

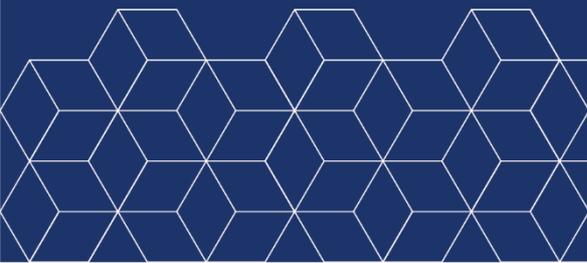
WORKING PAPER

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Early Childhood Education and Care in Italy: investments and effects of the 0-6 years education system

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ABSTRACT

Early Childhood Education and Care in Italy: investments and effects of the 0-6 years education system

The 2002 Barcelona European Council strategy envisaged reaching 33% coverage of early childhood education services (0-3 years) by 2010. In Italy, the public social spending for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) remains below the expected levels and today, with the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic, education and care could be provided at different qualitative and quantitative levels more than the past.

After an in-depth study on the relationship between investments in early childhood education services and their social return, the empirical analysis will be lead on the effects, in Italy, of the "Integrated education and training system from 0 to 6 years" (L. 65/2017) and on the use of the "National Fund for the integrated education and training system". An analysis of the data relating to the availability of places in socio-educational services for early childhood (MIUR, Istat and Istituto degli Innocenti), will identify the territorial areas for which it would be useful to intensify funding, by calculating the ratio between the allocation of resources of the fund with respect to the estimated needs (% excluding the 0-2-year range). In the final part, the measure in support of families and children during Covid-19 pandemic will be also analysed as well as some mention to the National Resilience and Recovery Plan funding and programmes.

KEYWORDS: Early childhood education, Early childhood services, Integrated Educational System, Right to education and training

JEL CODES: H52, H75, I24

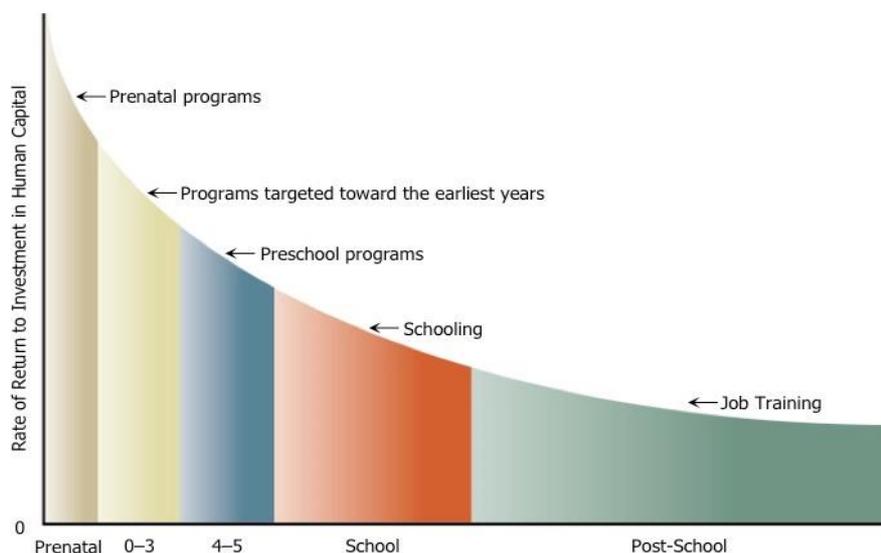
1. Reference context and theoretical framework

Early Childhood Education and Care - ECEC refers to services aimed at children in the age group 0-6 years of education and care (Van Laere and Vandebroek 2017). In the 2018 Recommendation, the European Union provides a definition of ECEC by stating¹ that

early childhood education and care means any regulated system that provides education and care for children from birth to compulsory primary school age, regardless of structure, funding, opening hours or programme content, and also includes family and day care, publicly and privately funded services and pre-school service.

Child-focused services (educational, health, social) play a key role in supporting the role of parents, particularly in the dimension of work-life balance, in promoting child development and in preventing inequalities (Tamburlini 2014; Thompson and Nelson 2001). Investments in education and primary education result in well-being and produce benefits that have been measured not only at the individual level but also for society as a whole². Investing in education and care services for children aged 0-2 years is the most effective way for a government to enrich the “human capital” (Chevalier *et al.* 2006; Heckman 2006; Esping-Andersen 2008).

Figure 1. The Hackman Curve: Return of Investment in Human Capital



Source: James Heckman - heckmanequation.org

¹ Proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems, SWD(2018)173 final <<https://bit.ly/3A4oxua>>.

² Regarding the outcomes and benefits of investments in Early Childhood Education and Care, the approach using cost-benefit analyses to quantify these values is interesting. For further discussion, see Karoly *et al.* (2005); Wolfe and Haveman (2002).

Several authors (Kilburn and Karoly 2008) reiterate that, according to human capital theory, investing in the productive capacities of individuals improves personal outcomes and these outcomes are even more relevant if the investment takes place from the earliest years of individuals' lives³. Important studies that explicitly call into question the return on investment in early childhood education, carried out for many years by Professor James Heckman⁴, evaluated interventions implemented with a socio-educational character. They demonstrated that investments in health, education and social protection in the early stages of life, starting from pregnancy, produce an economic return well above that produced by interventions in later ages because there are skills that it is essential to achieve in the earliest age (Heckman 2006; Biroli *et al.* 2018). The Heckman curve (figure 1) shows how the maximum return on investment in human capital is achieved in the earliest years of life.

Using a regression discontinuity approach, Carneiro and Ginja (2014), similarly found sizeable and persistent long-run benefits from USA “Head Start” programme⁵ participation. With a similar focus on persistence, the re-examination of evidence on the “Perry Preschool Project” by Heckman *et al.* (2013) distinguished between positive cognitive effects that faded and positive noncognitive effects that persisted. These latter long-run impacts led to improved economic outcomes and lower incidence of criminal behaviour such that Heckman *et al.* (2013) found the measured annualized rate of return to the Perry Preschool investment as 6–10 percent. Other positive effects that can be measured in the long term are the reduced reliance on the welfare system, which also translates into greater autonomy (Eurochild 2015; Barnett 2011; Heckman 2006). Over the years, studies have increased, spreading also across Europe, and they confirmed the thesis that correlates increased accessibility and frequency of education and care services for children 0-2 years old with positive impacts on skill development and educational outcomes (Del Boca and Pasqua 2010; Brilli *et al.* 2011).

Moreover, it has been shown that the initial growth objectives underlying investment in ECEC services fade away if no further investment follows as the individual grows (Currie and Thomas 1999). Therefore, it remains essential to continue to invest in a system that provides lifelong education, training and care, so that what is sown in early childhood produces the expected long-term benefits.

³ “Human capital theory suggests that investments in individuals' productive capacities have the potential to improve individual outcomes and that these investments might produce the greatest payoffs when made early in individuals' lives” (Kilburn and Karoly 2008).

⁴ In recent years, Nobel Prize winner J. Heckman has worked with the Emilia-Romagna Region to investigate the long-term benefits of early childhood investments, both in economic terms and in terms of community well-being. See Biroli *et al.* (2018) <<https://www.frchildren.org/it>>.

⁵ Head Start and Early Head Start programs are free, federally funded programs designed to promote school readiness for children from low-income families. Early Head Start serves pregnant women and families with children under age. Head Start programs serve children between 3 and 5 years old.

2. EU policies: Early Childhood Education and Care and the Child Guarantee

The European Union is at the forefront of this process of investment in early childhood services and has demonstrated this through numerous Commission Communications⁶ and Recommendations⁷, in particular in the *Investing in children* 2013 Recommendation, which calls on the Member States to develop multidimensional policies and interventions to combat the exclusion of disadvantaged children and promote their well-being⁸, by relaunching the achievement of the 2002 Barcelona Conference⁹ targets of 33% coverage for kindergartens and at least 90% coverage for pre-schools, targets that were intended to be reached by 2010 but which still have not been reached in some EU countries¹⁰ (figure 2). The effort required from Member States is to improve access to high quality ECEC systems in terms of affordability and inclusiveness, as well as to ensure curricula for the 0-2 age group that consider the specific needs and potential of each child, including those with special needs or in a vulnerable or disadvantaged situation (European Council Recommendation 2019).

The *EU Pillar of Social Rights*, adopted in 2017, states that “children have the right to affordable and good quality early childhood education and care”¹¹. The EU Pillar has recently been implemented by the *Action Plan*¹² adopted at the Porto Summit (7-8 May 2021), with the renewed “Porto Agenda 2030” that foresees the adoption of numerous measures by the Commission to achieve the objectives set by 2030 (*Porto Social Commitment*) and make the social dimension of the European Union effective. The goals of the Porto Agenda are, of course, intertwined with the 2015 *UN Sustainable*

⁶ See, for example, Communication from the European Commission (2017a). For further discussion see also European Political Strategy Centre (2017) <<https://bit.ly/3AgyTHc>>.

⁷ European Commission Recommendation (2013), European Commission (2014) <<https://bit.ly/3h5uLIQ>>; European Council Recommendation (2019).

⁸ European Commission Recommendation (2013), on investing in children also stresses the importance of a rights-based approach, setting out as one of its horizontal principles that Member States should “address child poverty and social exclusion from a children's rights approach, in particular by referring to the relevant provisions of the Treaty on European Union, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, making sure that these rights are respected, protected and fulfilled” <<https://bit.ly/366L1wB>>.

⁹ See Article n. 32 of the Presidency Conclusions of the Barcelona European Council, 15 and 16 March 2002: “Member States should remove disincentives to female labour force participation and strive to provide, by 2010, in accordance with the patterns of care provision, childcare for at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age.” The Barcelona targets still suffer from a welfarist approach directed at mothers rather than an encouragement of the pedagogical role aimed at children: the development of early childhood services was seen not as an end in itself, but as the means to promote female employment.

¹⁰ Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the development of childcare facilities for young children with a view to increase female labour participation, strike a work-life balance for working parents and bring about sustainable and inclusive growth in Europe (the *Barcelona objectives*), European Commission (2018).

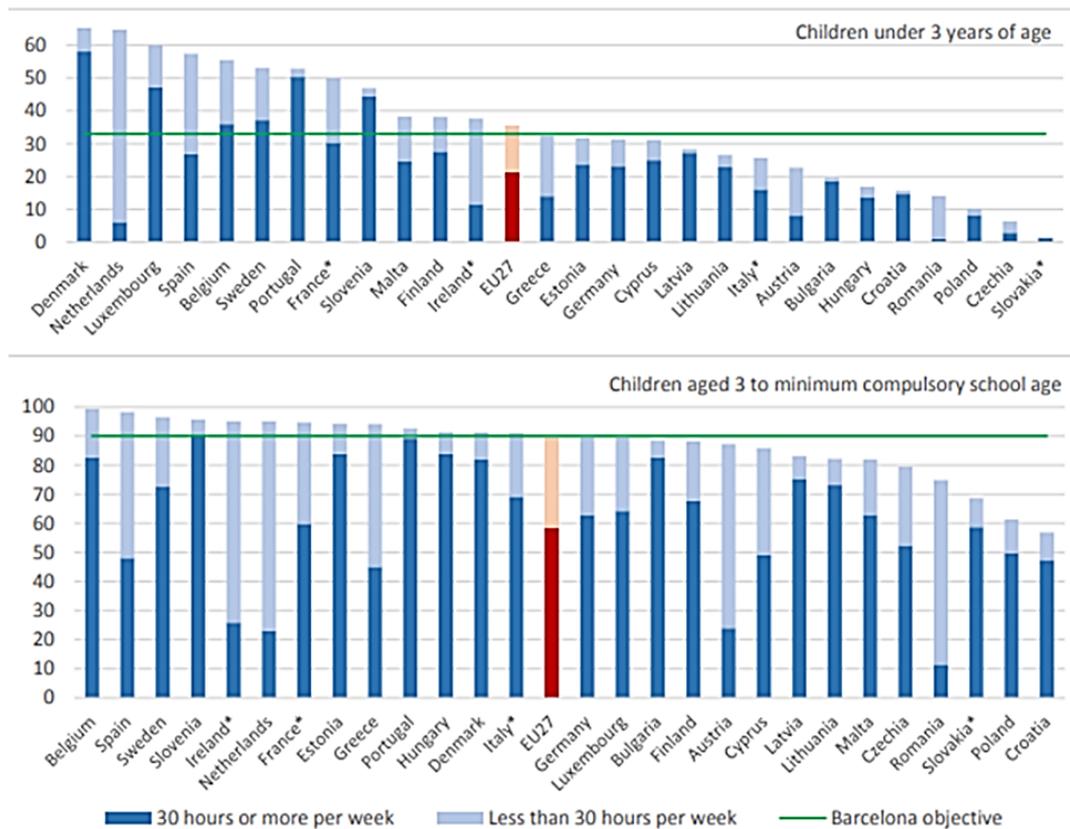
¹¹ “(a) Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality. Children have the right to protection from poverty. (b) Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities”, The European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission 2017b), Chapter III: Social protection and inclusion, Principle n. 11: Childcare and support to children: <<https://bit.ly/2UL7q03>>; <<https://bit.ly/364Wmxk>>.

¹² The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan: <<https://bit.ly/363ZVnp>>.

*Development Goals - SDGs*¹³, in particular in goal 4.2 which stipulates that by 2030 “all boys and girls should have access to quality early childhood services, care and education so that they are ready for primary education¹⁴”.

Furthermore recently, the Commission communication on the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 announced a proposal for the revision of the Barcelona objectives¹⁵ to foster upward convergence and will propose the new targets in 2022. A subsequent Council resolution set a European target of 96% of participation in education for the 3-6 age group.

Figure 2. Percentage of children in formal early childhood education and care, 2018 or 2019 (latest data)



Source: Eurostat [ilc_caindformal]

The EU's approach is “right based”, so it aims to recognise children's rights and is based on international law sources such as the 2009 *European Charter of Fundamental Rights* and the 1989 *UN Convention on Children*, signed by all member states. Recently, greater emphasis has been placed on

¹³ United Nations, 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.

¹⁴ In particular for objective 4.2 “By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education”, the following indicators are identified: 4.2.1 Proportion of children under 5 years of age who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being, by sex; 4.2.2 Participation rate in organised learning (one year before the official primary entry age), by sex <<https://bit.ly/3hqnLPs>>.

¹⁵ See <<https://bit.ly/3y985a8>>.

combating child poverty, which is predominantly present among the SDGs of the Agenda 2030 and accentuated by the growing inequalities created by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Finally, in March 2021, the EU adopted the *EU Strategy for the Rights of the Child*¹⁶ which includes six thematic areas ranging from the fight against poverty to social and civic participation, risks and opportunities of the digital world (figure 2). At the same time, the *European Child Guarantee* (Council Recommendation (2021))¹⁷ was adopted, a programme aimed at breaking the cycle of transmission of poverty and social exclusion across generations¹⁸ by ensuring that the most vulnerable children in the European Union have access to healthcare, education, childcare, decent housing and adequate nutrition. Once more, it is well recognized that a pilot role in breaking this cycle is played by Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and healthcare systems (Hemerijck *et al.* 2016).

Figure 3. Child Guarantee: core recommendations



Source: Proposal for a Child Guarantee (2021)

Child Guarantee Scheme makes concrete suggestions for improving policies and programmes at EU member States. It focuses on access to free healthcare, free education, free childcare, decent housing, and adequate nutrition by four groups of children: children with disabilities; children in alternative care; children with a migrant background (incl. refugee children) and children living in precarious family situations.

The Council Recommendation offers Member States a guide on how to implement the Child Guarantee, while leaving each State the flexibility to design and implement the relevant measures: however, it provides for implementation, monitoring and evaluation methods, in particular through a new specific indicator on children at risk of poverty or social exclusion to be included in the *Social Scoreboard* and the appointment of a national *Child Guarantee coordinator*, with adequate resources and mandate, to effectively coordinate the implementation of the recommendation. Countries with a level of child poverty higher than the EU average will have to use at least 5% of their ESF+ resources

¹⁶ See <<https://bit.ly/2TszpBn>>.

¹⁷ See <<https://bit.ly/3AUs929>>.

¹⁸ In particular, actions are aimed at tackling child poverty. In fact, in 2019, 22.2% of children (under 18 years old) in the EU lived in households at risk of poverty or social exclusion, representing almost 18 million children in need of specific measures. For more information see <<https://bit.ly/3Ahkpad>> or <<https://bit.ly/3wdTpFg>>.

to tackle this phenomenon, including Italy, which is also one of the countries selected to launch an experimental pilot project.

3. ECEC strategy in Italy and its implementation

Ten years after the Extraordinary Plan for the development of social and educational services for early childhood, the reform “Buona scuola” (Legge n. 107/2015) foresees the integration of early childhood education and care (0-2 years children) and of nursery schools (3-6 years) in a single “integrated education and education system from birth to six years”. It will aim at offering quality services and an adequate number of structures to achieve the objectives set in 2002 by the Barcelona European Council.

In April 2017, the decree establishing the “Integrated system of education and instruction from 0 to 6 years” was issued (Decreto Legislativo n. 65/2017)¹⁹, implementing the programmes contained in the reform law on the school system (L. n. 107/2015 so-called “La buona scuola”). It contains the indications for the “multi-year plan of the integrated system”²⁰ with the creation at the Ministry of Education – ME of a National Fund of 672mIn for the three-year period 2017-2019. One of the main objectives is therefore to unify the management of crèches and preschools (aimed at children aged 0-6), under the management of the ME, guaranteeing the right to education as a fundamental public service, at a national level, especially through the strengthening of services aimed at the 0-3 age group (crèches). Until now, these services have been placed among the 'public services on individual demand', managed by the municipalities with the contribution of the users²¹ with tariffs defined by the individual municipalities. More specifically, the new legislation entrusts to a State-Regions agreement the definition of the maximum level of contribution that families must pay (art. 9), with the aim of eliminating territorial inequalities and increasing access to the early childhood education and training system that has so far negatively characterised our country. In fact, the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat 2020)²² identifies among the causes of the greatest inequality at territorial level and of the drop in enrolment in the public service the increase in the fees charged by

¹⁹ D.L. n. 65 of 13 April 2017, 'Establishment of the integrated education and training system from birth to six years, pursuant to Article 1, paragraphs 180 and 181(e) of L. n. 107 of 13 July 2015 <<https://bit.ly/3x4MTSx>>.

²⁰ Children's education services are divided into: crèches and micro-crèches for children aged between 3 and 36 months; spring sections for children aged between 24 and 36 months; nursery schools for children aged between 3 and 6 years. The integrated education system for children from 0 to 3 years old also includes supplementary services, which are divided into play areas (children from 12 to 36 months entrusted to one or more educators), children and family centres (children from the first months of life together with an accompanying adult), educational services in a home setting (children from 3 to 36 months).

²¹ The D.M. 31.12.1983, implementing L. n. 131/1983 (ex D.L. n. 55/2983) defines the types of “public services on individual demand” (rest homes, day nurseries, hostels, canteens, etc.). These services are managed by the municipalities, they do not have to be provided compulsorily, but if they are, the municipality has to determine the share exceeding its own funding in the budget resolution, to be charged to the taxpayers-users of the services. In this determination of the relative tariffs the local authorities have full discretion since for all those services defined by the Decreto Ministeriale there is no institutional obligation and therefore they do not enjoy the gratuitousness of other public services that may have been declared by national or regional laws.

²² See <<https://bit.ly/3w6FWPv>>.

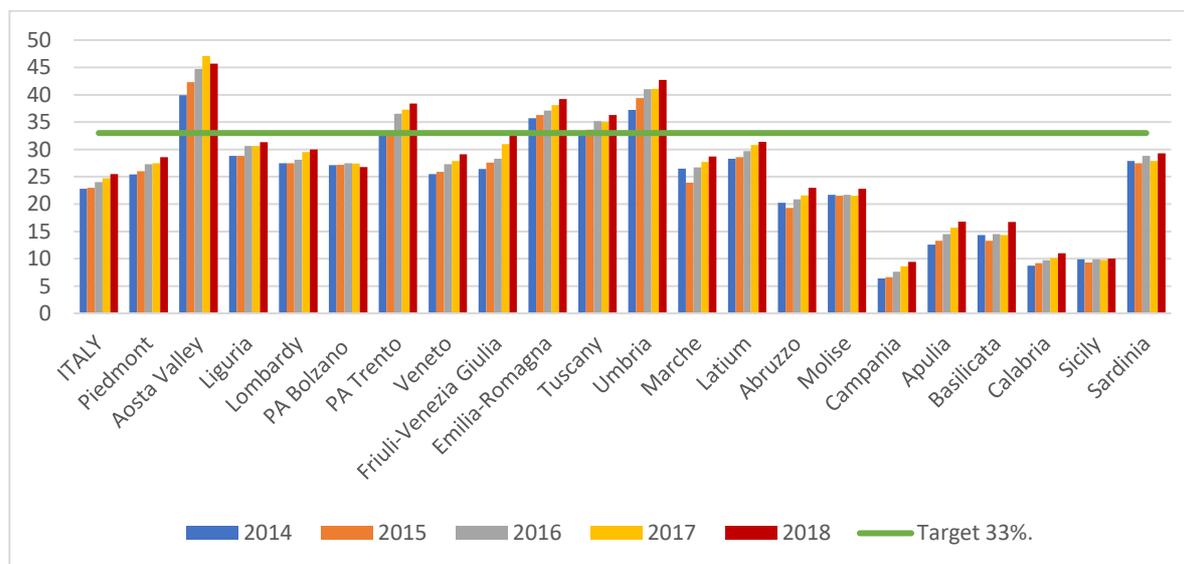
municipalities for the services offered. For this reason, in many areas, the number of enrolments in municipal crèches is so low as to lead to the closure of public facilities, creating a boomerang effect on the already difficult income and employment situation of families.

The general objectives (art. 4) to be pursued through the “Multiannual National Action Plan” are expressed in a number of points, including: to reach 33% coverage of the population under 3 years of age using educational services; to have a presence of crèches in at least 75% of the municipalities; to achieve the diffusion and generalisation²³ of quality services for the 3-6 years age group throughout the territory.

In the Gazzetta Ufficiale of 25 January 2018, the resolution of the Council of Ministers containing the *Multiannual National Action Plan for the promotion of the Integrated System*²⁴, which recalls the generic aims of art. 12 above, was published.

In general, in the last five years, there has been a general increase in the number of children enrolled in the socio-educational services (figure 4), although the territorial gap remains marked, highlighting the delay of some Regions such as Campania, Apulia, Calabria, Sicily and Basilicata. Compared to the previous years, there has been a slight increase in the supply, mainly due to the public sector, which has registered about 2,000 more places; in the private sector, despite a slight increase in the number of active services, there has been a decrease of about 1,000 places.

Figure 4. Available places in public and private early childhood education services 0-2 years (% by Region)



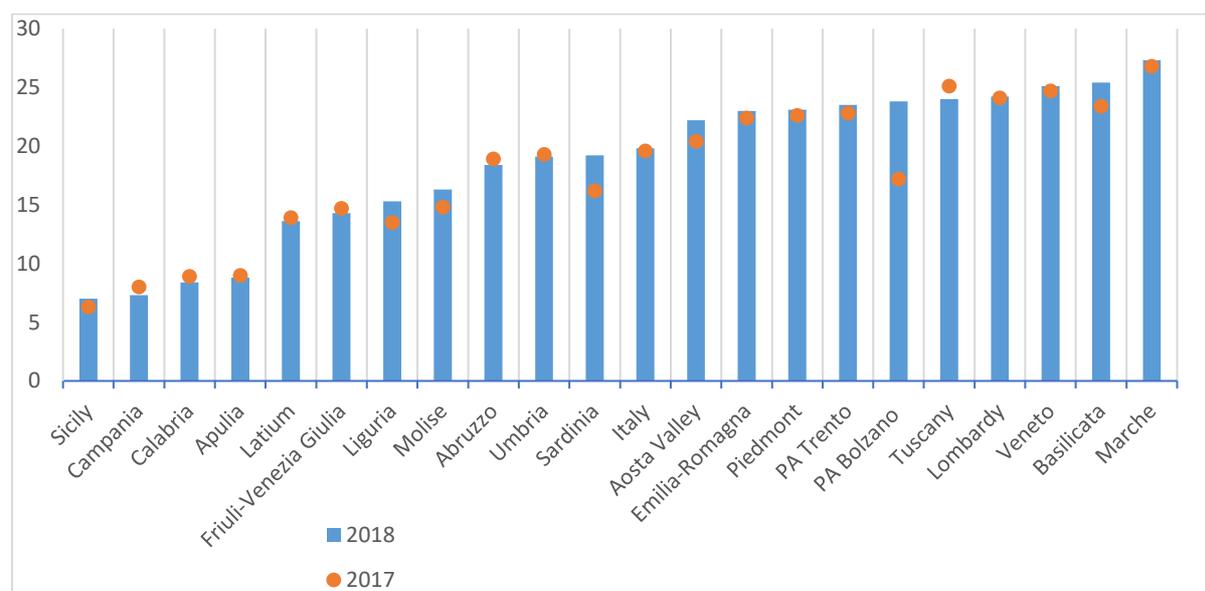
Source: our elaboration on Istat

²³ It is pursued through the direct management of state schools and the system of parity schools, as provided for by L. n. 62 of 10 March 2000.

²⁴ Deliberation of the Council of Ministers 11 December 2017, “Multiannual National Action Plan for the Promotion of the Integrated System of Education and Instruction, referred to in art. n. 8 of Decreto Legislativo n. 65 of 13 April 2017 on the Establishment of the Integrated System of Education and Instruction from Birth to Six Years” <<https://bit.ly/3hnyDxJ>>.

It is also useful to place side by side with this type of data, which concerns both public (municipal or municipally owned but managed by third parties) and purely private facilities, the data concerning the percentage of expenditure paid by users with respect to the fees of public facilities (figure 5), which varies considerably from Region to Region in terms of percentage of the overall expenditure of the service.

Figure 5. Expenditure paid by users per Region (percentage on total expenditure, years 2017 and 2018)

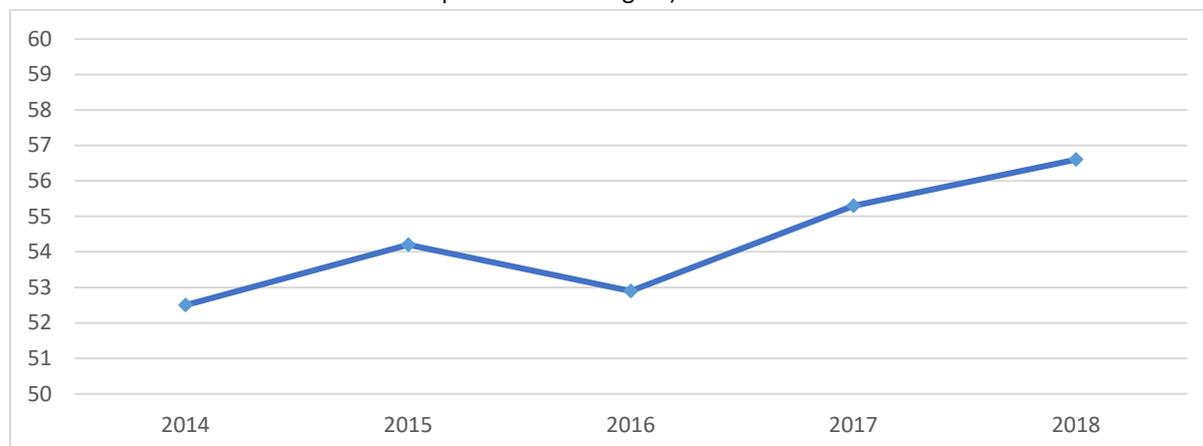


Source: Our elaboration on Istat

According to the latest available data in the 2018/19 school year (Istat 2020), 13,335 socio-educational services for children were surveyed on the national territory, of which 11,204 nurseries (to which 2,131 supplementary services for early childhood are added). There are about 355,800 places authorised to operate, of which just over half are public and 48% private. Regarding their legal status, there is a significant territorial variability: in Calabria 76% of the crèches are managed by private entities, while in Val d'Aosta 77.4% are public (Istat 2020). In publicly managed direct crèches, there are about 169,200 authorised places compared to 167,110 in 2017/2018, while the users of crèches contracted to private managers are 153,702 when in 2017/2018 there were about 154,925, suggesting a slight shift (about 1,000 units) of availability from the private to the public sector, which has increased by more than 2,000 units.

As far as the territorial spread is concerned (the target of the national plan is to reach at least 75% of the municipalities offering childcare services), there has been a slow improvement (figure 6), although since 2014 the situation has been stationary and still below the target level.

Figure 6. Spread of early childhood services, years 2014-2018 (% of municipalities that have activated services out of total municipalities in the Region)



Source: our elaboration on Istat

On the European target for the number of children enrolled in education services in the 4-6 years age bracket (minimum level set at 95% of the total 4-6 years old population²⁵), the National Plan has not insisted, since it has already been fully achieved thanks to the wide coverage of the country's nursery schools. Although it should be noted that there has been a slight decrease in the availability of places in recent years, starting in 2013 (figure 5), which should give us pause for thought, reaching the minimum threshold in 2017 (the latest available data).

Decreto Legislativo n. 65/2017²⁶, provided for the creation (art. 12-13) of the National Fund for the Integrated Education and Training System with resources amounting to 209 million euros for the year 2017, 224 million euros for the year 2018 and 239 million euros starting from the year 2019²⁷. These resources are intended to finance the Regions' planning for the purposes detailed above. Regional planning, in response to the State-Regions agreement, has shown an interest in financing crèches and kindergartens, even though it reflects the high share of privately managed services for crèches (figure 7) and the equally high share of non-state public kindergartens (figure 8) in the allocation of these resources as well. Given the high number of privately managed schools in the 'Infancy' sector, in fact, a large part of the fund went to finance these very structures instead of being a stimulus for the creation of new publicly owned centres²⁸.

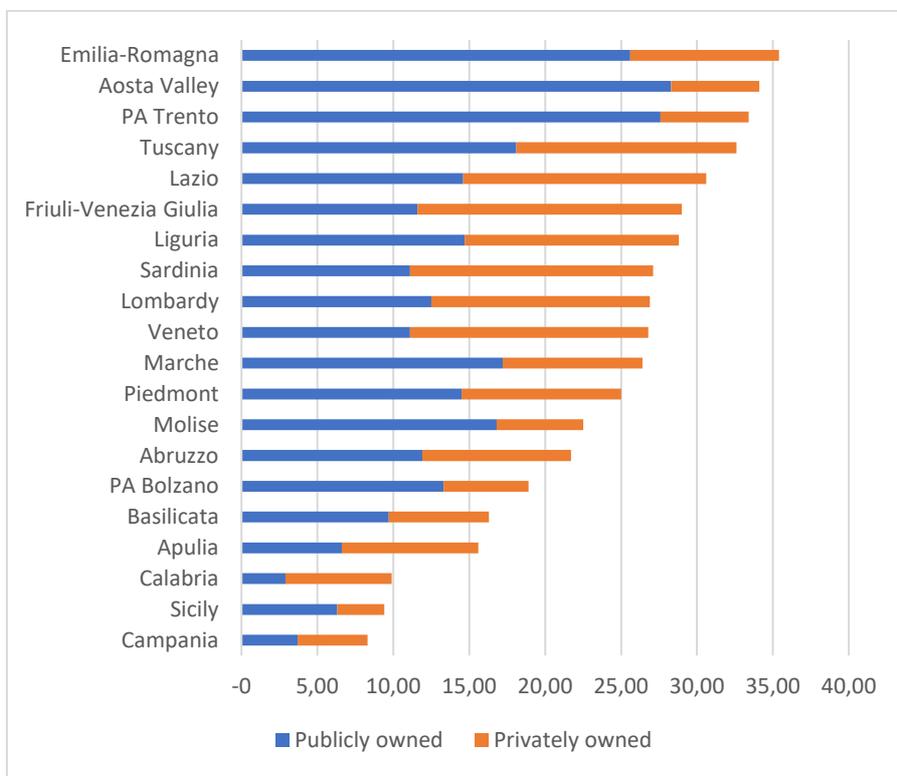
²⁵ As renewed in 2009 by the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) <<https://bit.ly/2UR4gYA>>.

²⁶ See <<https://bit.ly/3BgaD8S>>.

²⁷ The 2019 Budget Law (L. 145/2018: art. 1, para. 741) increased the Fund by € 10mln per year, starting from 2019. Therefore, from 2019, the resources of the Fund are € 249mln per year. The Action Plan has the resources of the National Fund according to the annual breakdown: <<https://bit.ly/3ra1UjP>>.

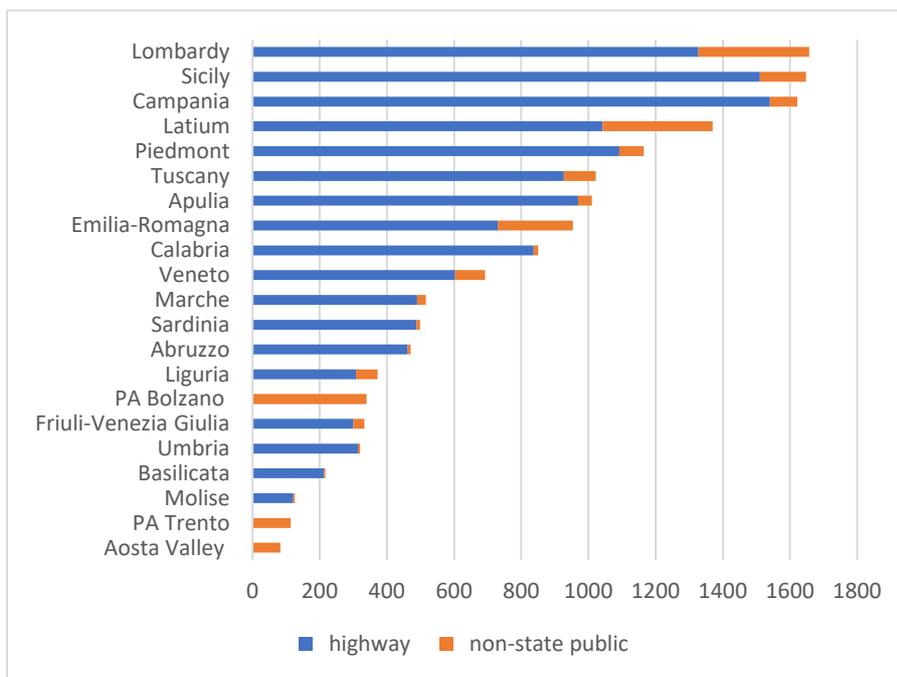
²⁸ An example of how these funds have been distributed at regional level can be found on the dedicated website of the Lombardy Region: <<https://bit.ly/3klO2BK>>. Some indications can also be found in the annex to the Resolution of the Regional Council of Apulia: <<https://bit.ly/2Uh5Zqe>>.

Figure 7. Active crèches by region and type of management (Number of places per 100 children aged 0-2 years, 2018)



Source: elaboration on Istat data

Figure 8. Public and public non-state preschools (3-6 years) by region (number, year 2019)



Source: our elaboration on Istat

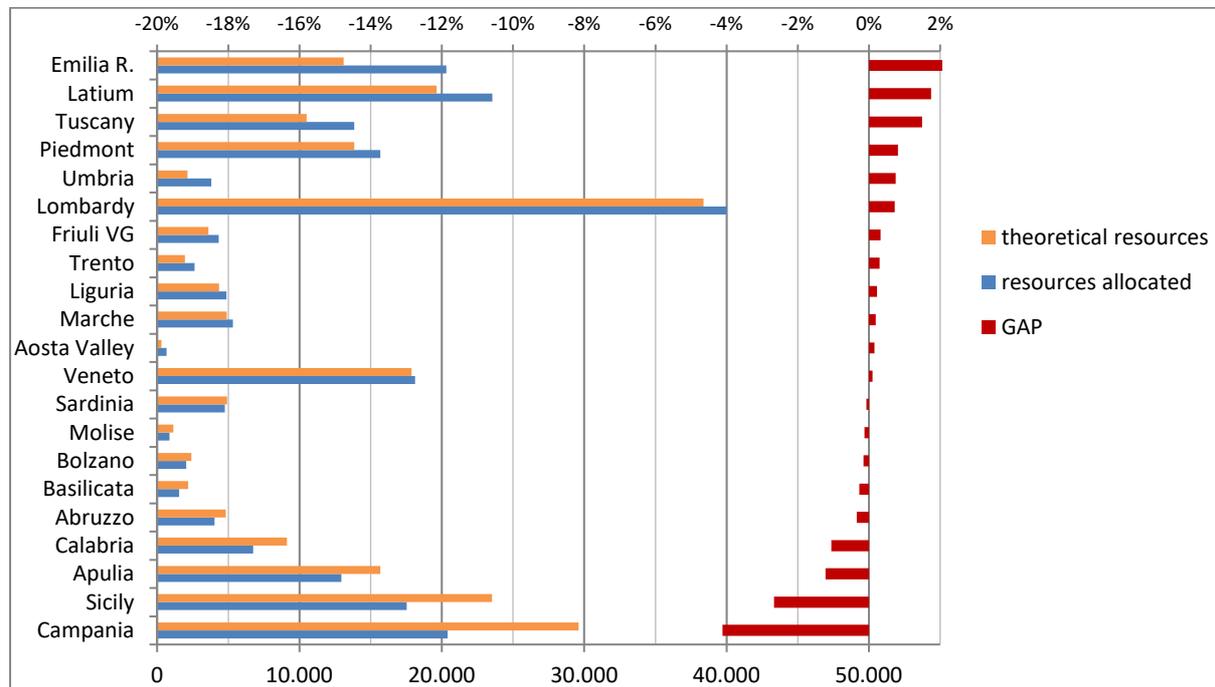
The possibility of financing the private sector has thus partly deformed the legislator's intentions, which was aimed above all at creating new public facilities to increase, on the one hand, the rate of children enrolled in the 0-2 age bracket, also by lowering the fees, and, on the other, the percentage of municipalities with early childhood education services. It would therefore be desirable for the distribution of these funds among the Regions to take greater account of the territorial inequalities mentioned above, and to support those territories where the level of service is lower. The criteria decided by the Ministerial Decrees are in fact based to a large extent (50% of the total resources) on the number of persons enrolled in educational services for 0-3 years²⁹ and not on the number of those excluded. Moreover, there is no destination constraint, since once the quotas due to the Regions have been allocated through these statistical criteria, they are not allocated to the strengthening of the specific dimension, but are left to the full discretion - ultimately to the Municipalities - as to where to divert these resources (for example, the strong need for building renovation and safety of school buildings, although they are already the subject of the three-year school building plan).

As already highlighted in previous analyses (Marucci and Rosiello 2019), it would be desirable for the distribution of these funds among the Regions to take greater account of the territorial inequality mentioned above, supporting the territories where the level of service is lower. We quantified the distance between the real needs for early childhood education services and the final resources allocated by Region in order to suggest to policy makers a rebalancing of the allocations in the wake of the corrective measure already applied in 2018, which allocated an additional share to the Regions with a deficit compared to the national average³⁰. By means of a simple simulation (figure 9), the possible regional distribution (theoretical resources) is shown, considering the regional needs understood as the number of persons excluded from the early childhood services (population 0-2 years old not covered by public nurseries and care services).

²⁹ As expressed in DM. 22.12.2017 that defined the first distribution criteria: 50% of the total 209mIn in proportion to the number of those enrolled in educational services 0-2 years old as of 31 December 2015; 40% in proportion to the population 0-6 years old; 10% in proportion to the population 3-6 years old not enrolled in the state preschool <<https://bit.ly/36O8Ppq>>.

³⁰ The second D.M. 26.10.2018 allocates the same share of 209mIn according to the criteria of the previous D.M. (on updated data) and an additional share of 15mIn to the 7 Regions with enrolments in educational services 0-2 years lower than the national average (Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Molise, Apulia and Sicily), in proportion to the number of excluded <<https://bit.ly/3eICzyb>>.

Figure 9. Breakdown of actual resources of the National Early Childhood Fund (thousands) VS estimated needs for day-care centres (% of excluded children aged 0-2)



Note: for the calculation of the needs, only the 0-2 years age group has been considered. For the Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano and Val d'Aosta, the data concerning the number of children enrolled in the spring sections are missing (slight over-estimation of needs).

Source: elaborations on 2015 Istat data and annex DM 2018

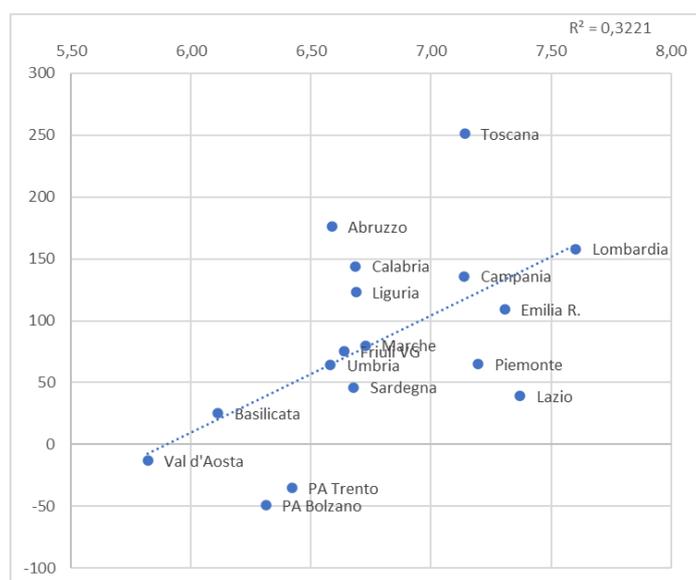
The exercise that we can carry out three years after the first funding, relating to the year 2018, is to verify whether the latest data available to us, which record the availability of facilities and places as at 31.12.2018, allow us to perceive the initial results of this funding, aware that many of the interventions implemented³¹ did not end in the same year and that they will be better recorded when the 2019 data are released. In order to do this, we calculated the difference in several variables between 2018 and the previous year and related it to the number of resources received on the basis of the regional breakdown³² (figure 9). The analysis did not produce much evidence, except for a slight correlation (of the order of 0.45-0.49 of the correlation coefficient) between the resources and the

³¹ In particular, the measures requested from the municipalities could cover the following priorities: A - new construction, building renovation, restoration and conservation, functional and aesthetic upgrading, mechanical and fire safety, energy saving and the use of buildings owned by public administrations; B - financing of operating costs, in part, of educational services for infants and kindergartens, in view of their costs and qualifications; C - measures for in-service training of educational and teaching staff and promotion of territorial pedagogical coordination <<https://bit.ly/3kxAKSI>>.

³² In particular, the amount of resources per Region (euros) was reduced on a logarithmic scale and the correlation index was calculated for several variables referring to 2018: active early childhood socio-educational services, available places, users of educational services, expenditure of municipalities for early childhood, users' cost-sharing, state and public non-state preschools, directly managed and third-party managed kindergartens (both in terms of numbers and - where present - as a percentage of the 0-2 resident population); percentage of municipalities offering educational services in the Region.

early childhood education services whose management is entrusted to third parties (those not directly managed by the municipalities. Taking away 4 *outliers* (two extremely negative - Molise and Sicily and 2 extremely positive - Veneto and Apulia), the correlation between the resources obtained and the users of the educational services managed by third parties is well represented (figure 10), even if slight ($R^2=0.32$). The component of kindergartens, rather than company kindergartens and micro-nurseries, within these services, is the one that most influences this correlation.

Figure 10. Correlation between resources allocated for 2018 (log scale - x values) and 2018-2017 variation in educational services users (0-2 aged) managed by third parties (y values)



Source: Inapp elaboration on Istat

Lately, other measures have intervened to support care and education services, especially for infrastructural needs. Such as the 2020 Budget Law³³ (Article 1, paragraph 59, Legge n. 160/2019), which established, for the financing of interventions relating to public works³⁴ for securing, restructuring, upgrading or construction of buildings owned by municipalities for use as crèches and kindergartens, a special fund in the estimate of the Ministry of the Interior called the “Fondo asili nido e scuole dell'infanzia”, with an allocation of 100 million euros for each of the years from 2021 to 2023 and 200 million euros for each of the years from 2024 to 2034. The Budget Law for 2021³⁵ (L. n.

³³ See <<https://bit.ly/2VK1p4q>>.

³⁴ On 23 March 2021, the Department for Family Policies published the notice allowing municipalities to access the first 700 million euros of the *Fondo asili nido e scuole dell'infanzia* (Fund for crèches and kindergartens) for the financing of public works related to securing, restructuring, upgrading or construction of buildings owned by municipalities for crèches, kindergartens and multifunctional centres for family services, as established by the DPCM of 30 December 2020 <<https://bit.ly/3enBgid>>.

³⁵ See <<https://bit.ly/2UM2ecy>>.

178/2020) increases these quotas to €100 million for the year 2022, €150 million for the year 2023, €200 million for the year 2024, €250 million for the year 2025 and €300 million per year as from the year 2026³⁶.

4. ECEC and the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy

The situation certainly did not improve during the Covid-19 emergency, as studies by Save The Children and Unicef show (Unicef 2021; Save the Children 2020a, 2020b). The data of the Save the Children³⁷ report state that, in 2020, 117 million more children in the world could fall into poverty and 9.7 million children risk never returning to school. Even for Italy the data are not comforting, where it is stated that by the end of the year, 1 million more children could slip into absolute poverty, twice as many as in 2019 (Save the Children 2020b). According to a survey³⁸ carried out in April 2020, six out of ten parents (60.3%) in Italy believe that their children would need support once they returned to school due to the loss of learning in recent months (Save the Children 2020b). In addition to lack of access to education and care, many children are suffering from mental disorders and a significant proportion over a third of children say they rarely or never feel sad or unhappy. A fifth of children say they feel sad most of the time (Unicef 2021).

To contain some of these effects, several urgent government measures were issued in the early months of 2020 (see box 1 for more details), responding to the state of emergency declared at the end of January 2020 by the Council of Ministers. On 19 May, the “Decreto Rilancio”, converted into L. n. 77 of 17 July 2020, came into force, containing a set of measures on health and safety, support for businesses and the economy, support for workers, families and the disabled, local authorities, taxation and sectoral measures that also include education (see article 231 of Decreto Legge n. 34/2020), partially amending the provisions of the previous Decreto Legge n. 18 of 17 March 2020, so called “Cura Italia”. In this context, 331 million euro has been allocated for new investments in schools of all levels, to be finalised by September 2020.

³⁶ In March 2021, the Ministry of Education issued a notice to use seven hundred million euros over the five-year period 2021-2025 to be allocated to municipalities for the safety, renovation, redevelopment, conversion or construction of buildings for crèches, kindergartens and multifunctional centres for family services. The seven hundred million will be distributed as follows: 280 million will be allocated to crèches, 175 million to kindergartens, 105 million to multifunctional centres for family services, and 140 million will be allocated to the conversion of spaces in kindergartens that are currently unused. Sixty per cent of the resources of each of these chapters will be earmarked for peripheral and disadvantaged areas, in order to make up for the existing gaps: on average, five million euros are needed to build a school, so with this money it will be possible to finance about 140 new structures <<https://bit.ly/3r9KZhc>>.

³⁷ See: Save the Children (2020b).

³⁸ The survey was conducted online, from 22 to 27 April, on a statistically significant national sample of 1,003 children aged between 8 and 17 years, using a questionnaire aimed at observing the impact of restrictions due to the health emergency on children and adolescents in Italy (the same survey was also conducted in Spain).

The decree also increases the “National Fund for the Integrated Education and Training System for 0–6-year-olds” by €15 million for 2020, establishing specific procedures for the allocation of resources³⁹, in order to ensure their timely disbursement (paragraph 1, article 233, D.L. n. 34/2020). In addition to allocating 65 million euro, which later became 165 million euro when the law was converted into law, to “non-state” kindergartens (*ibidem* paragraph 3) and 70 million euro, which later became 120 million euro, to primary and secondary schools. It is interesting to note that the only amount that was not increased when the law was converted into law is the amount allocated to the National Fund for the Integrated System, with priority given to public schools.

Subsequently, with the document of 26 June 2020, the “Plan for the September restart”, the MIUR gave specific indications for pre-schools and on 31 July 2020 the “Guidelines for the 0–6-year” were approved⁴⁰ in the Unified State-Regions Concilium. The text (annexed to Decreto Ministeriale n. 80 of 03 August 2020) provides specific organisational indications for the 0-6 age group so that the resumption and safe running of educational services and preschools in attendance can be guaranteed⁴¹. However, while the document marks a necessary step for the reopening of early childhood services, clarifying the preconditions for the presence of children, parents and staff in the educational services and preschools, little is determined in response to the specific needs of the facilities in question (crèches and micro-crèches in particular).

Box 1. Italian main family support measures

Nursery school bonus - L. n. 232/2016 (Budget Law 2017)

As part of the regulatory interventions to support family income, article 1, paragraph 355, L. n. 232 of 11 December 2016 if children born from 1 January 2016 are entitled to a contribution of up to € 1,000, for the payment of fees for attendance at authorised public and private crèches and forms of home care in favour of children under three years of age suffering from serious chronic pathologies.

Article 1, paragraph 343, L. n. 160 of 27 December 2019, raised the amount of the voucher up to a maximum of € 3,000 based on the Equivalent Economic Situation Indicator - ISEE, referred to the child for whom the benefit is requested.

³⁹ Paragraph 2 art. 233, D.L. n. 34/2020 mentions “the allocation of the fund referred to in paragraph 1, for the year 2020 only, shall be made by decree of the Minister of Education, following an agreement in the Unified Conference, without prejudice to the criteria provided for in Article 12 of D.Lgs. n. 65 of 13 April 2017, also pending the adoption of the multi-year National Action Plan referred to in Article 8 of the aforementioned Legislative Decree. The agreement shall be disregarded if it is not received within the aforementioned 15-day period.”

⁴⁰ The Document is the result of work coordinated by the Ministry of Education with other relevant Ministries, the Regions and the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI).

⁴¹ Stable groups/sections are identified, organised in such a way as to be identifiable, with the identification of educator staff for each group. The organisation of the spaces provides for structured areas, in compliance with the needs of the age group and “checks” the possibility of identifying further professional figures, of providing for possible exceptions for substitutions and of assigning additional staff within the limits of the available resources (as regards state preschools, the Ministry is already working on increasing the number of staff). Specific staff training/information is provided for, but not defined.

Universal allowance and family services fund - Budget Law 2020

The 2020 Budget Law has established the “Universal Allowance and Family Services Fund”, into which, as of 2021, the resources dedicated to the payment of childbirth allowance (the so called “bonus bebè”) and the “Bonus asilo nido” will be transferred. The additional resources of the Fund will be directed to the reorganisation and systematisation of policies to support families with children. In this regard, it should be noted that the following bills are being examined by the Houses of Parliament: Senate Act 1892 delegating to the Government the adoption of one or more legislative decrees aimed at reorganising, simplifying and strengthening, also in a progressive manner, the measures in support of dependent children through the single and universal allowance and the so-called “Family Act” (C.C. 2561). Family act is a government initiative which affects different matters, such as: support for female employment; promotion of the birth rate; the importance of the social value of children's formal and non-formal education and learning activities; and support for the financial independence of young people. Measures integrated into the single universal allowance include the bonus for the birth or adoption of a child (so-called “Bonus mamma domani”), a one-off allowance of € 800, introduced by the 2017 Stability Law, which replaced the economic benefit for new-borns and adopted children within households with certain ISEE incomes (so-called “Bonus bebè”), introduced by the 2015 Stability Law. The measure continued in 2018, and was extended to 2019 as well, with the same modalities established for those born or adopted during 2018, but with a 20 per cent increase in the amount of the allowance for births and adoptions occurring in 2019 with respect to children after the first. The 2020 Budget Law extended the measure to the year 2021, reinforcing it and making it a universally accessible benefit based on three income brackets, and extended and strengthened the provision of a voucher for the payment of fees related to the attendance of public or private crèches, which can also be used to support, at home, children under three years of age suffering from serious chronic pathologies.

While waiting for the Universal Family Allowance to become fully operational in January 2022, the Council of Ministers decreed the start of the process with the approval, on 4 June, of the 2021 Single Child Allowance Decree, which constitutes a 'bridge measure' between 1 July 2021 and 31 December 2022, allocating a temporary allowance to families that are not entitled to the current family allowances.

Decreto Legge n. 18 of 17 March 2020 (“Cura Italia”): Covid leave and Bonus baby-sitting

The decree under review provides for an extraordinary leave of absence from work, in whole or in part, for employed parents, during the period of suspension of teaching activities in attendance for secondary schools located in areas of the national territory characterised by a scenario of maximum severity and a high level of risk (so-called red zones). The leave, which can be requested only in cases where parents cannot work in agile mode, can be taken by one or both parents, but not on the same days. For the days of leave taken, the parent is entitled to an allowance equal to 50% of the salary, and to a figurative contribution. The same decree also provides for employed parents, in the presence of severely disabled children (article 4, paragraph 1, L. n. 104/1992), an extraordinary leave in case of suspension of teaching activities or closure of care centres. Also limited to the so-called red zones, the right to receive one or more bonuses for the purchase of bonus baby-sitting or supplementary services for children is recognised. The maximum limit is set at 1,000 euros. The decree under review extends the possibility to take time off work for children aged between 14 and 16 years, but without payment of salary or allowance or recognition of figurative contributions.

Decreto Legge n. 34 of 19 May 2020 (“Decreto Rilancio”)

The decree amends the rules set out in the “Cura Italia” Decree:

- a. The maximum duration of parental leave introduced in favour of working parents due to the suspension of school activities is increased (from 15) to 30 days, which can be taken for children up to 12 years old until 31 August 2020.
- b. It is provided that unpaid leave granted to parents who are private employees for the closure of schools may be taken in the presence of children under 16 years.
- c. the maximum total amount of the baby-sitting bonus granted as an alternative to the above-mentioned leave is increased from € 600 to € 1,200 (for employees in the health sector, the increase is from € 1,000 to € 2,000), providing that the same voucher can also be used for enrolment in summer centres and childcare services.

As an alternative to the measure for baby-sitting services, a bonus for enrolment in summer centres and/or supplementary services for children is also provided. The bonus is an alternative to Covid leave, in fact, the maximum amount of € 1,200 – 2,000 (depending on the category) is only available to those who, at the time of application, have not applied for Covid leave. If the total Covid leave does not exceed 15 days, only the residual amount of € 600/1,000 is available. If, on the other hand, the period of Covid leave taken exceeds 15 days, there is no entitlement to bonuses, as the two measures are incompatible; there is an increase of 12 days of paid leave for the care of disabled family members, in addition to the three-months provided, to be used in May and June 2020.

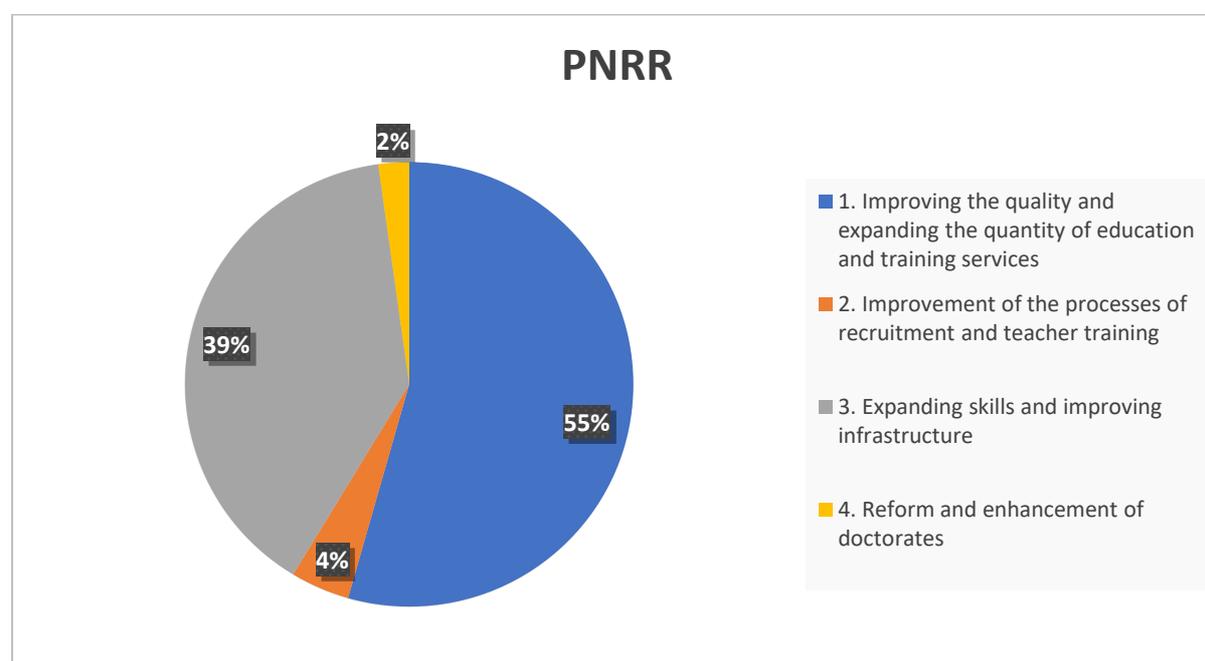
5. The Italian PNRR and prospects

The recent National Recovery and Resilience Plan (*Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza* - PNRR), although not free from some criticism, represents a fundamental tool for the relaunch of Italy at a time when the effects of the crisis generated by the pandemic that began in 2020 are showing their full severity. The Plan meets the requirements imposed by the European Commission with reference to the need to operate through investments and not current expenditure, the obligation to allocate these investments mainly to the environment and digitalisation, for at least 37% and 20% respectively, as well as the need to envisage system reforms to accompany the investments. To avoid the umpteenth ineffective injection of money – this time, moreover, very substantial – it is necessary to prepare solid reforms that guarantee the implementation of policy interventions upstream of financial interventions.

Among the 6 objective measures into which the Plan is divided, Mission 4 is dedicated to Education and Research and envisages, among other measures, the strengthening of the entire 0-2 years education system through the planning of interventions for kindergartens. This strengthening action responds to a twofold objective: first of all, to strengthen the education system from the very first years of life, in line with L. n. 65/2017, which includes the 0-6 years bracket in the education chain, and with the aforementioned literature that identifies a directly proportional link between the inclusion of children in the first 1,000 days of life (0-2 years) in a quality education system and participation in terms of socio-occupational inclusion as adults (Heckman 2006). Moreover, the creation of new places in day-care centres indirectly supports female employment – as well as the creation of skilled jobs in this sector – which is one of the transversal objectives of the PNRR itself, for which the European Commission required a comprehensive strategy⁴².

Within Mission 4 (figure 11), the part dedicated to the strengthening of kindergartens provides for a “Plan for kindergartens and nursery schools and early childhood education and care services” with the aim of increasing the take-up of early childhood education and care services, for which resources of 4,6 billion euros are allocated.

⁴² European Commission, COM(2019)512 final - *Council Recommendation on Italy's 2019 National Reform Programme and delivering a Council opinion on Italy's 2019 Stability Programme*, Brussels, 5.6.2019. In its 2019 Recommendation to Italy, the Commission called on Italy to “step up efforts to combat undeclared work; ensure that active labour market and social policies are effectively integrated and involve especially young people and vulnerable groups; support women's participation in the labour market through a comprehensive strategy, in particular by ensuring access to quality childcare and long-term care services”.

Figure 11. Distribution of resources in Mission 4 Objective 1

Source: Consiglio dei ministri, PNRR (2021)

The aim is to create 264,480 places for children in crèches and kindergartens by building or expanding facilities, which would also be accompanied by the creation of skilled jobs. However, the Plan lacks a detailed breakdown of the allocation of places for nursery schools (0-2 years) and pre-schools (3-6 years); the only reference to a breakdown of resources is to be found in the data sheets and is 152,000 places for nursery schools and 76,000 for schools for 3-6 years. This number should be the result of a comparison between the places currently available and the number of children born, also considering the trend in births in recent years.

If Italy is not far from the average of the other European countries as far as preschools are concerned, the same is not true for the attendance of the 0-2 age group: in the school year 2018-2019, in fact, the number of children who manage to attend a nursery school in our country is on average around 25.5%, an increase compared to 24.7% of the previous year⁴³ but still 7.5 percentage points away from the 33% of the 2002 Barcelona Goals and 9,6 percentage points below the European average (PNRR 2021; Istat 2021). There are, moreover, within that 25.5%, evident differences between the regions of the Centre and the North – 33.3% for the former, 33.6% and 29.9% for the Northeast and the Northwest respectively – and those of the South and the Islands – 13.3% and 13.8% with the service guaranteed in about 47.6% of the municipalities only (Istat 2020) – which highlight structural deficiencies in the supply of primary education services for which a European Recommendation intervened in 2019 (European Commission 2019) calling for guaranteeing access to childcare services

⁴³ The alleged increase in available nursery places could actually be linked to the trend in births, which have been declining for years now, with 404,000 new births in 2020, 16,000 fewer than in 2019.

and investing in the improvement of educational outcomes and the strengthening of skills, particularly digital skills. Going into detail on the data relating to municipalities, the situation is further differentiated, as in general the supply of services is concentrated in large municipalities and in the most economically developed areas; while the provincial capital municipalities have reached 33% coverage, all other municipalities stand at an average of 22.4 places per 100 residents under the age of 3.

Starting from the data, therefore, the total number of day-care places that must be created to reach the threshold of at least 33% through public day-care centres was identified, calculated at around 298,000 places (Alleanza per l'infanzia 2020). This number responded to the need to guarantee more rapidly a regional coverage of 33% and in the long term, for the year 2026, a national coverage of 60%, proposing at the same time a financial endowment ranging from 4,8 billion to ensure the implementation of the plan for the day-care centres, up to 8 billion (Servizio studi Senato 2021).

The target contained in the latest version of the PNRR envisages 264,480 total places, with reference to all the places available on the national territory (public and private, including both crèches and supplementary services). The hope is that this target is sufficiently solid/valid not only to achieve the 33% coverage but also to bridge, at least in part, the distances between territories in the spread of crèches and early childhood services, with a view to rebalancing the territorial system as suggested by D.Lgs. n. 65/2017 and indicated in the PNRR itself. In fact, it is a matter of investing in early childhood, in the first 1,000 days of life, to have a return not only in educational terms but, as demonstrated, also to ensure greater gender equity in employment and to bridge territorial and socioeconomic gaps that strongly affect families and communities.

6. Latest post-Covid guidance and concluding remarks

The integrated system for the 0-6 years age group, which in Italy, as we have seen, has been translated into the decree establishing the “Integrated system of education and instruction from 0 to 6 years” (D.Lgs. n. 65/2017) and the dedicated National Fund, must today come to terms with some criticalities identified through literature and an analysis that has used the most recent data available. These criticalities essentially refer to the burden of early childhood services on the expenditure of municipalities; to the massive presence of private and equal management of kindergartens, with a consequent heterogeneity in both organisational and pricing systems; to the delay of adequate funding to the Regions that have greater gaps for the 0-3 age group; to the need to ensure monitoring of the use of these resources in order to pursue the stated objectives and incentivise the opening of new services. In addition, there is a lack of some elements of comparison, useful to the community, such as the biennial report on the implementation of the National Plan for Childhood and Adolescence, as provided for by D.Lgs. n. 65/2017, the State-Regions agreement on the limit of private expenditure⁴⁴, also provided for by the Decree, and the reprogramming of the National Plan for

⁴⁴ The maximum level of expenditure to be borne by households will have to be carefully assessed as this threshold could lead to difficulties for local authorities with fewer resources in the face of a predominantly rigid type of expenditure. The provision to exclude childcare services from public services on individual demand (art. 8 of D.L. n. 65/17) would lead to the exclusion of user contributions and therefore a significant increase in expenditure for municipalities, with respect to which the necessary financial coverage must be provided.

Childhood and Adolescence, replacing the first one referring to the years 2017-2019. While there are some positive elements, such as the recent Guidelines of the Ministry of Education on the 0-6 System (March 2021) and the post-Covid supplementary measures: 2020 baby-sitter bonus, nursery school voucher from 2017 today covering almost the entire cost for families with low ISEE and other benefits such as the 'nursery school voucher' for public and private companies, as part of corporate welfare initiatives.

Other criticisms⁴⁵ (Agia and Irs 2019) of the D.Lgs. n. 65/2017 system addressed by the scientific community, can be summarised in the following dimensions: the crèches remain, despite the intentions of the legislator, a service on individual demand; the National Fund of D.Lgs. n. 65/2017 is intended overall for the 0-6 range without specific indications on the 0-3 range, which would deserve a more substantial contribution; the 33% coverage target of D.Lgs. n. 65/2017 refers to all childcare services and not only to crèches; awareness-raising actions on the educational function of crèches remain absent. In addition, the most macroscopic, relating to the lack of funds: it seems clear that the 249 million per year at regime provided for in the Plan, intended for the entire 0-6 bracket, cannot be considered sufficient to reach and maintain a 33% coverage in early childhood services, a quota that presupposes doubling the places currently offered in the public sector and sustaining their management costs. The recent integrations from the parallel “Fund for crèches and early childhood” and those envisaged by the PNRR partly remedy this lack, but the allocation of these resources still needs to be adequately monitored.

In addition to these proposed lines of action, it would also be appropriate to approve the essential levels of services (LEP) centred on children's rights (art. 117, letter m of the Constitution), starting from the discussion of the proposal recently presented by the National Guarantor for Children and Adolescents⁴⁶. The enforceability of the LEPs must be guaranteed through adequate allocation of structural and continuous resources (in the next budget law and through dedicated funds). The available evidence on the situation in our country therefore calls for a strong and decisive action in the fight against child education poverty through a process that leads to consider the day-care service also from the point of view of quality (e.g., child-teacher ratio), affordable rates, school canteen and territorial coverage (at least 75% of Italian municipalities must have a day-care centre).

The increase in fees charged by municipalities for the services they offer and the difficult income and employment situation of families are among the factors that have influenced the drop in enrolment. Therefore, in many territorial realities, municipal crèches have fewer enrolments than available places and sometimes the lack of demand from families paradoxically leads to the closure of public facilities (Istat 2017).

The strengthening of the integrated 0-6 years system, and for the 0-3 age group, must be considered a national priority. The consultation campaign⁴⁷ launched at the end of March on the “Pedagogical guidelines for the integrated 0-6 system” is a step forward in this direction, and the debate on the guidelines drawn up by the national commission⁴⁸, which will involve the various stakeholders -

⁴⁵ See <<https://bit.ly/3wFuvic>>.

⁴⁶ The proposal is available on the website of the National Guarantor for Children and Adolescents: <www.garanteinfanzia.org>.

⁴⁷ See <<https://bit.ly/2VNp43V>> (Campaign launched on 31 March 2021).

⁴⁸ See <<https://bit.ly/3wNNA1O>>.

educators, parents, service managers, institutions - in the coming months, must be an opportunity to bring the issue back to the centre of the public debate.

The results of the experimentation of SINSE, the “National Information System on Early Childhood Socio-Educational Services”, previously managed by the MLPS with the collaboration of the Emilia-Romagna Region, are also awaited. In implementation of the reform initiated by D.Lgs. n. 65 of 2017, the Ministry of Education assumes, in fact, the competence of services for children also for the zero/three sector and has among its tasks the activation of an information system coordinated with the Regions, Autonomous Provinces and Local Authorities.

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