

The professionalization of early childhood education, care educators and pedagogical coordinators: a key issue of adult education

La formazione degli educatori di nidi e servizi prima infanzia e dei coordinatori pedagogici: un tema chiave della formazione degli adulti

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Abstract

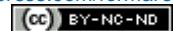
This paper focuses on the issue of in-service training of personnel involved in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), in light of the most recent European and Italian studies and regulations and in line with the principles of lifelong learning and adult education. The paper then illustrates the main aspects of a survey of the literature on in-service training of ECEC personnel, indicating the most significant experiences in Italy. Finally, as an example of good in-service training practices at university level, the case of the Master in “Pedagogical coordination of early childhood education and care services” of the University of Florence is described, together with some reflections on the role and function of the figure of the pedagogical coordinator, also as a promoter of in-service training of ECEC personnel.

Keywords: professionalization; in-service training; ECEC educators; pedagogical coordinators; adult education.

Abstract

L'articolo affronta il tema della formazione in servizio del personale della Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), alla luce degli studi e delle normative europee e italiane più recenti, nella prospettiva dei principi dell'educazione permanente e degli adulti. Presenta poi gli aspetti salienti di un'analisi della letteratura sulla formazione in servizio del personale dell'ECEC e indica le più significative esperienze realizzate sul territorio italiano. Infine, come esempio di buone pratiche di formazione in servizio a livello universitario, riporta il caso del Master in “Coordinamento di nidi e servizi per l'infanzia zero-sei anni” dell'Università degli Studi di Firenze, insieme ad alcune riflessioni sul ruolo e sulla funzione della figura del coordinatore pedagogico, anche come promotore della formazione in servizio del personale dell'ECEC.

Parole chiave: professionalizzazione; formazione in servizio; educatori nidi e servizi prima infanzia; coordinatori pedagogici; educazione degli adulti.



1. The continuing education of ECEC professionals at a European level

In-service training is situated within the framework of lifelong learning, which is based on the idea that human beings express a need for training throughout their life. With this in mind, lifelong learning should not therefore be seen as a mere extension of the education received during childhood and adolescence, but as a new way of conceiving education itself. This is clearly shown by the *European Reference Framework of Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning*, starting from the Resolution of the Council of the European Union of 27 June 2002 on lifelong learning (CEU, 2002) which is considered within a timespan ranging “from the pre-school age to that of post-retirement” (p. 2)¹. Lifelong learning thus includes “the entire spectrum of formal, non-formal and informal learning” (*ibid.*), and it “must be understood as all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective” (*ibid.*). In the case of adults, lifelong education therefore includes all those educational and/or training practices aimed at responding to specific educational needs, related to professional retraining or self-fulfilment, but also to the performance of a new social role: suffice to think, for example, of that of parenting, or active participation in society and culture, and so on. (Dozza & Olivieri, 2016; Federighi, 2016; Loiodice, 2016).

Since the early Nineties, as stated in its *Green Paper* on the matter, the European Union, in an address to all its member states, stressed the need to fight social inequality through the implementation of inclusive, equal, and democratic policies, also in the education and training sector, with particular attention to adults: “The social integration of all citizens is of strategic importance because it goes to the heart of the impact of existing welfare-state policies and provides a powerful goal for the future development of member state policy and action. Indeed, the idea that not only the active but also the non-active population needs the dignity of a social, coupled with the return to full employment even if in a new shape (as discussed above), constitutes the backbone of an active social policy for the future” (CEC, 1993, p. 43).

The importance of policies aimed at maintaining the quality of professional training has been reaffirmed at a European level in the 2000s: “Education and training have a crucial role to play in meeting the many socio-economic, demographic, environmental and technological challenges facing Europe and its citizens today and, in the years, ahead. [...] Efficient investment in human capital through education and training systems is an essential component of Europe’s strategy [...]. High quality education and training systems, which are both efficient and equitable, are crucial for Europe’s success and for enhancing employability. The major challenge is to ensure the acquisition of key competences by everyone, while developing the excellence and attractiveness at all levels of education and training that will allow Europe to retain a strong global role”. (CEU, 2009, pp. 2-3).

Hence, within the general framework of European policies on lifelong learning and continuing education, it emerges that adult education especially seeks to combine the goal of economic competitiveness with that of social cohesion, resulting, among its various forms, in continuous training, understood as professional training addressed to workers.

¹ For one of the most recent EU documents on this subject, see also EU, 2018.

In light of the development strategies outlined subsequently in official EU documents, above all those enacted within the framework of the *Europe 2020 Strategy*, continuous education assumes a decisive function, to be exact, the strengthening of the skills acquired during initial training, while also promoting the acquisition of new competence and skills, useful to promote employability; to enhance human capital development; to avoid unemployment (EC, 2010).

In-service training of personnel working in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services – services for the 0-6 age group, prior to the primary school – is included in the range of continuous training activities (Bondioli, 2016). In Europe, this education and training sector is increasingly seen as a system that involves a multiplicity of subjects with different roles and skills, who, in many cases, work in synergy to achieve the same goal: namely, to guarantee all children access to ECEC services, while improving the quality of these (EC, 2011). Accessibility and quality are, in fact, two key elements of recent EU legislation; they essentially represent the foundation of the policies and projects of those countries committed to transforming ECEC services from individual demand into services of social interest aimed at all children (EC, 2011; Grange Sergi, 2016).

At a European level, as recent international research has also shown, ECEC systems differ from country to country in many respects: governance; types of personnel employed; educators' qualifications, initial training, basic knowledge, and skills; in-service training methods; policies and reforms; organizational and management models. However, there is the determination to think of ECEC with a view to identifying common aspects, by taking a broader look: not only in regulatory terms, but also in relation to the individual elements that ECEC is composed of. In a recent study on the profile of personnel and on data relating to specific national contexts, commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth, and carried out in 30 countries, one aspect that emerged was the importance which ECEC in-service training of educators assumes in each of the countries involved (Oberhuemer & Schreyer, 2017).

In keeping with the indications of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) has included a thematic workgroup on ECEC, representing the 26 member states, for some years. This workgroup has developed a European Qualification Framework (EQF) on ECEC, presented in Athens in 2014, which was officially launched by the DG EAC at the *Great Start in Life* conference, held in Brussels in 2016 (EC, 2014; <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/10102/2017/EN/SWD-2017-258-F1-EN-MAIN-PART-1.PDF>). This document, which contains eight statements, encourages member states to develop a comprehensive approach in designing training programmes for ECEC service personnel. At the same time, several international organizations (such as the OECD and the ILO) have recently stressed the importance of continuous professional development as a crucial factor in enhancing the quality of ECEC services and the learning processes of the children using them (ILO, 2014; OECD; 2012a; 2012b).

However, there are very few scientific studies that provide a mapping of the processes and tools used at a European level to promote the continuous training of ECEC educators (Sheridan, Pope Edwards, Marvin & Knoche, 2009). This is also due to the lack of relevant investment by individual member states in the construction of organic systems aimed at developing continuous training. However, the impetus given by European institutions did favour the first global survey on ECEC systems in the EU. In this context,

this research, commissioned by Eurofound, sought to analyse the impact of working conditions and in-service training of ECEC professionals on the quality of the services themselves (Eurofound, 2015). At the very heart of this research was a comparative analysis of the literature on the subject, which showed that the benefits of the continuous training of educators include the acquisition of greater pedagogical awareness and new methodological competence, in terms of implementing the pedagogical curriculum, strengthening teamwork, and involving families in educational planning and programming processes (Peleman et al., 2018).

2. The Italian ECEC system and in-service training, as a qualifying factor

In Italy, in-service training of the staff employed in ECEC services for the 0-3 age group has been a key element in the development of quality educational practices, ever since the first experiences of traditional *nidi d'infanzia* (analogous to nurseries) created with Law no. 1044/1971. Subsequently, Law no. 285/1997 introduced public financing for the activation of new services, defined as *integrativi* (supplementary), including playgrounds, centres for children and their families, *nidi domiciliari* (home-based nurseries), and *nidi aziendali* (company nurseries). The Italian ECEC system is thus enriched by many types of services, managed not only by the municipalities, but also by a variety of private social bodies, including cooperatives, associations, social societies, and sometimes even through agreements with the municipality itself (Silva, 2016b).

However, this has only occurred in the regions of the north and centre of Italy, and not in the south, thereby creating a non-homogeneous national framework as regards extra-domestic education for children aged 0-3 years. The lack of ECEC services in the southern regions is partly due to the half-heartedness of the central State when it comes to intervening in ECEC. By attributing the task of implementing ECEC 0-3 to the regions and their management to the municipalities, the Italian State has essentially given these bodies a free hand to found nurseries – or not. This explains their patchy presence in Italy, or rather, only in those contexts where public administrations have been solicited by social participation to listen to and meet the educational needs of a territory, including those of the children (Lazzari, Picchio & Musatti, 2013).

A regulatory vacuum which Law no. 107/2015, also known as *Legge sulla buona scuola* (Good School Reform) – and above all the implementing decrees envisaged by it starting from Decree Law no. 65/2017 – have tried to fill, by providing ECEC services nationwide in order to guarantee the right to education from birth. Moreover, among other things, the above Decree Law wishes to promote a precise qualification for ECEC educators, as well as pedagogical coordinators, following a bachelor's and master's degree course, respectively.

Although present only in a part of the country, through a national associative network called *Gruppo Nazionale Nidi e Infanzia*, ECEC services have given a voice to childhood, making children's potential visible, and encouraging relations between infants, children, adolescents, and adults (GNNI, 2005). ECEC services, in their reconfiguration in places that promote a *culture of childhood*, also become openings for continuous training of the professionals working in them (Bove, Mantovani & Cescato, 2016). In fact, to actively involve children and parents in educational experiences centred on the paradigm of the *competent child* – that is, a child who is a protagonist of the building of his/her knowledge and identity – takes staff with great expertise.

For this to be possible, educators must therefore acquire additional skills *in itinere*, other than their initial ones (Malaguzzi, 1993). Paraphrasing Enzo Catarsi (2010), in the new ECEC services, educational staff are required to possess the following skills: (i) cultural and psycho-pedagogical; (ii) technical-professional; (iii) methodological and didactic; (iv) relational; (v) reflective. The initial training, to be acquired through a university degree course, needs to be continually updated and enriched through in-service training, given today's continuous social transformations and the rapid progress of scientific pedagogical knowledge.

In recent years, and also thanks to requests from the European Union, the role of the State in ECEC of each individual EU member has grown; this is the case in Italy which, on the basis of a popular law proposal, established – by Law no. 107/2015 – the right to education from birth, also laying the foundations for an integrated 0-6 ECEC system. For the first time, in this scenario the Italian State assumed the task of coordinating, directing, and promoting children's preschool education, while the regions remained responsible for planning and developing ECEC systems at a local level, and the municipalities for managing them within their territory, also through professional support from a pedagogical coordinator (Silva, 2018).

The role of the State is also that of integrating the system of educational services for the 0-3 age group with those for children aged from 3 to 6 years (albeit still incomplete), which have operated separately so far. On the one hand, 0-3 ECEC services – including the traditional *nidi d'infanzia*, established with Law no. 1044/1971, represent the first form of a public organization of childcare facilities. On the other, the State *scuola materna* (analogous to a kindergarten, for the 3-6 age group, and now called *scuola dell'infanzia*), instituted with Law no. 444/1968, which is open to all children – Italians and foreigners – between the ages of 3 and 5 as stipulated by the MIUR (Italian Ministry of Education, University, and Research). The *scuola dell'infanzia* lasts for three years and is not compulsory (<http://www.miur.gov.it/scuola-dell-infanzia>).

Through the establishment of an integrated preschool education system, the Italian State has finally linked ECEC services to primary schools, as per Law no. 53/2003 (see art. 2, par. d). In this way, a 0-6 ECEC system was created, organically connecting two situations – respectively, educational services from 0-3 and 3-6 – which had walked in parallel until then, wherever Regions and local authorities had launched 0-3 year services.

As already mentioned, the Italian ECEC system is currently at the centre of a reform of the educational and school system, which has also strongly affected ECEC through the establishment of an integrated education system from 0 to 6 years. In-service training of early childhood educators is also the subject of recent regulatory provisions. Law no. 107/2015 makes explicit reference to in-service training of teachers in art. 1, paragraphs 121-124, where an Electronic Card is issued specifically for their professional updating and training, above all through in-service training activities, which are incentivized and financially supported through a three-year national training plan. This plan was adopted for the period 2016-2019, with the Ministerial Decree no. 797/2016 (MIUR, 2016). Subsequently, Decree Law no. 65/2017, in establishing the integrated education and school system², provided by the abovementioned Law no. 107/2015 (paragraphs 180-181), clarifies in article 1, paragraph 3, letter g, that it “promotes the quality of the

² From now on, unless otherwise stated, all English translations of Italian Laws quoted herein are mine.

educational offer through the use of educational and teaching staff with university qualifications and through in-service training, the collegial dimension of work, and territorial pedagogical coordination". This decree Law then refers to art. 4, paragraph 1 that the State promotes and supports the qualification of the offer of 0-6 educational services through the multi-year national action plan for the promotion of the integrated system (see art. 8). This qualification is achieved among other things through "in-service training of the staff of the integrated system of education and training system, also with the aim of promoting their psycho-physical well-being" (idem, par. 1, f). The plan was approved by the Council of Ministers on 6 December 2017 and it provides for continuous in-service training for educators and teachers, in accordance with the provisions of the national training plan pursuant to art. 1, par. 124 of the so-called *Good School Law* (CdM, 2017). With the note prot. n. 404/2018, the MIUR invited Regional School Offices to set up round tables, in order to systematically fulfil the various objectives indicated by Decree Law no. 65/2017, one of which is the continuous training of professionals working within the integrated 0-6 system (MIUR, 2018).

3. The benefits of in-service training, starting from a European level survey

A survey of the outcomes of in-service training of ECEC educators, through analyses of both the scientific literature and some national and international experiences, shows that in-service training provides educators with greater skills, including a boosting of their self-confidence through reflection on their practices during training. A reflection on one's own work that sometimes involves the de-construction and re-conceptualization of one's professional role (Peleman et al., 2018).

In-service training fosters the ability of educators to broaden their theoretical perspectives, reflecting critically on educational policies and on the goals of the practices they carry out in ECEC services. For the most part, in-service training is conducted according to the Participatory Action Research model: this gives educators the opportunity to critically question the link between theory and practice in their daily work, thus helping to bridge the gap that tends to separate theoretical principles and practices (Johansson, Sandberg & Vuorinen, 2007).

By bringing into play their theoretical and practical reference framework, educators are stimulated to question their point of view on children, recognizing the latter as active participants within the educational scene. In this way, they are encouraged to carry out a reorganization of the service they work in, as regards the spaces and timescales set for the activities (Sheridan, Williams & Sandberg, 2013). At a time when children are subjects to whom educators listen, their actions are no longer taken for granted, and the activities that were previously considered *natural*, such as play, become pedagogical opportunities, valuable for enriching children's knowledge and skills, also from a relational and emotional point of view.

Another front on which it is possible to evaluate the positive effects of in-service training is the educators' attitude towards parents: the strengthening of skills and a willingness to listen to the point of view of other social actors on the educational scene, leads educators to become more interested in how parents educate young children at home, even to the extent of adopting some family practices in the service where they work (Peeters & Vandebroeck, 2011).

From analyses of the scientific literature produced at a European level, it emerges that those interventions which combine training and supervision during daily practice in ECEC services are more effective compared to the traditional models, based on one-off interventions and on the individual acquisition of content through refresher courses. The analyses also showed that the systematic use of tools, such as video-observation and the documentation of experiences with children, help educators to re-program their educational practices, in order to meet children's needs more effectively and responsively (Picchio, Giovannini, Mayer & Musatti, 2012).

Ultimately, these are the key factors that determine a positive impact of continuing education programmes on pedagogical practices and therefore on the quality of services: training integrated with the local situation and with the needs of educators; the involvement of educators in the training process; training centred on daily practice and on exchanges of ideas with all the actors on the educational scene, including colleagues and parents. The result is the greater effectiveness of those Action Research projects which involve educators in a critical exploration of their work and that provide them with tools to document the practices, to reflect on them, and to avoid the expectation of predetermined learning outcomes (Peleman et al., 2018).

Focusing on the Italian context, we can find similar trends that have emerged at a European level and some specific factors connected to the evolution of its 0-3 ECEC system in which in-service training was conceived as a central element for its development within the regional regulations controlling it. In particular, in the panorama of concrete training experiences carried out in Italy, some strengths of the system emerge when in-service training of ECEC staff is carried out involving all the actors operating in the ECEC system in a certain territory (at a municipal level, or in an inter-municipal area), within training programmes that allow exchanges of educational staff, both nationally and internationally, and in the presence of documentation centres that perform the function of a resource (Lazzari et al., 2013).

One example with regard to in-service training at a territorial level is that of the Empoli-Valdelsa, in Tuscany, designed and coordinated by the Bruno Ciari Study Centre on behalf of the local municipalities, which involves all of the extremely diverse ECEC services from the territory within a common training plan, which is developed with specific methods and contents according to the needs of each service. In general, this type of training ends with a seminar at which the subjects involved present, in groups, the practical effects of all the training experiences they have participated in (Silva, Boffo & Freschi, 2017).

A model of training *growth* is based on exchanges of experiences and on the comparison of mutual skills between educators and pedagogical coordinators who work in different national situations, or even in other countries. The experience that connects the situations of Pistoia and Palermo, in which – as part of a twinning process between the two cities – the first is a *guide* for the second (Galardini, Giovannini, Mandalà & Tonucci, 1997) is particularly significant. The training experiences carried out thanks to international exchanges are also interesting. In certain cases, they benefit from the participation of those bodies that manage ECEC services in European projects. For example, this was the case for the Multicultural Early Childhood Education project (MECEC+), which involved three Countries – namely, Italy, Spain, and Hungary – which also afforded an opportunity for reciprocal exchange regarding both childhood pedagogical theories, and, above all, the practices carried out in ECEC services (Silva, Bajzáth & Piovano, 2018).

Last but not least, in this framework, the documentation centre called *Raccontinfanzia*, in Ferrara, and *La Bottega di Geppetto*, in San Miniato (Pisa), represent two of the most significant examples of advanced approaches to ECEC in Italy; as a result, they represent benchmarks for the in-service training of educators from Italy but also from abroad³.

4. The Master in Pedagogical Coordination of Early Childhood Education and Care⁴ of the University of Florence: an example of good practices

A key figure in the in-service training of ECEC staff is unquestionably that of the pedagogical coordinator. In Italy, this is a figure who has played an essential role in the process to turn the infant school from a type of care institute into a proper educational service, above all in the contribution given to the management and in-service training of professionals (Silva, 2015). This figure's centrality in the promotion of the educational offer of the integrated 0-6 year system is today reaffirmed by Decree Law no. 65/2017, where an implicit link is created between this figure and the planning of the continuous training activities of the educational staff who work in ECEC services, outlining the so-called 'integrated system'. This is professionalism with sundry functions, ranging from the drafting of the educational project to the performance of administrative tasks. In addition, the pedagogical coordinator guarantees the correct functioning of work teams, who count on his/her systematic and significant presence – in the most far-reaching and deepest sense of the term.

In addition to promoting in-service training for educators, the latter are encouraged to reflect on their pedagogical and educational practices. The coordinator is also tasked with fostering the relationship between educators through collective and small group meetings, as well as the planning of individual encounters between them and the children's families. Moreover, the pedagogical coordinator promotes continuity in education, both vertically and horizontally, representing a key figure who lets ECEC services enjoy and offer quality experiences, in so doing achieving effective results in education (Catarsi, 2010; Musatti & Mayer, 2003; Silva, 2015).

Looking at the transborder context, we must also point out that this particular professional figure is present, albeit with different denominations, in several European countries (Silva, 2016a; Silva, Freschi & Caselli, 2015). As far as the Italian context is concerned, the figure of the pedagogical coordinator first appeared in the early childhood education services of certain regions of central and northern Italy as far back as the Seventies, especially in those municipalities that could count on the stimuli offered by outstanding and renowned pedagogists, such as Loris Malaguzzi, Bruno Ciari, Sergio Neri, and Duilio Santarini (Catarsi, 2010).

In Italy, the presence of the pedagogical coordinator emerges within the 0-3 educational services, alongside and in tandem with that of the educator, with specific tasks and functions that he/her carries out within the staff employed in ECEC services, to allow the growth of these services, while ensuring their educational, managerial, and pedagogical

³ <https://www.informafamiglie.it/ferrara/scuola-e-servizi-educativi-per-linfanzia/centri-di-documentazione-educativa/centro-di-documentazione-educativa>; <http://www.bottegadigeppetto.it/>

⁴ Original Italian title: *Master di I livello in Coordinamento pedagogico di nidi e servizi per l'infanzia zero-sei*; Master's Scientific Coordinator: Clara Silva.

quality. All of this in the absence of a national Law that clarifies the role and function of the pedagogical coordinator, a function that was officially recognized only in 2015, with the aforementioned Law no. 107/2015, when in paragraph 181, letter e), in establishing the right to education from birth, reference was made to the figure of the ‘psycho-pedagogical coordinator’. The regulatory gap at a national level has in many cases been filled by regional regulations which have allowed significant experiences to be produced not only by individual pedagogical coordinators but also by pedagogical coordination structures, thus allowing the complexity of the system to be governed in the best way and at various ECEC levels, both public and private (Silva, 2015).

Around the year 2000, several municipalities in northern and central Italy began to introduce the figure of the pedagogical coordinator into their staff, and many regions, including Tuscany, included him/her in their legislation on education for children. Until that time, to coordinate educational services, educators and coordinators had been employed, in many cases with a university degree and significant work experience in the educational sphere, but without specific skills in pedagogical coordination.

To strengthen in-service training of educators and those who had already worked as pedagogical coordinators, in the academic year 2006-2007, the Master in Pedagogical Coordination of Early Childhood Education and Care was established⁵, on the initiative of Enzo Catarsi, formerly a tenured professor of General Pedagogy at the University of Florence⁶. This Master – still offered today – now remains one of the very few specific postgraduate courses specifically addressed to and focused on the figure of the pedagogical coordinator (<https://www.unifi.it/p11432.html#coordinamento>).

From the outset, it became clear that the Master in Pedagogical Coordination of Early Childhood Education and Care needed to provide training with a strong pedagogical basis, but at the same time foster multi-faceted skills, in order to allow its students to coordinate the various types of preschool service and network them. Consequently, the Master swiftly took shape as a concrete response to both educational service needs (to find support in a professional leadership able to promote high-level culture and a pedagogical vision), and to local administrations’ need to equip themselves with professionals who had multiple skills: not only psycho-pedagogical, but also relational, political-administrative, and managerial. The course’s educational offer is therefore original and multifaceted; it is split between lectures, internships, practical activities, visits to ECEC services around Tuscany, and seminars conducted by experts engaged in education at various levels.

5. The professional-occupational profile and employability of ECEC Master students: methodology and the results of a survey

Taking into account the framework outlined above, in order to test the effectiveness of the master’s course and the usefulness of its qualification in the field of preschool education, in 2016 – just ten years after its establishment – a survey was conducted employing Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) technology, through an electronic questionnaire administered to all those had attended the Master up to that point (Silva,

⁵ At the time of its establishment, the Italian name of the Master was *Master in coordinamento pedagogico di nidi e servizi per l'infanzia*.

⁶ For more details on the figure of Enzo Catarsi, see also: Silva, Freschi and Sharmahd, 2015.

2019). The aim was to verify the effectiveness of the master's educational offer, as well as the tangible usefulness of the qualification obtained as an educator or pedagogical coordinator. From the electronic archive of the Study and Tuition Service of the Master, it emerged that, in these ten years, 443 people had successfully taken the degree, with a considerable increase in attendance in the last four. They were asked to complete an *ad hoc* questionnaire, uploaded onto the *Google Drive* platform, a specific cloud platform hosting modular cloud-based services. Through the so-called *Google Drive Modules* it was possible to immediately create and disseminate the questionnaire to a reference mailing list; after which, the system automatically stored the answers in a special Excel file in the same folder, generating tables for each question for subsequent statistical processing. Respondents were given a deadline of around two months, a period within which they could participate in the survey, during which the rate of redemption was constantly monitored. Then the data was analysed from a quantitative point of view.

Compared to the predefined sample of 443 people, only 266 graduates, or 60% of the sample, answered the questions. There was a clear overall prevalence of participants living in Tuscany (86.3%), even though over time the number of those from other regions had increased. It is interesting to note that, as a result of the Master, the percentage of unemployed had decreased significantly (from 15% to 8.8%), compared to 85% of those employed when entering the master's programme. It also emerged that the percentage of those who, having obtained the master's degree, had found work as pedagogical coordinators (from 12.7%, to 21.4%), had increased; the percentage of graduates who found work as educators after obtaining the master's degree had also increased. On the other hand, there was a significant decrease, following the attainment of the master's degree, of those employed in other areas, or were unemployed; there was a decrease of 2% in the first case, and 6.2% in the second. It can therefore be asserted that employability increased once students had obtained the master's qualification.

Regarding the usefulness of this course for job placement, and for improving employability and professional advancement, it emerged that 12.3% of those who were employed as educators during the Master subsequently became pedagogical coordinators. This percentage rose to 33% after the acquisition of the master's degree in the case of those employed in other areas or unemployed, who subsequently found employment in the education sector. The direct opinion of the graduates who declared themselves satisfied with their decision to take the Master corroborated the data presented here. Indeed, 24.9% of them believed that the Master was determinant; 38.5% supposed that in any case it contributed significantly to obtaining a job in the field of education. In this sense, 74.4% of the respondents already employed believed that the Master had played an important role (or could play one) in improving their employability: consequently, 84.3% would recommend it.

6. Conclusions

Within the framework of ECEC, in-service training of educational staff is effective only if it leads to an increase in the general wellbeing of the children, the educators themselves, and the children's parents, thanks to an improvement in the educational activity of all the staff operating in ECEC services. Therefore, this cannot be training imposed top-down, therefore characterized by a vertical transmission of information and procedures; on the contrary, professional training must be bottom-up, involving all the

subjects in the selected context according to the Action Research model, in order to generate participatory learning processes (Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2015).

In-service training must be scheduled starting from an analysis of the needs expressed by educators and organized by the pedagogical coordinator (Oberhuemer, Schryer & Neuman, 2010). In this way, thanks to the proactive presence of the coordinator, all the subjects involved in education in various ways can enjoy moments of both individual and collegial reflection, which positively impact several levels of the educational work: namely, educational planning, observation, documentation, verification, relations with the families, continuity in education; timescales and settings, etc. In-service training can also take the form of an in-depth analysis of a certain topic (e.g. reading, art, drama, science, etc.) (Catarsi & Fortunati, 2004). Indeed, the role of the pedagogical coordinator is particularly relevant in investigating central aspects of children's development and growth, in order to allow educational staff to gain awareness of the outcomes of scientific research, thereby promoting a fruitful connection between theory and practice.

Finally and more specifically, as regards the relationship between employability, training, and adult education, we have seen how the Master in Pedagogical Coordination represents a significant opportunity for students to not only strengthen their ECEC knowledge and skills, but also – in concrete terms – to enhance their professional profile, their employment position, and improve their employability. In fact, in this regard, as detailed in the previous paragraph, the research conducted highlighted that, after taking the Master, the percentage of unemployed students had decreased significantly. In parallel, it also emerged that the percentage of those who started working as pedagogical coordinators had considerably increased after obtaining the master's degree. The same applied to those students who, after the Master, found work as educators: their percentage had increased as well. Once more, what emerges is the close link between strengthening one's own skills and knowledge, through ongoing training opportunities – such as those represented by the Master in Pedagogical Coordination – and effective improvement of one's employment position and one's *palatability* in the labour market.

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