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Tuscan Approach Learning for
Early childhood education and care

TALE

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TUSCAN APPROACH LEARNING FOR EARLY
CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE
activities, results and perspectives

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VIDEO

the *Tuscan Approach* to children's education
an experience open to dialogue

Edited by

Aldo Fortunati and Arianna Pucci

Link to following Url to download the Video

<http://www.>

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Summary

07 Preface

Alessandra Maggi

09 Introduction

Aldo Fortunati

13 The *Tuscan Approach* to childhood education and the TALE project

The *Tuscan Approach* to children's education: an experience open to dialogue

Aldo Fortunati

The TALE project in the frame of the EU policy for education and training
Toni Compagno

The *Tuscan Approach* issues in the International case review
Clara Maria Silva, Enrica Freschi, Paola Caselli

Supporting the transfer of innovations
Mihaela Ionescu

83 TALE: the experimentation in the Partner Countries

Meetings with families and other things. Activities, results and perspectives from the experimentation in Bulgaria

Emil Buzov

Suggestions for the ambience and other things. Activities, results and perspectives from the experimentation in Slovenia

Mateja Rezek

Education and training for all and other things. Activities, results and perspectives from the experimentation in Lithuania

Regina Sabaliauskiene

127 Final results and perspectives

Contributions, reflections, and new perspectives of mutual learning

Aldo Fortunati

Lilia Bottigli

Alba Cortecci

Donatella Giovannini

Theresa Heeney

Anke van Keulen

Lourdes Pérez Pérez

Lúcia Santos

Gloria Tognetti

Mathias Urban



Preface

Child education is not of central interest to the politicians, although it is clear that the children themselves would allow us to design our future as a project open to possibilities, instead of being stuck into the everyday problems.

So, even though the economists tell us that investing in the early years is a marker to predict the future economic development and well-being of our societies and communities, the policymakers are not forward-looking enough to realize it and the education services - especially those for the youngest - are floating in between an assistance-approach and the lack of a clear identification of the education as a child's right.

The early years education and care services are still few, and they are not yet clearly recognizable as services where the education and the care are complementary, so that both the simple assistance-approach and the early inclusion in the school education are abandoned.

In this context, the *Tuscan Approach* to children's education is interesting - we think - because it demonstrates that three of the following elements - which are not always linked - can be well balanced:

- . a clear and durable policy commitment in the field of child education;
- . updated and accurate pedagogical research;
- . an active and constructive involvement of the local resources in developing the experiences.

With *TALE*, this experience is at the centre of an exchange and innovation project, which brings together the Istituto degli Innocenti of Florence and other organizations from Bulgaria, Lithuania and Slovenia. We are all following a path together, reflecting and learning mutually about the quality of the education and care services for children.

From this point of view the *Tuscan Approach* - exactly as an approach, not a model - can be seen as an opportunity to reflect on what are the indispensable conditions for building quality in the services for children and families.

Alessandra Maggi
President
Istituto degli Innocenti

Introduction

by Aldo Fortunati

Knowing, knowing-how and behaving are the three constituents of the professional competence which can be spent in any organization.

This applies especially in the sectors of personal services, where the human factor is the main ingredient of quality, as opposed to the technological sectors.

Training is always seen as a promising activity to support professional development, in the perspective of permanent learning organizations. This implies integration between work practices and reflection within a framework of exchange and comparison between different experiences.

The TALE project has made a bet exactly upon this: it puts the traditional research-action approach together with an exchange of experiences, set in a European trans-national context.

In this sense, the *Tuscan Approach* should not be seen as a model or a good practice to be repeated in other contexts. Rather, an opportunity to reflect on some important "markers" of the quality in the early childhood education services: space as a resource; the open curriculum; family education and participation; continuous training and learning; *governance*.

After the kick-off meeting in November 2013, we had three workshops:

- . one in Vratsa, Bulgaria, from 6 to 8 March 2014;
- . one in Ljubljana from 10 to 12 April 2014;
- . one in Vilnius from 15 to 17 May 2014.

In these meetings, after introducing the *Tuscan Approach*, we dedicated a long time to the presentation of the local experience and started to reflect on possible lines of innovations.

A training module in Tuscany in November 2014 gathered together 21 educators, managers and pedagogues from Bulgaria, Slovenia and Lithuania, bringing them to meet with Tuscan experts, professionals and educators from the Istituto degli Innocenti, from the University of Florence and from the Municipalities of Florence, Livorno, Pistoia and San Miniato.

The training module took one week, from Monday 10 to Saturday 15 November 2014. After a general introduction, specific sessions were dedicated to 5 thematic issues.



The *Governance* and the *Training* were dealt with in seminars organized by the Istituto degli Innocenti and the University Department of Education Sciences. The pedagogical issues were addressed with the involvement of some of the most representative municipal experiences in Tuscany:

- . Pistoia raised the issue *Spaces*;
- . San Miniato tackled the *Curriculum*;
- . Livorno spoke for *Family education and participation*.

Space, which has recently come to the attention of pedagogy, is undoubtedly a key quality factor in the early years education services. Not only does the organization of materials reflect an educational awareness, but it also provides a basis for an active protagonism of the children in their path of experience, relationships and learning.

Exactly this kind of protagonism is the fulcrum around which an open and flexible curriculum can be built up, where the provision of rich and generous opportunities can stand against any inappropriate result-oriented and school-like approaches.

Lastly, families are not only to be acknowledged as actors in the development of the education services, but also as potential beneficiaries of the opportunities of socialization and exchange of experiences, which is bound to support the security and awareness of the parental role, while remaining at the center the children's needs.

At the end of the week of learning each Country Partner Team discussed internally about making a workplan for some innovations and experimentations to be undertaken in the year ahead.



Finally, an important International workshop allowed an extension in the debate and exchange of experiences, starting from the *Tuscan Approach*, then involving professionals and experts from Tuscany and elsewhere, such as from Livorno, Pistoia, and San Miniato.

Many suggestions and tips were offered to make the project continue in 2015.

The ISTITUTO degli INNOCENTI as project leader has implemented the website where the project documentation is hosted; a video on the *Tuscan Approach* is published in many languages: in Italian and English; in Bulgarian, Slovenian, Lithuanian for the dissemination in the Partner countries; then in French, Spanish and Portuguese for a wider circulation.

The Department of Education Sciences of the University of Florence is finalizing a specific research to set the *Tuscan Approach* principles and contents within the International literature about quality education services for children.

The Partners from Bulgaria, Slovenia, Lithuania, with the coordination of the International Step by Step Association, are committed to document their experimentation, by producing material to be published on the website.

This volume, containing the main documents that present the various activities completed, proposes a final evaluation, indicating possible perspectives for their further development, also through the commentaries by the Tuscan and European operators who were present at the final, international meeting held in Florence on 4th September 2015.

The new edition of the video on the Tuscan educational services' experiences, which is an integral part of the book, is intended to provide inspiration and the hope that the *Tuscan Approach* may also in the future inspire exchanges and reflections about the different experiences, to improve the quality of the childhood educational services.



The *Tuscan Approach*
to childhood education
and the *TALE* project



"The dissemination of the Tuscan Approach seems very helpful and appropriate to us, over any egocentric regionalism, because we are convinced that the Tuscan early years education services are a precious good, issued by a forward-looking policy, characterized by the professed will to promote the democracy also through the children's education experiences"

Enzo Catarsi



The *Tuscan Approach* to children's education: an experience open to dialogue

by Aldo Fortunati

Introduction

Although there are many reasons for recalling the twentieth century for its history of shame – let's think of the wars and the persecutions, and their impact on the lives of the children – it is meaningful that at the conclusion of that century the United Nations approved a document formally stating for the first time the capacity of the child to be recognized as a person. The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child¹, which has been ratified by more than 200 countries, is a landmark of our capacity to consider the children as legal actors.

1. The United Nations' 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child

Nevertheless, although many economists have recently explained that investing in the early years of life has a clear effect on the economy and on the well-being of our societies, international reports² say that in the rich countries such investments are often inadequate, not to mention what happens in the poorer countries, where other priorities are set on the agenda (Figure 1).

Claiming the children's right to education by statement of principles has far to go before moving to deeds.

If we zoom in on Europe, we welcome those recent EU policy documents³ affirming the importance of promoting the education services for young children as a key element of social inclusion, and also – mainly – as the acknowledgement that education is a right of all children, and a primary issue on the public agenda.

Nonetheless, in this case the words do not match the facts. Especially when we talk about the youngest children, it turns out that the distribution of the education services⁴ is rather uneven (Figure 2), as is the educational quality of the facilities open to children and families.

Italy is not an exception in this respect, standing in an intermediate position in the comparative international statistics (same Figure 2), and presenting in the meantime many differentiations in the levels of accessibility and availability of such education services within the Country and across the Regions.

In this context, Tuscany has a privileged position. The 33% target in the early years education services coverage rate is achieved and consolidated, not by chance but as a result of a couple of converging factors which have been acting in synergy in the last decades.



The Tuscan Region's policy awareness and continuity in this field has positively matched the activism of the local municipalities.

This has enhanced an original pedagogical thinking and practice, which has grown lively by connecting the public and private resources into a network of education services, and by actively involving the families. These are the very ingredients of what we have started to call the *Tuscan Approach* to child education.

2. Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators (2014)
3. Communication from the Commission "ECEC: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow" (2011/66/EU)
4. Key Data on early childhood education and care in Europe, Eurydice and Eurostat Report (2014)

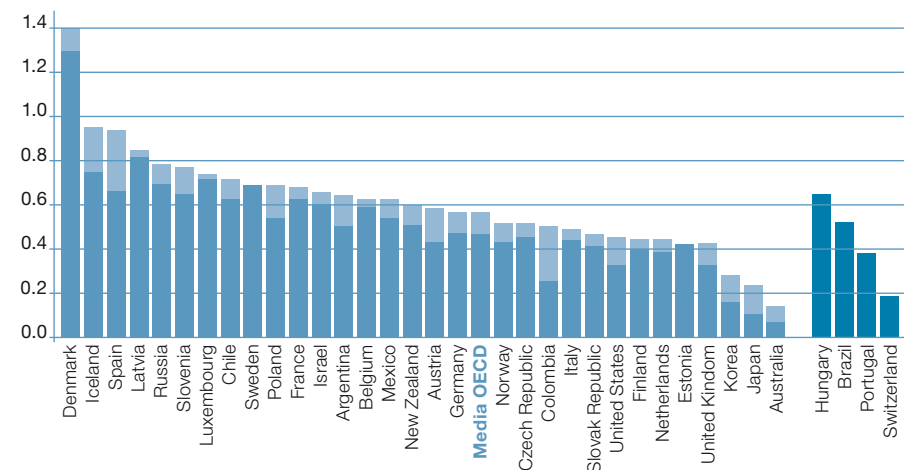
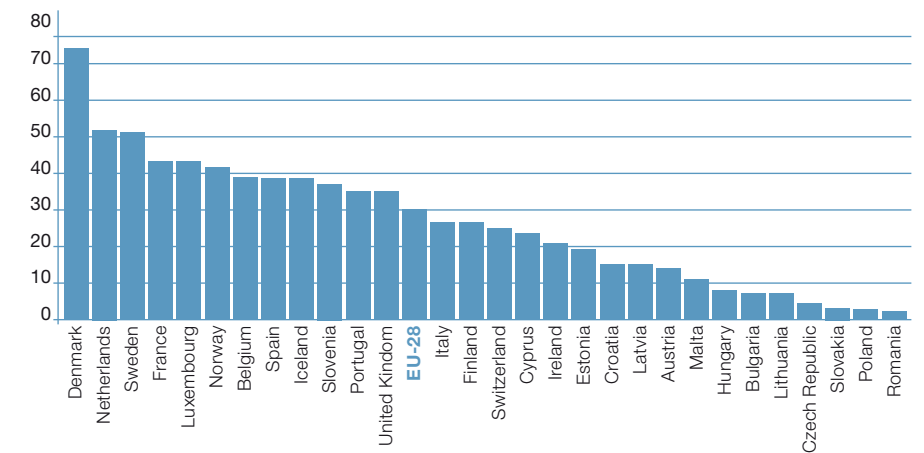


Figure 1
Expenditure on early childhood educational institutions as a percentage of GDP (2011)
Source OECD (2013)

Figure 2
Participation rates of children under the age of 3 in ECEC (2011)



Some data on the situation in Italy

Childhood policies have never had an easy life. In Italy – as in many other countries – they are part of broader social policies, which have been developed in differentiated ways in the local territories.

Although Italian law n.1044/1971⁵ instituting the early years education and care services envisaged a balanced implementation all over the Country, today we are still in front of a multifaceted framework of investments by regions and municipalities, within a quite inadequate policy initiative at national level.

In fact, the Infant schools (attended by children from three to six) are widely spread all over the Country. This is due partly to State intervention in the field since the end of the nineteen sixties⁶, when the service provisions which were already there at that time by initiative of the municipalities and of private religious bodies were reinforced, covering up to 2/3 of the overall supply.

On the other side, the services for children from 0 to 3 could not count on a similar action plan and commitment from the State. Therefore, today the situations are diverse according to the activism of the Regions and the local territories. Another part – not very relevant – of the early years education system is represented by the so-called "integrative services": play centres, centres for children and families, services at home; whereas more important is the "early schooling" option⁷, by which children under three may be accepted in the Infant schools.

Early schooling is particularly important in the South, where it provides an alternative to the very scarce number of Nidi (infant schools)⁸.

5. Law 6/12/1971 n. 1044, Five-Year Plan for the establishment of NIDI cofunded by the State.

6. Law 18/3/1968, n. 444, Regulation of the State Infant school. The data presented in these figures come from ISTAT (2013)

7. The Law n. 53/2003 had already provided the possibility for the children completing the third year by the month of April to be admitted to an Infant school. The implementation of this law had been restricted to children completing the third year of age by the month of February. After being applied for the last time in the education year 2007-2008, this provision had been then abrogated by the finance bill (Law n. 297/2006).

Finally the "anticipation" has been reintroduced by later regulations (D.P.R. n. 89 /2009) and has started again with the education year 2009-10.

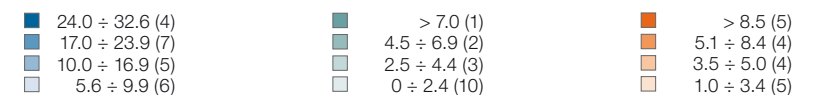
8. The data presented in this paragraph come from Rapporto di monitoraggio del Piano nidi al 31 dicembre 2013, <http://www.minori.it/minori/rapporto-di-monitoraggio-del-piano-nidi-al-31-dicembre-2013>



Figure 3a
Percentage of infant schools, according to management:



Figure 3b
Places in the Nidi children 0 to 2
Places in the complementary services children 0 to 2
"Anticipators" in the Infant schools children 0 to 2





Generally speaking, while the infant school is potentially universal, the early years education services are available to one child out of four in the Centre-North, and to less than one child out of ten in the South, where the children under three have the only alternative of attending an "early" education service in an Infant school (Figure 4). This solution hardly meets the very specific needs connected to the child's age - let's only think of the high children-adults standard ratios, or of the adequate care setting for the youngest, which is unlikely to be found in the infant schools.

If we look at the different opportunities of access according to the children's age (Figure 5), we can note that these are effective for the children over three, and largely guaranteed to the children in the third year, while still available to one child out of five in the second year, and less than one child out of ten in the first year.

9. A bill (n. 1260) is under discussion in the Italian Parliament concerning "Provisions on an integrated education system from birth to six, and equal learning opportunities for the children".

Attempts at reforms were also launched in the past, aimed to coordinate and harmonize the services across the Country. Unfortunately, the lack of unity and continuity in the political impulse, together with the budget constraints, have resulted in little impact⁹.

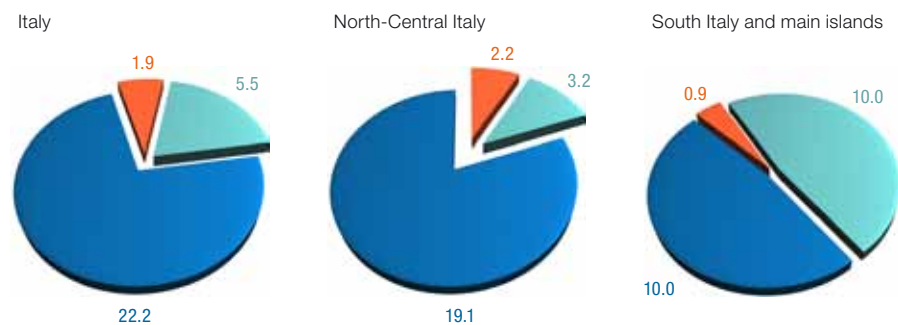
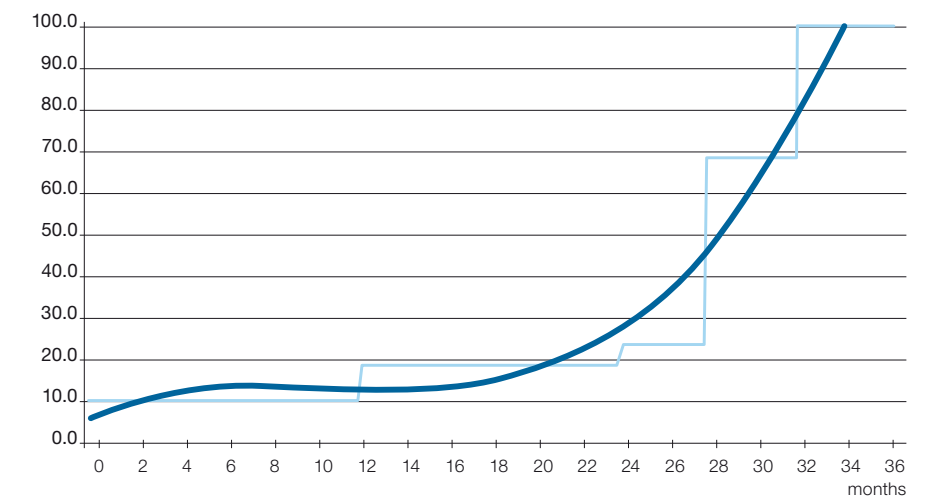


Figure 4
Cover rates according to macro-area for children 0-2.
■ nidi
■ complementary services
■ "anticipators"

Figure 5
Coverage percentage of education services, according to age in the 0-2 years



The tuscan case: a privileged experience

The Tuscan network of early years education services (Figure 6) gives an opportunity to one child out of three, thus performing at the top ranks in comparison with the other Italian Regions¹⁰.

In addition to this quantitative achievement, the good policy coordination, its continuity and the intense commitment to planning and innovation have allowed Tuscany to become a quality benchmark.

In fact:

- First among the Italian Regions, Tuscany has issued legislation – dating back to the end of the nineteen nineties - which sets up the "integrated system of education services"¹¹. The main elements of this system – Nidi and integrative services - have been identified, and their characteristics have been defined: typologies of services, space standards, organization and qualification of the staff, easy and good collaboration between the public regulation and private entrepreneurship.
- Second, Tuscany has set rules about environmental standards, and has established models and guidelines aiming to implement the education services under principles of realistic economic sustainability¹²;
- Finally, the long-lasting investment on quality¹³ has pushed towards a general improvement and growing up in the service system. This has been realized through applying evaluation methods, continuous learning programmes for the educators, and setting up locally based managerial and pedagogical coordination functions.

10. The data presented in this paragraph come from the Report on Educational services for early childhood in Tuscany. Analysis and comments on the SIRIA information system data updated to 31.12.2014.pdf.

11. Tuscany Region Law n. 22 of 14 April 1999, "Interventi educativi per l'infanzia e gli adolescenti" (Education measures for children and adolescents), followed by Tuscany Region Law n. 32 of 26 July 2002 "Testo unico della normativa della Regione Toscana in materia di educazione, istruzione, orientamento, formazione professionale e lavoro", (digest of laws concerning education, instruction, mentoring, training and work, recently modified by law n. 2 of 23 January 2013., and later implementing regulations).

12. In this connection, we recall the "study of prototypes", as guidelines for the design of the early years education services, in Fumagalli, G., Masotti, F., Melograni, C., Catarsi, E., Fortunati, A., Galardini, A.L., Rauch, A., Servizi educativi per la prima infanzia: guida alla progettazione, Pisa, Plus, 2003.

13. After publishing "Guidelines for quality in the Nidi" in 1993, and an "Evaluation tool for quality in the Nidi" in 1998, the Tuscany Region issued in 2004, in collaboration with the Istituto degli Innocenti a new "Evaluation tool for quality in the Nidi and in the complementary services.



	Users/place			% Coverage 0-2 years
	Infant schools	Integrative services	Early schooling	
Piemonte	22,4	3,6	3,5	29,5
Valle d'Aosta	23,1	9,5	0,0	32,6
Lombardia	22,2	1,2	3,0	26,4
Liguria	23,0	2,2	4,3	29,5
North-west Italy	22,4	2,0	3,2	26,8
Provincia di Bolzano	10,7	5,4	-	16,1
Provincia di Trento	21,8	3,4	-	25,2
Veneto	19,9	1,4	4,3	25,6
Friuli Venezia Giulia	20,3	3,5	4,1	27,9
Emilia-Romagna	32,6	2,4	1,8	36,8
North west Italy	24,4	2,3	3,2	29,5
Toscana	28,3	3,9	3,3	35,5
Umbria	27,8	4,9	5,2	37,9
Marche	24,7	1,9	4,3	30,9
Lazio	14,5	1,5	3,2	19,2
Central Italy	20,8	2,5	3,5	26,8
Abruzzo	8,9	1,0	7,8	17,7
Molise	14,1	0,2	10,5	24,7
Campania	-	-	8,9	8,9
Puglia	13,7	1,7	15,4	30,8
Basilicata	12,5	0,0	9,2	21,7
Calabria	6,2	-	11,8	18,0
Sicilia	5,6	0,3	7,8	13,7
Sardegna	20,6	1,2	7,6	29,4
Southern Italy and the islands	10,0	0,9	10,0	21,3
Total	19,1	1,9	5,5	26,1

Figure 6
Coverage rates in the education services for children 0-2. Year 2012. Users in the Nidi and in the complementary services, and "early schooling" in the Infant schools at the date of 31/12/2013 as a percentage of the total population 0-2.



II *Tuscan Approach* to children's education: the fundamental elements

The *Tuscan Approach* has not to be considered just a model that has been applied in Tuscany. Rather, it should be seen as the composition of the most relevant crosscutting results coming from the varied and diverse experiences in the Tuscan early years education services.

In other words, some elements constitute the minimum standard, which can be found in most early years services. The following can be seen as shared lines founding the *Tuscan Approach*:

- . The importance of space design in the education setting
- . The effectiveness of an open and flexible curriculum
- . The acknowledgement of the families as co-actors in the education project

In the next chapter, the elements above will be rapidly reviewed. The video-DVD attached to this publication will also add an opportunity of visual comprehension.

Today, the public-private cooperation is a deeply rooted feature in the Tuscan experience (*Figure 7*), in a scenario where most of the private service providers – two out of three - are contracted by the Municipalities. Thus:

- . The access to the service is delivered after public selection;
- . The private providers may count on some business stability;
- . The fees are not too high and vary under equity principles.

This way, the pluralistic community of providers encounters a high-profile governance, including:

- . Setting the rules and standards (Region);
- . Budgeting and programming the system of services (Municipalities, with the support of the Regions);
- . Quality control, assistance and development (Municipalities, in the context of Regional rules and standards).

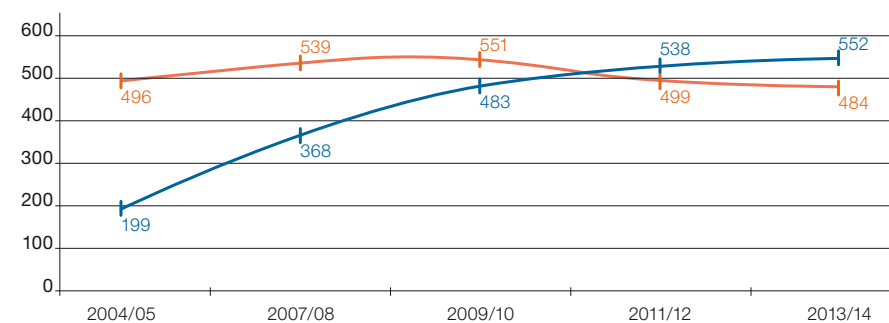


Figure 7
Early years education services,
according to ownership:
— public
— private



Space into relations

The idea of a space supporting constructively the child's experience belongs to the most recent pedagogical reflections, as long as these prove sensitive to offering the child stimuli and opportunities already within the education context and before the initiative of the single educator.

This kind of attention to sustaining the child's exploration, learning and relations via a good, warm and challenging environment embraces many options and choices at the adult's disposal, taking into account the children's age and the level of their autonomy.

It is important to say that the children's social competences can be better expressed when contained in the right dimension. In this sense, the section-group is the reference context that has to be hosted in a space with some peculiar characteristics: a space to get into relations, to carry out specific activities, also a space to have lunch, to have a nap, to receive care.

Therefore, a small group, accompanied by a sensitive and caring adult, is a social dimension that naturally takes shape, the best situation for supporting new relations, knowledge and learning.

In addition to the spaces for the section-groups, the education service should appreciate and valorize with opportunities the joint spaces, in order for them to be not only a transit area, rather a source for new experiences for the children, and confirming the concept of a space as a transparent net of immediately available chances.



With these premises, in Tuscany the space is an important term of reference for the interior design of the education services for young children. It makes them cozy, warm and beautiful for the children as well as for the adults, and immediately connoting the "good taste" of education and growing up.

As a matter of fact, in the *Tuscan Approach* the spaces must first of all be hospitable, and corresponding to the strong need in the early years of life for safety and affectivity. They have to sustain and encourage the wish to know and explore, and progressively allowing the children's enrichment, expanding their experiences, promoting their learning capabilities.

The children have to feel at their ease, safe and confident to move in an environment that is not their home, but which has soon to become familiar and be experienced actively, originally and ever more in autonomy. Therefore the feeling of a good reception has to be evident at first glance. It has to shine through the arrangement of the furniture, from the choice of the colours, from the materials at hand, from the attention to create corners for the moments of tranquillity. The children need spaces that respect their boundaries and favour the experimentation of their autonomy and their relations with the adults and the other children.

The outdoor spaces should be easily accessible and also visible from indoors. They are excellent places where the children are guided towards active and constructive explorations.

The workshops, as well, are settings where additional opportunities for supporting creative small group works take place, and complement what is normally done within the class section.

More, the documentation activities, which are the base for the collective self-monitoring of the education project by the staff, request an appropriate place to be regularly done. In fact, we think that the space should contain the memory of its history, to be read and comprehended by those who live in it and visit it, showing clear documents and evidences about the experiences made there.

In the *Tuscan Approach*, the spaces for the educators and for the parents are also important, because they reveal that a quality experience need a proper place to stay, to meet, to reflect between adults. The quality of the work – and the overall wellbeing of the workers – is a guarantee for the wellbeing of the children.

Toward a curriculum of possibilities

From a general point of view, a pedagogy of the education context affirms that the education process should be less dependent on the asymmetries between children and adults, and rely more on the constructive and original contribution of all the protagonists, by interpreting the environment as an asset supporting positively the relations between adults and the children themselves. The education project, which is the shared result carefully pursued within the team of educators, focuses on the attention to opportunities and to the effective processes, instead of targets and achievements. It aims towards a "curriculum" which is necessarily different from that of a school, so that the children's potential can be cultivated starting from their own individual resources.

Moreover, offering children an experience open to creativity – the main feature of the *Tuscan Approach* - is the starting point of a flexible curriculum open to possibilities.

This way, in the Tuscan experience the old dilemma between education and care – which are supposed to be distant if not opposed - is overcome in the direction of a "radical complementarity" of the two terms.

Starting from this point, a possibility is offered to interpret in a flexible way the project-making in education. This is a complex field where the attention to the opportunities, the empowerment of individuals, the analysis of the processes and the investment on documentation are permanent tools for reflection and innovation. An active and constructive experience can be cultivated starting with offering the children interesting stimuli; it goes on with supporting the autonomy and the self-organization in the daily routines, until understanding the children's capacity to act within real micro-cultures.

The daily routines are precious for supporting the self-determination capabilities of the children. As well, breakfast is the moment when the group meets before engaging in the proposals of activities.

Free play and activities are not alternative, rather they share the same origin: the way the children explore the world, the way they know and take the many opportunities into the organized space.

Symbolic play soon becomes the ground where imaginative stories are shared among the children and common initiatives and activities are undertaken, thus giving a sense and value to the daily time spent together.

The manipulation activities occur after identifying the appropriate natural and recycled materials. As these are unstructured and neutral, they are perfect for being shaped personally and originally.

Finally, a book is a cultural object to explore, to learn from and to have immediately available. Its value will be appreciated even more when the adult uses it as a pretext for exciting and engaging stories.



Whereas play and activities make the day full of rich experiences, there are other valuable occasions beating the time.

From this perspective, the lunch has its own potential in the carefulness with which it is arranged and proposed with the active involvement of the children. The bathroom too is a place where the childcare is closely entwined with the experimentation of the first personal autonomy. Finally the rest time is also warmly appreciated by the children, as a moment that new experiences can start from.

As far as the open and flexible curriculum is based on recognizing the children's protagonism, the documentation and the reflection on the experiences follows spontaneously, meanwhile being a real habitus of the early years services educators.

These all are activities demanding well-organized spaces and times, enabling the meetings, discussions and reflections by the educators. The collaboration between the educators and the Pedagogical Coordinator will also be helpful, as well as specific in-service training programs to be scheduled in continuity.

Working on these aspects allows getting to know a child not only in the usual routines, rather and above all in the reflection about the educational action and its results, with a direct involvement in the discussion among the staff, about the most appropriate initiatives to be taken, then shared with the families, and their continuous renewal.

Inter alia, keeping track of the children's experiences in an organized manner is the pre-condition for fostering the exchange and the debate between different services in view of further development.

Participation and family education

Although in the *Tuscan Approach* the central role of protagonists is given to the children, on the other hand nobody should underestimate the crucial involvement of the families in the implementation and development of the education project.

The step taken in Tuscany in this case was, first of all, to free the participatory approach from any bureaucratic obligation or political manipulation, to give it back to a genuine parental co-operation in the undertaking, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the service's education project.

The education services welcome and meet the families as soon as the annual call for registration is issued, so that the education offer can be clearly explained to everybody. Then, a meeting is scheduled between educators and parents, to get to know each other. This is held before summer, so that the arrangements for the familiarization of the children can be taken in good time. The exchange of information with the families is a good practice, which will be daily confirmed at the moments of the arrival in the facility, and on departure from it.

The relationship with the families includes a number of other meetings when the planning of activities is discussed or when parents and educators together reorganize the documentation of the children's experiences.

Additional individual interviews are arranged for the moment when the diary is delivered. This is a valuable document witnessing each child's story, after a year spent in the education service.



Very often the conclusion of the education year is celebrated with a party with the children and their families, in some cases with the participation of the local communities. Moreover, this concept of education services open to the socialization of children and adults sometimes contains more structured proposals for meetings among children and parents.

These situations – like in general anything concerning the parents' participation – are the basis for the development of new opportunities for family education, in which the parents' personal experiences are not under the scrutiny of an expert; rather they can draw benefit from an exchange where the awareness and self-reliance on the parental role may be positively reinforced





Looking at a sustainable future

In a time when the economic crisis bites also in the education sector, threatening the keeping and development of the network of services – if we only think of the difficulties in the public budgeting process, or of the families unable to pay the fee - the positive exception of Tuscany stands out in its capacity to interpret originally the possible future developments.

Defining clear guidelines for quality and effective standards: these issues are at the centre of the international and Italian debate on how to regenerate legislation and regulations, and on what are the conditions for a sustainable policy in the sector.

On the other hand, the discussion about the professional requirements is always on and permanently swinging between the concern about how to qualify the education staff and how to contain the budget.

The governance issue is on the agenda too. This entails answering such questions as how to set up and consolidate the appropriate network coordination which can guarantee the required quality in the management and in the professional practice in the early years education services.

In Tuscany the investment on the updating of standards focused on realistic quality goals, the provision of initial and continuous training for the education staffs, and the pledge to provide locally-based network coordination functions shall hopefully push the debate forwards and shall encourage new developments in this policy sector.

Conclusions

When we tell of a positive experience we tend to embellish and transform it into a model. As a matter of fact, every experience sets its roots in the predetermined place and time, and this applies mostly when we talk about education. That is why it makes little sense to try to "translate" such experiences directly from one place to another.

On the other hand – and again it surely applies in education – the dialogue and the sharing of points of view are the basis for growing up, as our experience is then repeated by those who have had the chance to accompany us on our path.

This kind of dynamic also fits in with the varied and multiple experiences, which can be brought back to the concept of *Tuscan Approach*. Exactly this open attitude to match the diversities is a reason to disseminate the *Tuscan Approach* and to keep on feeding it with new future developments.





The TALE project in the framework of the EU policy for education and training

by Toni Compagno

The European Union enforces its policies with different degrees of cogency.

The history of the European integration shows the Member States have always negotiated what powers – and to what extent - would be devolved and raised to the rank of *common policies*, instead of *common actions*, or enacted under *enhanced cooperation* procedures.



An open method of coordination has also been devised as a soft law mechanism that allows cooperation through guidelines, indicators, benchmarks and sharing of best practises, thus opting out of real obligations upon the Member States on certain issues, including Education. This is part of the overall complexity of the European governance.

Education and training have always been jealously guarded by the Member States, each time when they have discussed and consented to steps towards convergence. Only once, in the early nineteen seventies, some words were spent at the highest policy level in favour of a common education model, but soon this formulation was dropped because it was too generic and unrealistic. Nevertheless, we can say that a European education and training policy is – and has always been - well on track, enshrined in the Treaties and with a clear profile, though of supportive nature with respect to the Member States' powers.

Recalling the EU policy-making complexity is not irrelevant, at the moment when we are going to make a report of the results of the TALE Project, which pertains to the EU education and training programmes on a dual basis:

- . the actions aiming to improve the early years education services;
- . the actions aiming to improve the training systems.

It is therefore worth pointing out what could be Europe's expectations in these respects – although placed in the background - in order to ease any later evaluation on the matching with the TALE's activities and results.

In this article, we have room enough to mention the main elements – not much more than titles – documents and topics defining the ground where the European Union would like to accompany us gently, in the fields concerning the TALE projects.

ET 2020. The overall strategy.

On 12 May 2009, the European Council issued a Conclusion on a "strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET2020)" drawing the lines and policy objectives in the sector, as part of the larger Europe2020 strategy.

Among the goals, the universal access to early years education and care services is set, together with the 95% participation rate for children between 4 and the age of compulsory education. In addition, special attention is raised for children with disadvantaged backgrounds, and for the quality of provision and support for ECEC teachers, to be strengthened.

As for vocational education and training, ET2020 pushes forwards the Copenhagen process (the cooperation on a voluntary basis by the Member States), and demands that the training systems improve their attractiveness, inclusiveness, relevancy and accessibility by 2020.



Quality ECEC services

In the field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), the European Commission has charged a Thematic Working Group of experts with the task of making suggestions on the issue of quality.

In October 2014, the Group delivered a *Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care*, providing good support to policy-makers wishing to engage into developments in the systems and service provisions.

The *Proposal* identifies a list of 10 Statements, within 5 dimensions of improvement, which can be considered quality reference terms. The framework can be summarised as follows.

Issues	Quality statements
ACCESSO to ECEC	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provision that is available and affordable to all families and their children. 2. Provision that encourages participation, strenghtens social inclusion and embraces diversity.
The ECEC workforce	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Well-qualified staff whose initial and continuing training enables them to fulfill their professional role. 4. Supportive working conditions including professional leadership which creates opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation with parents.
Curriculum	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. A curriculum based on pedagogic goals, values and approaches which enable children to reach their full potential in a holistic way. 6. A curriculum which requires staff to collaborate with children, colleagues and parents and to reflect on their own practice.
Monitoring and evaluation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Monitoring and evaluation produces information at the relevant local,regional, and/or national level to support continuing improvements in the quality of policy and practice. 8. Monitoring and evaluation which is in the best interest of the child.



Moreover, "achieving the above statements is easier if the following governance arrangements are in place":

Governance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stakeholders in the ECEC system have a clear and shared understanding of their role and responsibilities, and know that they are expected to collaborate with partner organizations, 2. Legislation, regulation and/or funding supports progress towards a universal legal entitlement to publicly subsidised or funded ECEC, and progress is regularly reported to all stakeholders.
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In order to check the effective improvements, the following quality benchmark is proposed – which operates alongside the ET2020 benchmark on the quantity of ECEC provision: "by 2020 at least 90% of ECEC provision is of good quality or better as measured by the national or regional criteria" which are based on the main statements in the Proposal.

Additionally, 1-2 indicators can complement each of the statements, to be chosen by the countries from a list of 3-4 indicators for each statement, or to be tailored according to the national contexts.

Vocational Education and Training

Since the Copenhagen Declaration of the European Ministers and the European Commission (2002), the European Countries have periodically confirmed their commitment to better the vocational education and training systems (VET). They have explained the need for an infrastructure enabling personal development, lifelong learning, and better adaptation to the changing labour market, then better social dynamism and economic competitiveness.

Besides, some tools have been designed, aiming to facilitate the mutual recognition of qualifications and competences, and to promote quality training systems. The challenge is making desirable a progressive harmonization in the education and training systems and provisions – always on a voluntary basis – from the perspectives of the Member States.

These are the tools:

- . The European Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF)
- . The European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)
- . The European Quality Assurance framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET)

The European Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008) is a device helping to compare the different national qualification systems, through a set of descriptors in a common framework. It is based on eight reference levels, each one describing the degree of complexity of knowledge, skills and competences held by a hypothetical worker. This approach reflects a shift towards the learning *outcomes* (instead of *inputs*, such as the length of the curriculum, or the institution issuing a diploma). The Member States are encouraged to realign their qualification system according to the EQF, while any enterprise in any European country right now can better assess the qualification and recruit a worker coming from another country.

The European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009) complements the EQF by applying the same outcome-oriented approach (unlike the ECTS system applied in the Universities).

It is a system for accumulation and transfer of credit points, which can be gained at the end of a formal, non-formal or informal training path in a Country, then documented and certified across country borders, based on the knowledge, competences and skill belonging to each learning unit.



The European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009), is intended to help the modernization of the vocational education and training systems.

Its methodology is based on three points, which are applicable both at the level of training systems and at the level of training providers:

- . a 4-steps cycle: planning, implementing, evaluating, reviewing
- . quality criteria and descriptors for each step of the cycle
- . indicators (qualitative and quantitative) to evaluate objectives, methods, procedures, and results of the training.

The Member States are invited to network and apply the model, and to set up National reference points to support the stakeholders and circulate information.

Beside the three tools, and also in reference to them, the Leonardo da Vinci Programme under the wider Lifelong Learning Programme (now replaced by Erasmus+) gives the European Commission the opportunity to support the actors and stakeholders in the training systems through projects of exchange and transfer of innovations, thus pursuing in this way a possible motion and convergence of the Countries towards the highest standards.



The TALE project. Contents, activities, Partners.

The Project *TALE - Tuscan Learning Approach for Early childhood education and care*, in the context of the Lifelong Learning Programme "Leonardo da Vinci – Transfer of innovation", was selected and launched in October 2013. It ends in September 2015.

The project intended to carry out a trans-national training program for teams of educators, pedagogues and managers of ECEC services from Slovenia, Bulgaria and Lithuania interested in knowing the *Tuscan Approach*, as part of their individual and in-service learning.

The training module has included lectures, study visits, observations, discussions held by the Istituto degli Innocenti and by other services in Tuscany.

The cycle has been preceded by a series of workshops in those countries, aiming to present the *Tuscan Approach* to a network of national/local professionals and stakeholders, then to plan publications and other dissemination materials, and involving experts and professionals who have been identified by the Partners.

A final follow-up attended by a selected representative and open to European experts and contributors helps evaluate the experimentations carried out by the Partners inspired by the *Tuscan Approach*, and their results in terms of individual skills and organizational impact of the training/learning.

Two main general project's features are particularly suited to the Leonardo da Vinci programme's objectives:

- . The topic of the transfer – the quality of educational services for the early childhood – is highly relevant for the European Commission, because it is highlighted in several policy documents and EU programmes (one for all: ET 2020).
- . The opportunity to reflect over any national/individual model of development of ECEC services and policies based on the suggestion of other national models and experiences may bring in elements from the European debate (on child policies, on ECEC quality assurance, on quality and tools of vocational education and training).
- . Such broader reflection has provided guidance in designing the training cycle with the ambition to experience a kind of European in-service training.

The activities have been organized around three work packages:

- 1) Transferring and re-interpreting the *Tuscan Approach*: Presentation of the *Tuscan Approach* to a national/local network in Bulgaria, Lithuania and Slovenia. 3 workshops and 3 publications
- 2) Designing the Pilot ECEC learning: Theoretical and methodological design, contents and programme of a European Pilot Learning Course
- 3) Launching the Pilot ECEC learning: A one-week session of training/learning in Tuscany, addressed to educators, pedagogues, managers from Bulgaria, Lithuania and Slovenia. A two-day follow-up evaluation and supervision on learning, transfer on-the-job, skills development, policy strategies in local and national contexts.

Complementary dissemination activities have been envisaged to guarantee the sustainability of the project: paper and publications, web platforms for internal and external communication, e-contents, networking initiatives.

Project Management and quality procedures have ensured coordination and decision-making, self-assessment administration accounting and reporting activities.

Here follow the project Partners.

Istituto degli Innocenti (Coordinator)

Committed to the rights of the child Under the High Patronage of the President of the Italian Republic, the Istituto degli Innocenti is a public body, which works independently under its Board of Directors appointed by the Tuscan Region, the Province and the Municipality of Florence.

The Institute implements activities and services for children, adolescents and families. Beside the traditional and new education and social services for the children of Florence (such as early childhood education and residential care), the Institute is a centre of research, documentation and training.

In this area, the Istituto degli Innocenti runs programmes, consultancies and collaborations on child policies and services at local, regional, national and international level.

University of Florence, Department of Education and Psychology

With 60.000 students, the University of Florence is one of the biggest in Italy. The Department of Education and Psychology has now 3 new three-year graduate degrees (Bachelor) and 3 new five year graduate degrees (II level degree). The teaching programme includes 7 Master degrees, 13 post-graduation degrees and 2 PHD courses. The Department of Education and Psychology has a long history of participation in national and international research projects.



International Step by Step Association

ISSA is the leading professional network for early education and care in Europe and Central Asia. Uniting over 60 NGOs from over 40 countries, ISSA members are members committed to improving quality and access to early years services. Primarily focused on children from birth-10 and their families, ISSA promotes inclusive, quality care and education experiences that create the conditions for every child to be happy and reach his or her full potential.

ISSA undertakes to support professional communities and develop a strong civil society that influences and assists decision makers. Through the work of REYN (Romani Early Years Network) ISSA empowers practitioners by supporting and educating professionals and paraprofessionals working with Roma and children and families. And through the work of EYRA (Early Years Regional Alliance), ISSA unites European-based stakeholders advocating for children's rights, addressing issues of exclusion, inequality, poverty and violence.

In the 15 years since it was founded, ISSA has grown into a vibrant learning community, a robust association with broad international links and partnerships which manages a significant roster of EU- funded early education projects. As a leading professional network for early education and care, ISSA's mission is to build the capacity of its members to promote quality and equitable early childhood services.





Step by Step Program Foundation - BG

The Step by Step Program - Bulgaria was established as an NGO in March 1998 and is a member of the ISSA network.

Its main aims are: encouraging family involvement in education; providing equal access to quality education for minority children, with disabilities and children in social isolation; developing projects for infants and toddlers, preschools, mainstream and special schools and pedagogical faculties for training faculty teachers, students, principals, teachers and parents.

Pedagoski Institut - SI

The Educational Research Institute is the central research institution in Slovenia for research in education undertaking basic research, development and applied projects on issues of current interest in all sectors of education and related areas.

Its aim is to ensure quality education and equal opportunities in education for all children and involve families and community members in the educational process. The Centre's programs are based on principles of democratic civil society, child-centred approach, contemporary knowledge of child development and learning abilities and introduction of changes in the educational system.

Centre for Innovative Education – LT

The Centre for Innovative Education is an NGO established in 2000 and a continuer of the International Step by Step project in Lithuania since 1994.

The centre's mission is to support and effect the change process in education and to promote the values of open society and equal access to quality education for all the children in Lithuania.

The CIE closely co-operates with the Ministry of Education, and has developed a reputation as provider of quality educational services and active participant in the reform of the education system.





The *Tuscan Approach* issues in the International case review

by Clara Silva, Enrica Freschi, Paola Caselli

The main EU legislation on ECEC,
between 2006 and 2014

Over the years, and especially since 2000, the EU has paid increasing attention to the issue of pre-schooling, which is considered more and more a key tool for the cultural, cognitive, physical and emotional development and education of children and, at the same time, for the promotion of equal opportunities, the building of a democratic society and the fight against poverty.

Emblematic in this regard are the official documents produced on this subject by the EU between 2006 and 2014, starting from the Communication to the Council and the European Parliament, entitled Efficiency and Equity in European *Education and Training* Systems published on 8th September 2006 (European Commission, COM (2006) 481def.). This is the first official document in which the EU explicitly correlates the need to tackle the social and economic challenges of the third millennium in a winning way, ensuring greater inclusion and social justice, with the need to develop permanent learning strategies, starting from early childhood.

The Recommendation of 23rd April 2008 (European Parliament and Council, C(2008)/C 111/01) reiterates the importance of quality lifelong learning, which starts from the earliest years of life, and emphasises the close link between high quality learning throughout a lifetime and initial and ongoing training, from highly skilled educational professionals - including pre-schooling - and schooling. Indeed, it is not possible for Member States to ensure quality services - including those dedicated to early childhood - without worrying about the training of teachers and educators. Another document of importance on ECEC was issued by the EU in 2011 and entitled *Early Childhood Education and Care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow* (European Commission, COM (2011) 66def.). This is a particularly important communication, since it is entirely dedicated to early childhood and the services aimed at this, with specific focus on the importance of quality ECEC. In this communication a matter of no easy resolution is then highlighted, which is still unresolved in the majority of Member States, and significantly described as "a serious problem" (COM (2011) 66def: p. 4): namely, the urgent need for expansion of ECEC services for pre-schoolers. The Communication addresses a central aspect in a concrete way, regarding the fact that Member States can guarantee childcare services that are accessible and with a high quality profile: the need for equitable and efficient funding to the benefit of ECEC. This is a problematic issue in most Member States: "Can investing more in early childhood result in later savings [...]? In most Member States public funds for education of individual children in early childhood are nevertheless lower than those spent on any other stage" (COM (2011) 66 final: pp. 7-8). The document also touches on another issue worthy of note that is the composition of the workforce engaged in childcare services with regard to gender: educators, in fact, are still almost exclusively women. The document draws to a conclusion pointing to issues at the heart of the Italian and Tuscan debate on ECEC, namely the need to rethink education with a view to the educational continuity of an integrated and comprehensive approach, which aims for quality, as well as for the accessibility of the services.

In the Report of 29th May 2013 in the *Barcelona Objectives. The development of early childhood care services in Europe for sustainable and inclusive growth*, it explicitly states that, "the availability of care services for children from 0 years until the age of compulsory education [...], financial sustainability and of quality is a priority of the European Union" (European Commission, COM(2013)322def.). The report reaffirms the commitment to achieve the Barcelona targets by 2020, identifying the major points of weakness related to ECEC, such as the worsened situation in some countries, especially regarding the services offered for 0-3 years; ECEC costs for 0-3 years on average still too high; opening hours not always compatible with the needs of families and the need to rethink the financing and the use of structural funds in order to implement accessibility and quality of services. The characteristics and mode of financing of ECEC services in Europe were once again the focus of the recent report published by the European Commission on 19th June 2014 (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014). Here the following issues are considered: access and accessibility, governance and leadership, levels and implementation of quality, professionalism of educational staff, parents' participation in the life of services and measures to support disadvantaged children. The report covers thirty-two European countries and thirty-seven education systems: all EU Member States - except the Netherlands - along with Iceland, Turkey, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland. It appears that to date only seven Member States (Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Malta, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden) guarantee the legal right to education and early childhood care from the birth of a child and, in general, starting from the end of paid parental leave. In the other EU countries, about two years pass between the end of maternity leave and the beginning of the legal right to ECEC. The report also shows that, in terms of quality, besides that of accessibility to services for children, many member countries struggle to make progress mainly because of a structural lack of economic resources and adequate national policies and the lack of staff (both in terms of quantity and quality). Let us move on now from the general EU legislative framework around ECEC to the systems of care and education for children in individual EU countries, for which we have chosen to investigate several national realities: Belgium, France, Germany, Spain and Finland. In each country, we have analysed the general characteristics, highlighting both aspects of convergence with and those of divergence from the "*Tuscan Approach*". Particular attention has been paid to the professional profile of teachers and their relationship with families and the territory.

ECEC in Belgium, France, Germany, Finland and Spain: general features, professional profile of educators, and the relationship with families and the territory

Belgium

Belgium is a federal state composed of three regions, corresponding to three different linguistic communities, each of which manages ECEC independently; respectively: Flanders (to the north), inhabited mostly by the Flemish community, Dutch-speaking; Wallonia (to the south), mostly French-speaking, although it includes a small German-speaking community; lastly, the Brussels-Capital Region, bilingual: French and, to a lesser extent, Dutch. The three linguistic areas identified are joined by a fourth minority, represented by the German-speaking community, which does not correspond to a specific autonomous region. From a socio-demographic point of view it must be taken into account that the percentage of women active in the labour market - according to data from the OECD and Eurostat, is among the highest in the EU - and especially the fact that more than 64% of mothers with children aged less than two years are employed outside the home. In terms of parenting support, although parental leave is not particularly long for mothers (15 weeks of leave, starting from the sixth week prior to the expected date of birth), even the fathers are entitled to a short period of paid leave, and economic subsidies are envisaged for families with children that can reach 230 euros per month in the presence of three children (cf. European Commission, 2013; Oberhuemer, Schreyer, Neuman, 2010).

In Belgium, the system of education and childcare has evolved over the years until taking on its present shape. It is a bipartite system, which sees the inclusion, in all three autonomous regions, of ECEC 3-6 within the school system, unlike that for the age group 0-3 that, as we shall see, is not part of the school system in Belgium and comes, however, under the Ministry of Welfare, Family and Equal Opportunities (in Flanders, in the Brussels Region and the German speaking Community) and that of Childhood (in Wallonia).

Since it is a federal state, every region has full autonomy in decision-making and management of education and childcare, and therefore entrusts different ministries with the political and administrative management of ECEC. The frequency of children using ECEC services is high both for the 0-3 band and for the 3-6 one, in all three of the regions; in Wallonia and in the Brussels Region the 0-3 services are generally open all year round, with a daily schedule that varies from 10 to 12 hours; the services in this region are attended by about 30% of children. It is also worth noting that around 13% of households prefer childminding, i.e. home services.



A feature of Belgian ECEC is the prevalence of home educational services especially for the 0-3 age group. In Wallonia, the public and private educational services aimed at children from 2 to 6 years old - which are totally free of charge - are usually open every day from 8.30am to 3.30pm, except on Wednesdays (day on which they are only open in the morning), and are used by more than 98% of children. In Flanders, the 0-3 services - including home-based ones, even more common in this region than in others - are open all year, from Monday to Friday, from 7.00am to 6.00pm and are attended by more than 49% of children. As in Wallonia and Flanders, also in the German-speaking community, the 0-3 services - including home-based - are usually open all year round, Monday to Friday, from 8.00am to 5.00pm; overall, 0-3 ECEC is attended by about 35% of children and most parents - almost 32% - make use of home care services. It is also worth pointing out that in all the regions there are many recreational and educational centres for after-school activities - the *hort* - both public and private, open from approximately 7.00 to 8.30am and from 3.30 to 6.00pm and during the summer holidays, aimed at children from 2 years and 8 months to 12 years of age. The staff employed in Belgian ECEC are characterised by a strong presence of professionals of nursing and health extraction, hence an educational model centred on the care and hygiene of the child. One notices a lack of attention to educational continuity 0-6, while for both the 0-3 and that of 3-6 great attention is paid to the strengthening of relations between services, families and territory, also through careful documentation of educational activities. As for relations between services and families, the active involvement of parents in the life of services is higher in all three regions and is considered an essential element that brings quality to the services themselves. In this regard, it seems interesting to mention the experience of childcare services in Ghent, Flanders: the *kindergartens* of the city of Ghent are engaged in new ways of parent participation inspired by the pedagogy of Célestin Freinet.

In this contemporary 'Freinet approach', collaboration with parents is essential for the well-being of the young child. In the mid-1990s, Armand Demeyer and colleagues started up Freinet schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods [...], developing a pedagogy of diversity together with the parents from ethnic minorities. Concurrently, in the childcare sector, the role of parents in disadvantaged neighbourhoods was highlighted, first in the city centres of Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels. Later the importance of the participation of fathers was also highlighted (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, Neuman, 2010, pp. 42-43).

In conclusion, Belgian ECEC plays three pivotal functions: social, educational but also economic, and this applies both to children from 0 to 6 years and to those from 3 to 6 years. This is made evident by the widespread dissemination of the services and their high rates of use, even in the private sector (remember, for example, in Wallonia and in the Brussels-Capital Region, more than 40% of services are privately owned, mainly religious, Catholic, and enjoys the financial support of the state), and the fundamental role of support services offered to families and especially mothers who are active work-wise. In Wallonia and in the Brussels-Capital Region a primarily education-training role is assigned to ECEC; in Flanders, however, the economic and social function dominates: not by chance, since 2009, it is in this region that all ECEC services are required to allocate 20% of places available to children from families at high risk of social exclusion, with single-sex parents or in conditions of poverty (cf. European Parliament - Directorate General for Internal Policies Policy Department, 2013). Finally, the services of the German Community are by nature mainly private and 'home' based - especially with regard to early childhood.



Finland

From a socio-demographic point of view, there are three important data relating to Finland for the purposes of our discussion: a) the average fertility rate, which is 1.9%, and that rises in areas further north up to 2.3 % (OECD, 2006, 2011; European Commission - Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, 2009); b) the very small number of economically and socially less privileged families, equal to less than 3% of the total population; c) the very high percentage - more than ten points higher than the EU average of 59.1% - of women active work-wise: in 2009, the female Finns engaged in the labour market were around 70%, of which more than 60% full-time (OECD, 2000; Eurostat, 2012).

The Finnish welfare system supports parenting and employment for women with many kinds of benefits, including the so-called "care-time", literally a "period, with time to care", in which parents who need it can ask the state for a financial subsidy of 300 euros per month, to which other forms of financial support from individual municipalities can be added. Over three years of age and until the age of 17, there are other forms of facilitation, in particular in the presence of single-parent families. Another form of help concerns parental leave, which is divided into three different types: maternal, paternal and family. Lastly, new mothers who are unemployed are recipients of a special social safety net and receive compensation - a sort of 'social' salary - about 16 euros per working day of 'virtual' leave. In the light of these data, and despite the economic crisis that has long plagued Europe, it is not surprising that Finland is one of the most effectively democratic and welfare-conscious, politically stable and economically prosperous European countries; aspects that have had - and continue to have - a positive impact on the level of dissemination, the quality and accessibility of educational services for children. Finnish ECEC boasts, to that effect, a long and established history that explains how Finland is the only country that we have studied where the education system for children is unique and since 1st January 2013 has pertained entirely to the Ministry of Education and Culture, which establishes the curricula.

In terms of their articulation, Finnish ECEC services are divided essentially into two main types: day care centres (mainly public under municipal management, decentralised) for the education and care of children from 0 to 7 years to be reached, called *päiväkoti* or *daghem*, to which are added the home childcare services, called *perhepäivähoito* or, if organised by associations or groups of parents, *familjedagvård*, aimed at the same age group. Families can also apply for child minder: this is a self-employed, authorised person, specialising in pedagogy, who is responsible for the care and upbringing of children in his/her own home and is paid by the municipality of residence. It is also important to note that in the year before a child goes to primary school, almost all Finnish children - even though there



is no explicit legal requirement - participate in pre-school education, and attend *päiväkoti* and *daghem*, or those schools that offer - through a kind of "spring sections" or, drawing a comparison with the French case, *classes passerelles* - basic educational activities and a start of literacy. In terms of management, the Ministry - in certain respects in a manner similar to the case of Tuscany - delegates to municipalities the furnishing, the setting up and monitoring of structures for ECEC services. Municipalities must ensure by law the possibility of use by each family that applies for it; if the places in local public services are not sufficient, municipalities may 'buy' those left free in the centres for older children, located in the surrounding areas (cf. European Parliament, IP/B/CULT/FWC/2010-001/LOT2/C1/SC3, 2013).

The services are used by 38% of children aged 0 to 3 years - reaching and exceeding by about 3 percentage points the Lisbon 2000 and Europe 2020 targets - and more than 98% of those from 4 to 7 years old (Eurydice, Eurostat, 2013). Pre-school education - even for the range 0-3 - is not compulsory and unlike other EU countries can be totally free of charge - in the case of families in need or due to welfare policies practised in certain towns and areas of the country, which have chosen to offer free public services for all; the last year of *kindergarten* is, however, always free of charge. At least a third of the staff employed in services must possess a degree in teaching methods, which gives the title of *kindergarten* teacher or of social pedagogue. The remaining two-thirds of the staff may have the qualification of childhood assistant or auxiliary. It follows that 30% of the professionals engaged in Finnish ECEC are graduates; Furthermore, the other figures that make up the educational team possess a post-secondary diploma. The 1973 decree on Children's Day Care - still in force - established that in each centre for children, at least one third of the staff employed should have a pedagogical qualification of post-secondary level.

The decree also establishes that the numerical ratio of educators and children, which must be respected in the services, must be, for the range 0-2 years, not more than 1:4; in the case of children of 3 years of age it must not exceed 1:7, while, for the range 4-7, it must not be greater than 1:13 (cf. Eurostat, 2012; Oberhuemer, Schreyer, Neuman, 2010). Specifically, in Finnish ECEC there are a number of professionals who work within the services: a) *Lastentarhanopettaja* ("*kindergarten* teachers"), whose duties and functions are similar to those that in our system are called pedagogical coordinators and directors of services; b) *sosionomi* ("social pedagogues"), which is equivalent to our professional educators and can fill the role of educators in services, including home care, social workers, educators for parenting and parental support experts or even trainers and entertainers (for youth, adults, elderly); c) *lastenhoitaja* (childhood assistant/nurse), a figure not found in our system, who has a nursing background and pertains to the field of health sciences and to the medical field rather than teaching and the science of education in the strict sense; d) *lastenhojaaja* ("instructor/ coordinator of fun activities in groups"): these particular figures - specific to the Finnish reality - involved in the conception and management of the games (especially group) in services for children, in play, in after-school centres and in play-centres aimed at the age group 0-6; e) *erityislastentarhanopettaja* ("infant teachers to support children with special needs"), which correspond to what in Italy we call support teachers; f) family day care-givers ("home teachers") who work alone, and deal with a maximum of four children at a time, including any of their children in pre-school age, or who can join a group; g) Steering of family day care, figures with many roles including what could be called in Italian animators of family education.

In the Finnish ECEC system an important role is played by families and the local community, working together, giving rise to 'networking' involving private and religious organisations. The role of parents within the services is central; the value and necessity of their involvement in the daily life of the child-care centres are established and regulated by law: the 1995 Local Government Act, indeed, officialised and highlighted - generally, and not only referring to ECEC - the importance of ensuring that all citizens actively participate in decision making and the life of the municipality of residence. In this way the role of ECEC as privileged childhood education, but also family and parental support, is emphasised.

France

France is divided into 27 regions and 101 departments (including 5 overseas), in turn divided into *Arrondissements* (Districts). These *Arrondissements* are divided into cantons and municipalities, which deal with local administration (and, as we shall see, in some cases ECEC). Demographically, France is densely populated and is one of the few Western countries to show a positive trend of births: the birth rate has gone from 1.65% in 1993 to 2% in 2008, and appears to be continuing, albeit slightly, to grow. About 80% of children born in 2008, had both parents French; more than 12.5% were born of a mixed couple and about 7% of foreign parents. Finally, it is important to note that France has high rates of female employment: in 2008 almost 61% of women were active work-wise, surpassing by one percentage point the European average. In the same year, 66% of women with children from 0 to 12 years of age were working full-time in almost 40% of cases (Eurostat, OECD, 2008, 2013; Oberhuemer, Schreyer, Neuman, 2010).

In addition to a long history of public services for children, France can count on a solid and widespread system of tax breaks to parents and parental leave. The latter begins four weeks before the expected birth date and is between 16 and 26 weeks, extendable for a further year in the case of serious illness or disability of the child. Paternal leave is also provided: it can be received in the first four months after the birth of the child and for the first two weeks 100% of their salary is paid to fathers; it is worth mentioning, in this regard, as early as 2003 about two thirds of men made use of their leave (cf. Oberhuemer, Schreyer, Neuman, 2010). As for the mothers, during the maternity leave they receive more than the equivalent of 80% tax free of their salary previously received. Furthermore, the programme provides several different means of financial support for parenting and use of ECEC; among the most representative, the *Prestation d'Accueil du Jeune Enfant* (PAJE), through which contributions are paid monthly to families deemed eligible for this benefit, from the seventh month of pregnancy of the woman, until the child is 3 years old.

The French education system for children is bipartite: services 0-3 - attended by more than 34% of children, including home-based ECEC services, belong to different ministries of economic and social nature, while those for 3-6 (or rather 2-6, since children are already welcomed in *kindergarten* at 2 years of age) are centralised and belong solely to the Ministry of National Education. France is perhaps the European nation with the most types of educational services for early childhood, reported below in ascending order of age of welcoming the child: a) *crèches collectives*: public facilities that depend on municipalities and which exclusively accept children between 2 and a half months and 3 years resident in the municipality where the structure is located and are open all week and for the entire day; b) *crèches familiales*: currently the most common type in France; today defined *services d'accueil familial*,

in which the emphasis is placed on the fact that the child's education takes place in a domestic-family context and parents can choose to entrust their child to one teacher, at her/his home, or more associated assistants who take care of more children, at one of their homes; c) *crèches parentales* or "nursery under parental management" that welcome children from 3 months to 3 or 4 years old, created and operated primarily by the parents of the children enrolled; d) *microcrèches*, designed to accommodate children aged between 10 weeks and 6 years (old), they can accommodate up to 10 children (11, if the weekly frequency does not exceed 100%) and can be set up in an apartment, a house or any other place that meets certain standards of health and environmental safety. In France, ECEC 0-3 – including home-based childcare services – is attended by more than 34% of children.

Regarding instead childcare 3-6, they consist essentially of: *écoles maternelles* (for children between 2 or 3 and 6 years) and *gardes/accueils périscolaires* (for children aged from 2 or 3 to 11 years). The most representative is the *école maternelle*, established in 1880, today officially part of the education system and national education and attended by 99% of French children. Therefore, it is the Ministry of Education that establishes the educational plans and legislates with regard to initial training and ongoing education of professionals in this area. However, direct management of the structures is down to municipalities. The *école maternelle* is almost entirely a public service - in France, in 2012, there were 15,435 public *écoles maternelles* and 123 private (cf. www.education.gouv.fr; www.iut.fr; Eurydice, Eurostat, 2012), secular and free and divided according to age, into three (from 2016, four) cycles.



French ECEC is characterised by a multitude of professionals, many of them historically belonging to the sanitary-health area, although now the first signs of a gradual 'turnaround' in favour of a more educational approach are appearing. Whereas the working team in an *école maternelle* consists of a teaching staff, institutionally recognised and with relevant training in pedagogy, the 0-3 service has more heterogeneous training and often that comes from the 'health' sector. The general 'medicalisation' of services for young children seems to be justified by the very same history of French nurseries: only in recent years, along with nurses, paediatricians and paramedical staff involved in the care of children outside the family of French children from 0-3 years has the figure of childhood educator been added. Therefore, currently we can find the following professionals: a) *Éducateur/Éducatrice des jeunes enfants*, who operate in services for the 0-3 age range (such as *crèches collectives, d'entreprise, familiales, parentales* - selected and employed, in this case, by the parents - *minicrèches, halte-garderies* and *kindergartens*, for children from 6 months to 6 years of age, children's libraries specialised in early childhood, children's hospitals, etc.), b) *Puéricultrice* or *Infirmière en puériculture*, essentially trained in health care, operating in services aimed at the 0-4 age range, such as *crèches collectives, parentales* and *familiales, minicrèches* and home based ECEC centres; c) *Auxiliaire de puériculture*, i.e. an assistant paediatric nurse who works in the 0-3 services where there are paediatric nurses; d) *Animateur*: this is a professional who works primarily in pre-school education centres, aimed at the age group 3-11 years, in the games rooms and centres, as well as *extracurricular* services provided in the various municipalities and departments before and after the opening hours of nursery and primary school; e) *Assistantes maternelles agréées* i.e. accredited maternal assistants who deal with care and education at home - most of the time in their own, but sometimes also in the homes of the families they work for - of children between 0 and 18 years of age, although in most cases they are used for the age group 0-3. Then there is also a professional who could be compared to our pedagogical coordinator, the *éducateur de jeunes enfants*, who in some cases takes on the role of human resources manager and supervisor of educational services. As for the nursery, there are institutional professional figures, at least in part, more similar - than those found in services for young children - to our pedagogical coordinators: these are the territorial agents specialised in *école maternelle (agents territoriaux spécialisés d'école maternelle: ATSEM)*. They deal with supervision, control and coordination of nursery schools, considered integral parts of the educational community (cf. Oberhuemer, Schreyer, Neuman, 2010).

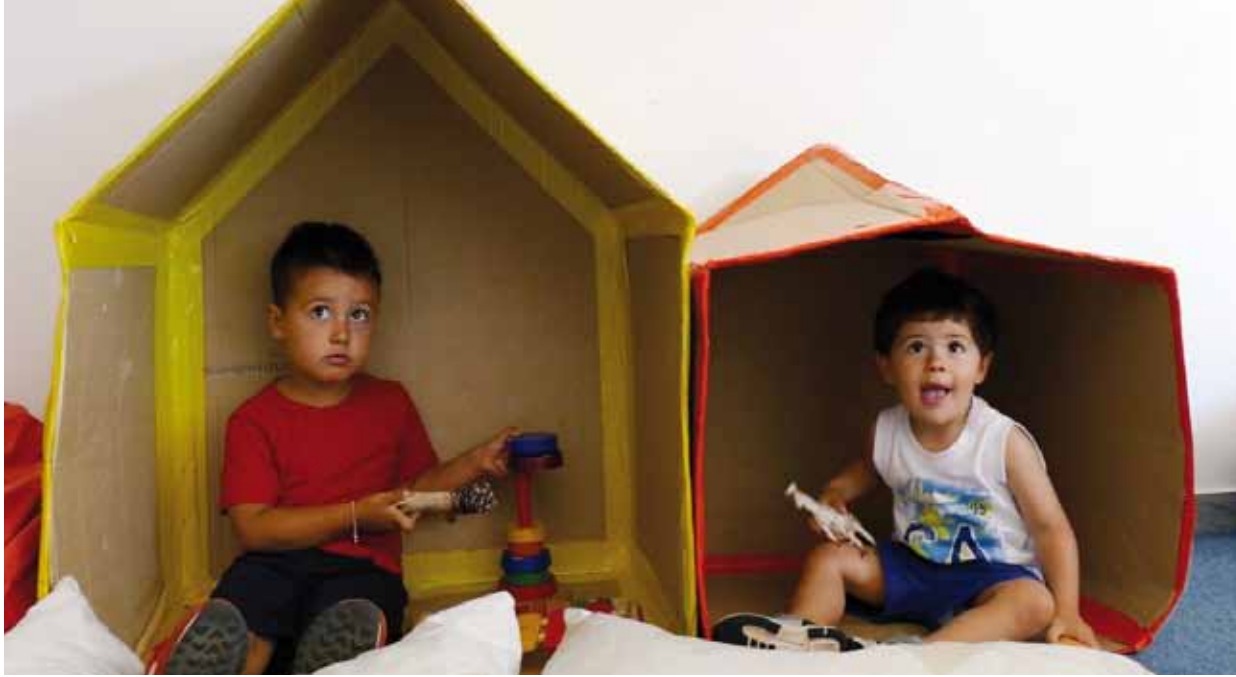
Both the ECEC 0-3 services and those for 3-6 pay particular attention to building a good relationship with the families and with the territory. In the case of 0-3 services, many activities are cultivated in collaboration with families and local authorities with an open and shared approach.



Although the French ECEC system is placed inside a centralised state controlled framework, it is characterised by a great commitment to the promotion of activities involving families and the territory, to the point of being an excellence at European level. The school and the territory interrelate in several ways: one is the PEDT, *projet éducatif territorial*, through which, on a voluntary basis, the citizenry and the local community organise educational and training activities, to be presented to students of the *écoles maternelles* in timetables that are *peri-* and *extra-*curricular, that are consistent with the educational project of the institution and with the directives and ministerial circulars on the subject.

Germany

Since 1990 Germany has been a federal republic made up of 16 regions - *Länder* - which enjoy extensive autonomy from the central government. At the federal level, an average of almost 9% of residents in Germany are of foreign origin, of which nearly one-third coming from EU countries, while about 25% are originally from Turkey and former Yugoslavia: in Germany, for every three babies born, one is a "child of immigration". The German systems of childhood care and education originate and are inserted in this socio-historical context; they are affected - this applies to the ECEC of all the countries selected, but is particularly evident in the German case - by the history and social composition of the country. The German ECEC systems as they are today are the result of a radical change that occurred in Germany after the Second World War. It was in fact between 1945 and 1990 that German ECEC developed and was structured, giving rise to many different models and types of services. In this context, the *kindergarten* was officially recognised as the first step in the national education system in 1973, but it remains under the responsibility of the Ministry of Welfare for childhood and youth policies.



By the late '70s, more than 79% of children between 3 and 6 years of age were attending a *kindergarten*. A major expansion of the *kindergarten* took place in the '90s, especially after unification in 1998, as far as *kindergartens* were concerned, there was almost 90% of available places. The number and accessibility of *kindergartens* gradually continued to rise by about 2 percentage points per year until 2002; the year in which there was an additional peak of 9%, while slightly slower, over these years, was the spread of services for the 0-3 age group. 2002 turned out, not by chance, to be a crucial year for the revival of ECEC among the central topics of the German political debate; it is since then that in Germany, as a result of the disappointing results achieved at the time by fifteen-year-old German students on the PISA test, they have begun talking again with particular vigour about the urgency to reform and implement education systems and education services for all, including childhood.

Abiding by what has been said, lastly, it is necessary to point out that, both in terms of 0-3 services and those for 3-6, there are still substantial differences between eastern and western *Länder*; both types of ECEC services (particularly those intended for 0-3) are - and continue to be - the most widespread and used in the East. In the case of Germany, we are also dealing with an educational system for children divided into 0-3 and 3-6, which at the central level comes under the Ministry of Welfare for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, which provides the Ministries of individual *Länder* with non-binding guidelines concerning ECEC. The management of the services for both age groups thus take place at territorial level, where it is shared by the structures with a wide range of local actors, such as NGOs, municipalities (single and, more often associated), churches and parishes, according to the principle of subsidiarity. Under this principle, the public institutions have an obligation to provide social services, including

those aimed at children, only if the non-state actors are not able to do so; therefore, the individual *Länder* are proving highly oriented to financing the latter, so as to facilitate their management autonomy. It is precisely in the adoption on a large-scale, throughout Germany, of the principle of solidarity, that the spreading and the constant increase of ECEC services of a private or, in any case, non-governmental nature are justified and sink their roots, which is particularly evident in the eastern *Länder*. In Germany ECEC services are not mandatory nor free, but concessions are provided for families who wish to use them. The services in this area, however, are now obliged to prepare enough space to accommodate all the children from 1-year-old on. From a typological point of view, German ECEC is essentially organised into:

- . *kinderkrippen* (or *krippen*, "nurseries"): aimed at children from 0 to 3 years and usually open all day, structured in sections that can accommodate between 8 and 13 children, with an average teacher/pupil ratio of 1:6; they are used on average by 30% of children aged 0-2 and by over 86% of children aged 3 years, rising to around 96% in the case of children aged 4 and 5 years old (showing higher participation rates in the eastern regions);
- . *kindertagespflegen* (official "daily home services"): home services aimed mainly at the 0-3 age range, which allow a lot of flexibility about the days (and sometimes nights) of the week and times in which to leave the child in custody;
- . *kindergarten*: aimed at children from 3 to 6 years old and open part-time or full day, depending on the circumstances and needs, they envisage a kind of 'registration' fee in proportion to income and are attended by more than 90% of children;
- . *vorklassen* or *schulkindergarten*: present only in some states, they are made up of preparatory classes for primary school, whose name changes depending on the *Länder*; they are services aimed at children aged 6 who are not yet ready, physically and cognitively to go to Primary school, or children aged 5 whose parents wish to give a more thorough preparation, in view of compulsory education;
- . *kitas*, daycare services, widespread and aimed at the range 1-14 years, offering after-school recreational-educational and cultural activities (cf. Destatis, 2013; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014; Oberhuemer, Schreyer, Neuman, 2010).

Unlike France or Italy, in Germany there is no differentiation 0-3/3-6 at the level of initial training of educational staff that will work in ECEC. There are three types of qualification leading to the acquisition of professional skills to work in childcare. The first, *Erzieherin*, is obtained by attending a three-year course at *Fachschulen* or *Fachakademien*, the second, *Kinderpflegerin*, i.e. a childcare assistant, is obtained by attending a two-year course after secondary school; the third, *Sozialpädagogin*, i.e. social pedagogue, follows a teacher-training university course generally of four years.

Besides these professionals, the spectrum of roles and professional figures working in German ECEC centres is much wider and more varied. In childcare – both for 0-3 and 3-6 – it is possible to find, apart from educators, childhood assistants and pedagogues, interns and trainees from post-secondary degree programmes dedicated to children's education; "social collaborators" (understood, in the German case, as workers involved in various capacities in social work), personnel for childcare and assistance with a secondary school diploma, with no further specific qualifications in pedagogy, who have had experience in ECEC and who were trained in the field; graduates in educational science and psychology; and again: social assistants, 'nannies', nurses specialising in early childhood, primary and secondary school teachers who have chosen or had to go to work in ECEC services; administrative workers specialised in management of childcare centres; finally, psychologists and pedagogues specialised in special education, delinquency or disability.

The school-family relationship and the one with the outside world are very well looked after in Germany and this under the initiative of individual services above all thanks to the *sozialpädagogin* who, as already mentioned, also covers the role of pedagogical coordinator. The social educator deals with family education, as well as the coordination and management of staff, relationships with governments and agencies in states and territories, with health and social services, both in the 0-3 services and in those for 3-6. In the specific case of the latter, the special attention given to the school-family relationship and the opening up of services to the local community by the Klax 3-6 centres should be emphasised, where social relations and school-family and school-territory exchanges are clearly indicated, in educational programmes, as key points of the training plan. Together with the Klax centres, another particularly interesting case of attention to school-family relationship is also represented by Nordrhein-Westfalen. In the guidelines issued by its Ministry of Education, parents are considered key players in the development and education of the child. Therefore, in the same guidelines it states that the plans and educational content should be transparent and shared with families; assistants, educators and social educators must arrange and hold meetings with parents on a regular basis, and should place themselves as empathetic and competent "facilitators" rather than as "teachers".

Finally, a new type of service has recently been spreading throughout Germany, the *Kinder-und Familienzentren* or *Eltern-Kind-Zentren*, or "centres for children and families", often located inside nurseries or childhood schools, where families can find information, opportunities and initiatives to support parenting.



Spain

Only after the end of the Franco dictatorship could Spanish ECEC enjoy laws and reforms that have greatly enhanced it, particularly as regards the 3-6 age group. Since the early years after the fall of the regime, the government has paid increasing attention to policies and programmes for pre-school education. The number of children who use ECEC services has grown exponentially: it went from about 300,000 children between 0 and 6 years, in 1975-1976, who attended public ECEC services, to over one million in 2008 (cf. Hagemann, Jarasch, Allemann-Ghionda, 2014), with a further peak after the entrance of Spain in the then European Economic Community (EEC). Indeed, overall, the policy changes [*not only about ECEC*] initiated after 1975 have elevated Spanish pre-school enrolment rates, which now stand at 97 to 100% for children between four and six, to among the highest in the EU. In 2002-2003, only four EU countries (Belgium, France, Italy, and Spain) could claim full enrolment (100 percent) even for four-year-old children, with an average enrolment rate in the EU of 86%. For three-year-old children in pre-school education, only Belgium, France and Italy [...] exceeded the Spanish participation rate of 95%, which was far above the EU average of 72 percent (Hagemann, Jarasch, Allemann-Ghionda, 2014, p. 226).

At the administrative level, the Spanish educational system for children is, on the whole, highly decentralised, with a strong weight of local institutions and the Autonomous Communities even though the curriculum for both the 0-3 band and, in a special manner, the 3-6 one is defined by the Ministry of Education. Spanish ECEC services may be: public, private with state subsidies, totally private or run by non-profit organisations. On the structural side, pre-school education is divided by law into two cycles: 0-3 and 3-6 years; although not mandatory, it is officially considered the first level of the school system that children can use from birth to 6 years of age.

Most services are public and secular. Timetables are highly diversified; as a rule, for both cycles, they are open on weekdays from 9 to 12 in the morning and from 3 to 5 in the afternoon, with a long postprandial break, which obviously does not facilitate the more and more parents who work full-time. Both cycles must prepare an educational project, which complies with the requirements of the LOE 2006, relating to education, and by Royal Decree 1630/2006. The most important laws to date concerning ECEC are in fact the Spanish *Ley Organica 2/2006*, of 3rd May, and Royal Decree 1630/2006 of 29th December, establishing the minimum learning/teaching targets to reach/teach in the second cycle of *Educación infantil*. The executive management of the services is the responsibility of individual communities, which have their own legislation on the subject. Finally, as regards the numerical children-educators ratio, generally it is 1:13 for the age group 1-2 years; 1:20 for children of 2 and 3 years, while for the 3-6 age group there is one teacher for every 25 children (cf. Oberhuemer, Schreyer, Neuman, 2010). Specifically, 0-3 services - which are, in any case, always by payment, although financial support is provided for families - are divided into:

- . *Escuelas de educación infantil* (sections/sectors dedicated to the first cycle);
- . *centros concertados* (first cycle; private, they receive state subsidies and are often religious);
- . *colegios de educación infantil* (private, often religious).
- . *ludotecas* (private, accredited, generally for children from 1 to 12 years old).

Services 3-6, whether public or private accredited, are instead totally free of charge, and are arranged in:

- . *Escuelas de educación infantil* (sections/sectors dedicated to the second learning cycle);
- . *centros concertados*;
- . *colegios de educación infantil y primaria*;
- . the already mentioned *ludotecas*.

The 3-6 cycle is given in special sectors of the *escuelas de educación infantil* and in public centres that bring together pre- and primary school, called *colegios de educación infantil y primaria* and that belong to *consejerías de educación* (the local departments delegated to education). A special feature in this area is given by the associated rural colleges (*colegios rurales agrupados*), public and lay, found in areas far from urban centres, where children from 3 to 12 years are educated in a single structure divided into sections.

Regarding their use, it should be emphasised that, in Spain, the participation of children in ECEC is remarkable: in 2013 - thanks to the increase in public funds allocated to the first cycle of the education system, envisaged by LOE since 2005 - almost 35% of children between 0 and 3 years of age

benefitted from the first cycle, while in the same year, 99.9% of children of 3, 4 and 5 years old took part in the second stage of *pre-primary*, a rate among the highest in Europe and the world (cf. European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014).

From the point of view of the professional requirements for working with children from 0 to 6 years it is necessary to have the qualification of *Maestro/Maestra especialista*. Since 2006, it has been possible to receive this qualification after completing a three-year post-secondary degree in early childhood education at the *Escuela universitaria de formación de profesorado* and after following a practical training specific to the 0-3 or 3-6 cycle. The figure of *Técnico Superior de Educación Infantil* is also envisaged; this person can handle only the first cycle of ECEC and must have a high school diploma or be at least 20 years old and have passed an entry test for specialised vocational training. The Spanish system also provides a periodic refresher course for educators for the 3-6 year range, carried out in recent years by the "*Rosa Sensat*" association - which since 1965 has brought together teachers from schools of all levels, who cooperate with the aim of improving the quality of education and instruction in Spain - along with approved private providers, such as, among the most representative, the *Centros de Renovación Pedagógica* and *Movimientos de Renovación Pedagógica*. The situation is different regarding updating and in-service training of *tecnicos* and *técnicas superiores*, for which there are still more rarely training initiatives that are less structured and on the whole qualitatively lower. The participation of parents within the services has been envisaged by national legislation since 1985. Indeed the LOE - "*Ley Orgánica reguladora del Derecho a la Educación*" - sets out that "all education provision, including that for children before school entry, should set up a School Council.





Both parents and professionals are members of the board and elected democratically. A local authority representative is also expected to participate. In most centres there are parent associations [...] which encourage active engagement [of families] in various centre activities" (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, Neuman, 2010, p. 421). The subsequent laws enacted regarding ECEC and school have reiterated the importance of strengthening the services-family and services-territory relationship. Yet today, with respect to this issue, there is a great diversity: whereas, indeed, in autonomous communities such as Catalonia, Valencia and Andalusia, the centres – both and, more importantly, 0-3 and 3-6 - seem to pay on the whole great attention to the relationship between ECEC centres and parents and between centres and the local community, this does not happen to the same extent in other communities, such as the Basque Country, the Balearics and Canary Islands. Especially in Andalusia the theme of parental involvement appears to be central, especially as regards the ECEC 0-3; since the 2000s, research centres, universities, parenting associations and local departments that deal with education, teaching and childhood, have often investigated and promoted family-related services. That said, it remains a fact that the participation of parents in the life of Spanish services is, in general, higher and more sought after in ECEC 0-3; it is also true that, in this regard, it is difficult to "sum up", given the significant lack of homogeneity in terms of centre-family relationships and of openness with regard to the territory and the local community characterises Spanish ECEC, with wide variations between one community and another: "there is great variation between centres as to the extent of parent involvement, particularly in decision-making processes. Only a minority really support full parent participation. The centres for under-threes tend to be more flexible in terms of opening hours and have a more active parental engagement and exchange with professionals than the school-based centres for 3 to 6 year olds" (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, Neuman, 2010, p. 421).

Conclusions

We conclude by saying that in general in the countries investigated, just as for Italy and Tuscany, there is a bipartite education system aimed at the 0-6 band, both from an organisational point of view and from a regulatory and administrative standpoint: on the one hand the services aimed at children from 0 to 3 years old and on the other those aimed at children from 3 to 6 years. Similarly, from the point of view of the political and administrative management of ECEC, one notices that in most cases the 0-3 band is not the responsibility of the Ministry of Education but of others, such as that of Welfare, Labour, Health or Family, while the 3-6 band is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. Inside the shortlist of EU countries chosen Finland is an exception and presents a single ECEC system both from the point of view of continuity 0-6 and that of the relevant Ministry which for the whole system is that of Education. In this context, Germany and Spain are two special cases: indeed, they are countries with a federal nature - or more precisely, in the case of Spain, highly decentralised - in which ECEC is unified at the level of central government, which legislates and issues general guidelines, but is regulated in detail by the individual community or by the *Länder*. In Spain, in general, the ECEC is governed by the Ministry of Education while in Germany it is the prerogative of the central Ministry of Welfare.

Some elements that represent constants in the ECEC system of the countries surveyed are equally present in the Italian system and the *Tuscan Approach*. The main ones are: a) the presence of both public and private ECEC, with a prevalence of the former over the latter, particularly evident in Finland; b) a distribution of educational services - especially 0-3 - closely related to employment policies promoted and, in particular, to women's work; c) non-compulsory ECEC aimed at the 0-3 band and its obligatory nature in the 3-6 range only in certain cases, generally the last year; d) need to pay for ECEC for under-threes, with the exception of Finland, granting substantial benefits to families and tax relief, as against free care for the 3-6 band, with the exception of some German *Länder*.



Supporting the transfer of innovations

by *Mihaela Ionescu*

Brief introduction of the role of ISSA as an association facilitating learning between organizations

ISSA is a vibrant international association that connects professionals and non-profit organizations working in the field of early childhood development. Established in the Netherlands in 1999, ISSA's community today stretches across the globe with members from 50 countries primarily located in Europe and Central Asia. ISSA aims to ensure equal access to high quality care and education for all young children from birth to 10 years of age. This mission is implemented through three main programmatic pillars: equal access for all children; promoting high quality and professionalism in early years services; and empowering parents and communities to be part of children's development and learning.

In addition, as an international association, ISSA encourages peer-learning, exchange of experiences and cross-fertilization of good practices among its members, and stimulate innovations in the network both by facilitating cooperation among members and engaging with partners from the early childhood field.

Given the diversity that exists among its member organizations and the country contexts in which they are operating, the opportunities for transferring and critically reflecting on innovations to be introduced in the early childhood education and care systems (ECEC) provide an excellent platform for learning and for advancing the policy and practice agenda in the countries. Therefore, the empowerment of ISSA members through various partnership projects is crucial for nurturing developments in the ECEC field in their own countries.

The focus on quality improvement of ECEC services has been for more than 15 years at the heart of the ISSA's work. Many of its initiatives and resources were developed to enable members to engage in their countries in initiatives that mobilize and empower practitioners, managers, training providers and policy makers to contribute to strengthening the professionalism in early years services.

In a survey ISSA ran in 2013 for mapping the features of ECEC provisions for children under 3 years of age in the countries from where ISSA members come, there was a clear indication that this age group is the most in need to be addressed in terms of access, equity and quality of services. The more recent EURYDICE report (2014) indicates also that in Europe, the supply of early childhood services for children under 3 is not meeting the demand and that children under three years of age have a lower participation in ECEC services: "ECEC attendance among children under 3 is very low. In 2002, the 'Barcelona target for childcare facilities' was agreed, with the aim that by 2010 childcare should be provided for 33 % of children under 3 years old. However, in 2011, only ten European Union countries had reached the Barcelona target. Denmark stands out with 74 % of under-3s in ECEC. In contrast, ECEC attendance among under-3s was especially low (approximately 10 % or less) in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. Some of these countries provide long childcare-related leaves."¹ This led to a stronger interest for ISSA to engage with partners in projects aimed at improving the quality of services for the youngest children. TALE provided a rich opportunity to stimulate such innovations and developments.

Being a European funded project, three European Union countries represented by organizations in ISSA were selected to participate in the project based on their high interest to engage in an innovative project focusing on improving the quality of ECEC services for children from birth to



three years of age. The three countries represented are: Bulgaria, Lithuania and Slovenia. The selection also considered the diversity that exists between the three European countries in terms of the ECEC systems: provisions, policies, legislation, structural and process quality aspects, so that the cooperation contributes to a rich learning process and to a wider realm of innovative changes starting from the same source of inspiration: the *Tuscan Approach* to ECEC services.

An example of the diverse ambits for ECEC services is that while Lithuania and Slovenia do not have a split ECEC system and the Ministry of Education is responsible for regulating the provisions for the youngest children, in Bulgaria a split system is in place and the services for children under 3 are under the responsibility of the Ministry of Health, therefore a strong focus is put on health and care services with no recognition of the importance of stimulation and learning at this early age.

Another example of the diverse ECEC contexts in the three countries is related to the autonomy each preschool setting has in terms of developing and implementing the early childhood curriculum. In this regard, in Lithuania, the practitioners' role is empowered the most. Each preschool can develop and follow its own curriculum based on the Outline of Criteria for Pre-School Education Curriculum. This change came into force in 2005 in Lithuania and led to a major change from a centralized curriculum, to a decentralized curriculum responsive to child's needs, interest, and context. In Slovenia, The Curriculum for Pre-School Institutions was developed in 1999 and defines six areas of activities: movement, language, art, nature, society and mathematics. It also defines the global objectives and the objectives of individual areas of activity, examples of activities for individual age groups and the role of adults. Practitioners' autonomy lies in choosing the content and the activity to engage children for meeting the objectives. In Bulgaria,

1. Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe. Eurydice Report. 2014 Edition. Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, Bruxelles.



there is no national curriculum guiding the learning activities to be carried out in early childhood centers. Most of the activities are focused on ensuring a safe, hygienic and age appropriate physical environment for the youngest children, and limited structured activities to stimulate the child's development holistically are provided.

The three ISSA member organizations participating in the project are very experienced organizations in implementing programs and projects that contribute to improving the quality of service for children from birth to 10 years of age. Their expertise relies on connecting early childhood theory with practice and initiating and supporting innovative changes in ECEC systems with a specific focus on empowering practitioners to become better professionals.

The TALE approach to ECEC tackled crucial aspects of the ECEC system: governance, curriculum, learning environment, family participation, and the professional preparation and development of the workforce. Given such a comprehensive approach, the implementing organizations in the project were highly interested in exploring various venues for experimentation in all the five dimensions taking into account the country and the local specific context of the early childhood services involved in the project.

Brief comparative commentary about the experimentation in the three Countries

The *Tuscan Approach* provided a common platform for understanding and for joint reflection on the quality of ECEC services. The careful attention paid to child's agency and autonomy, to the child's self-driven learning through the exploration of a stimulating, safe and age-appropriate environment are conceptual pillars in the *Tuscan Approach*. The insightful experience of visiting the early childhood centers provided the teams of experienced practitioners from the three countries with a solid ground for experimenting new ways of engaging with children, with families, with colleagues, with the learning and professional environment. All pieces of a broader puzzle: the child's development and learning universe.

All teams from the three countries worked on improving the learning environment, the family participation and joint curriculum planning. However, although inspired by the same approach, the three country teams reflected differently on their plans for experimentation. Each team focused on those aspects that were most innovative for their own contexts to enrich their work, thus contributing better to offering high quality opportunities for the children to learn and develop and for families to participate and get involved in the ECEC centers' lives.

In Lithuania, practitioners were already having a great deal of autonomy in designing and implementing the curriculum, and their attention focused more on how they can improve the learning environment in terms of making it more stimulating for the child's development by providing more opportunities for learning: new spaces were created (laboratories) or some were entirely changed (e.g. they created the 'wall of sensations' in each classroom where children could experience different sensations) and more attention was given to providing children with natural meaningful learning materials. A second important change they initiated was to organize mixed age groups, thus allowing more interactions between younger children and older children. The visit to the Tuscan centers provided clear examples of the benefits of having mixed age groups thus nurturing interactions between older and younger children and peer learning. On the level of governance, the most important change in Lithuanian centers was related to increased horizontal communication, decision making process and taking responsibility. A climate of increased cooperation and collegiality was strengthened and more attention was paid to team planning.

Although the learning environment and the curriculum have been also subject to experimenting changes, distinct from the Lithuanian plan of experimentation, in the Slovenian team a greater attention was paid to family involvement and participation in the planning and implementation of the curriculum.



The visits to the Tuscan ECEC centers provided inspiring examples of practice and empowered practitioners from Slovenia to experiment new ways of building solid cooperation and support to parents in a very participatory way. The recognition of the powerful and crucial role that parents play in child's development especially when the child is very young, was translated into putting more efforts to bringing parents closer to the ECEC center and into making them key-actors in the life of the center. Therefore, a more focused attention was paid to mapping parents' needs, expectations and openness to participate in activities, to engaging them in activities with children, and to increasing the exchange of knowledge and experience in joint learning activities. The pro-active and sustained involvement of the staff in approaching parents in a more participatory and empowering manner led to a closer communication and contributed to a better understanding of child's agency and development. Parents felt more confident in sharing information from their parenting experience, felt more confident in becoming active actors and co-participating in learning activities, and understood better how important and benefitting the cooperation between family and staff is for the child's wellbeing and not only. A climate of co-participation, cooperation and mutual support was created in the centers involved in the project.

In Bulgaria, many changes inspired by the Tuscan experience regarded the learning environment, the curriculum, family involvement and governance in the services. More focus on creating a stimulating and multicultural environment, more focus of child's play and interaction in small groups activities, as well as more play and freedom of choice for children to engage in activities, more focus on participatory curriculum planning in the staff team grounded in children's interests and needs, and more responsiveness to parents' needs and participation in activities in the *crèches* were the main directions for change.

These changes were extremely important for the Bulgarian ECEC contexts where much attention was given to health and care services and less to learning and stimulation, and to team working for planning meaningful learning opportunities/activities. Many changes in the learning environment (creating small 'laboratories', supplying groups with natural materials, etc.) were complemented by a new way of conceptualizing the daily program, of planning the curriculum, and allowing more flexibility to practitioners to propose activities to children. Another important development was engaging more with the local authorities and institutions on the local level, nurturing a dialogue for changes as they were initiated in the services where TALE was implemented. Little laboratories for change were created in those services which may contaminate other services later. In this sense, one important development that could create a long lasting impact of the project, is that in one of the places in Bulgaria through the cooperation with the teacher training college, student teachers within their practicum stages were exposed to the new practices inspired by the *Tuscan Approach*. This is an important avenue for enriching the future educators' understanding of the complexity and the importance of understanding the role of the educator in a child-centered philosophy that promotes child's agency.



Reflections and prospects of medium/long term impact and further developments of the TALE project

The sustainability of changes and innovations are often determined by the degree to which they seem relevant, needed, and feasible by those that need to make those changes, even if they ask for stepping into the 'out of comfort' zone. Changes also need not only acceptance, the embrace and ownership of their main actors, but also sustained support from various (f)actors that impact their drive.

The TALE project offered professionals from the three countries the opportunity to engage in a self-reflection process upon their own early childhood philosophy and practice against the concept of child's 'protagonism' in their own development and learning. Seeing the child through the lenses of their '100 languages' opened the door to a more complex understanding of the crucial role that adults play around the child and the demand for assuring that their potential is fulfilled. It is a matter of how profoundly professionals and families understand the children, listen and learn from them, understand how they develop and learn and position themselves appropriately in the interaction and relationship with the child so that they create as many opportunities as possible for the child's holistic and healthy development.

The changes that happened in the early childhood services in the TALE project have been initiated and implemented by practitioners from the three countries moved by the living examples provided by the services visited in Tuscany.



The philosophy and practice they learned about in the TALE project resonated with their high interest in improving the quality of their services and confirmed that there are practices that can be changed, leading to a more responsive approach to a child's needs and potential.

When the changes to be made are chosen by practitioners, they are most likely to last. They did not happen because they were imposed, but because they activated the practitioners' interest and motivation to become better professionals. The changes they made in the learning environment, the new pathways for working together with parents, the new routines in team working and participatory planning are only some examples of new practices that moved the 'wheel of change'. Keeping the practitioners' motivation for professional development alive is crucial. And the TALE project offered this opportunity to all those involved in the project. However it also revealed the complex profile of the early childhood practitioner, the broad areas of competences that are needed to be in place to assure high quality services for the youngest children and their families.

On the other hand, such changes need time to bring their return. Some results were already mentioned: either regarding the child's agency, their excitement to engage in activities, to explore and experiment; or the importance of providing a flexible framework for the daily activities and exploit all moments of the day for providing learning opportunities in the most natural way of learning; or regarding parents' increasing participation and contribution to joint learning activities. Not less important is also staff's satisfaction in seeing the changes they wanted to see.

Projects are fecund environments for mobilizing new understandings, joint critical thinking and enriching the practices among professionals from different countries.



However, they have limited duration thus limited power, unless the changes they animate are grounded in the need for growing, for learning, for making a difference and they are sustained through new meaningful routines and support networks.

Through the TALE project, a network of organizations and professionals sharing the same values and beliefs in early childhood development and learning was created both on the local level and on the international level. The commitment to quality early years services for the youngest children will be further nurtured within the ISSA network by creating future opportunities for shared learning among member organizations and also by showcasing the good practices that grew within the project to other early childhood organizations from Europe and around the world. The documentation that has been carried out throughout the project offers a rich foundation for inspiring other professionals.

To sustain the changes, the actors of change need to be empowered and supported, need to be provided with opportunities to share their experience and to consolidate their approaches by mirroring their experiences in professional discussions and debates around how we can best provide children and families with high quality services. To strengthen the power of the innovations that have been conducted within the TALE project, ISSA involved the three member organizations in a pilot process of the *Quality Framework for Early Childhood Practice in Services for Children under 3*, developed by ISSA and other international early childhood experts. The framework is promoting internationally the concept of quality education and care in early years and unites professionals from all sectors, families, policy makers around a dialogue around what quality practices in ECEC services mean.

The Framework is very much in line with the values and practices promoted in the TALE project and aims to create a new discourse around early years on the country level, by engaging in policy roundtable discussions with decision makers and in workshops with practitioners from various types of services. The experiments in the TALE project have been reinforced by the process of piloting the usability of an international framework on the country level. The two initiatives reinforce each other. TALE is providing concrete examples of high quality practices, while the Framework provides guidance on how to define quality in early years in a comprehensive and inter-sectoral approach on the policy and practice level. Both promote child's 'protagonism' and the fundamental role that families have in the early years.

Both initiatives provide a fertile platform for future developments. The Quality Framework will be further promoted in the coming years in ISSA and on the international level, and the *Tuscan Approach* and the experiences from the various countries where the approach was a source of inspiration, will provide excellent examples of how high quality can be achieved in early childhood settings. New countries will be invited to embrace the pathway for experimentation towards achieving excellence in services for the youngest children. Peer learning activities among ISSA members and ISSA's international conference will contribute to expanding the network of 'agents for high quality services'.



TALE:
the experimentation
in the Partner Countries





Meetings with families and other things.

Activities, results and perspectives
from the experimentation in Bulgaria

by *Emil Buzov*

In November, in "**TALE - Tuscan Approach for Early childhood and care**" project, a working visit to Florence of representatives of two *crèches* (directors, nurses and teachers) from the town of Vratsa was paid. The visit was at the invitation of the leading organization of the project - Istituto degli Innocenti. After the visit, a general presentation before the teams of the two educational institutions about the purpose of the visit and the visits paid to various sites was made, impressions were shared and discussions were held at sites.

At the end of November, with the help of Step by Step Program Foundation Action plans for implementation of the five main approaches arising from the project were developed for both institutions:

- . Management of the environment (space) including
 - . Updating Activities Centers (drama, manipulative games and building blocks, art, sand and water / seasonal center / areas for self-discovery - mirrors) aiming at child protagonists;
 - . Construction of a mini-laboratory within the organization of the study-room / Science Center/, satisfying the needs of the children in terms of their technical development - natural materials, leaves, cones, chestnuts, walnuts, mussels, etc. plastic caps, bottles, cups, etc., wooden figurines with regular and irregular shapes;
 - . Updating the multicultural functional environment;
 - . Symbols for belonging to different ethnic groups - tables, photos, objects.
- . Planning (curriculum) including
 - . Transition from detailed to a more global planning for greater operational freedom of the teacher, oriented to children's interests;
 - . Optimization of cooperative learning (the process of working in small groups);
 - . Development of a child portfolio mechanism, facilitating child's early diagnostics and revealing the child's holistic development.
- . Family involvement (families) including
 - . Updating the Charter for cooperation with the family, reflecting the planned work with the family and assisting the transition from home to crèche;
 - . Expanding parents' activities together with crèche staff through parent meetings, individual meetings, discussions, happenings, trainings and other cooperative forms;
 - . Improving the connection for information through planned individual meetings in the Family room.
- . Qualification (training) including
 - . External qualification (after studying the needs of the team);
 - . Internal qualification.
- . Management of the institution (governance) including
 - . Developing good practices in relation to changing policies and working with all stakeholders for policy change (municipalities, NGOs, Agency for Social Protection, SACP (State Agency for Child Protection), RHI (Regional Health Inspectorate), BFSA **Bulgarian Food Safety Agency**, universities, cultural institutions, the police, banks etc.).
 - . Developing a system for evaluating the work quality of the people working in the crèche.



For the elapsed period of time various activities related to Management of the environment (space) approach in accordance with the adopted Action plans were carried out in both crèches. Work on the establishment and renovation of the centers was oriented to children as protagonists. Each center has a variety of equipment and materials, according to the interests, needs, level of development and the environment of the children. Thus they turn into a laboratory for children's initiatives, creativity and imagination. Didactic cabinets were replaced and educational materials, toys, books and supplies were purchased from the budget of the two educational institutions and from donations from parents.

- . Manipulative games and building blocks Center was created. It aimed at forming and developing children's creativity, enhancing their ability to independently solve problems, forming their intellectual skills and improving their fine motor skills. The Center included plastic and wooden constructor games, wooden puzzles, skittles, manipulative games, plastic cubes.
- . A mini laboratory as a basis of a Science Center was established. The children have the opportunity to work and experiment in it every day (crush, tear, glue, stack) with colored paper and natural materials (chestnuts, walnuts, mussels, cones). The center was expanded with fluffy, colorful sticks, caps, colored cups and shapes for modeling dough or plasticine, wooden figurines with regular and irregular shapes, colored sprays for water and "mini-gardens" / colored bowls / for planting seeds of beans and corn. Children have a real opportunity to experiment, which successfully elicits in them skills for observation, prognosticating and experimenting with various materials. Children explore the world around them through exploration and study of the physical and natural objects and phenomena. Heuristic thinking, intellect, communication, and research behavior are stimulated.



- . Arts center, which through its variety of materials and activities creates conditions for the development of intellectual and social energy of children was established. It makes the children's life more interesting, funny and exciting. The center was equipped with drawing blocks, colored pencils, pastels, colored sheets, clay, clay board, colored paint, and cups for water.
- . Literacy center which develops children's communicative sensitivity by looking at interesting colorful books and books with sounds of animals and natural phenomena, by listening and perceiving interesting stories and folk tales with the help of nurses or educators was also established. The Center was equipped with a number of books with colorful pictures, books made of fabric, music books.
- . Family Center, which includes a kitchen, a hairdressing corner, a café, and a shop helps the children to understand their world. Through roles, actions and objects they explore the adult world, and develop social, emotional and cognitive skills and attitudes.
- . A temporary summer Sand and Water center, offering pleasant opportunities for developing children's mental and physical abilities was established. They acquire sensory experience, discover creative solutions, and generate valuable ideas about the surrounding world in an accessible and emotional way.
- . In the *crèche* groups there are children of Roma origin, that is why multicultural environment was built by placing symbols of belonging in the wardrobe / reception room of the group - photos of the Roma flag / deeply interwoven symbolism, reflecting the historical, social and cultural heritage of the ethnic group; its elements / red wheel in the center / show constant movement and change, as well as the eternal laws / and objects typical and reflecting the lives of the Roma ethnic group – a tambourine and colored scarf with coins.

. The organization of the Learning environment in the *crèche* groups was realized by working in small groups and creating a supportive, receiving, educational and caring environment. Working in a small group facilitates building of strong teams and creates an atmosphere of trust, sense of belonging to a community, kindness and tolerance to differences. A positive climate is created through inclusion, sharing, interest encouragement and participation.

For the elapsed period of time various activities related to Planning (curriculum) approach in accordance with the adopted Action plan were carried out in both *crèches*. There were three main points - Transition from detailed to a more global planning allowing greater operational freedom of the teacher, oriented to children's interests; Optimization of cooperative learning (the process of working in small groups); Development of a child portfolio mechanism, facilitating child's early diagnostics and revealing child's holistic development. Working in small groups leads to: more effective communication and collaboration in small groups, establishing better contact between adults and children and better acquaintance between the two sides, building confidence between the two sides and a heightened sense of closeness and empathy; stimulating communication skills and collaboration in small groups; mastering the necessary rules for life in the group. At the end of November, 2014, the educator, together with nurses in the *crèche* groups, discussed the implementation of those moments in their December planning and incorporated the specific topics within global ones.

This process continued throughout the year and established itself as a good practice. It was realized that implementing the new approach in planning contributed to the educator's greater operational freedom.



Example: The "Christmas tree and presents" and "Santa Claus is here", topics planned for the first week of December, 2014, were united in one - "Christmas Surprises"; "Dwarves and Bells" and "Christmas in the Forest", planned for the second week of December, 2014 became "Christmas Adventures in the Forest"

Example: "With a sledge on the snow" and "Grey Sparrow", topics for the third week of February, 2015, were united in "Winter Adventures"; and the topics for the fourth week of February, 2015, "Martenichki, martenichki" and "Baba Marta" were combined into "Baba Marta hurried, martenichki tied."

Example: "Mom's Day" and "Winnie the Pooh Family" topics, planned for the first week of March 2015, were combined in one - "Mum's holiday in Winnie the Pooh's Family"; "Train" and "Playing and Riding", planned for the fourth week of March were combined into "Traveling and Having fun".

Searching for new forms of communication with children: evaluation of the personal peculiarity of each child; creating preconditions for content-rich and meaningful contacts through active interaction with the individual child and with the group. Nurses, guided by the plan made together with the teacher and according to the teacher's methodological guidelines for working on a specific topic, were allocated for the work in small groups /2-3/ depending on the number of nurses for the day / based on topic tasks. In this way children have the freedom to choose which group to join and the opportunity to move freely from one center to another according to their interests. On the "Christmas adventures in the forest" topic, children could choose to be in the "Literacy" center and meet and recognize forest animals in winter - Fox, Rabbit and Bear, with their characteristics and seasonal changes in their appearance.



Concerning children's portfolios - each of the children had their portfolio, which was enriched monthly with information about them, in order to trace their potential and development - physical and neuro-psychical, verbal, social, emotional and cognitive as well as the child's adaptation to the group. The portfolio of each child gives a real opportunity to the educator and the team of the *crèche* group to explore and specify development, interests and abilities of each individual child and to support the planning of activities.

For the elapsed period of time, various activities related to the Family involvement approach in accordance with the adopted Action plan were carried out in both *crèches*, but as a beginning, a Charter for Cooperation was adopted, and a "Family room" was refurbished and started to function. At the same time, parents got involved in enriching the "Art" activity center - by donating dresses and blouses for their children's artistic entering into social roles, picture books for the "Literacy" center, a tent with cushions for the "Privacy" corner. All this contributed to real interaction and voluntary partnership between the *crèche* groups team, children and members of their families, as well as to consolidating the positions of full-value cooperation with the members of the families of children from the *crèche* group. Through their special knowledge, skills and hobbies, family members are useful for the development of children, and that makes communication and cooperation between adults and children rich and full. In December, parent meetings in both *crèches* were held. They aimed at introducing families to the Charter of Cooperation, where goals, objectives, principles of joint activities, responsibilities and expectations on both sides, joint activities during the year, addresses and telephone numbers for contact, consultation timetable with the family were clearly listed. In January, both *crèches'* parents were introduced to the renovated "Family room", which started to serve its purpose.



Creating a family room provides possibilities for meetings with the nurses, for getting information and advice in an environment close to the family one, and for an exchange of experience with other families. Each month various activities were organized with the families, such as: making *survachki* - traditional for Christmas and the New Year. Twigs of cornel-tree, popcorn, dried peppers, wool and other things were brought by parents; *martenichki* from white and red thread, beads and wooden balls were made; Easter decorations for the daycare room of the *crèche* group and painting eggs with parents was organized; spring festival in the *kindergarten* and joint musical and mobile games with brothers and sisters from other age groups were held. There was also a "sports festival in the yard of the kindergarten" with Mom and Dad; and the kindergarten's annual concert. The *crèche* group team prepared on a daily basis a table with information for parents regarding the stay and the regime of the child in the *crèche*. In the elapsed period of time more than 300 individual meetings and consultations with members of the families of children were held in the "Family room" according to the schedule adopted at the beginning of the school year. The following topics, interesting for the parents, were included: "Attracting children to the values of the family and educating them in a spirit of love and peace" / Christian Family Day / " Preventing colds and the flu. Why is my child often sick?", "Tips for faster and more successful adaptation of newcomers", "Healthy eating for children", "Adaptation to the new social environment of a newcomer in the group", "Taking more vitamins in spring", "Harmful habits in children and dealing with them." This approach influenced positively the improvement of cooperation with members of the children's families and their awareness regarding the children's stay in the *crèche*. For the elapsed period of time various activities related to Qualification (training) approach in accordance with the adopted Action plan were carried out in both *crèches*.

Increasing the pedagogical competences of the *crèche* group educator and training of nurses together with students from "St. Cyril and Methodius" University, Vratsa subsidiary through trainings /February -April-May 2015 / included the following topics: "Relationships", "Family and Community", "Integration, Diversity and Values of Democracy," "Health, Well-being and Nutrition", "Development and Learning," "Observation, Documentation, Reflection and Planning," "Supportive Environment", "Professional Development", "Intersectoral Collaboration" with Assoc.prof. Sofia Dermendzhieva, PhD as a coach. /"Pedagogy and Methodology" Department, Head of department – Vratsa subsidiary/. The exchange of best practices between the teams of the two *crèches* was on a monthly basis through visits and meetings-discussions on conducting pedagogical practices. For the elapsed period of time various activities related to Management of the institution (governance) approach in accordance with the adopted Action plan were carried out in both *crèches* In different periods of time, meetings-discussions were conducted with various institutions - municipality, NGOs, Agency for Social Protection, RHI (Regional Health Inspectorate), BFSA **Bulgarian Food Safety Agency**, universities. At the same time a System for evaluating the work quality of the people working in *crèche* was discussed and implemented. Based on the five main areas covered in the Action plans of both institutions the following main conclusions can be made:

- . In the **Management of the environment (space)** area, including Updating Activities Centers (drama, manipulative games and building blocks, art, sand and water /seasonal center/ areas for self-discovery - mirrors) aiming at children as protagonists, Construction of a minilaboratory within the organization of the study-room / Science Center/, satisfying the needs of the children in terms of their technical development - natural materials, leaves, cones, chestnuts, walnuts, mussels, etc.; plastic caps, bottles, cups, etc.; wooden figurines with regular and irregular shape; Updating multicultural functional environment; Symbols for belonging to different ethnic groups - tables, photos, and objects, a significant development was observed. For a short period of time, study rooms already had different environment organization and created the opportunity for greater choice. Development of various centers of activities (some of the ideas were borrowed during the working visit to Florence) greatly changed the environment in which children participated and we can say that from a didactic environment it became a Learning environment. The results achieved were the fruit of a changed motivation on the part of participants in the work efforts, who actively got involved in sharing with their colleagues what they saw, especially in the change of the study-rooms whose new look was really visible and considerable. With additional resources all study-rooms were filled with content and allowed each child to participate in activities, which they chose in the framework of the planned activities.



. In the **Planning (curriculum)** area including: Transition from detailed to a more global planning for greater operational freedom of the teacher, oriented towards children's interests; Optimization of cooperative learning (the process of working in small groups); Development of a child portfolio mechanism, facilitating children's early diagnostics and revealing children's holistic development there was great progress. Evidently, there was teamwork in planning and combining activities that were previously single and often independent. In this connection, progress in conducting activities related to thematic training and cooperative learning is visible. It is of great importance for the children themselves especially for their holistic development. The idea about a Portfolio for each child was implemented 100%, and that document was one of the main tools for diagnosing children's development. Of course, this area has great potential for development and depends largely on the participants themselves in the planning process. It is assumed that the effect of this type of activity planning will be recognized as a permanent trend in educational institutions.

. In the **Family involvement (families)** area, including: updating the Charter for cooperation with the family, reflecting the planned work with the family and assisting the transition from home to Crèche, expanding parents' activities together with crèche staff through parent meetings, individual meetings, discussions, happenings, training and other cooperative forms and improving the connection for information through planned individual meetings in the Family room, the strong interest and effect of this approach was apparent. Each crèche has developed and signed a Charter for Cooperation with the Family, which regulates basic interactions between Family and pedagogical team. Of particular importance was the opening of the "Family Room" where all individual meetings with parents

were held, from where they could borrow certain games or toys to use. At the same time, through improved forms of information parents could learn every day what and how something happened to their child and how they could cooperate in improving their results.

. In the **Qualification (training)** area, including: External qualification (after studying the needs of the team), progress in improving and raising professional qualification was also observed. Despite the conducted trainings and meetings between the two institutions it is necessary for this process to be deepened and become a priority for both educational institutions. There are certain legal difficulties in terms of specifying the role and function of nurses and their participation in professional training. That is often the reason for their not participating in this type of activities.

In the **Management of the institution (governance)** area, including: activities with the municipality, NGOs, Agency for Social Protection, RHI (Regional Health Inspectorate), BFSA **Bulgarian Food Safety Agency**, universities, there is a positive change for the elapsed period of time. Much greater concern could be desired from the institutions, in relation to the care and education of crèche children. Obviously, the time was very short and we cannot expect a big change, all the more that it has to come from the outside, which is a question of additional resources and policy. At the same time, the implementation of the System for evaluating the work quality of the people working in crèches (ISSA instruments) is going on very successfully and the approaches proposed for working in crèches are gradually introduced.





Suggestions for the ambience and other things.

Activities, results and perspectives from the experimentation in Slovenia

by *Mateja Rezek*

Executive planning

From preschool Grosuplje, 6 preschool teachers and 2 preschool administrators (director and deputy the director) were involved in a week of experimental learning in Florence. We have deliberately chosen such a staff structure, because preschool administrators need to be really informed and have to have a deep understanding of new content that is to be transformed into practice, in order to offer meaningful support to preschool teachers, who will implement those changes.

Immediately after the experimental learning week, the executive plan on a general level, that will be introduced in the practice, was made. After the week of experimental learning in Tuscany, the preschool teachers that have been involved there, have introduced all novelties seen/heard to other preschool teachers from preschool, who work in groups 1-3. After that, every preschool teacher has developed her own, individual plan of action.

In order to follow-up changes introduced in the practice on the preschool level, all preschool teachers involved in the TALE project, have met 6 times (from November 2014 till June 2015). In the meetings, they discussed changes introduced into the practice, room for improvement and further actions. On the preschool level, executive planning was made in three areas: family, environment and curriculum:

Executive planning in the Family area:

Month	Goal	Strategy (how to achieve the goal?)
09/2014	To collect the ideas, wishes, needs of families of children aged 1-3 years	Questionnaires for parents.
09/2014	To inform parents with possible forms of cooperation	Meeting with parent's brochure/leaflet for parents, informative poster on the possible forms of cooperation, calendar of collaboration, publication.
09/2014 - 06/2015	To invite parents to participate in different forms of cooperation throughout the school year.	Message board for parents, e-mail, information folder of the group, video of the activities, parent's room in the preschool, shared birthday celebrations.
12/2014	To invite as many parents as possible to December creative workshops.	Attractive invitation to every family, to choose appropriate day, hour, place, to assure material for creating, to welcome parents. To notice every present family.
09/2014 - 06/2015	To provide responsible partnership between preschool and parents in taking care for child.	Monthly individual meetings with parents, developing child's portfolio (together parents and preschool teacher), "pocket" of daily messages.
09/2014 - 06/2015	To provide responsible partnership between preschool and parents in taking care for child's development in the field of child's language skills.	Book backpack with puppet, group's toy/mascot, cooperation with speech therapist. .
09/2014 - 06/2015	To attract parents to get involved into direct group activities.	Written invitation to parents, agreement on date, hour, content, planning of the day and joint reflection of the activity. Thank you note for all involved.
01/2015 in 02/2015	To help and support parents in raising children and overcoming development problems. To connect and bring parents together.	Community tea party.
03/2015 - 05/2015	Reinforce positive experiences on the development of children with families	Creating network of friendship, photo material (child in one week), photo story in the changing room on theme: "I can do it", watching video of a child in action together with parents and discussion preschool teacher-parents



Executive planning in the Learning environment area:

Month	Goal	Strategy
09/2014 - 06/2015	To add natural materials and objects from real life in the learning environment	Collecting natural materials and real life objects for interest areas together with parents.
09/2014 do 12/2014	To design individual/ intimate corner in the group.	Designing intimate /individual corner in the group together with parents
09/2014 - 06/2015	Enrichment of outer playground and terrace with natural and recyclable (waste) materials- playroom in the open space.	Adding different playing equipment, making table for water/sand play from old unused tables, gathering playing materials (natural, waste) also with the help of parents. Changing the materials regularly.
09/2014 do 12/2014	Ensuring/arranging vertical surfaces for drawing and painting of the children.	Easel, billboards, sides of wardrobes in the corners, sides of changing table.
09/2014 - 06/2015	Enrichment of learning environment with tactile elements.	Setting sensory materials to the learning environment as a learning context.
09/2014 - 06/2015	Enrichment of learning environment with materials means for language development.	Enrichment of learning corners, materials in book corner also with the help of parents.
09/2014 till 12/2014	Using mirrors for stimulating child's development.	Putting mirrors (in different positions) in the groups, systematically using mirrors that already exist in groups and in preschool.
09/2014 till 12/2014	Designing corner for regular exercising of the children.	Corner with different props, that are being changed (balls, boxes, gymnastic ring etc.

Executive planning in the Curriculum area:

Month	Goal	Strategy
09/2014 - 06/2015	Artistic creation after the artistic experience – observing reproductions	Children draw and paint expressive art after the experience with the reproductions
09/2014 - 06/2015	To adapt learning strategies to developmental and individual needs of children as much as possible. To give children time and space, not to give them instructions how to work.	Implementing activities in small groups, allowing more opportunities for individual learning and work.
09/2014 - 06/2015	All daily routines and time between the routines organize and offer to children as opportunity for learning and raising independence.	Planning and reflection on all parts of daily schedule.
09/2014 - 06/2015	Enable children to express their individuality.	By creating/designing space and offering different materials encourage spontaneous reaction of the children to activities. Provide enough choices for children (according their interest).
09/2014 - 06/2015	Enable children to experience themselves as capable, competent persons, who have certain features which make them unique.	The construction of many identities of children.
09/2014 - 06/2015	To provide flexibility in resting for children.	Arrangement of intimate/individual/quiet space, where children can take rest. This space is available to children on permanent basis.



Description of the results achieved

On Family area involvement

At the beginning of the school year (in September), all preschool teachers from groups 1-3 distributed questionnaires to all parents. With the questionnaires they wanted to get information on what forms of cooperation preschool parents are familiar with and use; what they miss on the level of cooperation with the preschool, how they assess the level of child well-being, what is their assessment of satisfaction with the preschool teacher in their relationship with the child, the reasons for the chosen assessment, suggestions for improvement. Preschool teachers have found that parents are very satisfied with the attitude/relation of professional workers and preschool administrators to them and children; that they have very poor knowledge of different forms and possibilities of co-operation (parents listed only few most well-known forms); they want their children in preschool to feel good, but otherwise they had no proposals for changes/improvements.

According to the identified fact that parents do not know possible forms of cooperation well, preschool teachers decided to start special "promotional" activities for informing parents on possible ways of cooperation. Thinking that "parents already know everything about how to participate in the preschool's life" is not correct, as was also evident from the results of the questionnaire. In the preschool every year, they "enroll" 150 new parents. If they want parents to be actively involved in organized activities even in the 1st or 2nd year their child is included in preschool, every year preschool has to organize strong campaigns on how to involve parents and strong campaigns on informing parents about how they can participate.

Throughout the school year all preschool teachers in groups 1-3 intensively worked on inviting parents to participate in different forms of cooperation. They were inviting parents to the workshops, to joint celebrations, to the working campaign, to the walk together with the whole group - as volunteers. At the last meeting of teachers involved in the TALE project, all of them reported that the number of parents who come to each meeting has increased. One of the events preschool teachers organized (and invited parents to) were creative workshops in December. They invited (in person and with a written invitation) every family to the workshop. The workshop was designed as a creative workshop, where participants could choose among various activities and when participating in activities, they could play with their child and interact with other parents and preschool teachers. The final aim was to create a festive atmosphere and also to "show" parents how they can be creative with their child at home, to give them some ideas on how to spend quality time with their child. More than 70% of parents attended the workshop. Feedback was very encouraging. Parents expressed interest for more workshops like this.



Preschool teachers also put a lot of emphasis on inviting parents to participate in direct group activities. In such a way parents have been involved in story reading in groups, performed role play "hairdresser", have been involved in arranging a learning environment in groups, been involved in music activities (playing on different instruments), been involved in various sports activities. In June, all preschool teachers in 1-3 groups could report about experience with parent's involvement in the group. When parents are involved in the group, children have the opportunity to acquire new strategies/skills of communicating with adults, who are not preschool teachers or their parents. In every group there were at least 2 parental visits, in some groups, 80% of parents have been involved.

Besides inviting parents to different forms of events, preschool teachers put a lot of emphasis on building a real partnership in caring for the child, on sharing information about children and planning their development together. Preschool teachers and parents regularly in monthly meetings shared information about the child's development. The child's portfolio travelled between home and preschool. The portfolio contained information on the child's development, their achievements, impressions, photo material. Every child has her/his portfolio. Preschool teachers were responsible for putting information into the portfolio and also for encouraging parents to do the same. Some parents got really familiar with this form of communicating/cooperation, but some were still very cautious. But still, preschool teachers say, that they are satisfied, they have started this activity, they want to continue and upgrade the activity in the future. Preschool teachers have also developed/introduced some activities that can help parents take care of their child's development in different areas of development. For example for language development, they have introduced "Book backpack" that travels between home and preschool and vice versa. In the backpack, there are

various didactic games for encouraging the child's language development with instructions on how to play. Parents got the idea of how they can play with the child and through play encourage his/her language development. Since the content of the book backpack has been co-created by a speech therapist from preschool, parents also got information about where they can get additional help if necessary.

Preschool teachers also introduced some activities that can help parents see their child as competent. Teachers offered parents a presentation of the child's achievements on a regular basis through video or photo material, with emphasis on the individual child's achievements, his/her milestones achieved (first time he eats alone, first time he sleeps in preschool, first time he cooperates with others...) Photographs and videos help adults to start communicating about the child, to see the child's achievements, to see the child as a developing, independent person and to more easily plan further steps of development. All preschool teachers that used that form of cooperation were very enthusiastic about it.

Preschool teachers also wanted to connect parents among themselves, so they could offer support to each other, share experiences etc. Preschool teachers prepared an afternoon tea party for parents. The theme was chosen by parents (stubbornness, how the child is learning, setting the borders...). Parents were actively involved, they were interacting one with one another and exchanging their experiences. Preschool teachers were facilitating the discussion and were responsible for inclusion of all parents in the discussion, they were reflecting, summarizing the ideas, giving the cues etc. Form of a classical meeting: preschool teachers-parents, has been replaced by a tea party, which is more participatory for parents.



Atmosphere at the tea party is more relaxed, parents are more active and effects are more long-term. Parents are not willing just to accept/listen to information, but want to compare their point of view with others and/or check information with other parents.

All groups have developed forms of cooperation with families. Those forms of cooperation were introduced at the team meeting. Professional debate/ reflection on meetings with TALE teachers has deepened the understanding of the meaning of those activities for families and children and also enabled preschool teachers to get familiar with various forms of cooperation.

On the learning environment area

All groups have planned enrichment of the didactic materials / replacement of plastic materials with natural ones. In the majority of groups, they invited parents to help them with this task, so they sent an oral invitation to parents, invitation through posters, bulletin boards, organizing workshop for parents for playing home, hairdresser, doctor, carpenter, mechanic, doctor etc...

Everything that they planned has been realized. Children have accepted the changes in learning materials very well. The overall conclusion is that children are playing in a very engaged manner if they have meaningful and stimulating materials. In the groups, they also enriched the inner learning environment with tactile/sensory elements, such as sensory cards, sensory path, tactile posters. Using different tactile materials in preschool was not a novelty, but they offered some things in a different/new way: sensory materials on the wall in the locker room, on the floor as a permanent placement, in bathrooms etc.



Preschool teachers enriched the learning environment with materials for language development, such as picture books, children's magazines, puppets, illustrations of poems, soft accessories, armchair, picture books, which were made by parents and children at the workshop, photo album of events in the preschool etc. All groups have at least two picture books per child regularly available in the book corner. In all groups there is also a collection of photographs of the events in the preschool, which is available to children and parents. Groups have systematically begun to use mirrors for stimulating children's development. Mirrors were placed in all groups, washrooms/toilets and locker rooms, preschool teachers encourage children to use them- observing parts of the body, learning how to dress, put shoes on, identifying emotions etc. The mirror is also used by a speech therapist for individual work with children. Alternative uses are still open and preschool teachers are open to try new ideas and new ways of use. Preschool teachers also begin to think more about artistic experiences they offer children, so they were ensuring/arranging vertical surfaces for drawing and painting and have also displayed reproductions of art work of different artists in the groups. Preschool teachers introduced children to painting and drawing with different tools, on vertical and horizontal surfaces, the use of art cards, and various reproductions (Miro, Kandinsky ...). Use of reproductions of famous artists in this age group was a novelty. It is really important that preschool teachers understand why this experience is important for children, so they can transfer it to the parents, who sometimes do not see the point of such activities. Preschool teachers also put more emphasis on designing a corner for regular exercising of the children. After visiting Florence, preschool teachers were impressed by the individual/intimate corner, so they introduced it in every group.



A house made of cardboard, corner covered with curtains, bedspread on the table, re-designing the changing table, a low shelf in the closet with soft equipment, table under which children can hide and there are also different kinds of mobile (made from corks, feathers, paper...), were designed as individual/intimate corners. All groups have intimate corners, but they are very different. Preschool teachers say that children use this space for relaxation (individual use or quiet play in pairs). In addition to the inner learning environment, they have put more emphasis also on the outer environment. They put a lot of emphasis on enrichment of the outer playground and terrace with natural and recyclable (waste) materials- they created a playroom in the open space. Throughout the school year they have used various different natural materials in the groups for exploring, playing. Every new material is a new motivation and stimulation for the children to explore. Preschool teachers now feel more close to the idea, that children in this age group need firstly free research of materials, which later is upgraded with guided research. The sensible choice of material, enough time and opportunities for individual work or work in a small group is of crucial importance. They encourage play with water, sand, snow, soil, wooden waste materials, paper waste ribbons, clay, clay, starch, sand, flour, meal, leaves, cones, fruits...

On the Curriculum area

After the Florence experience, preschool teachers have begun to think more about the artistic experience children are exposed to. In all groups, the space has been enriched with reproductions, which has enabled children to get in touch with various artistic experiences. In one unit, preschool teachers have prepared an art exhibition where they have acquainted parents with the artistic expression of children and proposed to them how to guide children in artistic activities.

Preschool teachers also began to see possibilities of working in smaller groups, to use the opportunity of dividing into two small groups (with one preschool teacher instead of staying together in one big group with 2 preschool teachers); of being more flexible in daily routines, to offer children more space for being independent, to give them more space for independent exploration, enquiry into the materials, not just following the instructions. They began implementing activities in small groups, allowing more opportunities for individual learning and work. In such a way, preschool teachers began to organize activities in more corners simultaneously, in the hall, on the terrace on the playground in the preschool neighborhood. All indoor and outdoor spaces are getting new challenges for children's learning.

There is greater awareness among preschool teachers about the work in small groups, but there is still the presence of activities held in a "classic" way (whole group, frontal way) so there is still a need for raising awareness and putting new skills into practice.

In some groups they have also arranged a "quiet" space, where children can take rest. This space is available to children through the day, on a permanent basis. They have started to think about individual rest as individual need. They assert that they have made huge difference in this area in this school year. Self- service meals are still a big challenge; they will continue to work on this in next school year also.

Providing children with opportunities to play/ go outside is a routine already. A new strategy is organizing smaller groups (one group stays inside, the other goes out, using a different playing environment with small groups).



Preschool teachers have begun to create more opportunities for children to express their individuality, they have started to develop learning corners that provide intimate learning space and learning through different learning styles (book corner, home-family corner, playing roles, artistic, constructive play, play with natural and waste materials, space for drinks and snacks, place for rest etc.). In the preschool, they assert that in this school year in their preschool there has been a real flourishing of learning corners and materials that invite children to various activities. Many preschool teachers are really skillful in using opportunities that space is offering; they are getting more and more skillful in documenting those activities. Reflecting on events, re-planning, and a professional view on child development, parent participation and raising public awareness of our professional work are still areas where they see new opportunities and challenges.

Preschool teachers also started with activities that help children see themselves as capable, competent persons, who have certain features, which make them unique. For this purpose, they use photographs of the children and their families, mirrors, discussions about who is present and who not; they use a backpack with the group's mascot, a space for the child's personal belongings, take into account the specificities of child nutrition, rest, learning strategies, needs etc.

"I want to be visible and seen every day, I want to be important, I want preschool teacher to like me." is in the subconscious of each child, so this is a key area for a successful emotional and social development and hence child development in general.



Evaluation of results achieved and prospects

In the preschool Grosuplje and also in DRCPISBS we evaluate that changes introduced into preschool's daily life are so natural and so embedded in their daily practice, that preschool teachers have already taken them as theirs. On the level of preschool we have already taken care of the transfer of information to "new" preschool teachers, who will be working in groups 1-3 in the next school year. Preschool teachers who are involved in the TALE project have invited "new" teachers to several meetings and showed them "portfolios of change" – documented changes that every preschool teacher keeps for herself.

On the level of DRCPISBS we will involve some of the concepts, lessons learned, changes introduced in practice of the preschool Grosuplje in our in-service training for all preschool teachers working in 1-3 groups.





Education and training for all and other things.

Activities, results and perspectives
from the experimentation in Lithuania

by Regina Sabaliauskiene

The Center for Innovative Education invited a chain of preschools, "Vaikystes Sodas" (Childhood garden) and preschool "Boruzele" (Ladybird) to participate in the project and choose new ideas from Tuscany for adaptation in Lithuania. Both organizations advocate for the inherent right of every child to a child-centered quality education and provide high quality services for children and their parents. The Italian partners of the TALE project - Istituto degli Innocenti – organized a learning module in Italy from November 10 – 15, 2014.



Eight participants from Lithuania had the possibility to participate in this activity and learn about the *Tuscan Approach* to early childhood education in the context of the overall policy for the development of quality services. It was wonderful opportunity for project participants from Lithuania together with ISSA representative, partners from Bulgaria and Slovenia to visit different preschools in Tuscan region and to learn about space in relations, the integrated system of services and the governance issue, a curriculum of possibilities, the educational professions between academia and local practice, participation and family education, etc.

It was an unforgettable experience and a wonderful opportunity not only to learn from the words of international experts, but also to observe real life in different preschools, to ask questions and receive answers from researches and practitioners, to discuss different concerns with our colleagues from Bulgaria and Slovenia. We took lots of pictures and wrote many pages of useful information. Each evening we had discussions in our group about impressions of the day and at the same time we started planning of our future activities in Lithuania which were inspired by Italian colleagues.

Executive Planning

After visiting Italy, the representatives of a chain of preschools "Vaikystes Sodas" and preschool "Boruzele" (Ladybird) developed an activity plan, which included the main areas of expected changes in: management of the environment, curriculum, family involvement, professional development and governance.

In the area of the management of the environment, the following activities were planned:

- . We were all particularly delighted with the aesthetic environment and facilities of the Italian *kindergartens* and decided to adapt some ideas to the Lithuanian context:
 - . To provide less teacher-planned activities and more opportunities given by quality of space and design so that it supports and stimulates the children's desire to explore and learn individually or with their peers, encouraging more and more their ability to learn;
 - . To provide the possibility for children to experience education about beauty every day;
 - . To set up various activity tools (such as work-stands, mirror walls) on the children's eye- level;
 - . To create mini-labs - it was planned to collect natural materials and recycled materials that will be stored for the purpose of carrying out creative activities in mini-labs.
 - . To improve the environment in the eating area and eating culture. This activity was inspired by the practice we observed in Tuscany's *kindergartens*. It was planned that teachers will play the leading role in modeling appropriate behavior.



- . To improve outside spaces. It was our intention to create a teaching garden, where children would grow flowers, vegetables and other plants as well as observe the growing processes. Paving, geometrical figures, fences etc. would be built using natural materials.

In the area of the curriculum development, the following activities were planned:

- . To develop a curriculum for the new school year taking into consideration the Italian experience and summary of responses we'll receive from surveys;
- . To provide more possibilities for cooperative learning and work in small groups of children;
- . To create mixed age groups of children. Children's activities will be focused on cooperation rather than competition; younger children will be taught by the older ones, thus acquiring the relevant competencies and skills while the older children will obtain social and emotional skills, which are not available in the same age group; education in mixed age groups will be individualized; this will bring mutual benefits for different age groups.

In the area of the family involvement, the following activities were planned:

- . To improve content of questionnaires for parents. During the meetings with parents, teachers fill in certain questionnaires. Certain additional questions related to parents' feelings, expectations, fears, family habits etc. will be added to these questionnaires. We consider that these types of questions are valuable as regards reflection of family position, planning of a more targeted curriculum and individualization of working methods;



- . To expand the list of topics for Parental academies. Parental meetings will be targeted not only to the discussions on institutional matters; their knowledge on pre-school related issues will also be deepened. We will encourage parental involvement in the kindergarten's activities, as well as the organization of events.

In the area of the professional development, the following activities were planned:

- . To learn about the needs of the team in professional development and participate in relevant conferences, round tables, meetings and training;
- . To share experience of TALE project with other preschools in Lithuania.

In the area of the governance, the following activities were planned:

- . To develop good practices in implementation of changing policies on national level by working with all stakeholders for policy change on the level of organization;
- . To develop a system for evaluation of the quality of the services provided by preschool teachers;
- . To create a teacher's motivation system. There are on-going discussions within the organizational units on the need to improve the motivation system for teachers. The discussions are held on top management level; meanwhile the personnel of *kindergartens* provide their feedback through the surveys. The results of this work will feed the factual framework of the new motivation system.
- . To implement certain aspects of horizontal management in Lithuania. Qualified pedagogues will be provided with an opportunity to take on more responsibilities that will be defined in their new work tasks. Everyone who is charged with higher level of responsibility will participate in the management of the organization and contribute towards ensuring provision of high quality services.



Description of results achieved

In the area of the management of the environment, the following activities were implemented:

A safe, aesthetic, and functional educational environment is very important for the comprehensive personal development of a child. The learning environment should encourage children to act, learn, create and enjoy. Since October 2014 we have started implementing the project of creating new spaces and renovating the existing ones.

The Nature Research Center in the community room was established and the educational environment of *kindergarten* groups was replenished.

Sand and water centers were established with the help of parents. Children can now observe and explore the characteristics of water and sand, and experiment. During the winter time children can dig, sift, build tunnels, compare sinking and floating objects, draw on wet sand, and enjoy playing with sand and water.

When parents were introduced to the TALE project, most of them willingly engaged in the search for the means to renovate spaces and to build a laboratory. By the end of the school year they decided to donate aesthetic pictures made by parents to the groups.

Various natural materials and non-hazardous household waste is collected and classified. The Research laboratory has been equipped in a small available room since April 2015. The Community room should be renovated during the summer and a big research laboratory equipped with new furniture and facilities should be built during the autumn.

To encourage their independence, children were engaged in the table-setting process. We have acquired new aprons and caps for the children on duty. Children love setting tables: folding table napkins, placing flatware and crockery. They are all very willing to be involved in this process.

The walls of sensations in all classrooms attended by children under 3 years of age were built. They not only cheer up the children with colors, but they also serve as the centers of development of sensations. The walls of sensations are one of the main centers of attraction, where kids spend a lot of time. After all, children are the best and most sincere judges. The Educational environment – was our main investment and required the biggest changes. We named such changes "Mažylių klasės projektas" ("Classrooms for Babies" Project).

We all created beautiful aircraft, ships, treasure chests, forests, and gardens in each classroom trying to visualize the idea of the "Garden" the best. In each stand you can find rough and soft details, locks, bolts, buckles, etc.

The stands of children's arts and crafts were built at the children's eye level for them to be able to see, discuss, and enjoy their creative work.

Mirror walls were built for children to be able to observe their emotions and play. All the Childhood Garden's units and 12 classrooms attended by children under 3 years of age were equipped with unique stands of sensations (12), stands for children's arts and crafts (12), mirror walls (12). All facilities were built at the children's eye level, easy to reach and use.

Spaces for relaxation, sleep and quiet were improved in all groups.

In the area of the curriculum development, the following activities were implemented:

Each preschool in Lithuania develops their curriculum, which is approved by the Municipality Administration. Since 1996 the preschool "Boruzele" has been engaged in the international educational project "Step by Step", the workgroup of educators of the institution has framed the program with reference to the methodology "Step by Step" and ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy. Preschool "Vaikystės sodas" joined ISSA in 2012. Both preschools updated an innovative educational curriculum taking into account findings from their current programs and ideas they gained during implementation of the TALE project. After the visit to Italy, we decided also to move towards a "curriculum of possibilities": focus more attention on opportunities; provide better accommodation for the learning needs of individual learners, plan educational experiences; use process analysis and the documentation as a tool to reflect and to permanently update ideas and proposals.

The tables for the assessment of the level of development, progress, and achievements of children were adjusted and renewed on the educators' own initiative. The most relevant topics suggested by parents who filled in questionnaires were included in the Curriculum.





The plan of every week is evaluated, key aspects are distinguished, and the activities, which do not get children's attention, are noted. By the end of June we finished evaluation of the individual progress of children in six months, which will enable framing the guidelines of the educational program for the next year in a more expedient way. We are collecting data on the educational program implemented this year, which we are going to analyze in details before setting the program for next year. The heterogeneous groups of children were formed. It enabled easier development of a broad spectrum of children's competencies. Groups were merged in several Childhood Garden units and now children go to mixed-age groups. Most of them were from 1 to 3 years of age, other groups – from 3 to 6 years of age. Such groups – particularly working with older children – have less "teaching", and we believe it is good, because "teaching" in the old meaning is completely inappropriate for preschoolers. Children in mixed-age groups have more possibilities for cooperative learning, they are less competitive, and there are fewer disciplinary problems. In mixed groups, younger children learn self-help skills from the older ones and more quickly acquire competencies, which are appropriate for this age, whereas older children acquire social and emotional competencies, which children do not usually acquire so fast in their own age group. Since the educational activities in mixed groups are personalized, children's motivation and self-reliance is higher than in the group of the same age.

In the area of the family involvement, the following activities were implemented:

Based on existing practice we can say that in Lithuania, parents are actively engaged in the life of the preschool; they spend time in the group together with children and are involved in various activities. Family members of every child contribute to the creation of the environment of the group, suggest and implement different projects.

We are striving to make parents realize that they are always welcome at the institution, that their opinion matters and that children always benefit from continuous cooperation between the educators and parents.

Respecting parents' and families' primary responsibility for their children, the teachers – TALE project participants - decided to provide better support in their parental role. Questionnaires for parents with additional questions related to parents' feelings, expectations, fears, family habits etc. were improved. New questions helped us to understand better the family position and enable better planning and personalizing work with children in a more expedient way. Having received the answers to the questions, the educators can get to know the family better, find out its needs, expectations, fears, and habits. The answers to the questions enable planning the educational process in a more expedient way and personalizing the activities.

A new approach and more information collected about families helped more effectively use the observation results for planning and helping parents to gain knowledge about children's development and reinforce their confidence and energy as educators.

Individual meetings with parents were organized to discuss their concerns and to solve problems on a regular basis. A new "Mail for Parents" was arranged in the locker room for the correspondence between the educators and parents.

Parents are actively engaged in the life of the preschool; they spend time in the group together with children and are involved in various activities. Parents helped to arranged the exhibition "Senių besmegenių šalyje" ("In Snowmen's Land") in the group; they prepared the family presentation posters with illustrations; they participated in the project "Žaislo kelionė į namus" ("Toy's Journey Home"), etc.;

Together with the children, parents attended the institution's events: the "Pavasario spalvos" ("Colors of Spring" exhibition), the traditional campaign "Padovanok darželiui našlaitę" ("Give Kindergarten a Violet"), the campaign "As, tėtis ir mama – kartu kurianti šeima" ("Me, Dad, and Mom – Family that Creates Together"), etc.

Parents helped building the research laboratory. The "Tėvelių namų darbai" ("Parent's Homework" Project) was organized in February-March of 2015. The educators wrote the announcements for parents on what is being collected, what is required for one space or another. Parents already became used to noticing such announcements. They helped children to collect various natural materials, buttons, yarn, cloths, non-hazardous household waste, and such other objects required for children's exploration and education..

Parents organized a week of theatre and role-playing games for children. Together with the children they played theatre, improvised, composed fairytales, and performed for children.

Parents participated in the open doors day organized for parents and educators at the "Žilvitis" kindergarten, where the speech therapist's project "Noriu aiškiai kalbėti" ("I Want to Speak Clearly") was presented. The participants also shared their experience, had a discussion, and got the answers to the questions they were concerned about.

Parents or grandparents of every child in one way or another contributed to the creation of the group environment, and participated in the exhibitions and projects. Most of the parents are very inventive and active, willing to be a part of the life of the group and the kindergarten, thus engaging the other members of the community.

The regular meetings for parents with the educators were organized expanding their knowledge within preschool education. It helps to create a sustainable learning community.

We have established Parent academies. During meetings with parents, we have not only discussed the issues of certain unit or the entire Childhood Garden, but we have also strengthened parents's knowledge of better parenting skills.

Parents can come to the Childhood Garden and spend a few hours in the morning or in the evening watching how the educators work and learning from them. Also, if any questions arise, teachers send their advice and suggestions to parents by e-mail and make notes in the children's yearbook by giving a brief feedback on the child and providing the important information for parents on a daily basis.

Educational seminars are organized for parents on a regular basis. Once a month the Garden's psychologist, mentors, or other specialists conduct seminars for parents and organize educational assignments for families.



Assemblies are organized in the Gardens, during which the educators and children of the Garden present the main aspects of the last theme, which took place for approximately two months. Parents receive assignments; they are invited to join the organization of the assembly and to contribute both ideas and other resources, e.g., bringing cookies and other treats, following the dress code. For instance, when closing the "Little Red Riding Hood" theme, parents gathered for the assembly dressed in hats, later they were used for games and dances. For the closing of another theme – "The Ugly Duckling" – all were dressed in clothes with feathers. Parents gladly accept and creatively implement the assignments. They wore feather earrings, crowns, and skirts.

Common activities and interests helped to get better insight of families and their members, their expectations and habits. Involvement of parents in common activities changed their view about the educators' work. They understand better what is going on in the group and that they are always welcome to express their ideas, thoughts, and suggestions. Common projects and activities help to assure quality education of children.

In the area of professional development, the following activities were implemented:

We understand how important it is to constantly improve the quality of professional competencies of educators; to ensure methodical and subject-related cooperation between the educators; to spread the education innovations in improving the quality of education; to share and encourage good working practice and to solve problems in a responsible way; to gain new experience on the educational trips and through cooperation with other preschool educational institutions as well as lecturers in Lithuania.



Educators continually improve their professional skills by attending various seminars, training, and discussions. They participate in various conferences and share good working practices during seminars, participating in different projects, and competitions.

Each municipality in Lithuania has a methodical cluster, which unites educators from all preschools in this municipality. The Methodology day "Spread of a good Italian practice in order to improve quality of education for children under 3 years of age" took place in Vilnius and was attended by the educators from a large number of preschool educational institutions in Vilnius City: filmed materials and photos taken in Italy were demonstrated. TALE participants shared their impressions after training in Italy and discussed with colleagues how we can apply Tuscany's experience in the Lithuanian context.

We organized training and improved professional skills for all staff - not only teachers working with children under 3 years. We think that the Italian experience is of great importance and can be adopted in preschools serving children over 3 years of age and children attending pre-primary groups.

The educators of the Childhood Garden continually attend various trainings and seminars. One of the main and important ones is "Vaikystės Sodo akademija" ("Childhood Garden Academy"), which takes place annually and during which new educators get to know the specifics of our company's work and education program, even educators, who have been working for long, can update their knowledge and share their experience. During the last weeks of the academy, the educators prepare final papers and implement their aims, also related to the Garden's activities, learning environment, teaching strategies, etc.

The educators not only attend seminars as the audience, but some of them already conduct training themselves for both the Childhood Garden's community and for the broader audience in Lithuania. Especially popular among the Lithuanian educators are training sessions on development of emotional intelligence of children.

In the area of the governance, the following activities were implemented:

Certain aspects of horizontal management were implemented in the project for preschools by taking the management model presented in the TALE project into consideration. The educators were entrusted to perform additional functions related to the administration, which made them feel they are part of the management of the educational institution.

The educators have the additional functions and responsibilities of organizing events, participating in projects, seminars, holiday celebrations, expeditions, meetings; they are actively involved in various working groups and commissions responsible for curriculum development, assessment of children's achievements, family involvement, creating the aesthetic environment of groups and corridors, decorating the hall before traditional and calendar festivals.

Some educators prepare time-cards of their units and submit summaries of food orders. Other educators help to prepare the documents of the company's internal procedures. They not only improve their personal good knowledge of the company's management, but also remind their colleagues about it.

Others were entrusted with coordinating the implementation of the new projects. The backyards of every Childhood Garden's unit will change soon by taking into consideration the Reggio Emilia approach. In each unit the responsible educators are assigned to manage the yard building processes and cooperate with the designer.

Everyone, who has received new responsibilities, feels more engaged in the management of the educational institution and feels greater responsibility, and thus contributes to the provision of quality services for children and their parents.

Evaluation of results achieved and prospects

We are genuinely pleased that this project has been especially successful and enjoyed by children. Quality improvement is never ending process. The experience which we gained participating in the TALE project is very important for us - educators, children and their parents. Quality education of children under three is a burning topic in Lithuania now. According to the law on Education each preschool needs to be ready to serve children under three years of age. It was not very popular a few years ago, because usually mothers tried to stay at home with their children until the child turns three and is "strong enough" to attend preschool. But life is changing and more and more parents are looking for preschools when their child is one year old or even younger. So the experience of our partners from Italy is really valuable.

"Boruzele" Preschool is our training center and implements ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy and disseminates the "Step by Step" approach not only in Vilnius, but very often they have visitors from different regions of Lithuania as well as from other countries. The network of private preschools "Vaikystes sodas" is also a member of the ISSA network. Both organizations cooperate with teacher training institutions and have students for their practice according to the agreements with HE institutions. So all ideas which TALE participants from Lithuania gained during the project are disseminated very broadly, not only among preschools, but they also affect future teachers' understanding of quality practice .

The Center for Innovative Education and both organizations – the chain of preschools "Vaikystes Sodas" (Childhood garden) and preschool "Boruzele" (Ladybird) participate in piloting the ISSA Quality Framework for Early Childhood Practices in Services for Children Under Three Years of Age.



It was a great opportunity to enrich the experience teachers gained by participation in the TALE project with the possibility of reflecting on their practice using the new ISSA tool.

New Structural Fund Projects in Lithuania will start next year and some amount of money will be used for the renovation of preschools. On May 21 we presented the ISSA Quality Framework illustrated with pictures from our trip to Italy to the participants of the round table "Modernization of the Environment in Preschools". It was a really successful event, with deep discussions, not only about physical environment, but also about psychological aspects and the roles of different institutions which must ensure wellbeing of children and provide them the best possibilities to flourish. Representatives from MoE, Ministry of Social Security and Labor, Ministry of Health, representatives from the **Association of Local Authorities in Lithuania**, Institution of the Ombudsperson for Children's Rights, National Agency for school Evaluation, Human Rights Monitoring Institute, Universities, and the architects who are going to develop projects of modernization of facilities in preschools participated in the round table. Such close cooperation among different organizations helps to create a sustainable learning community and enables us to understand each other better, and of course helps to improve the quality of education.

We are planning to use TALE ideas and experiences in Lithuania by developing new teacher- training and retraining programs, by writing articles in the educational publications, by organizing discussions on quality education for children under three years of age with all those interested and all those responsible for quality education.



Final results and perspectives

Contributions, reflections,
and new perspectives of mutual learning





Aldo Fortunati

Reflecting on the prospects that may open up, based on the experience and activities completed in the TALE project, firstly I want to refer to the fact that in the work we have shared together in the past two years, we have tried to speak of child education, putting together two expressions – identity and diversity – seeking to understand how these two terms can enter into a dialogue and in this dialogue, how it can be possible to conceive, represent and practice an idea of education that is full of important potential.

I also want to stress that in a Europe that does not represent itself as very capable of holding identity and diversity together - nor of welcoming different identities – I believe it is very interesting and positive to acknowledge that reflecting about child education today may provide a fertile terrain for meeting, exchanging and sharing thoughts to increase our capacity to plan and build the future through this means.



Therefore, we should not only declare different identities and join them with the capacity of keeping them in a mutual dialogue, but there must also be the time, thinking in particular of the meetings and exchanges that we have held over these two years, even starting from a close-up view of the experience of the Tuscan services, to build an activity plan with a view to including the ingredients of experimentation and innovation in other experiences with which we have sought to build a dialogue.

The time dimension is an important one when speaking of education. I want to say this, pointing out that we recently celebrated the silver anniversary of the Convention on the rights of the child. Although, as some have said, the twentieth century has ended with the written declaration of the right of children to be considered as people, we must hope that the twenty-first century will be the one in which these rights progress from the written document to actual facts.

I would like to recall that in the same years that the Convention was adopted, Loris Malaguzzi, a great Italian educationalist, who I believe dedicated enormous energy to world pedagogical reflection between the end of the last century and the new one, declared: *"Services for children are not literary or simply pedagogical facts, but first and foremost they are deeds and achievements that challenge every day the quality and meaning of policies to find within the latter, the identity of what is possible and what is impossible"*. This reference to the possible and the impossible wanted somehow to assert the relevance and the necessity of a Utopian dimension within our reflections and our capacity to build facts around children's education.

Thus, I believe it is important to conceive and interpret the possibly evocative value of the *Tuscan Approach*. We have repeatedly declared that it is not a model but an approach, which represents the most widely shared of many different experiences completed in our region in the last thirty-forty years. We must not overlook the value of the diversities that these experiences represent, even when we seek to present some of the most crosscutting inspiring principles in an organised manner based, on certain key. We identified five of them at the start of our project and I would like to recall them briefly here, because they are the five points around which we have tried to animate the dimension of discussion, sharing, exchange and the intention of new activities and new projects to develop in future.

The first point is **space**. As some have said, the experience of education goes through experience of the world before it goes through the experience of words. This is a warning and an admonition that applies not only when speaking of education for adolescents and young people, but all the more so when we think of the education of small children, whose relationship with world experience, life experience, relations, knowledge and learning does not come firstly through someone teaching them something, but rather through the fact that there is someone who organises rich opportunities, open for an experience susceptible of evoking and bringing out the potential inherent in children's natural curiosity towards life. Therefore, the idea of space as a resource, an opportunity to support the development of children's experiences is a first very important trait, which we have identified as a crosscutting trait of the Tuscan experiences.

The investment in qualifying space helps us build an idea of a **flexible curriculum**, open and above all oriented towards a shift from attention to contents to attention to the conditions of the experience offered to children.



When speaking of child education, we do not need to prepare the contents table, but we need to prepare the table of conditions, the opportunities offered for children to experience. Investing in space as a resource helps us to develop an indirect pedagogical perspective in which the adult is able to make proposals not only through their direct action but also and above all through the potential that the framework of opportunities that they have organised offers for the children to experience.

Families, a third important point on which we have focused our thoughts as a key element for building an educational project that aims to be based on recognising the children's identity. Not only thinking that a project based on recognition of the children's identity cannot fail to recognise the importance of the family in which the children were born and have grown up, but also thinking that – following the peculiar experience of family education that has been strongly developed in the Tuscan educational services – supporting child education is a precious, rich clue to supporting the parents' role as educators.

Again, there is the subject of **training**, thinking first of all that it is fundamental to assert the idea that speaking of small children, training must be top quality, because it is not simpler, but much more complex to deal with a small child than to teach in a high school or even a university. Thus, little social recognition and little economic retribution of the value and work of educating small children is one more affront that measures the unsatisfactory development of childhood policies. We also know that it is not just a question of demanding high quality training, because we must also demand training that is ongoing and that links basic education to permanent education, and that continues to be a pre-condition for animating the educators' capacity to reflect on their experiences and to renew them on a permanent basis.



Lastly there is the theme of **governance**, the subject we speak of in high-sounding and, I'm afraid, rather generic words in many contexts and which in the Tuscan experience I think should have the merit of aiming not only for the general guidelines but also towards implementing, establishing, developing and supporting territorial coordination bodies capable of being fundamental for the care of management and educational quality in the experiences developed within the services. A children's school needs proximity and not distances, nor high-sounding designs, but to be built around an activism able to valorise resources and potential that are found above all within the communities. The Tuscan experience has certainly represented this too and – as has been pointed out – with the municipalities' extremely important role and the great skill employed in putting public initiatives in synergy and not in contrast with private initiatives. Many different points in synergy with each other, in a balance that not only allows breaks, but also needs to be maintained through the skill in animating and keeping alive the experiential processes that take place within the educational services. One could think – and we want to think - that the *Tuscan Approach* represents precisely this type of complexity and search for balance and that as such, it can provide a good opportunity to animate reflections and new ideas for comparison with other experiences. The wealth and the diversity of the innovative experimental initiatives that have been implemented in the TALE project, starting with the reflections inspired by the *Tuscan Approach*, tell us that it is possible, and highly positive, to cultivate and develop our experience, passing through the dimension of exchange but without falling into the perspective of simple repetition. TALE has helped us valorise the view that education is of top quality if it is able to creatively and constructively interpret the possibilities of every context and every situation, at the same time confirming that comparison with the experience of others is very important for helping us better understand what we are doing and also what we can do more and better.



Lilia Bottigli

I am proud and honoured to have participated in this project, and I wish to thank all the people who made it possible. I wish to thank the colleagues with whom exchanges have occurred because – as Mihaela Ionescu said – it is true, in the education practice the routine is always a risk. More, especially today, education cannot develop but in an international perspective.

I have been assigned the task to focus on the issue "relations with the families". In the *Tuscan Approach* the early years education services are places where children's education meets parental education, that is supporting the development of parenthood, which is in itself a sort of education to change, meant as evolution in the capabilities of growing together with others.

Therefore, we are talking about services for children and for the families. And we are talking about services and also education places, where families and professionals are together in a partnership, as intended before by Professor Buzov.

In the *Tuscan Approach* the participation of the families can be formal (bodies of elected representatives of parents, assemblies, section-group and/or subgroups meetings, individual talks) and informal (such as parties in the traditional festivities, outings and excursions which give the opportunity to discover the local cultural proposals), which ease socialization, as shown in the Slovenian video.

We owe to the foresight of Enzo Catarsi – who many years ago pushed Tuscan early years education in this direction – enriching the family participation in paths of parental education, which today are spread over all the education services and the infant schools. These are made of very diverse measures and activities, not only because the *Tuscan Approach* is not a unique model – as has been said – but also because the families are diverse - very diverse sometimes – and for that reason the *Tuscan Approach* urges a plurality of ways allowing any parent, any family (extended family, including grandparents) to choose what fits best with their needs and wishes, but also the possibility to question itself, to challenge itself, to discuss with others.

Some examples of proposals for the families.

- . The *open days*, which we have seen in the Lithuanian video, offering the families the possibility to spend a whole day in the Nido or Infant school.
- . The Laboratories *children and parents together*, to have moments of play and, through this, observing the different communication modes between children and adults.



- . The *discussion groups* or *groups of word*, or *community of travel*, as Prof. Gino Piagentini, a Tuscan psychologist and trainer in parental education, wrote in a recent article, to mean the changing path taken together, for groups of around 20 parents, who have 6/7 meetings.

In the *Tuscan Approach* the several activities with the families have some common features:

- . They are designed and carried out as an integral part of childhood education services, not as something additional to the ordinary activities for / with children;
- . They are addressed to all and to any family, not just those suffering from any social disease (real and perceived), in order to start a dialogue aiming to overcome the isolation and loneliness often declared by the contemporary families and a source of discomfort, and to create a network of relationships based on the practice of listening and helping;
- . They lie in terms of reciprocity between professionals (educators, teachers, pedagogical coordinators) and parents; in a dimension - among people, rather than roles - that helps to recognize, and then improve and enrich, the educational skills of every parent and every family.

In the *Tuscan Approach*, nobody teaches. The professionals are not teaching, rather they are providing a relational support, carrying the following tasks:

- . Structuring space and time, to ensure that meaningful situations and communications arise. This morning we talked about how important the environment is, like a "setting going beyond words".
- . Facilitating the telling of the emotions, feelings, thoughts that accompany the acts of children, and with the children; supporting the parents in "finding the words", about fears, desires, hopes of being a parent;
- . Making evident the educational project carried by each family and each parent, which may be implicit;

- . Encouraging communication among peers and the debate between families.

In a small group, formed by the parents (and / or grandparents) and the professionals, the latter are involved with the parents (though not like the parents, because they have to take the right distance to be capable of effective support). Then they make observations all together in the concrete situation about how the children are and behave, with the other adults, and with themselves.

The *Tuscan Approach* asks for the establishment of small groups of parents with their children, which makes possible both *acting* and *observing* on one side (including the children), and *reflecting* on the other side (only among adults), starting from the shared experience and aiming to gradually reach the education project and eventually, through differences and similarities, a shared education project.

Sharing play situations with the children, and observing them from the inside, leads the parents to question themselves, to bring out the memories of their childhood (compared with their children's) and of the relationships they had then with their parents (so different from that between grandparents and grandchildren). The reflection after the action, interweaving comparisons, allows the reconstruction of the educational sense of the behaviours (which not always is clear to the parents) and the dependency of those on the educational lines, uncovering the legacy from the parents' personal histories. Quite often during the meetings the parents not only recount, but also bring pictures, small objects and memories of their infancy. Even unaware, they compose their educational biography and tell it in the group, and sometimes they even write it when tools such as logbooks or footnotes or mailboxes are introduced.

In the play situations with children, parents and professionals, the analog languages find a place (which allow better expression than the oral languages, because – as a parent once said – "*often the person who talks more is the one who does it better, not always the one who needs it more*"). The listening to the inevitable differences is eased – feelings, emotions – which open up to the reception of the diverse competences, capacities, cultures and ethnicities (the latter very much present today).

The *Tuscan Approach* to family education helps in observing, listening, thinking about the children and the adults in relationships: with one's own children and with adults.

Thinking of oneself in relation to others reinforces one's capacity to negotiate, in the couple, between parents and children, with one's parents, in the enlarged families. This is becoming very important in today's families, where the roles are not determined once and forever, but rather progressively defined and remodeled.



Alba Cortecchi

I believe it is essential, speaking of the *Tuscan Approach*, to refer to our services' strong identity, something to be proud of also thanks to those who have contributed to building this approach, day by day, in educational services for early childhood in our Region.

I have heard the approach being described as an inspiration and I agree with this assertion that stresses the concept of not wanting to propose a model but a series of indications, possibilities and opportunities for all those who wish to grasp them, enhancing what has been achieved over the years through experience gained by means of a constant search for quality together with growth and complexity: social and organizational complexity; numerical and qualitative growth.

Over the years, and I think that the quality of the supply actually created the demand, Tuscany has experienced rapid numerical growth, also supported by the Regional legislation and by the culture of the infant school ("nido") in our territory, cultivated and nourished by rich and significant experiences. The integration of public with private management, which has exerted a strong influence following the LR (regional laws) 22/99 and 32/2002, with the relative implementing legislation, has enabled us to build local educational contexts using the System's measures; in particular I would like to mention two that are the pillars of every educational system and on which the Municipality of Florence has worked and documented assiduously, namely the *Formazione e Coordinamento pedagogico* (pedagogical training and coordination).

Today there is heavy investment in training, also in the collective, social, economic and individual imagination, coinciding in some way with a "principle of hope" for the future.



Indeed training in education refers to a constellation of values such as respect for everyone's dignity and the possibility of raising personal and professional levels in the course of a whole lifespan. It refers to the right to in-service training for those who, in varying degrees, are involved in the educational process with the aim of developing self-awareness and assertiveness; the development of cognitive democracy and active citizenship; possession of specific knowledge and skills that must be continually up-dated and renewed in consideration of the developing social context and of the organisational, social and cultural changes.

The training that is characteristic of the experiences underlying the *Tuscan Approach*, with differing themes and methods throughout the area, can be seen transversally as an open process, *bildung* without *bild*, being a flexible, non-rigid structure, non-static but dynamic, restless, continuous and continually evolving.

Training certainly understood as knowledge, knowing how and knowing how to be, but *essentially* as human training in the highest sense of the word which allows everyone to know themselves, their humanity; training that develops awareness, reflection about our actions, capacity to listen and welcome, to critically appraise ourselves and our own deeds, putting ourselves in the other person's shoes, understanding our own history and that of others, not denying emotions but cultivating the right distance.

Training in our time *that accepts and welcomes problematization*. In the sphere of public/private collaboration it was essential to think, plan and share network training, namely choosing training paths that promote growth in the entire sector, creating common ground, starting from the premise of wanting to unite without standardising, aiming to improve the quality of teaching and to spread the culture of education that has inspired the *Tuscan Approach*.

Of course, the regional legislative structure is sound and has supported the *Tuscan Approach* thanks also to the decision to qualify the educational professions through

- . revision of the qualifications for access that emphasise the importance of university level training for educators;
- . in-service training for all personnel, quantified as not less than 20 hours (training as an individual right/duty of the management, whether public or private/guarantee of quality)
- . earmarking of *dedicated* funds for coordination training in the context of zonal planning
- . pedagogical coordination on several levels, emerging from the single situation to acquire a broader dimension

Pedagogical Coordination is another *must* for the educational system in our region.

Literally speaking, coordination may be defined as a *link between several elements with a view to reaching a given aim*, therefore an action that is already complicated in itself in every sphere that requires specific knowledge, skills, capacities and aptitudes; in the pedagogical context it is more complicated because within the services the planning that is the basis of the experiences, open but never extemporaneous, comprises many aspects, including organisational ones.

In fact, the figure of the pedagogical coordinator is rich and multifaceted and in complex systems with a large number of services the pedagogical coordination must in its turn be coordinated; how many times over the years have I heard from many sources the oxymoron uncoordinated coordination? Innumerable times...



It is fundamental to *hold together* the system and the awareness that everything is possible if there are the principles, but also indications, to refer to, thus favouring homogeneity in our approach to education, without levelling out the characteristics of individual services in the territorial network, thanks to the possibility of ordering them into different actions and initiatives, although based on a common, shared ideal. Still more complicated is the 06 perspective, which cannot be neglected when thinking of the absolute value of the continuity of education, which is substantively based on common training and coordinated actions.

Each system has been equipped over time with a pedagogical coordination that has contributed to the elaboration of guidelines and the relative tools for planning and surveying/evaluating quality (all referable to the *Tuscan Approach*). These are firm points of departure thanks to which it has been possible to welcome and filter new proposals and ideas with an inclusive and open outlook, characteristic of situations susceptible to grow and develop in harmony with the changes in the educational services system.

Today, under the new regional legislation, we speak of zonal management and pedagogy coordination. The zone is coordinated in its turn and the organisational /management aspect (rightly) becomes more important.

In Tuscany, there are 35 zones, each of which has very different territorial characteristics both from the (highly relevant) point of view of their morphology and from the economic /social point of view.

Considering the *zone*, as a reference for a system of services for early childhood, what comes to mind is a place, an enclosed space which may correspond to a big city or unite several municipalities with similar morphological characteristics, which is meaningful when speaking of services and families because this targeted planning of actions;



thinking here of mountain communities or industrial zones more closely associated with the phenomenon of immigration. The zone (from the Latin *zonam* and the Greek *zōnē belt*) also acquires the characteristics of a privileged place where specific strategies conceived for those special places can be implemented. A protected space, even though it is open, where the rules may be changed because they are not strictly delimited (free zone) and where constant monitoring is used to assess the effects and to redefine (*zone play*). Zones of light and shade that at the national level mark deep differences and inequalities. Only thanks to processes of governance that are careful and sensitive to the territory can these differences be reduced, creating zones nearby, not far away, not in geographical terms, but in providing opportunities.

Training and pedagogical coordination are the essential founding elements of the *Tuscan Approach* and of its presentation of itself without imposition as a model, of its capacity to *arrive and inspire*, promoting exchange and the dissemination of practices in different and distant parts of the world.

We are ready to go ahead, towards an expected future *Bulgarian, Lithuanian, Brazilian, Argentine approach...* focused on children, the engine of thought and planning ability.



Donatella Giovannini

In the Tuscan experience, attention to the value of space in the educational services for early childhood has been a key work process, in contrast with what happens in the schools, where poor investment in giving the habitat defining characteristics shows schools as institutional settings, always the same in the different situations and not equipped to encourage specific experiences, not organised to offer situations of ease and wellbeing for children and adults. This is a consequence of the little value given by the pedagogical system itself, overlooking the value of the context, in favour of the central value of the figure of the teacher in the educational process.

In Italy, an exception to this general situation is provided by the childhood educational services, which have been able to supply some very interesting examples from an environmental point of view. Attention to the value of space has produced remarkable results especially in terms of creative solutions, which are not standardised and not exclusively functional.

Children's skills can be developed or inhibited according to the context in which the children live. Indeed, the environment is not merely a container of educational events; it is not an amorphous shell, but an integral part of the educational event that is not only rooted in it, but is represented by it. It represents our idea of a child, or education and the community. Talking of spaces means tackling many complex questions. Here we will deal with some of the many issues. Bruno Bettelheim's considerations about the notion of a "good" space for children, as a space able to convey to children the certainty of being safe, there and now, but also the sensation that they can venture out to discover the world around them, were very useful and appropriate for planning quality spaces.



A good space for a child must be able to welcome them and must support and encourage their desire to explore and to know.

It is therefore a matter of uniting the need for safety and care with the need to explore and for knowledge, the feeling of intimacy with the pleasure of being together with other people: different but complementary subjects in the growth process.

Following these indications has involved the creation of a structured geography of infant school spaces, able to provide children with the sense of their capabilities but also the sense of being in a place where they feel welcome because their subjectivity is recognised and valorised.

These are places that provide certainties, because it is around them that the deep sense of inhabiting is created, but also "uncertainties" that avoid repetition and boredom and make the environment stimulating. They are places that are able to propose variegated social situations (places where you can be alone, in pairs, in convivial encounters, in a small or a large group), in the awareness that the space organises and reflects the social organisation of relations, symmetries that are created between adults and children, of the ways in which the adult builds relationships with the children.

The infant school is also an environment for growth and knowledge. Learning is not something that comes from the adult to the child, but something that the child constructs in continuous interaction with the surrounding environment. There is an organic relationship between the organisation of spaces and the quality of learning, in the sense that in order to learn, children need a context that encourages curiosity and exploration, sustaining motivation and knowledge. Educational proposals must therefore always be contained within space and not improvised time by time. This is why we have aimed to create places where the proposal is placed within a rich, solid, attractive and accessible situation.

Generous places in terms of the accuracy, quality and variety of what they offer.

Predictable and significant places, to stimulate the children's capacity to organise themselves in play and other activities.

Evocative places not only because they envisage particular scenarios, but also because they allow children to encounter something unexpected.

Places rich in materials. Creating the possibility for encounters between children and materials deserves special attention and only when these encounters are conceived and fulfilled with care, in the organisation of school life, are new paths opened, to be followed together with the children and with enormous enjoyment. This is because a child, while experimenting, "acts out his thoughts". While he makes and dismantles, he interiorises the knowledge that becomes no longer a simply abstract aspect but something substantive, a reality experienced by each person, directly touched by everyone.

The organisation of the spaces, therefore, demands commitment, care, skill, cultivated thoughts, as well as the awareness that we are planning public places "third places" open to an informal sociality, based on dialogue, where we can feel we are members of a community.



Teresa Heeney

What TALE tells us about early childhood education in Ireland

Any collaborative project affords an opportunity not just to learn about others but to learn about ourselves from others. Once open to the opportunity for dialogue, we allow ourselves a chance to enhance, to grow and to continue on a journey of exploration and discovery. The TALE project is an example of what can be achieved when international partners commit to sharing and exchanging experiences and expertise. The *Tuscan Approach* to Learning for Early Childhood Education and Care offers us 5 inspiring principles.

Space as a resource

It is not only how space is used in Tuscany which is important but also how that space is presented. There is a commitment to making the spaces beautiful for the children, the professionals and the families. Nothing is taken for granted, everything is planned for. The equipment and how it is used is important and the light and how it changes every day is also considered. An interesting question in relation to space is how can we ensure that the spaces and equipment which we use in Ireland are culturally relevant and symbolic. But also, how can we make sure that new communities feel welcomed and represented in our early childhood settings.

A curriculum open to possibilities

When a curriculum in an early childhood setting is open, the possibilities are endless. A day may begin with a story about a baby and end up with building a tower. This concept of the emergent curriculum respects the voice, the rights and the protagonism of children and builds on their natural inclination to play. Play is not a word which seems to be used extensively in the *Tuscan Approach*.

In Ireland we view play as the work of children. We believe that play accurately describes children's work because it is how they make meaning of their world. Play is how children order reality and share knowledge with each other. In our view the ideal disposition for an early childhood educator is a willingness to be surprised every day and to follow the playful lead of the child.



Partnership with Families

In Ireland we have low levels of state investment in early childhood education and parents have to pay very high fees to the early childhood setting. This principle, therefore, poses a question for Ireland- are parents customers because they are paying? Can they be partners if they are paying so much for the service? This also provokes a question about early childhood education in Ireland- is it a business or is it a profession? In Ireland at the moment it is both. One critical role for parents in Ireland is as an advocate partner. The voice of the parent is very important when they ask politicians to invest more in early childhood education.

Professional Qualification

We know from the CoRe report how important initial training and qualifications are as predictors of quality in early childhood education settings. In Ireland we are building our community of qualified early childhood educators. We need to ensure that the terms of employment attract the best possible professionals who recognise the idea of the child as educator.

A most compelling facet about the *Tuscan Approach* to professionalisation is the commitment to having the most qualified staff with the youngest children, children birth-3. Our policies in Ireland provide additional financing for qualified professionals working with children aged over 3 years. The consequence of this is that the lower qualified staff now work with the youngest children. The TALE project provides motivation to continue to advocate for change to this policy.

We do recognise the importance of mentoring and the idea of communities of practice. Early Childhood educators in Ireland are open to co-professional dialogue and to creating meeting grounds to discuss and co-operate together.

Governance

Governance of early childhood education is a source of great tension in Ireland both at a Government and policy level and also at a setting level. For Government-what is the purpose of early childhood education? Are children's outcomes the priority or is having facilities to support the employment of parents the main purpose? There are a multiplicity of Government Departments and agencies involved, all with different expectations of the settings. There are different types of inspections and different sets of standards. At a setting level, there is the challenge of organising a setting in a way which is meaningful for and delivering for families as well as for professionals and children. Ensuring that sufficient time is available for documentation is the task of the setting leader. Sharing documentation with parents and with policy makers, however, is the most powerful of governance and leadership tasks and one which must be a moment for all early childhood education communities. Finally, this project is called TALE. A TALE is a story, and the Irish word for stories is Scéalta. Stories are the human way of co-constructing our cultural world. It is, like children in their play, how we order reality, make meaning, share insights and create new meaning. Stories are linked to listening, to really tuning into the child's voice and allowing ourselves to be led by them. When we are open to being persuaded by children and to seeing the world through their lens, we find a new dimension, a new world full of opportunities. The TALE project is a place of such opportunity.



Anke van Keulen

Today, I have learned a lot about the Tuscan approach and in my view it is a wonderful approach, not just because of the richness, the beauty and the art in the learning environment, we can learn a lot in that from that in the Netherlands. The Tuscan approach is much richer, in terms of professional competences and it touches all the levels of what we need in early childhood, so my congratulations.

I am very honoured to have been invited to this final conference of the TALE project. Bureau Mutant is a small enterprise in the Netherlands providing training and consultancy on Early Childhood Education and Care. Our Bureau is a member of the ISSA, the International Step by Step Association and a founding member of DECET, the European network on Diversity in Early Childhood services.

When reflecting before coming here to Florence I recognize many issues of my daily practice in the Tuscan approach, so I would like to share with you an example of my practice involving professional development and sustainable change. In Utrecht Municipality MUTANT is executing a project on professional learning communities with primary schools, preschools and early childhood centres. The aim of these networks is to improve the educational quality, the professional cooperation with parents, and in particular to enhance the learning in the teams, in the schools and in the community. In the project, a strong connection between the local government, the university and the educational practice in the schools and centres is a crucial factor, with cooperation and relations between all these levels.



The Utrecht Quality Framework for the young child

The quality of early childhood provisions is a key issue in the municipality of Utrecht. It concerns provisions for children in childcare (0-4 years), preschools (2-4 years) and the lower grades of primary school (4-6 years old).

The Utrecht Quality Framework has been developed in collaboration with the University of Utrecht, educational support services and Bureau MUTANT to ensure an integrated quality according to the latest research insights.

The Utrecht Quality Framework consists of three parts:

- . 1) *pedagogical / educational quality*
- . 2) *cooperation with parents*
- . 3) *mutual, cooperative and continuous learning in teams, organisation, community.*

Part 3 deals with the teams, the organisation and the community. The approach is based on the recommendations in the CoRe report and methodology book 'Permanent Learning in Teams': focus on the required competencies of the professionals (continuous learning, questioning attitude) and a learning attitude at all levels in the organisation (pedagogical staff, teachers, coordinators, middle managers and directors). Focal points are:

- . foster a culture of learning,
- . encourage everyone to be responsible for the learning process,
- . set up competent team coaches and counselors,
- . facilitate space and time for reflection in learning communities and learning teams.

Learning communities have been set up in each district of the city, where pedagogical staff and school teachers learn together in The Utrecht Quality Framework. The learning communities are supported by trainers who have been trained in the set up and support of a learning community.

All participating schools, preschools, childcare centres and learning communities have received the publication 'Permanent Learning in Teams'. There are currently 18 learning communities in the city, but they are extended progressively.

Comitment

Nearly all 200 elementary schools, preschools and childcare centres in Utrecht have committed themselves to The Utrecht Quality Framework. All governing boards have signed and committed themselves to participate in and to implement the Utrecht Quality Framework. The management and project implementation is executed by a project team comprising representatives of the school boards and childcare boards. The Utrecht Municipality plays an important role in the control and financial support. All parties have put aside their mutual conflicts of interests for the best interest of the child and for the common aim to improve quality in the ECCE services. Pedagogical staff and school teachers have the opportunity to participate in a learning community and to transfer their experiences to their teams, bringing their new knowledge to the rest of their colleagues.

So the quality of the school or childcare center is improved by practicing pedagogical and educational principles and indicators of quality. In each learning community per district one common educational theme has been chosen which needs improvement. The communities meet 4-6 times a year, participants learn from each other by working in pairs as critical friends, by visiting each other in a group or class, by studying relevant texts and by documenting the learning.

This approach promotes cooperation and understanding between schools and childcare centres; it promotes

- . a learning attitude,
- . ownership in learning,
- . continuous learning in teams and across the organisation
- . a continuous connection between preschool education and school,
- . quality of education and care for young children.

What is new in this project in our country is that the improvement of quality is achieved bottom-up, so the educators and the teachers have an important say in this. Also there is close cooperation between educators and teachers from different schools and centres.

And I will finish with a quote from an educator:

"In a learning community you learn together, it's not just learning from an expert. And so you get connected together, and so there is more cooperation".

Lourdes Pérez Pérez

This European educational innovation project, in which professionals from Lithuania, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Italy have taken part, is a clear example of how the experiences of interchange between educators from different countries can contribute to the creation of a broad common framework of quality services. As a quality experience, the *Tuscan Approach* stimulates reflection and experimentation in other countries in a set of training activities intended not to apply a model but to weave a network of complicities around key aspects of quality of services and of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and stimulate the necessary reflection and change for these to improve. It is also a good example of the need to involve various actors in an innovative training project: coordinated by the Istituto degli Innocenti, it has had input from NGOs and higher education and research institutions, facilitators of professional development in the participating countries and has enabled experts, policy makers and practitioners of early childhood educational services to work together to construct common knowledge on the basis of reflection, critical questioning and assessment from the recognition of context, subjectivity and complexity. The training activities made for a deeper engagement with the *Tuscan Approach* and in the analysis of each of the local contexts in which the project has been developed.

The main indicators of the shared identity of the set of educational practices that make up the *Tuscan Approach* based on the central role of the children and recognition of their rights and on the idea of the child as an active and competent creator of culture whom we accompany on their journey of personal development, including them in a community project, are themselves subjective indicators and constructors of quality.





This idea of the child fully embraces play as the core of their range of experiences, and the idea of a curriculum open to possibilities is central to the ongoing reflection on the opportunities afforded by the physical space, the furniture and equipment, the materials and their organization and the organization of time and the importance accorded to the professional staff and their initial and ongoing training. The Italian, Lithuanian, Slovenian and Bulgarian experiences provide us with a rich example of the diversity within ECEC in Europe, in terms of the typology of services, the ministries responsible, governance, the principal lines of their childhood policies, the regulations in force, levels of professional qualification and the professionals working in services, the level of provision, financing, the relative weights of public and private services, the systems for monitoring and evaluating quality, attention to children with special needs, the age of access to services, the number of groups and ages and the adult / child ratio. Dialogue with the *Tuscan Approach* has opened up rich and varied perspectives of experimentation and innovation in infant educational services: Boruzele (Ladybird) Nursery-kindergarten and Vaikystės Sodas Pre-School in Vilnius (Lithuania), Zivanche preschool and Zname na mira preschool in Vratsa (Bulgaria) and VZV Kekec Grosuplje in Grosuplje (Slovenia) all require proper contextualization to make clear their full significance. At the same time they allow us to appreciate a kind of shared identity centred on:

- . the importance of designing educational spaces as aesthetic contexts that stimulate children's experience and their construction of learning, engendering opportunities for play, experimentation, welcoming, encounter and positive significant relations with other children and adults;

- . a curriculum open to possibilities that generates opportunities and the conditions for holistic development centred on the children and their needs and interests and fosters their autonomy and independence, that improves the planning of educational experiences and the most appropriate organization of the duration and the ratio of child-initiated activities and activities proposed by the adults as facilitators of experiences;
- . fuller cooperation with families: a greater involvement of the children's families in the definition, implementation and evaluation of the educational project, in decision-making and in the life of the services, and their fuller involvement and participation in the local community (developing family and community empowerment programmes);
- . the production of pedagogical documentation as a means of constructing knowledge about infant learning processes, to design contexts that facilitate the development of potential and reflective practice based on the involvement of children, families, professionals and the community;
- . the importance of teamwork and intersectoral coordination and between the various elements of the network of services, and of the crucial role of the local authorities;
- . the opportunity of enhancing both the professional development of staff and training systems through the integration of knowledge and pedagogical practices by means of research-action.

This shared identity bears witness to the richness of the *Tuscan Approach* in fostering reflective work on the quality of education services in early childhood and should inspire future networks of interchange in other countries.



Maria Lúcia Santos

A culture of mutual learning

Our ability to learn from and with other people and to create environments in which everyone can learn is a remarkable thing. Sharing time and experiences, knowledge and ideas can open our minds to many different ways of perceiving and making sense of the world we live in, and, bring people together to create a desired future.

Both in the TALE project and in the *Tuscan Approach* we can acknowledge this collaborative and open process of bringing people together to create possible desirable worlds for our youngest citizens. The *Tuscan Approach* is an integrated framework that brings together all the protagonists working for the same goals, a theory, but one in close relationship with practice, one that helps *educators* and the community to better understand the nature of their problems and to create shared meanings that enrich and expand the value of their work. There are a few aspects that I especially value in the *Tuscan Approach*. Aspects that may be less considered for a number of reasons such as inadequate conceptions about early childhood education or economics. Those aspects are space and time, documentation, continuous training and the image of the *educator*.

Nidi (infant schools), like other educational contexts, perform several activities or tasks that need space and time to accomplish. Tuscan settings are well aware of how space shapes human experience as they provide pleasurable spaces for children and adults both *educators* and parents. This is a sign of a profound respect and consideration both for children and adults and of an understanding that the wellbeing of children requires the wellbeing of adults and also tells us about the value of childhood for the larger community.

The Children's centres we saw in Tuscany are beautifully designed and organised to make sure that children are actually the protagonists of their own experience and learning.

These are good spaces for children, where they feel at ease, safe and free to move around and explore, to manipulate the materials — that are at hand. The good taste and care that is put into every *corner*, in the furniture and materials displayed, in the choice of colours, in every set of wood blocks or leaf arrangement, appeals to children's curiosity and teaches about beauty. A variety of materials - mostly unstructured materials, that respond to different interests are carefully organized and displayed in such a way that fosters children's interest and drives them to observe and experiment.

The Centres also offer space for adults and time to meet and work together and have meaningful encounters as a team and with parents. Time is crucial. We live in an accelerated world where even food is fast. To be able to slow down and have time to reflect on the experience, to plan, to carefully

organise the space, to make changes is also something that suits children and professionals and early childhood education in general. Interacting and creating a relationship with each child and groups of children also takes time, also a more subtle time that happens when *educators* refrain from acting, allowing children to take their own pace, to take the time they need to explore and experiment, to get involved, to solve problems and do things in their own rhythm.

Documentation also takes time. A time that some may yet consider wasted but is really very valuable because it allows *educators* to really know each child and make visible his or her unique experience and learning. By building a narrative that shows and communicates how that child is making sense of the world around him or her, the *educator* shows what happened and why it is worth telling and thus creates memory.

Documentation respects not only the child but also the *educator*, for *educators* are not technicians but reflective and ethical practitioners and researchers. *Educators* work in interaction with people and that interaction is not only the process but also part of the content of their professional intervention. It is a world of uncertainty, where the unexpected must be expected at all times, and this takes a very special and highly qualified *educators* an *educator* that genuinely feels amazed and happy with all the small and big children's achievements and also able to accept the responsibility for each and every child. This leads us to the specific image of *educators* in the *Tuscan Approach* as an organizer of contexts. For sure, as an organizer of opportunities, for the image of a child as strong, rich, active and full of potential requires an educator able to organize opportunities that respect and challenge that potential.





The growing complexity of the educational, professional and social contexts in which educators work requires a high degree of competence, of integrated knowledge, scientifically supported and subject to regular and ongoing updates that must be addressed by continuous training, including in-service training. Engagement in continuous professional development also needs a proper space and time and also the company of others who may help support the professional's awareness and understanding of that complexity. The *Tuscan Approach* is a story of commitment with children and early childhood education, a story that may inspire other communities around the world. By listening to this story, like the Lost Boys in Never Land, maybe some of these communities may also grow on their commitment to the children's right to high quality spaces.

Gloria Tognetti

The TALE project, promoted by the Istituto degli Innocenti, has been an important opportunity for dialogue and discussion between Tuscany and other countries, building relations that have been able to count on their continuity in time, starting with the seminar promoted by the Gruppo Toscano Nidi Infanzia (Tuscan infant schools group) and held at San Miniato in November 2014, following the project's pilot model for training, up to the final seminar on 4th September in Florence.

The *Tuscan Approach* should not be considered a rigid model that is not open to discussion. Indeed, these seminars have provided further opportunities to reflect together about Tuscan experiences, identifying their unifying, but not necessarily homogeneous, traits. At the same time, they have contributed with requests to strengthen our capacity to represent the theories and programme choices that are characteristic of the evolution of the history of educational services in the various territories.

Some key words that we shared, during the activities that the project has made possible, were "Space", "Families", "Flexible curriculum", and the general consideration proposed was pertinent to the idea of an educational experience built around the recognition of the children's identity, giving rise to interesting experiments in other realities, like us involved in the search for an original, innovative approach. In particular, our territory – San Miniato – has been engaged in further research into the theme of the curriculum, in the knowledge that when we think of a curriculum – in relation to the general project concerning educational services - too often it continues to be natural to think of the results to be achieved rather than of the conditions and opportunities that should be made accessible to the children.



For this reason, the idea proposed for our discussion is the following: instead of starting from the development results to aim for and on this basis define the conditions and the means, it is important to seek to identify the opportunities and conditions that, through experiences and processes, transform the children's potential into actions and thoughts involving different types of learning, as different as every growth and development process.

Reference is made to a context in which the children undertake – in a complex social dimension, i.e. a community – experience of relationships with differences, discovery of spaces, objects, people, at an age when they are curious and original; accompanied by educators capable of not interfering but who back the development of the experiences.

Therefore, in the proposed perspective, the curriculum can be interpreted as the result of the opportunities that the educational model intentionally provides, consistently with the needs for exploration and learning at the relevant ages and with the relevant theories developed.

The focus is on the aim of “learning how to learn” rather than on specific outputs measurable on the basis of a supposedly infallible cause and effect relationship, able to face uncertainty and offer listening, welcome and support for children's and each child's unpredictable expression of original thought. A theme that could be the subject of a future discussion is the work of evaluation, which concerns, firstly, the adequacy of the context or the experiences that become available in the daily interweaving between groups of children, educators, space, objects and time.

Secondly, the evaluation can refer to the description of the processes observed, to give visibility to the original processes and strategic actions that children implement to solve problems and to actively and creatively use the available opportunities.



The documentation, with the support of good observational skills, which cannot be ignored by educational work, is the tool that may enable maps of observed processes to be made, giving visibility to the children's skills, without fragmenting them, but putting their expressions into context.

The required professionalism, in this perspective, may require emancipation from a defined and standardised pedagogic knowledge, no longer adequate for interpreting what we observe and that must be permanently nourished by the choices inherent to the preparation of the welcoming context, by sharing experiences with children, by working group reflection, the work of documentation, ongoing communication with the families and continuing education.

Good education today must consider the opportunities offered to children, especially in preschool age, thinking not only of the Tuscan diversities, but also those that Europe has to offer.

In fact, if we want to think that children's education is a responsibility of the community that receives them, we must clearly understand that we are speaking of different communities and cultures and that the subject is not the definition of programmes, but rather making our communities able to take in the unexpected and the differences inherent to childhood.





Mathias Urban

A pedagogy based on critical consciousness and democratic values

The TALE project is an important example that shows the value of shared learning across differences. I would like to congratulate the team and all participants to a successful completion of the project. I am grateful, too, for the invitation to witness some of that shared learning and for the opportunity to comment on the presentations. I will be framing my thoughts by the three different ‘hats’ I am wearing in my academic and professional roles:

- . As director of an Early Childhood Research Centre grounded in the philosophy, theory and practice of Friedrich Fröbel and Paulo Freire I look at early childhood education in the context of *democracy* (e.g. 1848 revolution as social and political context for Fröbel’s pedagogy), linked to *emancipatory professionalisation* (many of the women who worked with Fröbel went on to become the first female university graduates in 19th century Germany), and valued as a *public good and public responsibility*.
- . As one of the two co-chairs (with Toby Wolfe, Start Strong, Ireland) of the early years’ working group with Eurochild (www.eurochild.org) I look at early childhood education and its contribution to realising *children’s rights as manifest in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*.
- . As chair of DECET (www.decet.org for information on how to join), the international organisation that stands for diversity, equality and social justice in early childhood, I ask what contribution our pedagogies and practices make to *achieving more just and equitable conditions and outcomes for all children and their families*.

The three perspectives are interconnected; they all matter in the context of a project focusing on the ‘*Tuscan Approach*’ to early childhood education.

It is a pedagogy that reaches far beyond the immediate interaction between educator and children in the four walls of the *asilo nido* or the *scuola dell’infanzia*. In fact, it involves all levels and aspects of the local community, of local governance and policy-making and, as we can see in the TALE project, professional education and development. The practices at the foundation of TALE are an excellent example of how to create a *competent system*. In 2011 I had the privilege to lead an international research project on *competence requirements in early childhood education and care*. The main conclusions of the CoRe project (Urban et al., 2011, Urban et al., 2012) can be summarised as follows:

- . It is not enough to train, upskill or qualify individual practitioners. In order to enable educators to develop and deliver competent professional practice with young children, families and communities we need to develop all aspects of the early childhood system: individual practitioners, institutions and, most important, the *governance* of the system. Only where these aspects are interconnected and work together in mutually supportive ways we can speak of a *competent system*.
- . Competent systems have three key dimensions. They are built on shared *knowledge(s)*, *practices* and *values* (which connect well, by the way, to the three Aristotelian dimensions of education that Emil Buzov reminded us of in his presentation about TALE Bulgaria: *logos*, *pathos* and *ethos*).

The TALE project presentations are good examples for how the project facilitated the sharing of knowledge and practices among the participants in different countries. While there is no doubt about the importance of these examples, I think we urgently need to talk about values, too. We need to talk about how local approaches to early childhood education are embedded in, and influenced by local values and our shared ideas about what it means to be a child, to grow up in society.





What does this mean for the institutions we invent to support them (including preschools and nurseries) and their families? The challenge for an international project like TALE is not only to articulate these values locally, but to initiate and sustain open and democratic dialogue about them. At the very centre of this challenge lie questions about the *purpose* of education.

The founders of the *Tuscan Approach* – Loris Malaguzzi and Enzo Catarsi – had a clear position about the value base of early childhood education. To them it was a collective, communal project, grounded in public responsibility for a good childhood and, which often forgotten, grounded in an explicit antifascist political stance. Their project of education was very much one that Paulo Freire had in mind when he talked about education as a transformative, emancipatory and political practice. This project requires critical consciousness (*conscientização*) as well as an element of hope and utopian thinking. ‘*The future*’, Paulo Freire reminds us, ‘*isn’t something hidden in a corner. The future is something we build in the present*’ (Freire, 2004). So, where do we want to be, as a profession, as society, and, ever more important these days, as humanity as a whole?

I would like to introduce another Italian thinker into my reflection on the TALE project. Antonio Gramsci’s work (1971) points us to the relationship between education and oppression and hegemony. We learn from everything we experience. Hence every oppressive experience we live through is also an educational one he writes. What do young children, crossing the Mediterranean on rubber dinghies *learn* from their early childhood experience? What do their families *learn* about solidarity and humanity? What about the Roma child in Me emurje County in northern Croatia whose life is dominated by abject poverty, evictions and daily experiences of racism (Šiki -Mi anovi et al., 2015)? What are protected children from the dominant population *learning* about their *white privilege* (Derman-Sparks et al., 2006)?

These questions matter for a European project like TALE as the foundations of the *project Europe* are crumbling around us. Human rights, solidarity, open borders and shared values on a diverse continent are being dismantled before our eyes. The shameful response to the global humanitarian disaster unfolding at the borders of Europe show that solidarity between European partners is non-existent, and nationalism is rife. Inside the *fortress Europe*, we seem to accept rising levels of inequality, poverty and racism as inevitable. An increasing number of children, not least from Roma communities and other marginalised groups are now growing up under what we used to call (arrogantly) *third-world conditions*.

Other contradictions and uncomfortable aspects of reality emerge as I take notes for this paper. Thanks to the generous and warm hospitality of our hosts in Florence we enjoyed the experience of a lunch at a beautiful *Cantina* in the heart of Tuscany. The video we were shown by the friendly and competent guide showed the proud owners of the vinery, and their pride in tradition and family. I can’t help thinking: Where are, who are the workers that make the delicious wine and create the wealth and the beauty? Are their situations so that they can show pride in their traditions and pass them on to their children? Where are they in our early childhood education narrative?

Before travelling home to London, I am having lunch in a small restaurant with a view of Brunelleschi’s beautiful cupola. The waiter is attentive and friendly and does what he can to make me feel welcome. Then he turns to the elderly Roma woman approaching the tables with a paper cup. *Maledetti Zingari*, he shouts, shooing her away.

What are the values we want to instill in young children?



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