

Working with the Educators of the Centres for Children and Families of Modena on their Accessibility or all Families. An Action-Training Research

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a Research-Training project carried out within the Centres for Children and Families (CBF) of the Municipality of Modena. The study focuses on accessibility as a means to engage all families, particularly the most vulnerable ones. Numerous EU Recommendations and the integrated Italian system itself highlight this aspect, as essential for improving the quality of ECEC services, reducing inequalities from early childhood. The professionalisation of educators emerges as a key tool for achieving the goal of welcoming both children and adults, while also promoting the creation of a social network.

Keywords: 0-6 Italian integrated system, Centres for Children and Families (CCFs), Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), multivocality, integrated approach.

Abstract

Questo articolo presenta i risultati di un progetto di Ricerca-Formazione condotto all'interno dei Centri per Bambini e Famiglie (CBF) del Comune di Modena. Lo studio si concentra sull'accessibilità come mezzo per coinvolgere tutte le famiglie, in particolare quelle più vulnerabili. Numerose Raccomandazioni UE e lo stesso sistema integrato italiano sottolineano tale aspetto come essenziale per migliorare la qualità dei servizi ECEC e ridurre le disuguaglianze, fin dalla prima infanzia. La professionalizzazione degli educatori emerge come strumento fondamentale per raggiungere l'obiettivo di accogliere bambini e adulti, promuovendo al contempo la creazione della rete sociale.

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Parole chiave: sistema integrato 0-6, Centri per Bambini e Famiglie (CBF), Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), multivocalità, approccio integrato.

1. *Introduction*

This article illustrates a research project carried out by the ECEC Research Group of the Department of Education Studies of the University of Bologna. The project aimed to enhance the accessibility and inclusiveness of integrated early childhood services, by supporting professionals in reflecting on the evolving needs of families and involving them in the implementation of changes introduced by the 0-6 Italian integrated education and care system (see national Law 107/2015, and Legislative Decree 65/2017). This reform was designed to overcome the historically split system in Italy, which has long separated ECEC services for children aged 0-3 from those for the age range 3-6. In recent years, policy discourse has increasingly recognised the value of Early Childhood Education and Care services in reducing inequalities, with evidence pointing to their short, medium, and long-term benefits (European Commission, 2011). Research demonstrates that quality early childhood education and care particularly benefit children from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds (EACEA, 2009).

It is important to consider these findings alongside the updated Barcelona Objectives (Council Recommendation, 2022), which aims that by 2030, at least 45% of children should attend early childhood services, with 96% enrolled in pre-primary schools (*scuole dell'infanzia*). While Italy has consistently met the target for pre-primary school attendance, the participation rate in early childhood services varies significantly across Regions – from targets already reached in some northern areas to as low as 17% in parts of the South (ISTAT, 2020). This disparity reflects socio-economic factors, such as family background, parental education, and income, highlighting an imbalance that contradicts objectives to face educational poverty and social disadvantage from the earliest years.

Within this framework, the CCFs therefore assume a pivotal role. Alongside conventional services such as pre-primary school, they serve as low-threshold community-based services complementing traditional early childhood offerings, particularly for vulnerable families. Earlier research (the so-called *Insieme* Project, 2014-2015) underscored their importance in reinforcing parenting and family life, particularly where access to other services is limited or undesired, while still aspiring

to provide children with quality educational experiences. The research presented here, conducted from September 2022 to summer 2024, follows a participatory Action-Training methodology (Asquini, 2018; Balduzzi, Lazzari, in Asquini, Ed., 2018). This approach fosters moments of professional reflection (Schön, 1983), bringing to light educators' representations and enabling co-construction of pathways for change. Recognising a shared "problematic" situation, the pedagogical leader and educators of the integrative services collaboratively aimed to transform accessibility and comprehensibility of the services for all families. The decision to employ action-training research was made collectively by the professional group, deemed methodologically appropriate as it integrates dialogue, training, and practical action, empowering professionals and enhancing their professionalism, while impacting educational contexts.

2. The Italian integrated system of education and instruction: A space for integrative services

National Law 107/2015 and the subsequent Legislative Decree 65/2017 established the integrated system of education and instruction, from birth to six years of age⁴. This system aims to overcome the *split* system – namely, the separation between the 0-3 and 3-6 age segments – by bringing it under the Ministry of Education. The declared objective of this reform is to guarantee all children fair and democratic access to quality services and pre-primary schools, thereby making the rights and needs of every child enforceable and meet, and contributing to their overall development and educational and personal success. In constructing the integrated system – brought to completion with the publication of the national *Pedagogical Guidelines* (MI, 2021) – other organisational formats have been added alongside traditional services such as nurseries (*nidi d'infanzia*). These are referred to as "integrative" services because they enhance children's opportunities for socialisation and education through quality initiatives that complement or supplement traditional services. Integrative services share with traditional services the profes-

⁴In Italian, "*Sistema Integrato di Educazione e di Istruzione dalla nascita sino a sei anni*" (see <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:decreto.legislativo:2017-04-13;65!vig>, last access: 20.04.25).

sionals of the staff: educators, teachers and pedagogical coordinators (SEEPRO3, 2024).

CCFs (now more broadly termed *Centres for Children and Families*) spread across Italy from the late 1980s (Anolli, Mantovani, in Bondioli, Mantovani, Eds., 1987) and have gained renewed value with the development of the Integrated System of Education and Instruction. They are seen as opportunities to foster family relationships, as they involve the simultaneous presence of the child, a key adult figure, and an educator – ensuring a low-threshold access model. Their unique feature is this triadic presence, designed to support parenting by “normalising” it (Geens, Vandebroek, 2014), and to create networks among families who can socialise and share doubts, practices, and experiences. These centres often do not require any payment (or only a symbolic fee), and access may simply involve booking by phone or email—thus making them accessible even to the most vulnerable families.

Since their inception, CCFs have become widely established in Italy, with some experiences recognised for their educational value and quality. Their existence is often tied to that of nurseries, with which they may share spaces or planning efforts. The last study on their presence and organisation was the 2015 *Insieme* research, which mapped over 400 Italian centres, from North to South. This study highlighted the extreme diversity and difficulty of defining these centres clearly, while also highlighting the vibrancy of their educational proposals and organisational models. As Musatti states (2015), the heterogeneity that distinguishes integrative services with respect to both their organization and the educational provisions depends on the specific history of these experiences, which, being strongly linked to the territories in which they developed, initially sought to respond to needs emerging at the local level. In this sense, some of them, for example, provided foster care activities for children aged 0-3 years who do not attend traditional services, while others only provided educational proposals aimed at children and parents in the broader 0-6 years range. Musatti (*Ibidem*) thus points out that integrative services tend overall to provide actions addressed to prevent and support parenting and to welcome and support children and adults in their socialisation.

3. *Quality of Educational Provision: A Professional Learning Community*

The Italian integrated system places quality at the centre of its discourse, as it is essential that services and schools meet the educational

and care needs of every child and do not merely serve as facilities for reconciling work and family life. With the *Quality Framework* (Eurydice, 2014), UE adopted a shared reflective tool that defines several key pillars for recognising service quality, introducing the concept of a holistic approach to care and education, with a necessary involvement of families and local communities. Among the five core elements (*accessibility, governance and funding, monitoring and evaluation, curriculum*), the professionalism of educators stands out. This requires the presence of staff with appropriate initial training and opportunities for ongoing professional development⁵.

The professional development of staff is a key component that deserves dedicated attention. It aims to enhance the well-being and needs of children, which demand specific and in-depth knowledge – pedagogical, educational, and social. Starting from a solid initial training, in-service training is considered essential. The OECD (2018) identifies it as a predictor of the quality of relationships between professionals and children, linking it to children's development and learning. The importance of deep dialogue and situated, self-reflective training is therefore emphasised.

One particularly interesting aspect is the emphasis on “professional learning communities”, which frames educational work as a collegial effort. This requires time and space to construct a shared vocabulary and to negotiate common values and practices. This document, which encourages collaboration between services and universities, represents an essential starting point for the ongoing reflection within the CBGs managed by the Municipality of Modena. Offering quality, welcoming, and accessible services requires a deep level of shared understanding within the reference community - regarding both their own needs and those of the families and children involved - as well as agreement on the foundational values of their services and a jointly developed and continually reviewed strategy.

4. *Supporting Families*

Beyond professional training, supporting families themselves is essential. Milani (2018) stresses the importance of mobilising the educa-

⁵ For a deeper understanding of the initial and in-service training of childcare and school professionals, see the report *SEEPRO3* (2024) (https://www.seeepro.eu/Seiten_English/Home_engl.htm, last access: 20.04.25).

tional potential of parents, enabling them to recognise and nurture their children's capabilities. The Italian *Pedagogical Guidelines* (MI, 2021) define the family and social environment as a «formative ecosystem» (*Ibidem, passim*), in which *macro*, *meso*, and *micro* levels interact dynamically (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Harmonising these levels is crucial for holistic child development. In this complex reality, cultural diversity is often under-recognised; quality services have the role of understanding, welcoming, valuing, and supporting diverse cultural perspectives, particularly for those from vulnerable situations.

The concept of *co-education*, as articulated by Rayna (2014), involves parents and educators educating together without judgement or dominance of one perspective, despite challenges. In Italy, Bove's (2020) notion of *multivocality* conveys this as a chorus of voices, all deserving to be heard even if not fully understood. «No one educates alone; to educate their children, parents need to be part of an educational community that also cares for their own learning needs» (Serbati, Milani, 2013, p. 83, translation by the Authors). These words aptly describe the role of CCFs, which care not only for children but also for adults and their expressed or unspoken needs. In our observational experience, parents often asked educators about their child's (physiological, physical, cognitive, emotional) development, or requested suggestions for activities to do at home. Sometimes educators offered alternative approaches to interaction, providing concrete examples and acting as "models". On other occasions, grandmothers supported mothers by playing with children, giving them a moment to rest. We also observed that adults formed relationships beyond the Centre itself – organising small birthday parties or creating online groups to stay in touch.

5. *The Research*

In light of the reflections developed in the previous sections, we now turn to the research project started in the Municipality of Modena in June 2022. The request came from the educational coordinator of the integrative services, who asked for a dedicated time and space for reflection on the CCFs. The main aim is to support a revision of the Centres' aims considering the new needs of families. The shared decision was to adopt an action-research approach, which involves recursive use of training sessions – involving the CCFs practitioners – and interventions in the field, with the purpose of giving voice to and listening to the representations of the educational staff.

5.1 *Methodology and Objectives*

The Research-Training project is structured around iterative cycles of reflection, training, and micro-experimentation. It is targeted at education professionals, with the aim of encouraging change within their workplaces. This is achieved through shared reflection, the emergence of individual and collective representations, and the negotiation of any transformative actions to be implemented, supported by the researchers.

A key feature of this approach is that the initial agreement provides for the ongoing revision of the steps taken, so that the process can be as closely aligned as possible with the professionals' evolving needs. The ECEC research group and the working group made up of educators, pedagogical coordinators, and the educational coordinator focused on an initial goal: to reflect on how to make the CCFs more accessible and more responsive to families' (new) needs – especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Starting from this central question, the reflection extended to:

- how the services are structured, identifying what facilitates or hinders readability and accessibility;
- what elements define CCFs as accessible quality services;
- what training needs the staff identify as necessary to meet families' needs.

There was also discussion about family participation, to understand why families who attend these services choose to attend them and what factors facilitate their involvement. Based on these goals, the project was structured into the following phases:

1. exploratory phase – to define the project;
2. observational-narrative phase – field access through focus groups, observations, and interviews;
3. analytical phase – preliminary analysis of the data collected and feedback to the group, making educators' needs explicit;
4. operational phase – reflection on values and spaces, with initial changes planned for the September reopening;
5. training – on the integrated system and other initiatives involving children and families, to consider alternative services and the strategies they employ to support vulnerable families;
6. project work development phase – aimed at implementing micro-experimentations.

The group planned several changes to be implemented in their respective services, based on the reflections shared in the previous phases. The project also included further involvement of parents to understand their perceptions and experiences related to attending the Centres, but it was not possible to implement this last research action due to organizational problems.

5.2 *The Context*

The research focuses on the four CCFs managed by the Municipality of Modena: “Polo Barchetta”, “Polo Triva”, “Strapapera”, and “Momo”. These Centres welcome children aged 0 to 6 along with their adult caregivers. They are located in different districts of the city, which – as is often the case in medium to large urban centres – display highly varied urban, residential, and demographic characteristics.

A survey was designed and distributed to each service, aiming to highlight local features and the characteristics of the families who live in and attend the services under investigation. A key finding was that the “Momo” and “Strapapera Centres” have high participation from non-Italian-speaking families. At “Polo Barchetta”, many grandparents are present, while “Polo Triva” attracts a diverse user base, not only from the immediate neighbourhood but also from nearby districts and towns.

The Centres offer different opening times and activities to respond to the needs of various age groups. Overall, they provide:

- groups for infants aged 0-12 months, focusing on parental support through dialogue-based activities, particularly for mothers, enabling them to share questions and curiosities (e.g., breastfeeding, sleep, weaning), and offering early-age experiences;
- groups for 1-3 year-olds, offering sensory and manipulative stimulation through small, play-based, heuristic and creative workshops;
- activities for children aged 0-6, mostly held during the week;
- groups for 3-6-year-olds, often held on Saturday mornings and some afternoons.

The CCFs have positively responded to the need for spaces outside pre-primary schools by adapting their offerings and adding initiatives that enable further opportunities for socialisation and recreation. As

children grow, the activities tend to focus more on the child and less on the adult, although adults still participate and reflect alongside them. Reception methods also differ. In some Centres, the coffee break is considered the most important moment of the day, offering a relaxed setting for discussing educational issues and fostering relationships among families. Educators report that these moments strengthen adult support networks – an important goal, especially for new parents. In other Centres, the snack break is more individualised, or no formal shared time is provided. This diversity in formats encourages families to attend multiple Centres, depending on which one best meets their specific needs.

All CCFs are free of charge, although families may contribute a small donation for coffee or snacks, as a symbolic gesture. Access is by reservation only (via phone or email), which allows staff to manage participant numbers – essential both for planning and for safety and space limitations. If a reservation is cancelled, the service must be notified so another family on the waiting list may take the available slot. Despite being open every weekday and having decent capacity (around 20 families), educators report they cannot accommodate all interested families, and there are always around 10-15 families excluded.

There are differences in the adults who accompany children: in the mornings, mothers, grandparents, and babysitters are more common, while in the afternoons and Saturdays, more fathers are present. The typical daily structure, despite differences in specific activities, is generally consistent: it begins with welcoming the adult-child pair and free play, followed by a greeting song and a more structured activity, then a snack (where provided), and a closing song or farewell. Adults and children are free to leave at any time; they are not required to stay for the full session. Where snacks are offered, children eat what their parents bring, and adults are offered coffee, tea, and biscuits. The setup of the spaces varies by venue. Some Centres have clearly divided rooms for symbolic play, heuristic play, and multifunctional use. Others have a single open space with activity zones marked out by carpets and tables. One key area of reflection with educators was how to rethink the layout of spaces to make them more welcoming and legible for all families.

6. Analysis of Preliminary Data

The research, which ended in 2024, produced a very significant amount of data (observation protocols, interviews, focus groups, reports of wor-

king group discussions, project work.), the analysis of which opens several avenues for further study. Here we present the analysis of the in-depth interviews and of the focus groups realized in the first phase of the research. The interviews aimed to uncover the training needs of the educators (often involved in non-specific training), while the focus groups were intended to stimulate reflection on the core values underpinning their educational work, as perceived by both educators and pedagogical coordinators.

6.1. *Perceived Needs*

Surveying the training needs of educators was considered an important and necessary step because, in previous years, all their in-service training had always been conducted together with staff from traditional services and schools. The issues analysed in the past, therefore, had been treated from the perspective of operators who work exclusively with children and only cross paths with adults during drop-off and pick-up times at the beginning and end of the school day. Instead, the activated research pathway had CCFs as its sole target audience and for educators represented an important reflection and learning tool dedicated only to them and the specific needs of their services. To allow each professional to fully express what they perceived as their priority needs, also in relation to their professional background and previous training experiences, we chose to use in-depth interviewing for the training needs survey.

A question route was used during the interviews, which was adapted flexibly to suit the flow of conversation and to incorporate the insights shared by the educators. The aim was to build shared knowledge through relational dialogue. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically, resulting in the identification of three main thematic strands, around which various topics were grouped:

1) *organisation of the service* – Topics raised included the free nature of participation, opening hours, the requirement for advance booking, and the need for contact with other local community services.

2) *professional identity* – Educators expressed awareness of the need for a specific professional role. Right from the start, they framed their work in terms of supporting parenting – not only the adult-child relationship, but also peer-to-peer adult relationships – building social networks that require flexible support.

3) *training* – Seen as a tool that enables appropriate and respectful responses to family needs. Training should be in line with the Centre's history and identity while remaining open to innovation.

The *How to Recruit* document (2020) stated that only a clear and shared vision of a service's core values allow quality, accessible, and inclusive provision. The analysis of these training needs was the focus of a subsequent focus group, where it became evident that to respond to needs, it is crucial to dwell with service identity and first negotiate and clarify the foundational values of the service.

6.2. *Values*

Based on an analysis of the educators' own representations of their educational role and the nature of the services they provide, a first reflective activity was introduced. It aimed to make explicit those core values they considered fundamental. Educators, pedagogical coordinators, and educational manager worked to deeply reflect, both personally and collectively, about values. At the end, the core values, collectively selected and negotiated, were:

- (V1, 2, 3) – *welcoming*, interpreted in different ways: to foster well-being, to ensure everyone feels recognised, and to listen to emerging needs;
- (V13) – *suspension of judgement*, meeting others without assumptions about “right” or “wrong” parenting;
- (V14) – *high-quality time*, dedicated to adult-child bonding, interactions between families, and exchanges with educators;
- (V7) – *free access*, ensuring the service is genuinely open and welcoming to all, including considering summer provision.

Selecting a few collective values from among the many expressed by individuals has been an important task of consideration and negotiation: the choice between one value and another has required lengthy discussion time among educators. The values excluded from the selection represents an interesting pool of data to understand, in addition to the datum of common identity represented by the collective values, also the nuances of the different identities that this collective constitutes.

The debate on accepted and not selected values led several educators to ask what the true focus of the CCFs really is. Despite a strong emphasis on activities and tailoring the offer to family needs, the group wondered: *Is there truly a concrete and specific difference compared to traditional services? Are we really engaging the adults and working with them to reach the children?* The unique feature of the CCFs – the triadic

relationship (*adult-adult-child*) – emerged clearly through this reflection. One educator's question – *Are the CCFs for adults or for children?* – became a point of discussion and was explored in subsequent activities.

Conclusion

This article has presented the outcomes of a two-year action-training project carried out across four CCFs in Modena. Initial exploratory activities revealed both the professional needs of educators and the core values guiding their work. The research engaged educators in re-evaluating the physical and temporal structures of their services from the perspective of the families. The decision to involve families in focus groups enabled the integration of professionals' perspectives with those of the families, highlighting areas of convergence that were subsequently considered in the following steps.

Group discussions identified key challenges and preferred solutions, which were further addressed in training sessions focused on the Italian integrated educational system and the low-threshold interventions developed by *Save the Children* for vulnerable families. The professionals came to understand that CCFs are effective in supporting families, provided that the activities offered are accessible and comprehensible, particularly for families experiencing vulnerability.

In the final phase, micro-experiments were conducted based on earlier insights: they organised afternoon openings, without the need for registration or parties in a school garden open to all the families. While educators expressed a clear understanding of their roles and the importance of adult participation, questions remained about how best to achieve inclusive engagement. These tensions reinvigorated reflection on whether CCFs should be primarily viewed as spaces for children or for adults, and led to the development of more holistic, family-oriented strategies. Inspired by *Save the Children's* community-based outreach, the educators proposed a renewed focus on neighbourhood networking – reaffirming the CCFs' mission as *bridges* between educational provision and social inclusion.

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