

## **Early childhood education and care (ECEC) as social innovation tool? Insights from a multi-site case study carried out in Emilia-Romagna Region.**

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### **Abstract**

Nonostante stia emergendo un consenso sempre maggiore, nel dibattito internazionale, sul fatto che servizi educativi per l'infanzia accessibili e di qualità elevata contribuiscano in modo cruciale a ridurre le disuguaglianze sociali e culturali, le condizioni di contesto entro le quali tali servizi operano – che risultano essere determinanti nel promuovere il successo, o al contrario nel decretare l'insuccesso, di tali iniziative – sono raramente prese in esame. Lo studio di caso sul sistema integrato dei servizi educativi per la prima infanzia della Regione Emilia-Romagna, condotto nell'ambito del progetto Europeo INNOSI<sup>1</sup>, intende colmare questa lacuna analizzando in prospettiva sistemica le sperimentazioni e le pratiche innovative elaborate da tali servizi per rispondere in modo proattivo ai nuovi bisogni di bambini e famiglie all'interno delle comunità locali. La discussione dei risultati presentata in questo articolo esaminerà le principali sfide e i fattori di successo che potrebbero consentire ai servizi per l'infanzia di divenire strumenti di innovazione sociale.

There is an increasing consensus in international academic and policy debates that accessible and high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) can play a crucial role in tackling social and cultural inequalities. Nevertheless, the contextualised conditions within which ECEC services are operating at local level – conditions upon which the success of such initiatives in closing the educational gap and promoting social cohesion is critically relying on – are rarely investigated. The multi-site case study on the integrated system of ECEC in Emilia-Romagna carried out within the European project INNOSI addresses such research gap by analysing – within a systemic perspective – the experimental initiatives and practices elaborated by early childhood institutions in order to meet responsively the needs of children, families and local communities. The case study findings presented in this article examine and critically review the challenges and success factors characterising ECEC services as tools for promoting social innovation.

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**Parole chiave:** servizi educativi per la prima infanzia, accessibilità, qualità, innovazione, approccio sistemico.

**Keywords:** ECEC, accessibility, quality, social innovation, systemic approach.

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## 1. Introduction: the policy background

In recent years, early childhood education and care (ECEC) gained an increasingly prominent position in the European agenda. The growing number of policy initiatives promoted by the EU Commission and Council aimed to encourage the investment in high quality and accessible ECEC provision across Member States (*Strategic Framework for Cooperation in Education and Training, 2009; Recommendation on investing in children, 2013a*) attests a cultural and political turning point. Whereas initially the ‘child-care’ debate in the context of EU policies was mainly driven by concerns for women’s employment and equal opportunities (European Commission 1982-1985; Council of the of the European Communities, 1992), recent developments are rather focused on the *educational* and *social benefits* of ECEC for children, families and society at large (European Council, 2011; European Commission, 2011).

This shift in European policies regarding ECEC was accompanied, and influenced by, a new vision of the welfare state that changed its rhetoric from *social protection* to *social investment* (Casalini, 2014). By taking into consideration the multiple changes characterising the contemporary social landscape (i.e.: flexibility of labour market in post-industrial society, transformation of family models, ageing population,...), the *social investment* approach *views* education – and early education in particular – as a tool for equipping individuals with the necessary competences for coping effectively and rapidly adapting to these challenges. At the European level, this new approach to welfare state was officially endorsed during a conference entitled *Social Policy as a Productive Factor* that was organised by the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment in cooperation with the European Commission (Hemerijck, 2012).

From the *social investment* perspective, investing in high quality ECEC provision is increasingly seen as a crucial measure to realise the wide-ranging goals that are laid out in the Europe 2020 strategy (European Commission, 2010): promoting *economic growth and competitiveness, reducing poverty* and fostering *social cohesion*. In this context, the findings of evidence-based studies – showing how the positive effects of ECEC

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programmes on children's educational outcomes are particularly salient, from a *human capital* outlook, for those with a disadvantaged background (Heckman and Masterov, 2007; Burger, 2010) – acted as powerful policy drivers, as documented by the intensification of EU initiatives in this field (European Commission 2011; 2013a).

On one hand, on the impulse of the Communication '*Early childhood education and care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow*', the Directorate General of Education and Culture (DG EAC) took a leading role in giving ECEC a prominent position in the European agenda as a policy field in itself. Earlier considerations about work-life balance and economic competitiveness were therefore complemented with more focused concerns for children's development and well-being, families' participation and social inclusion, as attested by several studies commissioned by DG EAC with the aim of further investigating the educational and social functions of ECEC services across EU Member States<sup>2</sup>. The results of such developments converged and culminated in the establishment, under the auspices of the European Commission, of the Thematic Working Group on ECEC (2012-2014). The TWG involved representatives from 25 countries (plus Norway and Turkey) and adopted the Open Method of Coordination for developing a reference tool – *the Proposal for a Quality Framework in ECEC* – aimed at sustaining the efforts of Member States in improving the quality of ECEC provision (Milotay, 2016).

On the other hand, on the impulse of the *Recommendation Investing in Children – breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (2013a) that was adopted by the European Commission as part of the *Social Investment Package*<sup>3</sup>, the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC) was set up under the auspices of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. Being created as a tool to foster cooperation and mutual learning among Member States in this area, the aim of such platform is to monitor the activities triggered by the Recommendation, to collect and disseminate innovative and evidence-based practices that have a positive impact on children and families, and to facilitate policymaking exchanges (European Commission, 2015). It is to be noted, however, that the policy concerns for '*quality childcare*' and '*early childhood education*' expressed in this area of EU policies tend to be more focused on the social returns and economic impact of ECEC<sup>4</sup>, rather than on its value for children, families and local communities.

The fact that recent EU policy developments in the ECEC field have predominantly been built upon *human capital* and *social investment* rationales – considering early childhood education and care as 'the greatest of equalisers' (Morabito, Vandebroek and Roose, 2013) – has in turn generated a growing demand in evidence-based research to inform, orient and legitimate such policies (Urban, 2012). As part of this trend, large-scale studies characterised by strong comparison and evaluation components (between countries, programmes, groups of children) have become increasingly dominant in EU-funded programmes (EACEA, 2009; Tarki-Applica,

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2010; CARE, 2016; ISOTIS, ongoing) and, consequently, evidence-based research measuring the impact of ECEC attendance on children's development have gained momentum in international as well as in national academic debates. The increasing number of economic studies assessing the impact of ECEC programmes within the Italian context (Del Boca and Pasqua, 2010; Fort, Ichino and Zanella, 2016; Biroli, Del Boca et al., 2017) is just one of many examples attesting the growing influence of this global trend in shaping discourses on early childhood education within national research and political debates.

While such increased recognition of ECEC as policy and research field – accompanied by a rapidly growing body of scholarly literature from several domains (psychology, sociology and economy) – was initially welcomed, in more recent times concerns have been expressed by educational experts in regard to the narrow focus on children's outcomes adopted by such studies (Bennett et al., 2012; Urban, 2015). As several authors – including sociologists, law and political scholars – point out, the dominance of human capital and social investment paradigms in ECEC is problematic. In particular, the fact that children – within such paradigms – tend to be constructed in instrumentalist terms as profitable assets and human becoming (Lister, 2007; Kjørholt and Qvortrup, 2012), rather than being considered as citizens subjects of rights to be involved in decision-making processes here and now (U.N., 1989), raises many ethical concerns. In this sense, the main risk of using human capital arguments – underpinning an economic rationale – for investing in ECEC is to dismiss important elements that are laying the foundation of early childhood educational and care practices in many European countries, and above all, child-centred pedagogical approaches and children's democratic participation in the life of institutions and local communities (Lazzari, 2014). This might in turn induce counter-productive effects such as the *schoolification* of *early childhood practices*, which is gaining ground in several countries (Jensen, Brostrom and Hensen, 2010; Pramling Samuelsson and Sheridan, 2010; Balduzzi and Manini, 2013; Amerijckx, G. and Humblet, 2015), and the progressive marginalisation of the voices of children and families from the educational debate (Hübenthal and Ifland, 2011; Van Laere and Vandebroek, 2017).

The considerations elaborated so far, lead us to affirm that greater attention should be paid to the tensions and contradictions that are underlying the inextricable and reciprocal relationships existing between research and policy-making processes. It seems therefore apparent that – in order to avoid ECEC becoming part of the problem of social inequalities rather than contributing to its solution – a critical analysis of paradigms underlying research and policy discourses (Penn, 2011; Vandebroek et al., 2017), as well as a transdisciplinary re-conceptualisation of traditional epistemologies, are needed (Urban, 2015).

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The INNOSI case study on the integrated system of early childhood services in Emilia-Romagna presented in this article explores these dilemmas, and seeks to address them, by drawing on the conceptualisations of critical ecologies and systemic change as a way of understanding, orienting and theorising knowledge production and application in the ECEC field (Urban, 2012; Peeters, Urban and Vandenberg, 2016).

## 2. The INNOSI project: defining social innovation

The case study presented in this article was part of the larger project ‘*Innovative social investment: strengthening community in Europe*’ (INNOSI) aimed to identify innovative approaches to social investment at national and regional levels across the 28 Member States, with in-depth case study evaluations taking place in 10 countries. By looking specifically at the areas of ECEC, labour market policies for parents and employment policies, the project identified and examined existing innovative and strategic approaches in these areas in order to collate useful, practical learning from this new body of evidence and mobilise it to inform policy and practice across the EU.

Although the underpinning rationale of the project was clearly defined within a social investment paradigm, the adoption of social innovation as theoretical framing of the study offered the opportunity to break new ground in the way case-studies’ research questions were constructed, moving beyond a narrow instrumental view.

The choice of adopting *social innovation* (SI) as the theoretical framework for INNOSI case studies was motivated by the fact that such concept is currently at the heart of the EU2020 Growth Strategy and that two of its most important initiatives – ‘European platform against poverty and social exclusion’ and the ‘Innovation Union’- make explicit references to it. Within EU policies, SI is conceptualised as a service delivery strategy to help in achieving the goals set out by the Communication on the Social Investment Package ‘*Towards social investment for growth and cohesion*’ (European Commission, 2013b). However, the meaning of social innovation is far from being univocally defined in research literature (Montgomery, 2016). As highlighted by the findings of a study focusing on the role of ESF<sup>5</sup> in promoting the design and implementation of SI initiatives in Member States, direct reference to social innovation is rarely found outside the EU-funded scheme (Eurofound, 2013). More often, the social partners directly involved in the implementation of so-labelled ‘socially innovative projects’ are not even familiar with the concept of SI (Eurofound, 2013): this reveals how the use of such conceptual framework might be more relevant to the fields of policy and research rather than to the field of practice. The fact that social innovation remains a largely undefined concept but – at the same time – it is

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becoming increasingly influential in orienting service delivery approaches due to its rapid proliferation in academic and policy discourses, calls for a further contextualisation and problematisation of the concept itself.

For this reason, in the case study on the integrated system of ECEC in E-R the concept of social innovation was critically explored in the light of the paradigmatic analysis carried out by Montgomery (2016). By focusing the attention on the socio-political contentions surrounding the meaning of social innovation, the author identifies two emerging schools that are currently engaged in the struggle to define the concept: the technocratic and the democratic one.

On one side, the technocratic school of thought – underpinning a social investment paradigm – “espouse a rhetoric based upon the empowerment of individuals and communities but, in its actions, valorise the role of ‘experts’ in governing social change and mobilise ‘evidence-based’ knowledge to reduce the space for political dissent” (Montgomery, 2016, p. 1988). On the other, the democratic school of thought – underpinning an emancipatory paradigm – not only advocates for the participation of communities in driving social change but also perceives the knowledge produced with them as being of equal merit to the knowledge produced by ‘experts’. As conceptualised by the democratic school, SI could be seen as a framework for ‘re-politicising’ decision-making and knowledge production processes, for challenging the vertical distribution of power in society and seeking to replace it with ‘horizontal networks’ increasing the agency of individuals and communities as protagonists of change, and for giving voice to those who tend to be marginalised (Montgomery, 2016).

### 3. The case study on the integrated system of 0-3 services in Emilia-Romagna

The Emilia-Romagna Region case study, by adopting the democratic paradigm of social innovation as theoretical framework, indeed moved away from a social investment rationale. In this perspective, the reasons underlying the choice of investigating the integrated system of 0-3 services in Emilia-Romagna as an exemplary case for analysing social innovation processes in the ECEC field are presented in the diagram below, by making specific reference to the key-features of SI as conceptualised within the democratic paradigm (Moulaert et al., 2013).

*Empowering civil  
society  
actors as*

Early childhood institutions in E-R took origin in 1960s for the initiative of women’s groups and democratic movements. ECEC services were then taken over by municipal administrations, with pedagogical activism and participatory

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*protagonist of change*

management remaining a salient feature over the years. It is noteworthy that the experience of municipal services not only preceded the initiative of the State in answering the needs of its citizens (Law 1044/1971), but also acted as a driving force for the engagement of the national government in the provision of early childhood education (Mantovani, 2010).

*Systemic change achieved by combining grassroots initiatives with responsive and proactive policy-making*

Over the 1980s and early 1990s the E-R Region sustained the local experimentalism of municipal governments in promoting the pedagogical qualification of ECEC on a broader scale (Catarsi, 2010). The regional government played an active role in supporting the local experiences carried out by municipalities (i.e.: Reggio Emilia, Bologna, Modena...) by setting up institutional networks that enhanced the pedagogical culture elaborated in ECEC institutions and by providing a coherent framework of cutting edge educational policies (Manini, Gherardi and Balduzzi, 2006).

*Contextualised solutions for addressing social challenges (tailored to local circumstances)*

The E-R Region undertook a pioneer role in sustaining services' innovation in order to make the ECEC system more responsive to the changing needs of children and families in a constantly evolving society through an integrated, differentiated and flexible organisation of provision. From 1990s onward, new typologies of services (*centri bambini e genitori, spazi bambini, piccoli gruppi educativi*) were experimented in order to address the emerging needs of parents and children (Mantovani and Musatti, 1996). The peculiarity of the integrated system of ECEC services—which potentialities are particularly relevant in contexts of socio-cultural diversity — is the possibility of fostering reciprocal exchanges between services that, in turn, sustains their ongoing pedagogical growth and offers opportunities for systematic reflection and innovation (Musatti, 2004).

The case study was conducted by an interdisciplinary research team over an eight-month period and pursued the following goals:

- identifying current challenges and un-met demands in regard to the participation of children under-3 and their families in early childhood education

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and care provision by connecting the local socio-cultural and political context of ECEC to European policy priorities,

- exploring how such challenges are addressed by drawing on a selected sample of innovative practices,
- ascertaining key success factors for sustaining ECEC services' innovation that is responsive of local needs through an in-depth and contextualised analysis of the systemic conditions within which such services are operating.

Coherently with the aims illustrated above and with the theoretical framing of the study previously outlined, the research adopted a *multi-site case study design* for data collection and analysis (Swanborn, 2010). In particular, the process of data collection was articulated in three phases. In the first phase, the analysis of local needs in regard to 0-3 service provision and children's – as well as families participation – was carried out by analysing the data available from the regional observatory on childhood and family. Based on the findings from the needs analysis, and in consultation with E-R Region stakeholders, three sites (GIB, ADM and FN) were selected for the in-depth analysis of innovative practices carried out in the second phase. In order to select a balanced sample representing the diversity of 0-3 ECEC provision in E-R, the following selecting criteria were used: a) geographical distribution (West, Center, East provinces) and territorial location (Apennine, Po Valley, Romagna Coast), b) dimension of municipality where services are based (village, town, city), c) service provider and management structure (public, private accredited provision), d) service typology (*nido* / day-care centre, *piccolo gruppo educativo* / small educational group, *centro per bambini e genitori* / meeting place for children and parents).

The methods used for data collection and interpretation were documentary analysis (sources: municipal policy documents and regulations, services' educational plans and pedagogical documentation), thematic analysis of focus-groups (transcripts) involving early childhood educators and pedagogical coordinators as well as of individual interviews carried out with parents whose children attended the settings studied. In particular, the question route adopted for conducting the focus groups with ECEC professionals aimed at exploring how the educational practices enacted within their service have been changing over time in relation to the new emerging needs of children and families. Instead, the questions guiding the semi-structured interviews with parents aimed at exploring their motivation for ECEC participation and their perceptions on service's responsiveness to their needs (based upon the reflection on their own experience – as well as their children's daily experiences – of service attendance). Furthermore, the researchers conducted two visits in each setting in order to gather background knowledge on the everyday experiences of children, families and educators within such settings.

Data interpretation was carried out by adopting an inter-disciplinary framework, within which both sociological and educational aspects of ECEC service provision

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were analysed. Special attention was dedicated to valuing the voices and perspectives of all the actors involved – families, educators, coordinators and services’ providers – in the process of co-creation of meanings and understandings of ECEC, by recognising them as protagonists of change and innovation processes.

### 3.1 The local context of ECEC in E-R: situation analysis and needs assessment

The analysis of the data retrieved from the E-R Observatory on Early Childhood Services (SPI-ER database; Servizio Politiche Familiari, Infanzia e Adolescenza, 2016) revealed three main trends in relation to 0-3 services existing provision and demand at regional level. First, over the last 5-year period, it can be noticed a slight increase of privately-owned NFP provision (mostly social cooperatives), with approximately 40% of services being privately owned and approximately 60% being publicly owned. However, by considering the number of childcare places being publicly owned the breakdown is significantly higher (approximately 73% vs 27% of places privately owned) as – on average – publicly owned services tend to be bigger. Overall, in E-R Region, 7 childcare places out of the 10 are publicly subsidised as shown in the diagram below.

Figure 1. Breakdown childcare places ERR



Second, the number of children attending ECEC services is steadily decreasing in recent years, due both to demographic trends and to the impact of the economic crisis: as consequence, for the first time since data series were collected, the childcare places available exceed their uptake from families (index of coverage:35,5% VS uptake index: 29%)<sup>6</sup>. Third, regional data show that children and families with migrant background tend to be under-represented in 0-3 services, although such trend is not equally spread across E-R provinces<sup>7</sup>. Fourth, renunciation and/or withdrawing are becoming increasingly common phenomena in recent years, especially among lower-middle class families. This indicates that the economic crisis has impacted on

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the accessibility of early childhood services on two sides (Istituto degli Innocenti, 2015):

- on the side of ECEC provision, as the constraints of public expenditure makes it difficult for the municipalities to subsidise ECEC services to their full operational potential (economic sustainability) and
- on the side of families, as their spending power is progressively reduced making it difficult for parents to cover the expenses for attendance fees, with the result that children who are offered a place are either not enrolled or withdrawn from the services after few months of attendance.

Therefore, the findings from the needs analysis carried out within the case study identified the *accessibility of ECEC services* – especially for children from migrant background and middle-low income families – and their *economic sustainability* are the main challenges. However, while quantitative data on ECEC provision’s structural features and children’s participation are systematically collected, very few qualitative data exist in relation to the perceived needs of children and families attending these services. In addition, virtually no data exist in relation to good practices that might be generated as bottom-up responses to face such challenges within the local communities where ECEC services are operating. By acknowledging these research gaps, the in-depth analysis carried out within the multi-site case study investigated ECEC innovative practices elaborated and enacted in diverse local contexts: given the lack of qualitative data available on these issue, particular attention was devoted to giving ‘voice’ to the children, parents and professionals attending such services through the use of participatory observation and interviews.

### 3.2 Description of the cases selected for in-depth analysis

The first service examined (GIB) is a family day-care centre (*piccolo gruppo educativo*) located in a rural community of Modena Apennine (SM). The socio-demographic context is characterised by high variability in resident population due to national and international working migration flows (ceramic district): therefore, most newly arrived families settling in the community have no kin network. In this context, the SM municipality decided to provide organisational, pedagogical and financial support to existing ECEC services – among which the privately owned and accredited GIB family day-care – by establishing a centralised municipal admission list and offering direct subsidies to childcare providers so that parents in the municipal list could avail of income-related enrolment fees. In addition, the staff working in GIB family day-care – the owner and two employed qualified early childhood educators – are entitled to avail of both professional guidance from SM pedagogical coordinator and of in-service development opportunities offered by the municipality to all early childhood staff employed in local ECEC services. Being rooted in a

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rural mountain community, the education and care practices enacted in the family day-care centre reflect local cultural traditions and values (eg. integrated age groups, outdoor activities, exploration of nature), and curricular as well as extra-curricular activities are developed by linking to established community organisations (eg. public library, sport club, voluntary bodies). The service is chosen especially by families with very young children, given the small-size and home-based set up of the educational environment that facilitate their first transition outside the families.

The second service examined (ADM) is a multi-functional integrated setting – encompassing a meeting place for children and parents (*centro bambini e genitori*) and a children’s centre (*spazio bambini*) – located socio-economically disadvantaged area on the coast of Ferrara province (town of CC). The service took origin in the late 1980s for the initiative of a group of young mothers who advocated for public spaces demand facilitating the growth and education of their children in the context of community life. Initially the service was self-managed by the group of mothers – who set up a voluntary association – in a community hall provided by CC Municipality. At the beginning of 1990s the Municipality took over the responsibility for the funding and pedagogical qualification of the service with the support provided by the Van Leer Foundation<sup>8</sup>, within a project aimed at sustaining the improvement of organisational conditions and educational practices along with staff professional development (Frabboni and Dozza, 1994). Nowadays, the multifunctional ECEC service ADM is characterised by a strong commitment toward the outreaching of families living in vulnerable conditions, which is realised through:

- the provision of diversified educational activities involving mothers with young children along a continuum (eg. pre-natal, breastfeeding and infant massage courses, meeting place for children and parents, children’s centre, after-school care) and
- through inter-professional collaboration among the staff employed, displaying a multi-faceted and diversified expertise (eg. midwives, early childhood educators, social workers).

The third service examined (FN) is a municipal and inter-company day-care centre (nido) located in a large city (BO), within a neighbourhood characterised by an high degree of social mix encompassing upper-middle class parents working in the trade districts’ offices, low-income families traditionally living in that area and families with a migrant background. The service was set up in 2011 as result of a project financing processes that involved the collaboration between different cooperatives (consortium including social a cooperative responsible for pedagogical management, a cleaning cooperative, a cooperative proving meals and a construction workers’ cooperative), Bologna Municipality and private companies operating in the trade district. In this sense, municipal subsidies – contributing toward the enrolment fees

of children admitted through municipal list (income-related) – and private companies' subsidies – contributing toward the enrolment fees of children from their employees (paying the same as in any municipal day-care centre) – create the conditions for the accessibility and long-term sustainability of the ECEC service. The service is characterised by organisational flexibility – which allow to meet the demands of working parents also during school holidays – and by openness toward the local community (eg. summer camps, space available for self-organised activities by parents). The social cooperative's pedagogical coordinator in cooperation with Bologna Municipality carry out ongoing professionalisation initiatives for all the educational staff employed in the day-care centre.

## 4. Discussion of findings

### 4.1 Accessibility and sustainability: innovation in the use of resources

From the analysis of the data collected through interviews with managers and local decision-makers emerged that no-one model fits all. Rather, the key success factors for increasing the availability as well as the affordability of ECEC provision seems to reside in the flexible combination of different funding sources coming from the public sector (Municipal, Regional and State authorities) – as well as from the private NFP sector (social cooperatives and small-scale providers) and private enterprises (*responsabilità sociale di impresa*) – within a comprehensive framework of public policies that responsively addresses the needs identified within each community while striving for universalism. In this sense, the ECEC services analysed in the case study provide examples of how a diversified ECEC provision serving the diverse needs of children and families within local communities could be realised with a special focus on accessibility and economic sustainability.

In the case of SM – the rural municipality on Modenese Appenine where the GIB family-day care is located – the sustainability and accessibility of ECEC services is ensured through an integrated management of public and private-NFP provision that relies on a coherent framework of public policies and subsidies, sustaining pedagogical experimentation over times in order to address the constantly changing needs of children and families in the local community. At the present time, the integrated system of ECEC services that are publicly subsidised by SM Municipality encompasses not only the GIB family day-care service described earlier, but also a pre-kindergarten class (*sezione primavera*) run by a social cooperative within a state-maintained preschool and a centre for children and parents run by a local cultural association. This flexible combination of ECEC services allow the Municipality to cater for the educational needs of young children living in a small-size and quite

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isolated community, where the access to traditional centre-based provision would be either not possible (the closer centre-based facility is 10 Km away from town) or un-sustainable, due to the extreme variability in rates of new-born children over time. In this context, the affordability of ECEC provision for families is ensured by the fact that the enrolment fees for attending these services are regulated under a formal agreement with municipality (*convenzione*), meaning that childcare places are publicly subsidised through supply-side funding dispensed directly to the services. Moreover, the municipality supports the coordination and the ongoing qualification of ECEC services at local level by providing pedagogical guidance, mentoring and networking activities (monthly meetings with the pedagogical coordinator) as well as opportunities for continuing professional development which are available free of charge for all the staff employed in the services.

In the case of the multifunctional ECEC centre ADM, the sustainability and accessibility of services dedicated to young children and their families was ensured over time by the scaling up of a locally-based initiative originated within the voluntary sector. Such initiative took origin from the activism of a group of mothers<sup>9</sup> advocating for children's rights to educational spaces within an economically deprived community and, at the beginning, it was financially supported by the investments of an international NGOs (Bernard Van Leer Foundation). The funding initially provided by Bernard Van Leer Foundation allowed the professional qualification of the mothers setting up the advocacy group, who displayed a strong commitment to children's rights and social justice but had no professional background in regard to the education and care of young children. Therefore, a substantial investment was made at the beginning on the professional development of the low-qualified staff who operated within such services – who mostly consisted of previously un-employed mothers – and in the ongoing improvement of educational practices through pedagogical guidance and mentoring provided by highly-experienced professionals<sup>10</sup>. After the Bernard Van Leer funding expired, the municipal administration took over the responsibility for subsidising the ECEC centre within a formal agreement between CC Municipality and the advocacy group directly running the services through their Association. In the latest period, such Association became a social cooperative employing qualified staff and managing the ECEC centre as well as other educational services for children and young people in the neighbourhood within a formal, long-term agreement with Municipality. Therefore, the sustainability and accessibility of ECEC services in the case of CC was ensured over time through a responsive municipal administration that sustained the cultural growth of locally-based initiatives by providing both financial and pedagogical support through public funding and ongoing qualification initiatives<sup>11</sup>. At the present time, the integrated ECEC centre encompasses the following services, which are run by the social cooperative and funded by CC Municipality:

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- a half-day educational service (*spazio bambini*) attended by children aged 1 to 3 (5 mornings/week),
- a centre for children and parents (4 afternoons/week) proposing several activities depending on the age of the children,
- an after-school club (twice a week, including Saturday) and a family support service, which avails of a professional midwife running maternal and infant care programmes (pre- and post- natal) and of a family counsellor operating within the centre for children and parents, informally supporting those parents who might need additional advice (upon their request).

By providing diversified services under one roof, the ADM multifunctional centre proved not to be efficient in terms of public administration – in fact the cross-sectoral cooperation between health, education and social services prevents the dissipation of funding in different streams – but also effective in terms of outreaching – as the adoption of a multi-dimensional approach to family support allows to anticipate and meet comprehensively the needs of children and parents living the neighbourhood. In addition, the flexible combination of part-time day-care and sessional services for children and parents increases ECEC accessibility especially for low-income families and for those families in which only one parent is in employment.

In the case of FN – which is at the same time an inter-company and municipal day-care centre – the economic sustainability of expanding the number of childcare places available for children whose families live or work in the Trade District of Bologna city, was ensured by a project financing agreement signed between the Municipality, a cooperatives' consortium and local private enterprises. In response to Municipality's tender for building a publicly subsidised day-care centre in the area, the consortium elaborated a project – encompassing the construction plan, the pedagogical project of the centre and the service plan for cleaning and meals provision – that addressed comprehensively all the tender requirements by analysing the needs and resources of the neighbourhood. The fact that the consortium signed an agreement with the Municipality granting the management of the day-care centre for the next 20 years to the social cooperative – which is held responsible for the employment of educators and for their professionalization (pedagogical guidance and in-service development<sup>12</sup>) – provide the conditions for educational continuity as well as economic sustainability of the service. In addition, the fact that publicly and privately subsidised ECEC places are allocated to those children who are enrolled in municipal admission lists or whose parents are employed in local enterprises, guarantees an equal access in a context of social mix (diverse families' backgrounds and socio-economic status).

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## 4.2 Community engagement and knowledge co-creation: innovation in governance processes

Beside addressing the issues of sustainability and accessibility, the case studies shed light on how the pedagogical quality of ECEC provision and its ongoing improvement could be nurtured through the co-creation and sharing of knowledge, expertise and experiences that is generated by innovative forms of public governance (local and regional networks, partnerships with parents, coalitions for policy advocacy, inter-agency collaboration). In this regard, the ECEC services analysed in the case study may offer inspiring examples showing on how pedagogical quality could be achieved and promoted through local and regional initiatives, thus offering useful insights for policy-makers operating at these administrative levels.

The pedagogical quality of ECEC provision at system level – in the case of SM – is not only achieved through the provision of CPD opportunities and pedagogical guidance for all educators operating in the municipal district, but it is also sustained through inter-agency collaboration among educational services, cultural and leisure-time centres in the area (eg. library, sport activity centre,..) and through the engagement of community groups (eg. parent associations, voluntary organisations). In this case, the municipal pedagogical coordinator plays a key-role in sustaining networking and cooperation among the different stakeholders involved as well as in orienting educational practices across services within a shared pedagogical vision. The strength of the integrated system of ECEC in SM is a close inter-connection between the level of local policy-making and educational practices – which promote the active engagement of families and other community actors – providing a common framework for joint action while at the same time valuing the diversity and specific identity of each partner involved. The solid partnership developed between key decision-makers and community stakeholders in the case of SM allowed to develop local childhood policies that are more responsive of the needs of children and families and – at the same time – promoted the ongoing improvement of educational practices enacted in early childhood services through a systematic pedagogical coordination linking these two levels.

In the case of the ADM multifunctional ECEC centre in CC, the pedagogical quality of the service was achieved over a long period of time through ongoing professional development and pedagogical guidance, involvement in action-research projects and inter-professional cooperation across the healthcare, social and educational sector. Since its very beginning, the educational project of CC integrated centre was strongly marked by the collaboration with Bologna University (Frabboni and Dozza, 1994) and with the Emilia-Romagna Regional Institute for Professional Development (IRPA) which sustained its pedagogical growth (Andreoli and Cambi, 2001) through the professionalization of the staff working in the service. The on-

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going qualification of educational practices over the years was furthermore supported by the involvement of local pedagogical coordinators and practitioners in action-research projects aimed at rethinking the educational environment arrangements in the perspective of a multi-purpose use of the facility, where common spaces had to be shared by different users at different times (Gariboldi et al., 2007). In this sense, one of the main strength of the centre – that contributed significantly to the ongoing improvement of pedagogical practices – is the close inter-professional collaboration among early childhood educators, midwives, social workers and family counsellors which promotes a more holistic and integrated support to families with young children starting from their birth. At the same time, the ongoing confrontation and exchange among practitioners coming from different background, allow them to mature a deeper understanding of the development of young children across the different domains, therefore increasing their professional competence both at individual and team level. In this case – as well as in the case of SM – a crucial role is played by pedagogical coordinators<sup>13</sup>. Pedagogical coordinators are in fact responsible for facilitating cross-sectoral cooperation among services at local level and for leading innovation by constantly improving the quality of educational and care services by connecting the social demands emerging in the community with proactive interventions that are shaped within a shared vision of change (community regeneration).

In the case of the day-care centre FN located in BO, the educational quality of the service is promoted through the provision of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities and pedagogical guidance for all the educational staff operating within the service. The day-care centre not only shares the pedagogical vision and educational mission of the social cooperative that is directly involved in its management, but it is also part of a broader municipal ECEC system. This means that the educators employed by the social cooperative that runs FN are entitled to take part to the professionalising initiatives offered by BO Municipality, such as, for example professional exchanges and networking with colleagues from municipal services. In addition, FN's pedagogical coordinator (employed by the same social cooperative) is entitled to take part to the provincial network of pedagogical coordinators (CPP) which tasks are to document and exchange the good practices realised within ECEC services at local level, to analyse and discuss the needs for improvement and to take part to policy consultation processes<sup>14</sup>.

### **4.3 Pedagogical innovation: reconceptualising educational practices and re-framing participation**

In this section, the thematic analysis of the transcripts from focus groups with practitioners and interview with parents will be presented as complementary to the

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analysis of documentary sources and site visits. The decision to discuss the findings emerging from the analysis of practitioners' and parents' perceptions in the same paragraph was taken because the thematic categories emerging from both data pools revealed a symmetry between the two perspectives, hence it appeared more meaningful for interpretation to juxtapose them within the same section. In this perspective, the aim of the thematic analysis presented below is to highlight those common features that are associated to successful ECEC practices according to practitioners' and parents' perceptions.

The presence of a strong pedagogical identity and ethos shared by all staff working in the setting is identified by practitioners as a key-element of good practice as it contributes to orient educational decision-making processes in everyday interactions with children and parents on the basis of shared goals and values. A welcoming approach toward children and families is unanimously recognised as a core value shared by ECEC professionals, irrespectively of the type setting they are working in, and so is the adoption of a child-centred pedagogy orienting everyday educational and care practices. However, depending on the specific cultural identity and territorial connotation of each service within which practices are enacted, emphasis is placed on different aspects such as nurturing learning through daily life experiences and caring relationships, intentional planning of the educational environment, fostering warm transitions between the home and the ECEC setting.

'Parents like it here, not only because of the place where the setting is located, but mostly because of the relaxed rhythm in which children can make experience...The *piccolo gruppo educativo* is not a formal institution as such: it is half-way between a home and a day-care centre. This allows young children to learn to become independent by participating to everyday life activities [...]. And also the older children learn to take care of the younger...they hold their hands when we go walking in the wood, they help them eating at the table...and at the same time the younger children try to imitate the older ones...this is the strength of working with mixed-age groups!' [GIB.ED1.12]

'The strength of our *nido* resides in the shared pedagogical vision of the cooperative which is implemented through an intentional planning of educational initiatives, a special attention to the way the [learning] environment is organized and a constant reflection on practices that takes place within the team of educators with the support of the pedagogical coordinator. Team meetings and coordination meetings help us to look critically at our everyday work, by exchanging views with colleagues...and this lead us to improve our practices...' [FN.ED2.3]

‘What makes our service special compared to other services is the reciprocal influence between *spazio bambini* and *centro bambini e genitori*... The educators share the same coordination meetings and this allow them to exchange and mutually enrich their competences...among educators who work with children in the morning and educators who work with children and parents together in the afternoon [...]. For example, the idea of the morning coffee was taken from the centre for children and parents – because the educators in the afternoon always welcome parents with a coffee to make them feel more at ease – and it has been introduced in the children’s centre in order to facilitate transitions from home to the setting... [ADM.PC.25]

The statements reported above, clearly highlight that the development of a shared pedagogical approach orienting the educational practices enacted in each setting is nurtured by a constant exchange among practitioners and by an ongoing reflection on their everyday work, which is taking place with the facilitation of pedagogical coordinators. In this sense, collegiality, collective reflection and pedagogical guidance could be seen as the most effective strategies for improving pedagogical practices and for sustaining practitioners’ professional growth. Collective reflexivity in the context of collegiality not only deepens educators’ pedagogical understanding by setting the conditions for the generation of shared knowledge, but also nurtures the ethical dimension of their educational work. In fact, the decision-making processes carried out in the context of collegial meetings drive all actors involved to decide not only what to do (Am I doing things right?) but also to question the reasons why (Am I doing the right thing?).

From this point of view, what all the services included in the case study have in common, is a strong commitment toward working with families in a participatory and inclusive way, that values the contribution each parent can bring to the centre. The adoption of a welcoming approach toward parents – sustaining their informal involvement in the everyday life of the setting – seems to be a key-success factor for developing mutual relationship of trust between educators and families, especially in contexts where a certain diffidence toward formal childcare exists.

‘We usually ask parents to come and visit us with their children before the school year starts. In this way, the parents can have an understanding of what we do here and his/her child can start familiarizing with the other children and with the new environment. This helps parents a lot, as they can see their child is comfortable and enjoys playing with other children...and if the parent trusts the setting, it will be easier for the child to settle-in in September.’ [GIB.ED1.18]

‘We attach great importance to listening to parents as they can teach us a lot about their child...and this help us to develop a better understanding of their children... Furthermore, if the parents feel valued, they come back, because here they do not feel judged, they feel at home... This does not mean that there are no rules – but rather than the parents feel as they belong... [ADM.ED8.28]

The opportunity to become engaged in the life of the centre and to see what children do and learn when they are together is very much appreciated by parents, and their way of looking at their own children change after such experiences. They realise the educational value of daycare services – which are no longer seen as places where children are cared for while parents are at work – but rather are seen as spaces of socialisation and learning, where children’s potentialities and capabilities are nurtured through meaningful interactions with adults and peers.

‘Before my first child started to attend GIB, my wife and I were strongly against childcare but we were both working parents and we had no choice really... By thinking back, I am now convinced that it was the most important experience my child could have ever had from an educational point of view! And I realised that as a parent while being here with my child. When I accompanied him in the morning, I used to spend even half an hour on the armchair in the playroom, I played not only with my child but also with the other children, while the educators were offering me a coffee...’ [Italian father]

‘When I enter the service, I see with my eyes the things that children are able to do when they are together, older and younger...they help each other and they learn to care for each other!’ [Peruvian father]

Establishing a relationship of mutual trust and reciprocal learning between educators and parents is particularly important in order to enhance the participation of families living in vulnerable conditions, which are at risk of social exclusion and might fear stigmatization when approaching a formal setting. In this sense, adopting a non-judgmental and empowering attitude in working with families is crucial. This might encompass creating opportunities for listening to parents rather than talking to parents, as well as developing informal parent support initiatives sustaining their capability rather than providing them with ‘parental education training’ or ‘expert advice’ which might be perceived as patronising and therefore might turn out to be counterproductive.

‘I got to know the centre for children and parents through another mum attending the pre-natal course with me. I then started attending the baby massage course and at the end of it the nurse told me that in the same centre they also organise parents and toddler groups. As I was not employed and I was at home all day with my child, I started to go and we

are still here after 3 years! My child and I learned a lot of things together here...She learnt to socialise with other children although she did not attend the day-care centre. And I felt supported in my role as mother – not only at practical level – but also at psychological level... I learned to listen to her, to be responsive to her needs and...let's say that I learnt how to better interact with her... especially in those difficult situations when I used to panic, now I've learnt how to deal with them.' [Romanian mother]

As the findings from the interviews reveals, only if parents are involved as active agents of change in ECEC, their participation can be scaled up and become a powerful resource for bottom-up social innovation. This, in turn, might contribute to the regeneration of local communities starting from advocacy for children's rights – as in the case of CC – or to the improvement of the wider compulsory school system, like in the case of SM:

'Having had the experience of participation in the committee for the management of ECEC services set up by SM municipality, we decided to set up a parent committee also in the state-run pre- and primary school attended by our children. As there is no coordination between the 7 state-school institutions spread across the municipality, we decided to set up a parent committee to promote a more unified approach throughout the different school levels, starting from kindergarten to lower secondary school. We also help schools with fundraising initiatives in the community because, you know, here the schools do not have many resources... We all started when our children attended the day-care centre and we are still here, after 8 years!' [President of parents committee]

## 5. Concluding remarks

The lessons learnt from the case studies analysis point out that certain conditions are needed for the successful development of social innovation in the ECEC field. The first condition is the presence of a coherent system of policies providing a regulatory framework according to which funding to public and private-NFP provision could be systematically provided on the basis of accessibility and structural quality requirement such as, for example, the inclusion of children with special needs, income-related fees favouring the participation of low-income families, pedagogical coordination, amount of paid working hours without children allowing staff to participate in collegial meetings and ongoing professional development activities. Secondly, a shared commitment to ECEC as a public good at all level of governance – from the regional level, to the local level to the level of ECEC service providers – is needed in order to encourage bottom-up policy advocacy and sustains innovation through responsive policy-making processes.

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More specifically, the analysis of the data collected through documentary sources, interviews to key-stakeholders and site visits highlights that social innovation in ECEC is more likely to happen in contexts where:

- traditions of civic engagement and educational activism are present or emerging in the local community;
- the initiatives aimed to the development of ECEC services are driven by a commitment to children's rights and social justice, starting from parents and communities groups, rather than from a 'return of investment' rationale.

In line with the findings of the European study CoRe (Urban et al., 2012), the evidence gathered from the case study analysis underline that the quality of educational and care practices enacted in early childhood settings is more likely to be the result of joint actions inscribed within a competent system rather than the consequence of individual practitioners' competences. With specific reference to the case study examined, the key-factors contributing to the successful development of high quality ECEC practices are connected to:

- the elaboration of a regulatory framework ensuring an even level of structural quality across ECEC services in the Region (R.L.1/2000 and amendments) in relation to: coordination, mentoring and guidance of professionals at team level, practitioners' joint work opportunities and non-contact time for participating in collective meetings, in-house professional development, action-research projects and meeting with parents;

- a shared pedagogical vision that actively encourages the participation of families and community stakeholders to the management of ECEC institutions: in this sense, the fact that early childhood institutions are conceived as a public good implies that parents are perceived as partners rather than as end-users ('service approach') or costumers ('private business approach');

- the presence of a coordination infrastructure and of participatory networks at municipal, provincial and regional level which sustain bottom-up innovation and the scaling up of successful initiatives through the documentation and exchange of good practices;

- continuing professional development activities that are organised in the form of 'laboratories for social change' – empowering ECEC professionals – rather than as 'expert led training' aimed to the acquisition of predefined skills;

- inter-agency cooperation among professionals and institutions operating across different sectors (eg. healthcare, social welfare, education) for the welfare of young children and their families at all levels of the system (from the local community level to the inter-departmental collaboration at regional level);

- policy decision-making processes that are carried out in close consultation with ECEC professionals – such as the pedagogical coordination networks – with community advocacy groups and with other relevant stakeholders.

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In particular, the analysis of the data collected through interviews and documentary sources emphasise the crucial role played by pedagogical coordinators as ‘system figures’ (Manini, Gherardi, Balduzzi, 2006). By constantly connecting – in their everyday work – the educational and social needs emerging at local level (regular meeting with ECEC staff and families, services’ supervision) with pedagogical practice innovation through guidance and professional development initiatives, the coordinators become catalysers of change both at the level of ECEC services and at the level of local policy advocacy processes. In this regard, the findings from the cases studies highlight that it is precisely the mutual interaction of bottom-up and top-down innovation processes – characterising the connection between experimental pedagogical practices and responsive ECEC policies in Emilia-Romagna Region – to be a key-success factor of local social innovation initiatives.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The project ‘*Innovative social investment: strengthening community in Europe*’ (INNOSI) has been funded by the European Commission under the H2020 programme (2015-2017): <http://innosi.eu>

The author was involved in the project as part of an inter-disciplinary team of researchers including sociologists, policy analysts and economists.

<sup>2</sup> *Working for Inclusion: an overview of European Union early years services and their workforce* (Bennett and Moss, 2010); *Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for Children from Disadvantaged Backgrounds 2010*; *CoRe - competence requirements in ECEC, 2011*; *ECEC in promoting educational attainment of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and in fostering social inclusion, 2012*; *Study on the effective use of ECEC in preventing early school leaving, 2014*

<sup>3</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?lagId=en&catId=1044&newsId=1807&furtherNews=yes>

<sup>4</sup> ‘Social investment in individual capacities during the early years is particularly beneficial for children from a disadvantaged background and can provide large social returns. They are also a crucial factor in breaking cycles of intergenerational transmission of poverty’. Excerpt retrieved from: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1246&langId=en>

<sup>5</sup> European Social Fund

<sup>6</sup> Percentages are referred to the overall children’s population under 3 years of age.

<sup>7</sup> Whereas in Modena the proportion of 0-2 children with a migrant background is higher than the regional average (26,8% vs 23,6%), the proportion of migrant children in ECEC services is much lower than the regional average (8,9% vs 11%). On the opposite, in Bologna the proportion of 0-2 children with a migrant background is lower than the regional average (22,2% vs 23,6%) but the participation of migrant children to ECEC services is comparatively higher (12,8% vs 11%).

<sup>8</sup> The Van Leer Foundation supports initiatives aimed at improving children's living conditions in deprived areas of the world: the countries of the third and fourth world, but also are deprived of the developing countries.

<sup>9</sup> The self-organised initiative of the group of mothers who gave origin to ECEC services in Comacchio found a fertile ground in the feminist and mutual aid movements, which characterised the history of the community in the post-war period. In fact, many mothers who took part to the advocacy group reclaiming educational spaces for young children were active members of

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the National Feminist Movement (*Unione Donne Italiane*) – that played a crucial role in advocating for the National Childcare Act enacted in 1971 (law 1044/1971) – or of its catholic counterpart, the Italian Female Group (*Centro Italiano Femminile*).

<sup>10</sup>These pedagogical experts were either researchers from the Educational Department of Bologna University (Frabboni and Dozza, 1994) or experienced pedagogical coordinators from the Emilia-Romagna Regional Institute for Professional Development (IRPA).

<sup>11</sup>In addition, it needs to be said that the most important source of funding for supporting qualification initiatives through pedagogical coordination and ongoing professional development comes from the Emilia-Romagna Region that distribute financial contributions toward these initiatives at provincial level.

<sup>12</sup>The provision of staff continuing professional development opportunities (CPD) and pedagogical guidance activities - encompassing supervision and mentoring - is considered to be an essential quality requirement for ECEC services. Therefore, the availability of CPD free of charge for all staff as well as the presence of a pedagogical coordinator are integral parts of any agreement entitling private-NFP services to receive public subsidies from municipalities.

In addition, it needs to be said that the most important source of funding for supporting qualification initiatives through pedagogical coordination and ongoing professional development comes from the Emilia-Romagna Region that distribute financial contributions toward these initiatives at provincial level. The Region Emilia-Romagna is also responsible for orienting and coordinating the initiatives carried out at local level by the provincial pedagogical coordination group.

<sup>13</sup>In the case of CC there is a constant interplay between the coordinator from the social cooperative that directly run the centre and the municipal coordinator who is in charge of supervising and orienting cross-sectoral cooperation among the centres' services and the healthcare / social services in the district. The practitioners operating in each service meet once a month for planning, documenting and reflecting on their practices with the supervision of the social cooperative coordinator. In addition, three meetings a year are held among the different professionals operating across these services in order to share common goals and integrated strategies to achieve them: these meetings are jointly facilitated by the municipal pedagogical coordinator and by the social cooperative's coordinator.

<sup>14</sup>The participation to bottom-up policy consultation processes is realised through:

- the direct participation of pedagogical coordinators to the annual regional seminars organised by the Department of Social, Educational and Family Policies of Emilia-Romagna
- the participation in the Provincial Coordination Network's meetings, whose reference person – called CPP tutor – is directly involved in policy roundtables organised by Department of Social, Educational and Family Policies.

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