home area model. The model's impact on the child's best interests and

staff well-being is also considered (the city of Tampere curriculum for early childhood education and care, 2022). The home area model allows employees to utilise their strengths and learn from their colleagues.

In Tampere, the employee experience is strengthened by supporting the development of professional skills alongside core tasks. Staff competence is utilised in pedagogical development through responsibility (The City of Tampere Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2022). Each unit has a KETU (sustainable future), KUKA (cultural education), DIGI (digital education), and SALLI (physical activity and food education) coordinator. The coordinators' task is, in collaboration with their manager, to strengthen the pedagogy of their respective areas as set out in the curriculum. Staff in Tampere are supported in undertaking additional training alongside their work. A professional development service dedicated to the education and teaching staff in the Tampere region (Osake) organises training for the entire staff in ECEC, pre-primary education, comprehensive school education, and upper secondary education. The activities of Osake are free of charge for the municipalities in the Tampere city region that fund and guide the activities. In 2025, Osake covers a range of topics related to ECEC, such as using support sign language, consideration of multilingual children, bilingual pedagogy, anti-racism, and observation of motor skills.

In Finland, parents receive various social benefits after the birth of a child. Maternity leave, which is designated only for the parent giving birth, lasts for forty working days. The amount of support depends on the parent's salary, and the leave must always be scheduled for at least two weeks before and two weeks after the birth. In Finland, both parents have the opportunity to take parental leave after the birth of a child. Joint leave can be taken for eighteen working days. Parental leave lasts for 160 weekdays per parent. The amount of support depends on the parents' income. The minimum amount of support per parent is 800 euros per month. Partial care allowance allows parents to work shorter hours until the child's second school year. After parental leave, parents can take home-care leave (alternating or only one parent) until the child turns three. Home-care leave must be used in two parts. In Finland, only participation in pre-primary education is mandatory for children under eight years old. ECEC is not mandatory.

In Finland, early childhood education and care is implemented according to the principles of inclusion, which implies that all children have equal

rights. Inclusion encompasses value-based principles such as the primacy of the child's best interests, equality, non-discrimination, appreciation of diversity, social inclusion, and community. Inclusion is a continuous effort to find better ways to respond to and learn from diversity. All children are entitled to early childhood education and care at a local/nearby ECEC centre. Support can be provided, for example, by reducing the size of the child group (the city of Tampere curriculum for early childhood education and care, 2022). Each early childhood education and care unit in Tampere has its own special educational needs teachers (ECEC).

Inclusion, as Booth and Ainscow (2002) state, is often associated with students who are seen as 'having special educational needs'. However, inclusion should involve the education of all children. Inclusion always involves change and can be seen as a process that has no clear ending. Its purpose is to increase every child's participation and learning. The pursuit of full inclusion is an ongoing goal for educational service sectors, such as schools, though it remains an unattained ideal. However, inclusion happens from the moment actions are taken to increase children's participation. Booth and Ainscow (2002) point out some fundamental principles of inclusion: everyone needs to be valued equally, students' participation should be increased, cultures, policies and practices need to be restructured so that they respond to the diversity of students. It is important to reduce barriers to participation and learning of all students, not only those who are categorised as having 'special educational needs' (Booth and Ainscow, 2002).

7.2 Multicultural and multilingual approach in ECEC services in Tampere

In this text, we will focus particularly on the increase in the number of immigrants in Tampere, as well as themes related to language and culture, worldviews and religions (religious and worldview education), and social classes. We will examine these themes in the context of early childhood education and care provided in Tampere.

Finnish early childhood education and care is based on the concept of the intrinsic value of childhood. The task of early childhood education and care is to promote and protect the child's right to a safe and good childhood. Every child should have the opportunity to be heard, considered, understood, and

seen as themselves and as a member of their community (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). Multiculturalism and multilingualism refer to people who live under the influence of at least two cultures and languages. The terms 'immigrant' and 'multicultural' are often seen as synonyms. However, this is not the case, as multiculturalism affects almost all of us (Malinen, 2019).

Diversity includes the concept of many cultures. The majority of the world's population belongs to some minority group. Education that takes multiculturalism into account recognises every present culture. The goal of education is to integrate everyone into the dominant culture. However, integration must preserve the right of minorities to maintain their own culture. Multicultural education is primarily about providing high-quality education in an ethnically and culturally diverse society, where every child receives fair education and care (Paavola and Talib, 2010).

Multiculturalism is a multifaceted term. It includes the following areas: immigrants and issues related to them, questions of different cultures and languages, worldviews and religions, sexual orientation, gender identity, social class, disability, and marginalisation (Paavola and Talib, 2010).

According to the Finnish Immigration Service (2025), interest in Finland has been high for years. People come to Finland to study and work. It is also common for one family member to move to Finland first, after which the rest of the family will want to move too. Although the number of applications submitted to the Immigration Service has been high, the Immigration Service granted less permits in 2024 than in 2023. However, the number of applications has been historically high. The number of asylum applications in 2024 was almost halved compared to the previous year. According to the Immigration Service's estimate, approximately 3,000–4,000 asylum applications will be submitted in Finland in 2025.

In Finland, the processing times of the Immigration Service are among the fastest in Europe. For example, a specialist or student receives a decision on average within nine days. In 2024, the five largest nationalities applying for work-based residence permits in Finland were from Thailand, the Philippines, India, China and Vietnam. The top position of Thais is explained by the short-term residence permits applied by berry pickers. In 2025, the Immigration Service estimates that 15,000 people will apply for work-based residence permits in Finland. The same number of applicants is expected for student-based immigration in 2025 (Finnish Immigration Service, 2025). In 2023, a total

of 5,392 non-Finnish citizens moved to the Pirkanmaa region. Most of the immigrants to Pirkanmaa were Ukrainians. In addition to Ukraine, Sri Lanka, India, and Vietnam were among the most common countries of origin. Ukraine, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and Russia were among the most common countries of origin for children aged 0–14 (Statistics Finland, 2024).

The most common age groups of foreign-language speakers living in the Tampere city region are 30–39 years old. The age distribution of foreign-language speakers differs from that of native Finnish speakers. The most common age groups for native Finnish speakers are 20–29 years old. In Tampere, the majority of the foreign-language population lives in rental apartments in apartment buildings. According to the housing density classification, 38 % of foreign-language speakers live in cramped conditions. In recent years, the majority of people immigrating to Tampere have been from Europe and Asia, with Russian speakers being the largest foreign-language group. Unemployment among foreign-language speakers is 14 % higher than among the Finnish population (Regional Council, 2024).

In 2024, the highest number of asylum applications in Finland were submitted by citizens of Somalia, Afghanistan, Syria, and Nigeria. Prolonged conflicts affect the number of asylum seekers coming to Finland. Rapid and unexpected changes in the number of applicants can occur (Finnish Immigration Service, 2025).

The multiculturalism of families has increased in Tampere. In 2021, the proportion of foreign-language children in early childhood education and care was 12.5 %, while in 2024, the figure was over 15 %. In Tampere, there are early childhood education and care units where 60 % of the children speak a language other than Finnish, Swedish, or Sami as their mother tongue. Arabic, Russian, Somali, English, and Sinhala are the five most spoken languages in early childhood education and care in Tampere, in addition to Finnish. The second official language of Finland is Swedish. Swedish-language early childhood education and care is offered as a purchased service in a private ECEC centre. Bilingual early childhood education and care is offered in English, German, and French ECEC centres in Tampere. The number of foreign-language speaking children is highest in the southern residential areas of Tampere, where the number of children from a foreign language background in was 514 in 2024. In the eastern and western residential areas, the number of foreign-language speaking children in 2024 was a total of 309.

Therefore, it can be observed that segregation based on language background exists in Tampere.

According to Kivijärvi (2020), the development and learning of the Finnish language are significant factors in the daily lives of foreign and multilingual children. It is important to ensure that the child's own culture and mother tongue are visible and appreciated in activities. The responsibility for learning the child's own mother tongue and preserving the culture primarily lies within the child's family. Strong native language skills create a foundation for learning other languages. A child learns languages either sequentially or simultaneously. Early childhood education and care staff have a responsibility to inform families about the importance of the child's own language and culture for the child's learning and development. The initial cooperation between the family and early childhood education and care is particularly important. Activities arranged in small groups of children and the use of methods that support speech development (such as pictures and support signs) are important practices with foreign and multilingual children. Systematic and consistently progressing Finnish language teaching supports integration into the Finnish society (Kivijärvi, 2020).

According to Malinen (2019), language is above all power. Parents and professional educators have a duty to provide children with language. In our modern world, language acts as protection against exploitation and lies. Language opens up possibilities to connect with the surrounding society. Language enables everyone to find their place in society. Without language, a child cannot tell their own story, instead surrendering it to be narrated by someone else. According to Malinen, the mission of a professional educator is to provide every child with the language skills needed to influence matters that affect them. The educator must assist each child in expressing themselves using their current language skills. The educator must also give the child daily opportunities to improve their language skills, starting from their current level (Malinen, 2019).

In Tampere, support is provided for multilingual children to ensure they can learn both Finnish and their home language(s). Early childhood education and care in Tampere can, if necessary, assess the child's native language skills in agreement with the guardians. The assessment focuses on the child's linguistic understanding and language use, interaction, and willingness to engage with adults. The assessment is conducted in the child's own native

language. Native language teachers working in Tampere conduct assessments in collaboration with early childhood education and care staff with the consent of the guardians. After the assessment, the unit's special education needs teacher can assign a rehabilitation support period for the child's own native language. The support period is mainly implemented as individual teaching and takes place in the child's ECEC centre. The teacher during the support period is a native language teacher. The support period for the native language does not involve any additional costs for the family since it is included in the child's early childhood education and care fee.

In Tampere, the translanguaging method is applied in ECEC. According to Palojärvi (2024), this refers to bilingual planned pedagogy where languages are used in a flexible manner. Translanguaging has a positive impact on children's interaction, learning, and well-being, and it increases children's participation. Parents can be invited to the ECEC centre to use their home language with the children. Parents can support the use of the family's home language in early childhood education and care, for example, by teaching the staff common phrases. Using a child's home language supports the advancement of appreciation for different languages and language groups and promotes socially just education (Palojärvi, 2024).

When a multicultural and multilingual family starts their first-time customer relationship in the Finnish early childhood education and care, the child can be assigned structural support needs. The decision on support is made by the manager of the child's early childhood education and care unit, the staff working in the group, and the unit's special educational needs teacher. Children with a refugee background are automatically assigned a six-month structural place. A child seeking asylum can be assigned a three-month structural support. For other children, the duration of the place can be from one month to three months, depending on the consideration. Only the first child in the family is assigned integration support. The integration support coefficient for the child is 2. This means that the child is counted as 'worth' two children in the group ratio, and a smaller group is formed. The special educational needs teacher records the child's integration support needs in the online eVaka system.

Language assistants and Finnish as a second language teachers (S2 teachers) work in ECEC centres in Tampere. They work particularly in units with many foreign-language speaking children. The task of the language assistant is to

strengthen the participation of children from a foreign language background and help staff implement language-aware pedagogy. Language assistants use languages such as Arabic, Somali, Ukrainian, and Russian in their work. The language assistant enables the child and family to use their native language in early childhood education and care. Speaking one's own language increases the child's sense of security and helps them adapt to new situations. Language assistants also support cooperation with families. Finnish as a second language teachers (S2 teachers) work in child groups with many children learning Finnish. The purpose of S2 teaching is to increase Finnish language input/Finnish-language interaction in ECEC daily life. The target group for the activities are multilingual children aged between 4 and 5.

According to Kivijärvi (2020), educators from different cultures can act as intermediaries between families and ECEC. Native language assistants (language assistants in Tampere) support the child when the child's Finnish language skills are low. Native language assistant initially translates all situations for the child, and support is reduced as the child learns Finnish. Educators with the same cultural background can convey aspects related to the child's own culture (Kivijärvi, 2020). In ECEC centres in Tampere, as well as throughout Finland, picture support is used. Pictures help children understand the structure of the day in ECEC. Pictures should be easily visible at the child's height and should be clear. The use of pictures should always be interactive. Support signs also help the child understand and structure speech.

Evaluating and observing the child's development form the basis for working in early childhood education and care. Without evaluation and observation, it is impossible to know what kind of support and guidance each child benefits from. When assessing language development, attention is paid to the development of different aspects of language. This applies to all children, not just those who are multilingual. The child's language development should be assessed in parallel (Kivijärvi, 2020). LangPeda is an assessment tool used in ECEC in Tampere to support language-aware approaches in ECEC and multilingual children's learning of Finnish. The tool helps to develop and assess learning environments' language-aware relations since all languages deserve to be seen and acknowledged. When practicing language-aware pedagogy, ECEC educators acknowledge and value each child's full linguistic repertoire, actively support their Finnish language development, and foster an inclusive environment where multilingualism is made visible. LangPeda

consists of three forms. The first form helps to assess and develop ECEC learning environments in relation to language awareness. The second form examines the linguistic environment of a multilingual child in cooperation with the guardians. The third form is used to monitor the Finnish language development of a multilingual child (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2020).

When examining multiculturalism, it is important to remember to reject stereotypical thinking. Stereotypes can include assumptions related to the child's or young person's learning or behaviour. To engage in respectful and understanding interaction with children and families, the adult working with the child must recognise their own negative prejudices (Paavola and Talib, 2010). In Tampere the ECEC staff are provided with training in workshops that focus on anti-racist practices. The training addresses how racism can manifest in early childhood education and care and how it can be countered. Training sessions have been organised for early childhood education and care staff and managers. In recent years, around 180 ECEC workers have participated in training sessions, sharing the knowledge gained with other employees in their units.

In Tampere, functional gender equality and diversity planning is implemented in early childhood education and care. Each ECEC centre completes its own plan. The process has three phases. In the first phase, the level of equality and diversity in the facility is assessed. Based on the assessment, the ECEC centre considers its own development needs. Families and children can also be involved in the assessment. From the issues raised in the assessment, one to three themes are selected for development. Both equality and diversity perspectives must be considered. Each ECEC centre has its own designated staff member responsible for the development themes and their promotion, and they set a schedule for actions to take place. The plan is evaluated and refined annually. Tampere has its own Safer Space Principles, which are in effect in all city institutions. These principles aim to ensure that everyone feels welcome and safe.

At the beginning of 2025, the Finnish government removed the obligation for gender equality planning from early childhood education and care providers and service producers. Diversity planning is still mandated by law. The change has sparked debate both for and against it. Due to the change, the amount of written work required by law for ECEC centres decreased. The removal of the obligation has also caused concern. There is a fear that

work on equality will be sidelined now that goals and measures are no longer being recorded. Despite the legislative change, gender equality planning will continue alongside diversity planning in Tampere.

7.3 Multicultural and multilingual approach in relation to the EDUFIRST debates

The Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland grants state subsidies (145,683,000 €) for measures promoting educational equality and non-discrimination in early childhood education and care, pre-primary education, and basic education from 2024 to 2027. The subsidy is intended for the salary costs of early childhood education and care and teaching staff. The subsidy is targeted at the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas. The subsidy strengthens the equal, fair, and inclusive culture of early childhood education and care, pre-primary education, and basic education, as well as the principle of neighbourhood schools. In Finland, the Ministry of Education and Culture has been distributing state subsidies for equality work annually since 2009 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2024). Gender equality and diversity work in ECEC in Tampere is based on several guiding documents. These include the City of Tampere's curriculum for ECEC (2022), the national core curriculum for early childhood education and care (2022), and the City of Tampere's operational equality and non-discrimination plan (2023). In addition, the work is guided by the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) and international human rights agreements, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and UNICEF's Child-Friendly Cities Initiative. Together, these documents form a strong foundation for the planning and implementation of gender equality and diversity work in early childhood education and care. Thus, gender equality and diversity planning have become firmly established in Tampere, as well as in the Finnish education system.

Religious and worldview education is an important part of the pedagogical activities in early childhood education and care. According to the national core curriculum for ECEC (2022), religious and worldview education involves exploring the religions and other worldviews present in the lives of the children in the group. It also includes addressing religions and worldviews not represented in the group, as well as non-religious perspectives. The topic

is approached through celebrations and events related to the annual cycle. Daily situations in ECEC such as meals and getting dressed also provide opportunities to address these topics. It is important to give space to children's questions and wonderings. Cooperation is carried out with families, respecting each family's values and background (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). Dialogue between the family and early childhood education and care staff is important. Guardians hope for open dialogue about the family's worldview and culture. The child does not need to act as a representative of their own culture, religion, or ethnicity; instead, different cultures are examined comprehensively under the guidance of an adult. The diversity of each family is considered, for example, through celebration traditions and dialects. Religious and worldview education is part of the pedagogical activities in early childhood education and care, regardless of the backgrounds of the children in the group. All staff working with the child group participate in religious and worldview education, while the ECEC group's teacher is responsible for the group's pedagogy.

In Tampere, religious and worldview education in early childhood education and care is supported by KUKA coordinators. As mentioned in the first part of this chapter, each early childhood education and care unit in Tampere has coordinators focusing on different areas. The responsibility of KUKA coordinators is the pedagogical development of cultural education. KUKA coordinators highlight themes related to children's cultural education in their units and ensure their visibility in the various plans and activities of the facility. Coordinators also receive training and attend meetings, where they share the information they have gained with the rest of the staff in their units. They also share the tips, experiences and ideas of their own group and unit with other coordinators. Worldview education aims for equal, fair, and diversity-aware education. The goal is for every child to have an inclusive opportunity to experience the joy of learning, belong to a group, and learn from their peers.

Birth rates in Finland fell to a historically low level in 2023. The number of foreign-language speaking mothers has been steadily increasing in Finland. In 2000, 4 % of children were born to foreign-language speaking mothers, while in 2023, the figure was approximately 16 %. The average age of mothers who gave birth biologically rose to 30.3 years, and the age of fathers rose to 32.2 years (SVT, 2023). According to a study commissioned by the Ministry

of Education and Culture (2023), if the decline in birth rates continues in Finland in the coming years, the impact on the need for early childhood education and care services could be significant. The need for space in facilities may decrease as child groups become smaller. Differences in service needs can cause a shortage of early childhood education and care places and, on the other hand, overcapacity in facilities (FCG, 2023).

Tampere is an attractive city, and its population is expected to continue growing in the future. The cultural, linguistic, and worldview diversity of the area will increase in the future due to immigration. Birth rates have declined both in Finland and in Tampere. According to a study by the Tampere City Region (2024), birth rates in the Tampere city region have decreased by 22 % over the past ten years. If the decline in birth rates stops, the number of children could return to previous levels. The immigrant population in Tampere is expected to double by 2040. The number of foreign-language speakers is predicted to be at most 15 % of the population in 2040. City centres will be emphasised as growth hubs, particularly due to population ageing and immigration (Tampere City Region, 2024).

The participation rate of children under three years old in early childhood education and care has been on an upward trend in Tampere over the past five years. In 2019, 52 % of children under three participated in early childhood education and care, while in 2023, the figure was 64 %. Thus, the participation rate has increased by over 10 % over the past five years. In 2023, 95 % of children over the age of three participated in early childhood education and care services, compared to 90 % in 2019. Therefore, the number of children using services has increased by 5 % over the past five years for those aged three and over (Tampere City Region, 2023).

Although the birth rate in Tampere is declining, the participation rate of young children in early childhood education and care services is rising. Therefore, when planning services, the need to increase groups for children under three years old must be considered. As previously mentioned, the growing number of foreign-language speakers in Tampere (expected to double by 2040) poses challenges for early childhood education and care services. Staff working in ECEC settings must maintain a strong competence in the pedagogy of linguistic, cultural, and worldview diversity to foster an inclusive and participatory environment for all children using the services. It is important to consider how, as providers of early childhood education and

care services, we raise children to treat other children and their environment with respect and equality. Additionally, we need to consider how we can support children's adaptation and integration into our society. In the era of climate change, we must also consider what future skills we teach children and how we raise them to respect and protect nature.

Environmental justice is a multidisciplinary term. From a legal perspective, it includes the definition of international human rights treaties. From a societal and psychological research perspectives, it can be examined through unfairness, dignity, and recognition. Environmental justice involves considering economic, social, and psychological questions related to environmental issues. The fundamental question could be what practices ensure an equal and fair world (Lyytimäki et al., 2023). As climate warming threatens the living places of millions of people, cross-border refugee flows emerge. According to the UN forecast, a shortage of drinking water could drive 700 million people to move away from their living areas by 2050 (UN, 2025). Factors causing people to leave their homes due to climate are water shortages, extreme weather conditions, and rising sea levels (Clement et al., 2021).

The Tampere curriculum emphasises the importance of eco-social education. Responsibility, moderation, and interpersonal relationships guide the activities of early childhood education and care and pre-primary education. In Tampere, emphasis is placed particularly on individual equality, diverse community, quality and competence development, and the importance of eco-social education (The city of Tampere Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2022). The goal of eco-social education is to ensure the conditions for a good life within the limits of one planet for both future and current generations, as well as for the biosphere. In early childhood education and care, eco-social education begins with learning compassion and empathy.

7.4 Conclusions and futures challenges

According to a report commissioned by the City of Tampere (2023) on regional segregation, the city consists of three types of residential areas that differ in terms of housing, population structure, and the experiential and socio-economic well-being of their residents. Typically, older apartment-dominated rental areas in Tampere are associated with lower-than-average levels of perceived well-being. These areas are often home to low-income groups

such as economically disadvantaged families with children, students, people with immigrant backgrounds, and pensioners. In contrast, residents with higher socio-economic status tend to live in areas dominated by detached housing, where the population is relatively highly educated. Between these two extremes are areas where residents experience average levels of well-being (City of Tampere, 2023).

Regional segregation in Tampere is also evident in areas with a low number of multilingual and multicultural families. Addressing diversity in early childhood education and care is important across all communities, as everyone must learn to value their peers in ECEC, school, or the workplace. As stated previously, there are ECEC centres in Tampere where 60 % of children speak a language other than Finnish as their mother tongue. As segregation increases, some child groups consist mostly of children who speak a foreign language, with fewer Finnish-speaking peers to support language learning through peer interaction. In such groups, Finnish as a second language (S2) teachers aim to increase Finnish language input when the proportion of multilingual children exceeds 40 %.

In Tampere, the first foreign language (A1) is introduced in the first grade of basic education. Pupils can choose English, Spanish, Chinese, French, German, or Russian as their A1 language. Familiarisation with these languages is provided for pre-primary education pupils in Tampere. This practice is called early language education. According to a 2024 comparison by Eurydice, the EU's education information network, English is a compulsory subject in nearly all European countries where foreign language learning is mandatory. Finland is the only country in the comparison where English is not compulsory. English is the most studied language in the EU. In Finland, 83 % of primary school pupils and 100 % of lower secondary school pupils studied English in 2020 (Birch et al., 2023).

According to Meriläinen and Härmälä (2024), Finnish youth use English extensively in their free time, learning it through online gaming and social media. In multilingual families, the use of English as a shared language may weaken children's motivation to learn other home languages. As English continues to dominate across Europe, it is important to reflect on which languages we value and prioritise to preserve linguistic and cultural diversity.

In 2019, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) conducted a survey examining the experiences of nearly 6,000 people of

African descent in 12 EU member countries. The results revealed widespread exclusion and prejudice. Finland performed poorly in the survey: 63 % of respondents reported experiencing racist harassment in Finland – the highest rate among the countries surveyed. Additionally, 5 % had experienced racist violence, with 14 % of those incidents occurring in Finland, again the highest figure. Young respondents were more likely to report harassment, with the risk decreasing with age. Skin colour was the most common reason for discrimination, followed by ethnic origin. Discrimination was also reported based on religion or belief. Few respondents reported their experiences to any organisation, despite knowing that discrimination is illegal (FRA, 2019).

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that discrimination in Finland occurs based on skin colour, ethnic origin, and religion or belief. Discrimination related to language and language skills is also possible. In Tampere's early childhood education and care, children learn Finnish, and support is provided for learning their home languages, for example by language assistants. Discrimination based on linguistic background or skills may occur, which is why it is especially important for early childhood educators to highlight the group's linguistic diversity in everyday activities. For example, birthday songs can be sung in all the languages spoken by children in the group. Early childhood educators in Tampere are expected to be equipped to promote language-aware pedagogy and cultural diversity. Their competence is supported through training, supplementary materials developed in projects, and the use of the LangPeda assessment tool.

Finally, it is essential to recognise that, in line with the principles of inclusion, everyone must have equal rights. In early childhood education and care, the principles of inclusion require that every child is treated equally and without discrimination. When examining diversity, we must remember that it is not limited to specific groups, such as families with immigrant backgrounds – diversity exists within all of us. Every family has its own traditions, culture, and dialect. A global challenge in early childhood education and care is to ensure the inclusive treatment and welcoming of every child and family into the service. Every child deserves a pedagogical and safe learning environment.

8. Quality, evaluation and professionalism in ECEC services

Debates and challenges in Tampere

Tanja Moisala, Ulla Niskanen, Pia Kuisma

8.1 The role of quality and evaluation in ECEC services in Tampere. Justification from the SWOT analysis

In this chapter, we examine quality evaluation in early childhood education and care at various levels, from the national to the individual daycare centre, before concluding with assessments made by children and families. Quality is defined in the national regulation of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (504/2018) and the national core curriculum for early childhood education and care set by the Finnish National Agency for Education (2022). National guidelines for early childhood education and care aim to create equal conditions for every child to participate in ECEC and to grow, develop, and learn. The principles of early childhood education and care in Finland include equality, equal rights, non-discrimination, appreciation of diversity, community, and social inclusion (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). ECEC in Finland is known for its high quality.

Until 2025, the early childhood education and care plan in Finland had been three-tiered, consisting of the national core curriculum for early childhood education and care, local ECEC curricula and the child's individual early childhood education and care plan. The purpose of the regulations is to ensure quality and equality in early childhood education and care throughout Finland (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). Private sector operators also follow the national core curriculum for ECEC. On 1st January 2025, the Finnish government enacted a legislative amendment stating that local curricula are no longer required. Early childhood education and care providers can still create local early childhood education and care curricula,

but they are not mandatory (5.12.2024/700). The legislative amendment may have potential impacts on the quality of early childhood education and care. As the change has only just come into effect, it is currently difficult to assess its impact. For the time being, Tampere will continue to draft the local curriculum for early childhood education and care despite the legislative change.

In Finland, The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is responsible for the national evaluation of education and early childhood education and care. The evaluation centre's scope covers the entire education system, from early childhood education and care to higher education. In the context of early childhood education and care, FINEEC's task is to conduct national external evaluations of early childhood education and care. FINEEC also supports the implementation of statutory self-assessment by municipal and private service providers (FINEEC, 2025).

FINEEC maintains the digital national quality evaluation system for ECEC, Valssi. Valssi is part of the national early childhood education and care framework and has been in use in all ECEC activities since August 2023. The quality evaluation system is based on research-based digital assessment forms. Through these forms, it is possible to collect information, report collected data and publish statutory evaluation results. Municipal or private early childhood education and care service providers can use tools provided by Valssi to assess core processes and structures supporting early childhood education and care services. The surveys in Valssi are conducted by ECEC centre managers, who are responsible for the progress of the assessment process in their unit. Managers send the forms to the staff and support them at different stages of the process. Together with the staff, managers examine the strengths and development areas of the assessed entity. Based on the results, they create a development plan and monitor its progress. The surveys are answered by ECEC staff responsible for education and teaching (FINEEC, 2025). In Tampere, Valssi has been used to evaluate aspects related to support for the child and play.

The purpose of activity evaluation is to support the development of early childhood education and care and the implementation of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care and the national core curriculum for ECEC (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). In Finland, national supervision and guidance for early childhood education and care are also provided by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Finnish National Agency

for Education, Valvira, and regional state administrative agencies (Vlasov et al., 2018). Quality evaluation is comprehensive and accompanies all early childhood education and care activities.

According to the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018), the purpose of evaluation in Finnish ECEC is to ensure the implementation of the law, support the development of activities, and promote the conditions for children's well-being, learning, and development. Early childhood education and care providers and organisers must evaluate the services they provide and participate in external evaluations of their activities. The law requires the publication of key results from assessments (the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018). In Tampere, early childhood education and care evaluation is carried out at multiple levels. The implementation of the early childhood education and care plan is monitored based on quality factors and indicators set by FINEEC, as well as the evaluation and quality management handbook for early childhood education and care and pre-primary education in Tampere. Each early childhood education and care unit evaluates its own activities following the principles of continuous developmental evaluation (The City of Tampere Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2022).

The quality of early childhood education and care is evaluated at each ECEC unit through the creation of each group's pedagogical plans. The group's pedagogical plan is a tool used to evaluate, plan, and develop the implementation of pedagogical activities. Children participate in the assessment in the daily life of the group. Assessments are also conducted regularly in weekly team meetings of the staff. The early childhood education and care teacher is responsible for the content and updating of each group's pedagogical plan. The plan is created in the fall at the beginning of the operational period. The plan is evaluated, and its contents are developed throughout the operational period. Pedagogical documentation is a central method in early childhood education and care, enabling children and guardians to participate in the development and planning of activities. Staff observations, feedback from guardians and children, joint discussions, and assessments are considered when working on the plan (The City of Tampere Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2022).

The group's pedagogical plan takes into consideration each child's individual early childhood education and care plan. This practice assures that

group's pedagogical activities are chosen to meet the needs and goals of that specific group. The national core curriculum for ECEC establishes the foundation for the City of Tampere's curriculum, on which common practices and pedagogical activities in ECEC in Tampere are based. Evaluation in ECEC is based on the group's pedagogical plan as well as each child's individual early childhood education and care plan.

When drawing an individual early childhood education and care plan for each child, it is important to know the child's strengths, interests, individual needs, and skills. The child's linguistic, worldview, and cultural background are also considered. Any previously created individual ECEC plans or pedagogical documentation for the child can be used when creating the new plan. This plan serves as a tool for evaluating and planning activities (The City of Tampere Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2022). The foundation for evaluating and observing the child's development is formed by monitoring the child's developmental areas. Observations are documented, considering strengths and areas needing support (Kivijärvi, 2020). Ideally, pedagogical documentation functions as an active tool that drives and guides pedagogy forward (Vlasov et al., 2018). In Finland, early childhood education and care activities are built around group-level pedagogical plans and the child's individual early childhood education and care plan.

The operational culture of early childhood education and care affects its quality and is shaped by historical and cultural factors, as well as by interaction with the surrounding community. In Finland, the foundation for developing the operational culture of ECEC is inclusive, where every child is given the possibility to function, learn, and develop as a member of the community and as an individual (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). According to Vlasov and colleagues (2018), inclusive early childhood education and care also have an impact on children who do not receive any kind of extra support.

In early childhood education and care, each unit forms its own operational culture based on the national one. Leadership has a central impact on the development and quality of the culture. The starting point for leadership in ECEC in Finland is to promote the learning and well-being of every child. The planned pedagogical leadership of the operational culture creates good working conditions for staff, as well as opportunities for professional development and training (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022).

According to Kivijärvi (2020), the quality of early childhood education and care is based on the good educational competence of educators. Educational competence consists of the ability to see goals, contents, and methods that promote the child's development, well-being, and learning. The individual needs of each child guide the contents, methods, and goals used. The child's interests, strengths, and support needs are considered in the activities. The educator must critically assess their own activities and adapt and change them as needed (Kivijärvi, 2020).

In Tampere, annual surveys are conducted and directed at early childhood education and care staff and children's parents. The early childhood education and care customer experience survey is conducted once a year. The survey is distributed through the electronic eVaka system to guardians using municipal early childhood education and care services. The questionnaire was sent by email to other providers of ECEC to be forwarded to customers. In Tampere, private ECEC units provide services in addition to municipal ones. The City of Tampere also has agreements with some service voucher and purchased service ECEC units. The survey is divided into five different sections, which include background information, the child's early childhood education and care plan, the operational culture of early childhood education and care, interaction with staff, and the development of activities and the smoothness of transactions.

The questions address, for example, parents' perceptions of what constitutes a good day for the child in early childhood education and care, bullying prevention, and the development of cooperation between families and early childhood education and care. In the 2024 survey, most of the responding parents rated the early childhood education and care services in Tampere as successful in their task with a score of 4. The scale for this question ranged from 5 to 1, with 5 indicating services that exceeded expectations and 1 indicating services that did not meet expectations at all.

In Tampere, the quality survey for ECEC staff is distributed via email each year. The staff survey addresses the start of early childhood education and care, the child's early childhood education and care plan, the operational culture of early childhood education and care, interaction between staff and children, the development of activities, and the smoothness of transactions. Some questions in the surveys directed at staff and parents are included in both surveys. This allows for comparison of the views of staff and parents.

In Tampere, efforts have been made to standardise the quality of early childhood education and care by providing staff with induction training. Training sessions cover basic learning materials created by the city regarding the daily routines in ECEC centres. The material describes the basic routines of an ECEC day, including mealtimes and sleep. ECEC teachers, known as 'vasu-agents', distribute the material to each ECEC unit. They provide peer support to ECEC centres regarding the quality and practices of early childhood education and care. The training material is designed for both experienced staff and unqualified substitutes, with the content of the material being suitable for all levels of experience. Increasing training and induction aims to achieve consistent quality in early childhood education and care. A good induction has a positive impact on the employer's image and benefits recruitment and retention.

8.2 Political, institutional and pedagogical dimension ECEC services quality and evaluation in relation to the EDUFIRST debates

In Finland, the subjective right to ECEC guarantees a child's access to early childhood education and care regardless of the parents' employment status. In 2016, the Finnish government restricted the subjective right to ECEC, allowing municipalities to limit a child's right to early childhood education and care to 20 hours per week, for example, for children of unemployed parents. In 2019, the government repealed this restriction, and the subjective right to ECEC was restored to cover all children of early childhood education and care age. The subjective right to ECEC ensures equality for children, regardless of their family's situation or their parents' employment status (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019). The restriction of the subjective right to daycare has been part of public political debate in recent years. When parents book unnecessary ECEC days for their children, it creates unnecessary staffing costs.

According to studies by the OECD, participation in early childhood education and care has positive effects on a child's development. Participation in ECEC has been shown to be linked to the success of 15-year-olds in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test, which measures key skills. According to the OECD, children who have attended at least one

year of early childhood education and care perform better in the PISA test than children who have not attended early childhood education and care (OECD, 2020). ECEC has a particularly positive impact on the academic success of children from an immigrant background. According to the 2022 PISA results, the connection between the family's socio-economic background and children's skills has strengthened. The differences in the results between boys and girls from an immigrant background are greater than those in the native population (Pulkkinen et al., 2024).

Legislation on ECEC reflects the prevailing views and values in society regarding upbringing, care, and education. These concepts then influence the development and guidance of early childhood education and care (Vlasov et al., 2018). The need for ECEC services is increasing in Tampere as the number of children from different cultural backgrounds grows. In order for children to perform well in their future studies, it is important that they participate in high-quality ECEC. If the main goal of education in ECEC and primary school education is to produce 'high-quality' students, then ECEC services have a significant impact on this. It is important to consider the purpose of ECEC and education, and whether its primary goal is economic benefit or general education and social integration. Vlasov and her colleagues (2018) highlight the significant educational role of early childhood education and care, which promotes children's development into full members of society. The key question is how the services we provide meet the new needs set for them in a changing world.

8.3 Professionalisation in Tampere's ECEC services: current reality and future challenges

In 2023, 60 % of the staff working in early childhood education and care in Tampere were child carers in early childhood education and care, 38 % were early childhood education and care teachers, and 2 % were social pedagogues in early childhood education and care. In Finland, the Early childhood education and care Act (540/2018) sets the ratios to be followed in early childhood education and care, which determine the staff structure.

To become an early childhood education and care teacher, one must study for a three-year bachelor's degree in education at a university. The studies include practical training periods, which are carried out in ECEC centres.

Master's degree in education (typically lasting 2 years) qualifies an individual to work as a manager of an early childhood education and care unit and to work with developmental tasks in education (such as in administrational tasks). While working in a child group in ECEC, the teacher carries the main responsibility for pedagogical planning and implementation of pedagogical activities in accordance with the plans.

Social pedagogues (ECEC) are also employed in early childhood education and care. Their main tasks include educational and teaching duties in child groups, cooperation with families and communities, and developing the community's operational culture. A social pedagogue in ECEC uses social pedagogical judgement in daily care, education, and teaching situations. However, these tasks are not classified as care and welfare. Social pedagogues in ECEC have special expertise in areas such as early childhood education and care, social services systems, and legislation. In the work community, social pedagogues in early childhood education and care lead and coordinate network cooperation, consult with other professionals in the work community, and are responsible for developing the community's operational culture and preventing bullying (Talentia, 2024). It is possible to study to become a social pedagogue in early childhood education and care at a university of applied sciences. The training typically lasts 3.5 years.

In addition to social pedagogues and teachers, ECEC in Tampere also employs child carers in early childhood education and care. The work of a child carer includes planning, implementing, and evaluating activities. Child carers collaborate with guardians to support the well-being of families. Qualified child carers include individuals who have completed a vocational qualification in education and guidance or vocational qualification in social and health care (practical nurse) (SuPer, 2022). There are also assistants working in early childhood education and care in Tampere. An assistant works in a group either as a personal assistant for a child or as a group assistant. Assistants are not counted and are not included in the number of the educational staff required by the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018). Therefore, assistants are not responsible for a group of children but instead support one or more children who need additional support. In Finland, there is no legally mandated educational requirement for assistants, but it is possible to undertake training to become one (JHL, 2022).

According to a study conducted by the Regional State Administrative Agency in 2024, 20 % of the people working in early childhood education and care in Finland are unqualified. Due to the prevailing teacher shortage in the field, a child carer in early childhood education and care often fills the position of a missing teacher. In January 2025, there were 71 unqualified early childhood education and care teachers and 127 unqualified child carers in early childhood education and care working in Tampere. In total, there are 622 ECEC teachers and 956 child carers in ECEC working in Tampere.

According to the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018), by 2030, two-thirds of ECEC staff must be qualified as either teachers or social pedagogues, with at least half being qualified as teachers (ECEC). Other staff must have at least the qualifications of a child carer (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018). Based on the staffing structure in early childhood education and care in Tampere, the city will require an additional 550 early childhood education teachers or social pedagogues by 2030. The number of child carers needed will decrease by 550 employees (Tampere City Region, 2023).

Over the next ten years (2024–2033), 25.5 % of the teachers and 26.2 % of the child carers working in municipal early childhood education and care will retire (Keva, 2023). The retirement of large age groups and changes in the staff structure pose significant recruitment needs for the field, particularly for teachers. According to Keva's 2021 analysis, there is a shortage of approximately 4,000 early childhood education and care teachers in Finland.

In 2023, the Finnish government set out a goal in its government programme to significantly increase the number of starting places for early childhood education and care teachers at universities. According to the government programme, 1,400 new early childhood education and care teachers must be trained each year. The goal is also to strengthen the reputation and retention of the field by improving working conditions and ensuring the availability of conversion and multi-form training. The programme also includes additional training for immersion teachers (Finnish Government, 2023). Efforts have been made to address the teacher shortage by increasing the number of students at universities and offering conversion training. However, increasing the number of study places does not guarantee the resolution of the teacher shortage unless the reputation and retention of the field are improved.

In Tampere, efforts have been made to make the field more attractive by significantly improving salaries during 2023–2024. Recruitment efforts have been enhanced by renewing job advertisements and increasing marketing. A direct selection process has been introduced as an additional method of recruitment. This process allows a temporary employee who performs excellently to be hired permanently. The career path model has been strongly implemented in Tampere, with the employer encouraging and enabling staff to study while working, offering paid contact teaching days, among other things. Efforts have been made to improve the induction of new staff, including utilising the work contribution of the 'vasu-agents'. As mentioned in the previous chapter, 'vasu-agents' are early childhood education and care teachers working in Tampere who visit ECEC centres to provide pedagogical support. Efforts have also been made to provide mentoring for new teachers working in pre-primary education.

8.4 Conclusions, evaluation, quality, and future challenges

In Tampere, as well as throughout Finland, early childhood education and care providers follow the national core curriculum for ECEC. The purpose of this regulation is to ensure quality and equality in ECEC across the country (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). Based on the national core curriculum and the city's strategy, Tampere prepares its own local curriculum. In Finland, the national evaluation of early childhood education and care is the responsibility of the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC).

FINEEC maintains the digital quality evaluation system for ECEC, Valssi. Valssi has been in use in all ECEC activities since 2023 (FINEEC, 2025). In Tampere, Valssi has been used to evaluate aspects related to support for the child and play. The purpose of activity evaluation is to support the development of early childhood education and care and the implementation of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care and the national core curriculum for ECEC (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022).

Each early childhood education and care unit evaluates its own activities following the principles of continuous developmental evaluation. Quality assessment is part of the daily structure of ECEC through pedagogical planning. Each ECEC group has its own pedagogical plan. This plan is used as a

tool to plan, develop, and evaluate pedagogical activities. The participation of children and families is essential in the evaluation process (The City of Tampere curriculum for early childhood education and care, 2022). In Finland, each child has an individual early childhood education and care plan. This plan is used in the preparation of the group's pedagogical plan.

The occasionally hectic working environment in early childhood education and care can make evaluation challenging. Changing situations, a sense of urgency, noise, staff absences, and stressful circumstances can hinder the implementation of pedagogical documentation. According to Paananen (2017), quality measurement is often linked to accountability. If early childhood education and care is seen as an investment, it can be difficult to ensure that the investment has produced the expected outcomes. First, it is necessary to define what is meant by high-quality ECEC. In Finland, early childhood education and care is considered to have several societal functions, such as supporting the child's holistic development, learning and well-being as well as promoting educational and gender equality, and guiding children towards an ethically responsible and sustainable way of living. Another societal function of early childhood education and care is enabling guardians to study or work (Paananen, 2017). Thus, when examining quality, a common understanding of what quality is and what goals are set, must be formed.

Each ECEC centre manager is responsible for the centre's operations, effectiveness, and quality. In Tampere, some ECEC centres implement a shared leadership model, where two managers work together within the same centre. In these cases, one ECEC manager is responsible for pedagogical leadership, which includes the development of teaching, education, and learning environments. The other manager focuses on staff management, such as recruitment, staff well-being, work shifts, and other administrative tasks.

To ensure that ECEC managers have the time and resources to lead the centre effectively, the number and size of centres must be manageable. Each early childhood education and care centre in Tampere also has an assistant manager, and if necessary (depending on the size and number of units), several assistant managers. Reducing the number of ECEC centres per manager requires additional resources, as this requires hiring new managers. Tampere has aimed to reduce the number of ECEC centres overseen by each manager, but limited financial resources may challenge this goal moving forward. ECEC managers perceive leadership as involving human relations,

financial management, and administrative duties, as shown in Rytkönen's (2019) research. According to this research, study participants identified leading people as the most important aspect of leadership. It was also seen as the most challenging and time-consuming part of the role. The rapid pace of work in early childhood education and care, combined with performance expectations and continuous change, makes leadership increasingly demanding. The city can support managers by keeping the number and size of ECEC centres manageable, helping to prevent excessive workloads. It's also essential to provide opportunities for further education and peer collaboration.

According to Kivijärvi (2020) strong educational competence among educators has a direct impact on the quality of early childhood education and care. Educators must be able to critically reflect on their own practices and make adjustments when necessary. Pedagogical activities in early childhood education and care should be guided by the child's strengths, individual learning needs, and interests.

Following the legislative amendment introduced in the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018), by 2030 at least two-thirds of ECEC staff must be qualified as teachers or social pedagogues, with at least half having the qualification of a teacher in ECEC. To meet this requirement, the city will require approximately 550 additional ECEC teachers or social pedagogues (ECEC) by 2030.

The Finnish government has significantly increased the number of study places for early childhood education and care teacher training, with around 1,400 new professionals graduating each year (Finnish Government, 2023). However, simply increasing study places does not solve the teacher shortage if graduates leave the profession. Some students already switch fields during their studies. For many, the workload in ECEC may come as a surprise, which can lead to reconsidering their career path. University admissions could place greater emphasis on applicants' prior experience working with children and their understanding of early childhood education and care. This would help ensure that selected students are more familiar with the field and its practical realities. However, previous work experience is not a formal requirement for those applying to become ECEC teachers.

According to Koivusalo, Alasuutari, and Ruutiainen (2024), early childhood education and care teacher students perceived suitability for the profession was positively linked to their sense of pedagogical expertise. The more

strongly students felt they were suited to the field, the more confident they were that their pedagogical competence had grown during their studies. In addition, ECEC teachers who believed in their ability to succeed in their studies and acquire the necessary skills, rated their group management, self-regulation, assessment, and teaching abilities more highly. To support smooth collaboration in child groups and professional communities, teamwork and group management skills should be actively practiced during teacher education (Koivusalo, Alasuutari and Ruutiainen, 2024).

According to Kupila and Karila (2018), peer mentoring is particularly beneficial for new ECEC teachers. It offers valuable support in building professional identity and developing pedagogical practices, while also promoting occupational well-being. Mentoring can enhance both the professional growth and job satisfaction of newly qualified teachers, making its development in Tampere well justified. In addition, effective mentoring practices may positively influence recruitment and induction processes.

Families' expectations and needs regarding early childhood education and care have changed significantly over time. While the essence of childhood remains unchanged, the demands placed on services continue to evolve. Today's families value flexibility in education hours, among other things, and changes can occur unexpectedly. This shift raises an important question: how can ECEC services effectively respond to the diverse and individual needs of families?

It is essential to consider how staff can be supported through training and development to meet the evolving demands of early childhood education and care. The growing role of digitalisation, the use of artificial intelligence, environmental awareness, and the shift toward sustainable lifestyles, together with inclusion and multiculturalism, challenge the professionalism of educators. Unequal access to continuing education among staff remains a challenge, and solutions are still being sought. As the future becomes more complex and unpredictable, the need for continuous learning in ECEC is growing rapidly. Although the exact challenges ahead are not yet fully known, it is essential to begin preparing for them and to seek solutions as soon as possible.

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