EDUCAS

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| Report Case Study Italy

The space in mind

Italian Case Study

C-PD PATH THE SPACE IN MIND

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1 Situating the pilot in the Italian context

Italian ECEC system. Since 2015 Italy is moving towards the integration of 0-3 and 3-6 ECEC provisions, under the Ministry of Education (Law 107/2015; Law Decree 65/2017; National Pedagogical Lines for 0-6 Integrated System). Up until 2015, 0-3 centres (called nidi) were under the responsibility of the Minister of Welfare, with decentralised responsibilities for regulation and funding of provision. Regions are therefore responsible for regulation of 0-3 provisions, whereas Municipalities are responsible for management and funding. This creates autonomy and fragmentation of experiences at the same time, with great differences in ECEC quality from context to context. No national curriculum exists so far in relation to 0-3 provision. Rather pedagogical guidelines are developed at local level by municipalities and providers (progetto pedagogico).

3-6 years old settings (scuola dell'infanzia) fall under the administrative responsibility of the Ministry of Education at national level. The national curriculum for scuola dell'infanzia is elaborated by the Ministry of Education within a broader framework encompassing primary and secondary school education curricula as well (Indicazioni Nazionali per il Curricolo, 2018). State-funding to private provision complying with national standards (scuole paritarie) is provided under Law 62/2000.

In 2015 a new law for integrated system has been developed (Law 107/2015; Law Decree 65/2017), and now Italy is in a 'transition period' from a split to an integrated system. A Committee of Experts on the Integrated System was established under the Ministry of Education with the aim of developing shared pedagogical guidelines across the 0-6 sectors. Amongst the challenges to reach this integrated goal, we can certainly quote the key role of promoting a shared pedagogical vision concerning education and children in 0-3 and 3-6 settings. Common trainings and support provided by pedagogical coaches are thus crucial (Venturelli, Cigala, 2017.

The two main leadership roles are: 1)Pedagogical coordinators (coordinatori pedagogici) are responsible for providing guidance and support to educational teams in 0-3 and 3-6 centres, but only within municipal and private-NFP publicly subsidised provision; 2)School directors (dirigenti scolastici) are responsible for the management of large-size comprehensive state-maintained institutions (Istituti Comprensivi) attended by children aged 3-14, hence including also scuola dell'infanzia.

Municipal pedagogical coordinators, together with coordinators from socio-cooperatives that manage ECEC centres have traditionally a key role in promoting reflexivity on daily practice within ECEC teams. Childfree hours are also provided for ECEC staff in order to reflect, plan, document together.

EDUCARE and the Italian context. In the ECEC Italian context the connection between edu and care is present and visible in educational planning. The dimension of the care of physical needs and learning are in fact conceived as deeply interconnected starting from the assumption that the relationship supports every learning. It is a shared heritage that the development of children takes place at every moment of the educational day, in every proposed activity, in every routine. Italian teachers of 0-6 ECEC centers have among their tasks both the care activities (intimate hygiene, sleep, meal) and other activities they carry out during the day (structured and unstructured activities). At the level of practices, and therefore also of implicit knowledge, however, some ECEC implement a dichotomization between "child of care", of the 0-3 band and "child of learning" of kindergarten (Venturelli, Cigala, 2017; Zaninelli, 2021)

SPACE and Italian context. In the Italian context, a common heritage of ECEC culture is certainly the idea of space as a "third educator" characteristic of Reggio Emilia Approch (Edwards &Gandini, 2018; Malaguzzi, 1987). In this vision, the space assumes a primary -not accessory- educational role, and is conceived as a factor of promotion of children's development and not as a scenario in which the development of children takes place. It is a space that is not static and determined, but co-constructed and flexible. (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2014; Vuorisalo et al., 2015). In particular, in the Italian context there's a historical tradition of an interdisciplinary culture on space that sees a dialogue between education and architecture. The Italian architect Mario Botta has defined the construction of a school building as "the first pedagogical act" (Botta, Crepet, & Zois, 2007, p.73), highlighting the need to consider the physical spaces in which education takes place, even before constructing them. In particular, the reflection on the definition of "space" and "place" was very stimulating for the entire Italian case study: «Space is thought of, places are inhabited. The space is crossed, in the places you stop. Space is the abstract, the place the concrete.... The place is something that has to do with memory, with emotions and with desire. But if even, by law, I can make you space or deny it to you, it is only in the place that I can welcome you. It is only here, therefore, that hospitality can take place» (Tagliapietra, 2005).

EDUCAS and the Italian context. The EDUCAS project represented an interesting opportunity for the Italian ECEC system to reach many goals: 1.to learn about the culture and organization of ECEC in other countries; 2.to deepen the theme of spaces in an EduCare perspective, and therefore in a perspective of continuity 0-3/3-6, an aspect emerging in Italy in recent years and which generates multiple reflections; 3.to develop a CPD Path that provided for shared observation and video-observation as the main methodology; 4.to represent a great resource in the period of closure of services due to the pandemic.

2 The EDUCAS path

It is within this framework that the international Educas project (*Space and Educare: Creating child and family friendly learning spaces in ECEC centres* – Erasmus+ KA2) took shape, with the aim of creating ECEC environments that support children's development in a holistic way, taking into account the diverse needs of children and families, with special attention to the ones at risk of social exclusion. The project has been developed in three countries (Belgium, Italy, Lithuania) through the collaboration between research centres and ECEC services. In each country one research centre and two ECEC centres have been involved. Three International Training activities have been planned within the project, in order to learn from each other experiences.

Between 2018 and 2021 the partners developed several actions towards this objective, by mainly investing in:

1. Elaborating a literature review and research concerning the connection between ECEC environments and ECEC curricula within an *educare* approach[1].

[1] https://www.issa.nl/content/meanings-spaces-ecec-centres-literature-review and a specific article (Berti, S., Cigala, A. & Sharmahd, N. Early Childhood Education and Care Physical Environment and Child Development: State of the art and Reflections on Future Orientations and Methodologies. Educ Psychol Rev 31, 991–1021 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-019-09486-0

2. Elaborating and experimenting innovative pedagogical approaches, methods and tools to support professionals in improving ECEC environments within an *educare* approach, by involving children and families.
3. Dissemination of the project's findings, of its educational resources and of its related policy recommendations, both in national and international debates[2].

2.1 The Italian pilot: Who was involved?

The Italian pilot has been coordinated by University of Parma (UNIPR) and developed together with the staff of two Italian ECEC centers: *Maria Vittoria* ECEC center (1-3 years old), located in Turin, and *Gelsomino* sECEC center (1-3 and 3-6 years old), located in Parma[3]. Both centers are managed by Pro.Ges[4]. Pro.Ges-Parma is a no-profit Private Social Enterprise (social cooperative) active since 1994. Today it is nationally recognized as a leading organization in the field. Pro.Ges has long contributed to Innovation Projects in Early Childhood Education and runs several research projects in collaboration with the University of Parma (Italy). Nowadays, Pro.Ges is responsible for the management and organization of about 60 ECEC settings for children 0 to 6. These services are located in various Italian regions. The following aspects inspire the pedagogical approach guiding Pro.Ges projects and services: (a) the centrality of teacher/parent/child relations; (b) the emotional relationship teachers-children is the main way through which all learning and development can take place; (c) the working team is responsible for activity planning; (d) a pedagogical coordinator serves the function to support the teachers' working team.

The main features of the two ECEC centers involved in the project are described as follows:

Maria Vittoria ECEC center (Turin): welcomes 62 children, divided into 3 classes, spread over 2 floors: -At the first floor we found Bees and Sunflowers classes. Each class includes 23 children and 3 educators (in addition 1 part-time educator for the afternoon and the closure of the service, depending on the shifts). On the second floor we found Squirrels class, which includes 16 children and 2 educators (in addition 1 part-time educator for the afternoon). All the classes consist in mixed-age groups of children from 1 to 3 years old (in Italy such distribution is called vertical or inhomogeneous method); about half children -for each section- are "small" (from 1 to 2 years) and half "large" (from 2 to 3).

Concerning aspects related to space, the ECEC center is located in a historic building in the center of Turin, and it also has a little outdoor area, with earth and trees. The building consists of three floors, including ground floor. The ground floor includes an entrance where parents can leave the strollers and where they find photographs of the staff and small installations created over the years by the parents themselves, during various events organized. From the entrance there is acces to the atrium that is a large and spatious space in which the lockers are placed. There's one loker per family, marked with the photo and name of the child. At the same floor there are some offices, a family room, a little library and toilets.

[2] https://www.issa.nl/content/educas-policy-recommendations-strengthening-importance-space-and-educare-approach

[3] The Belgian pilot has been coordinated by VBJK (Centre for Innovation in the Early Years) and developed together with the staff of the Hippo's Hof and De Tandem In Lithuania the UIC, Center for Innovative Education, coordinated the pilot, and the ECEC centres Aukštelkė and Vaikystes Sodas took part. Besides these partners, ISSA (International Step by Step Association) has been also partner in this project, with a main responsibility concerning communication/dissemination activities.

[4] http://proges.it/

Classes are on the upper floors, reachable by a staircase and an elevator. Before the entrance of the class there's a space called "*terra di mezzo*" (middle earth), where parents find documentation (on particular experiences proposed to children or the section project), children's works and related photographs. Classes are organized by centers of interest, all have the symbolic corner of the kitchen and an adjacent space for dolls, cot and care corner; tables or pallets for the construction play (Lego or unstructured materials), animals, a bright coffee table. The teachers of each class set up the spaces in a personal way and according to the needs of the children's group, always with a view to order and beauty, trying to instill a sense of care and attention. Such meaning is also conveyed through the documentation at child height: photographs of the children and their works are posted at the bottom of the walls, so that they can be re-lived and re-read by children. Higher up for parents or visitors, frames or photo panels are hung to describe the centers of interest.

Meals are eaten within the section: there are wooden Montessori tables and chairs. In the hygiene room there are sinks at child height, small toilets, toilet paper available to children, a changing table, boxes with name and photo of each child, to hold children's clothes, books or small play corners to entertain children in the waits. In the sleeping room there are low beds that children always find ready, with sheet and cover; decorations or curtains to lower the ceilings, small lamps or lights. Part of the sleeping rooms have been set up with specific corners to be used in the morning as places of experience (exploration corner, theater, creative corner ... each group of educators chooses how to organize it independently).

Gelsomino ECEC Center (Parma): the center welcomes 84 preschool children divided into three classes (3-6 years) and 54 nursery children also divided into three sections (1-3 years). All the classes are organized in mixed-aged groups.

Concerning aspects related to space, the ECEC center is located in a new residential area close to unbuilt lands. Classes and common spaces are in a one-story building, while offices and locker rooms for teachers are on the first floor. The building is surrounded by a large garden and another little internal garden is accessible from the corridors.

Within all the preschool sections there are 28 children, 3 teachers (2 full time teacher and 1 part time) and an operator. Each class consists of a room where children and educators mainly live all the moments of the educational day, apart from the sleeping moment for which there is a dedicated sleeping room that can accommodate the children of all three classes. Inside the section there is also the bathroom.

The number of children in nursery class varies as it depends on the registrations (corporate, private, municipal). Approximately there are 21 children, 3 educators (2 full time and 1 part time) and an operator. Each class of the nursery consists of two rooms: in the first part of the class the children live mainly the moments of welcome, of the free and structured play, the meal and the reunion, while in the second part of the section there are scientific angles, disguises etc.; after the meal the second part of the section is organized to offer the possibility to the children to sleep. Inside each section there is also the bathroom.

The quality of the interior spaces comes from the search for balance between material, colors, fabrics, games, furnishings and functionality, in order to create places characterized by harmony and a sense of well-being. The class is the first well-defined reference place that the child recognizes within the wider context of the Nursery and Preschool. In each section it is easy to identify the location of both some areas functional to the various play experiences and spaces suitable for eating, sleeping and hygiene moments. There are spaces that are common to the various classes of Nursery and Preschool; for example, in a common space

of the structure a laboratory has been created, there children of both nursery and preschool can experiment unusual materials and techniques. Another common space is the "Blue Room", a multipurpose place that can be set up with various materials, or video projections, music or silence, depending on the different experiences offered to children. Used in small groups of children, this space facilitates personal and inner explorations, as well as in larger groups encourages more dynamic explorations. The ECEC center aslo includes a specially equipped and fenced green area for the exclusive use of children. This large green space allows children to run, discover, experiment according to their interests, curiosity and the need for movement. Through a path that also involved families, two natural shelters and a motor path were built with wood branches and sections of trunk. In addition, a part of the garden was dedicated to the creation of a vegetable garden and a sensory path.

2.2 Needs analysis

The Need Analysis was conducted by listening to the point of view of all the actors involved: children, parents, teachers, coordinators. An interesting challenge was to identify the suitable methodologies that have adequately brought out the voice of all the protagonists. In this sense, starting from the analysis of the literature that highlights the main aspects emerging from the research on the theme of spaces in children's services, and from the continuous exchanges with other countries, some methodologies have been developed. So the initial question was: *What is the point of view (thoughts, emotions, meanings) about the educational space of parents, children and teachers?*

The point of view of parents and teachers

The first methodology used was that of the **focus group** that allowed to grasp the ideas, emotions and needs of teachers and parents in relation to spaces of the educational contexts and their connection with education and care[4].In Italy we carried on 5 focus groups[5]: 2 with parents and 3 with teachers, in the 2 ECEC centers involved in the project. In total, we have involved 20 teachers (15 teachers of Childcare Center) and 17 parents in the focus groups. All focus groups were coordinated by two people, one facilitator and one assistant, and all participants were arranged in a circle. For introduce the questions concerning the hygienic and toilet/eating/sleeping spaces some pictures were provided in order to facilitate the discussion[6].

Concerning the favorite place very different spaces emerge. Some of these spaces are preferred by many participants and therefore seem to be very significant in the teachers', parent' and children's experience within the educational context ***("my class"; the garden; the place near the glass windows; the pretend play; the soft space***...). In general, from the focus groups, **the garden** emerges as a very popular choice and it is possible note that different points of view and feelings concerning this space come out between adults and children. In specific, the garden space is greatly appreciated from children, contrarily the parents and mostly the teachers recognize in the outdoor space some critical aspects. Another space that emerges frequently in the discussions in the focus groups is the **entrance and welcoming space**, it seems to be a very important and significant space especially for parents. In fact, they report that have many affective and

[5] The focus-groups guidelines are reported in the EDUCAS Toolbox. https://www.issa.nl/content/educas-toolbox-wonder-and-beauty-connecting-ecec-spaces-and-educare

[6] In this case study we report a synthesis of the results of the focus groups. For the full analysis of the results of the focus groups, see the following doc: *The points of view of families, professionals, children: Summary of the analysis of the focus groups with staff and parents, and of the drawings and interviews with the children in Belgium, Lithuania, Italy*. https://www.issa.nl/content/points-view-families-professionals-children; Berti, S. (2021). *The Meanings of Space in Early Childhood Education and Care Centers: the point of view of adults and children in Italy, Belgium and Lithuania* [doctoral dissertation]. University of Parma.

relevant experiences with their children in this place. The **pretend play space and soft play for reading space** are also considered very significant places both for teachers and for parents. Particular attention was paid to the specific type of motivations that the teachers and the parents reported regarding the choice of the favorite/not favorite place. The analysis of these motivations allows to highlight 5 different different meanings of space:

1)Space that FAVORS LEARNING ACTIVITIES, PLAY ACTIVITIES and EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES *(«I like the peekaboo space because I stay in there with the children and, reading, singing or simply telling stories, we are fine» «The garden space helps the children to deal with their fears , it helps them to get to know their bodies» «The laboratory is a space that the children do not recognize and they don't know what to do in it»*); 2)Space that FAVORS RELATIONS *(«I like the entrance and welcoming space because it is really an agora, so there are parents who meet ... It's noisy, but there is life, and there are relationships»; «In the den even very agitated children calm down, and here they create significant relationships»; «In the entrance space my baby and I meet after a long day, we hug and tell each other what we have done, important exchanges take place here every day»; «I don't like the entrance space, it's too big, there's too much confusion, it's not intimate, it doesn't favor relationships»*); 3) Space that is DESIGNED and WELL CONCEIVED *(«This year I had the opportunity to make changes in the space and so I feel it much more mine ... I'm fine»; «We dedicated a lot to the pretend play space, so that place was very well thought out and it is a space that all teachers can share»; «The space in front of the bathroom ... we still have to find the right way to use it. We have been thinking about it a lot, but we still haven't reached a solution»*); 4) Space that CONNECTS INSIDE/OUTSIDE *(«The glass windows are fantastic, my child likes to look outside: the construction sites, the garden, the arrivals .. a world..»; «The glass windows create a continuous connection between the inside and the outside»; «I like the kitchen because it reminds me of nature, we have a small table made with a piece of a tree trunk, it recalls the forest»*); 5) Space that has some PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS *«The reading corner is very nice with those lights and that small curtain at the entrance, it is really a beautiful place also aesthetically».«Even the bathrooms are beautiful because they are suitable for children, with a small sink, with low shelves, low chairs, cushions ..» (favorite place) «The garden isn't a real garden, it's too sunny, it's grassless and very dusty ...» (not favorite place)*

All these several meanings emerge both in parents' and teachers' discussions, highlighting a multiplicity of functions attributed to space. The space that **"favors learning activities, play activities and emotional experiences"** is the function that appears most, followed by the space as **"physical characteristics".** In particular, the teachers' contributions reveal the focus on the concept of **"designed and well designed"** space, while in the perception of parents emerge a focus on the importance of the **"space that connects inside/outside".**

Parents and teachers conceive the hygiene and toilet space as a place in which activities and relationships that concern both the care dimension (**having the experience of an adult taking care of you; the time for special attention, the time for pampering and tenderness; the time for listening to some children's stories**) and the education dimension (**achieving autonomies; learning to wait; learning by imitation of other children and teachers**) take place.

The eating space is conceived as a moment of care (**a moment of sharing: all children eat the same food together; each child has several tasks; the older children help the younger ones; care in preparing the table),** but also as a place where learning (**achieving autonomies; learning to taste all the food; learning to know when you are full; learning to appreciate the food: flavour, smell, appearance; learning to wait your turn**).

Particularly the teachers describe the sleeping space in detail. It is perceives as a place that **gives security, and as an embracing place.** Moreover, the sleeping space appears **intimate, comfortable, personalized and child-friendly.** Teachers and parents report in the focus groups, some physical characteristics of sleeping space that overall refer to a climate of tranquility and intimate relationships, such as: low light, music, not too large, cushions for adults, beds on the ground. From the ideas that emerged from the focus, this place is mainly characterized as a place where the care dimension predominates: teachers take care of children's emotion; the time for pampering and tenderness between teachers and children; the time for pampering and tenderness between peers; **emotionally-charged place**; the children learn to trust. The teachers and the parents perceive the sleeping place as a place where deep, intimate and emotionally **significant relationships** are being consolidated, both between peers and between children and adults.

Parents describe the entrance space and the space dedicated to the families in very positive terms, as a space where two important processes take place: **the reunion between parents and children and the transitions between home and school and vice versa**. Instead, the teachers recognize that they do not live daily this space with children; they experience it less meaningful and less functional; in particular, the team of Gelsomino center highlights **too narrow and not well conceived spaces** for families and also for the teachers.

Regarding to the ideal space an important aspect to emphasize is that for many parents it is very significant that in a school there are **natural and unstructured materials to stimulate the imagination**. The perceptions of ideal space of the teachers is more complex, they refer several aspects concerning different levels. Some of these identify an approach/attitude towards space and a way of conceiving it (**care and attention for the spaces, which are maintained over time; the space conceptualized as flexible and continuously changing; a welcoming place**). Instead, other aspects, referred to by teachers, concern an educational model and certain educational methodologies (the **documentation of the places**: the children's photographs while they play and move in the space; a space that **allows the relations between children of different ages** and from different classes; a space in which **to carry out the activities like at home**: washing, cleaning, cooking; a place in which the children can **experiment their body, their agility, in which they can practice psychomotricity**).

The point of view of children

A child-centered approach is recommended in ECEC spaces design issues and listening to children's voices is encouraged in order to create environments that respond to the real needs of children and to make them active participants in processes involved with their own development (Berti, Cigala & Sharmahd, 2019; The United Nations, 1989; UNICEF, 2018).

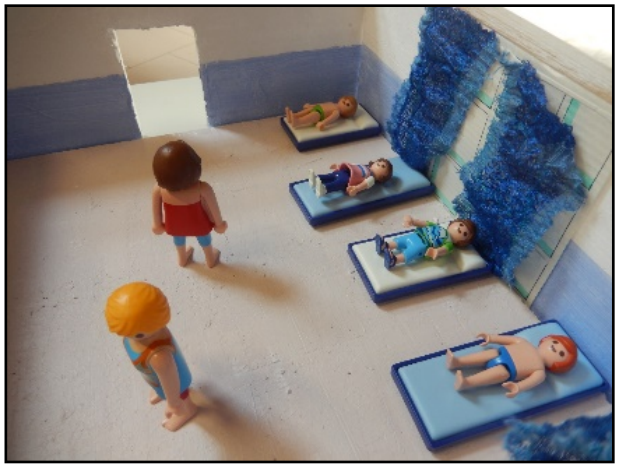
During the Italian CPD Path, the point of view of children was explored thrpugh two main tools: 1)a play activity with a three-dimensional model of the class; 2)drawings and interviews. Such exploration helped the teams get closer to children's vision about their ECEC Spaces, understand their visions and needs better, and reflect on possible actions to transform the spaces in relation to them.

Three-dimensional model. A Ph.D. student from the University of Parma, involved in the EDUCAS project, built a three-dimensional model of children's classrooms and asked them individually to position Playmobil dolls representing themselves, two friends, and the two professionals telling a story about a day in the center. 48 total children from the two ECEC centers were involved.

Two three-dimensional models were built: one for Parma and one for Turin. The tridimensional models represented the classes in scale, structure, furnishings and colors. Both models included a reading corner, a pretend-play corner, a construction corner, posters on the walls, shelves, child-friendly tables and chairs, toilet with child-friendly wc, sinks and benches and a sleeping room with child-friendly beds. The toilet space was inside the class in both models, while the sleeping space was inside the class in Turin and outside the class in Parma; for this reason, the model used in Parma had two parts, one with the class and the other with the sleeping room. It also should be specified that in both classes the eating moments took place on the table of the class. Thus, the main spaces were: the class, including its thematic-corner, the eating space, the sleeping space and the toilet space.

From the activity with the three-dimensional model interesting findings emerged:

- The great majority of children gave more importance to 'caring' than 'playing' spaces; especially sleeping space resulted to be the first choice for positioning all the characters:
- Most children positioned themselves in 'caring spaces': first sleeping, second eating, third toilet space. Another popular choice has been the reading corner, and only two children put themselves in playing spaces.
- The school friends also were positioned mostly in 'caring spaces': first sleeping, second toilet, third eating space. Another popular choice has been the playing space, while a few children put themselves in reading corner, then working at table or listening to music.
- Teachers were also positioned first in sleeping space and second in toilet spaces, then in the class with different occupation.
- In children's stories often emerged the pleasure of sleeping at school and being cared for by teachers, who cover them with sheets or give them pillows or make them fall asleep or cuddle them.
- Teachers have also been placed in the class and it is interesting to note that, differently from care spaces, they have mainly been assigned to activities where they do not interact directly with children. It seems that in the class children perceive their presence and observe their work even when they are not explicitly dedicating moments to them, as directors or supervisors of the scene.
- Concerning relationships configuration, it was interesting to note that most children placed themselves alone in the space of the class. This may indicate their need for privacy and not to be always in a big group.



"My friends and I are in the sleeping room. Teacher Lisa is covering us with sheets and teacher Miky is taking pillows for us." (Alice, 3 y.o.)

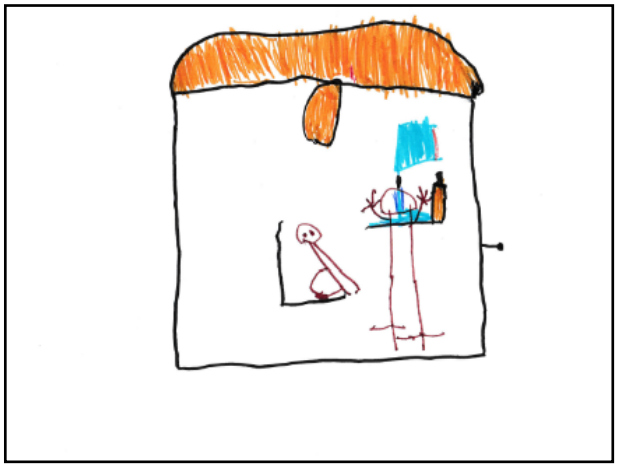
"I'm in the toilet doing pee and my friend Gabriele is next to me doing poo". (Alessio, 4 y.o.)

Drawings and interviews. The process of collecting children's perspectives and opinions through drawings followed the following steps: 1) The ECEC professionals asked children to draw their favorite space in the ECEC center; 2)Through a brief individual interview, the researchers or professionals asked each child to talk about his/ her drawing. The interview was guided by questions like: What space did you draw? What is happening in the situation you drew? Why do you like this space? The same 48 total children from the two ECEC centers who did the activity with the tridimensional moment were involved.

From the analysis of drawings and interviews interesting findings emerged:

- Most children represented outdoor spaces, highlighting the importance of the outdoors in children ECEC experience and indicating their pleasure to stay outside
- The most often represented playing materials were slides, swings and wooden houses.
- Although many specific places were indicated by children as their favorites, they were different for each child: the great variability in children's preferences indicates that each child has a personal vision about space and that each space of the school may be important for one child,
- Children represented many natural elements; the most represented ones, which were sun, earth, sky, trees and flowers, that could also be considered archetypic symbols indicating that ECEC spaces are experienced positively (Oliverio Ferraris, 2012; Serraglio, 2011) In particular, the revealed a sense of wellbeing, security and stability and at the same time the will to grow, learn and express their abilities
- Concerning the representation of people, the majority of children represented themselves in the space and school friends were also often represented while teachers, familiars and other people were less frequent.
- An interesting element is the presence of people from outside the school, 'the gardeners who came to hoe' and 'a boy who stands in the street', that reminds to the connection between the school context and the world outside. The fact that the children have highlighted this aspect, allows us to think that in their vision the boundaries of the school are defined but allow to be crossed by perception to include elements of the outside world that enrich the environment and acquire meanings in their school experience.

- Concerning relationships another interesting data was that the most represented configuration was the presence of the participant alone. The fact that both in drawings and tridimensional model play, most children chose to position themselves in the space alone, may indicate the importance of individual moments and personal experiences in the ECEC centers daily routine.



I drew myself in the toilet room: I did pee and then I washed my hands. (Jacopo, 4 y.o.)

"I drew me cuddling a little girl in the sleeping room: this is the kiss I give her" (Bianca, 5 y.o., Italy)

The point of view of the Italian stakeholders as a "critical friends"

At the beginning of the project, some institutions and services were contacted, as considered privileged interlocutors on the theme of educational spaces, and after a first meeting a stakeholder group was formed. The group was composed of key representatives from the National Group of Italian ECEC Services, Pedagogical Coordination of the Municipality of Parma and of the City of Turin, Department of Architecture of the University of Parma, Libraries for children, Italian pedagogical review "Bambini, Laboratorio Città Sostenibile of Turin, Opera Munifica Istruzione of Turin, Italian ECEC services furniture company Spazio Arredo. The Stakeholder Group is conceived as 'critical friend' and it has supported the development of the project, its influence on policy level, its sustainability and dissemination.

The stakeholders' point of view highlighted the following aspects with respect to the EDUCAS project and the theme of ECEC spaces: 1.the relevant of observation as a method to analyze which relational and learning processes taking place on the ECEC space; 2. the opportunity to verify how peer relationships an learning change by moving the furniture and the space; 3. the opportunity to make more explicit, in Italian ECEC services, the learning that children acquire in the moments of care; 4. the importance of the indoor / outdoor connection, recognizing how knowledge of other European experiences can also allow an expansion of the Italian vision and methods; 5 the importance of connecting educational thinking and practices to the professional field of architects and designers to guide the design of space and furnishings; 6. the reflection on sustainable urban development, in line with the 2030 Agenda, in order to translate participatory planning and co-design paths into educational services into completed works; 7. the importance of reflecting on what makes a service "beautiful", noting that buying "beautiful" furnishings is not enough to make a "beautiful" nest.

2.3 Implementation: "the Space in Mind"

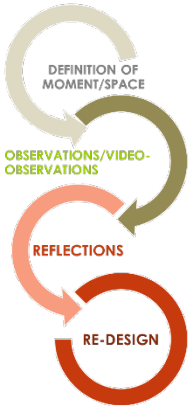
2.3.1 Which actions: processes and methods of CPD path

The focus groups were not just a simple collection of information: especially for teachers, they were rather as a very generative exchange opportunity that allowed them to acquire a greater awareness of the spaces of their school and the parents' point of view on the theme.

The reflections on the EduCare approach, shared with the European partners (Belgium and Lithuania) during the meeting held in Italy in June 2019, stimulated the Italian team to reflect on the 'Educational' and 'Caring' aspects of the space. It seemed that the 'Care' aspect emerged clearly for the partners who visited the Italian services, but the "Edu" value was sometimes hardly visible to an external view.

The first action was **the sharing** these interesting stimuli with the whole eduteam of ECEC centers (Maria Vittoria and Gelsomino: coordinators, teachers, practitioners) and with parents. Through a co-design by the whole teams, a CPD path took shape, it named: *The Space in Mind.* Why The space in mind? Why 'the space in mind'? Because this CPD Path is intended to help teachers: 1. **observe** what happens in space: what learnings? What relationships?; 2. to **make sense** of these processes; 3. to **activate changes** in the space.

In particular, the guiding-question of the CPD Path is *'How can we make more visible the 'Edu' value of our ECEC spaces, besides the 'Care value'?*



The Italian CPD Path was following a **reflective practice** methodology that include different phases: Definition of critical space/Observations/Reflections/Re-design/Documentation. It is a step by step, circular and recursive process that involves all parties.

Each team decided to work on their **'critical space'** by improving their aesthetics and functionality. Maria Vittoria chose the toilet and the welcoming/reunion spaces whilst Gelsomino chose the welcoming/reunion spaces and the spaces for structured activities.

The step of observation includes **observations** by teachers and coordinators and **video-observation** by researchers. An observational grid was individuated in order to adopt the common "lenses" to observe the space. This grid includes different aspect: a description of the behaviors (*What are children doing? What are teachers doing? What are parents doing?*) and reflections about children (How are children feeling? And what are children learning?), about space/environment (*How is the space and the general organization of materials? Which changes could be possible?*) and about onself (*How do i feel in that context? Which thoughts, emotions?*)

Observation Grid

Observer's name:	Serivce:	Section:
Space observed:	Date:	Time:

Focus of the observation	Description
Guide-Questions for the description	WHAT ARE CHILDREN DOING? WHAT ARE TEACHERS DOING? (also the observer him/herself) WHAT ARE PARENTS DOING? (if applicable)

Reflections	
Guide-Questions: **CHILDREN**	
HOW ARE CHILDREN FEELING? (emotional aspects/wellbeing...)	WHAT ARE CHILDREN LEARNING? (which social, emotional, relational skills)

Reflections	
Guide-Questions: **THE SPACE**	
HOW IS THE SPACE AND THE GENERAL ORGANIZATION OF MATERIALS?	WHICH CHANGES SHOULD BE POSSIBLE?

Riflessioni
Guide-Questions: **MYSELF**
HOW DID I FEEL IN THAT CONTEXT? (thoughts, emotions...)

The video-observations of the different critical spaces were precious tools for the whole group that allowed a plural observation. Before the beginning of the video-observations UNIPR researchers shared with the teachers/coordinators and practitioners some important aspects and opportunities of this methodology: the aim of video-observations is not to judge the educational practices, but to better understand them and reflect on spaces and practices in spaces. In particular, video-observations provide **a whole picture of the space or moment, represent an opportunity to observe oneself from an external perspective, and help**

to make visible: nonverbal communication, simultaneous actions, and complex interactions (not only dyadic ones).

All observations were shared with the whole team before the reflections step, so that each professional could read the observations from the others.

The **reflection moments** allowed for the sharing of different points of view regarding the observations of critical spaces. During this meeting, the strengths and difficulties of the critical spaces were discussed and the whole team thought about possible changes. In these reflection meetings, the whole team watched some significant pieces of video together in order to stimulate reflections, insight and awareness about the educational practices.

A teacher/the group of teachers. The reorganization of services related to the Covid-19 pandemic involved a lower sharing of teachers during the educational day and fewer opportunities to share educational and design aspects. For this reason, this reflection moments represented a significant opportunity for the teachers and the pedagogical coordinators to feel group.

In the course of the **re-design phase** several projects for changes are emerged; the professionals shared different ideas in order to re-design some aspects of critical space concerning both the space and the relationships. In particular the re-organization of the Service due to Covid-19,made it necessary to modify certain practices, such as the moments of welcoming at the beginning of the school day and rejoining at the end, the materials and the organization of groups. This reorganization involved a different way of dealing with the presence of parents in the service, a stricter division of children into groups ("the bubbles"), and less flexible and shared use of spaces. Changes were therefore necessary, they were imposed by the situation, and the working group did not have time to think about these changes, elaborate them and design them together. It was a great challenge. The path the "Space in Mind", reshaped and adapted, turned out to be an important opportunity to reflect on these new spaces and moments, and to observe what happens in these new contexts. For example for the welcoming moment the new questions are: How to make "border spaces" (doors) "inclusive and welcoming spaces"?

After the redesign **phase, the changes were implemented** by the team in various ways and subsequently the impact on children, teachers and possibly parents (welcoming space) was observed, again through observations conducted through the same observation grid.

For example, concerning the welcoming space,

1. In Gelsomino ECEC Center, the lockers near the entrance of the class were moved along the corridor and between the lockers a "table of autonomy" with seats was placed. Now when children arrive with their parents, they have more space near the entrance and children are incentivized to learn to manage themselves during dressing tasks.
2. In Maria Vittoria ECEC Center, a dan called "cucu" that was placed near the stained glass of the entrance and that prevented the view between the children inside the class and those who are arriving, was moved to another area of the class. Now children in the class and children who are arriving can see each other and there's less crowd at the door.
3. In both ECEC centers, the class space was reorganized by creating centers of interest recognizable by children. So the class areas became more readable for children, supporting their autonomy in moving from one area to another and playing more quietly and neatly.

Through reflections on the space with the team
we have decided to move one of the lockers from the entrance to the corridor

Through reflections on the space with the team
we have decided to create some centers of interest near the door

2.3.2 What changed: Impact on children, families and professionals

PROFESSIONALS

Professionals have shared several changes generated by the CPD path, both at the level of awareness and at the level of practices concerning the educational space.

Mindshift

-Awareness of the role of space in educational actions has increased

-A greater awareness of the point of view of children and families on space and greater enhancement of the involvement of the group of children in the design of spaces emerged

-Awareness of the possibility to involve families not only to give them feedback about their children's experience but also to explore their point of view on pedagogical, social and educational issues at an in-depth level (e.g.: through focus groups)

-Teachers have experienced the importance of adopting a narrative observational method guided by common lenses. The common observation grid helped the comparison on a given space and above all the verification of the effectiveness of the changes introduced at the time of the re-design

-The team became able to focus more on the aspect of Edu and to make children's learnings visible and communicable to colleagues and parents.

-It emerged the concept of "The "beauty" that educates", that is the attention to designing spaces that respond to functionality but also to the "pleasure of living"

- Video observation has been recognized as a very effective, engaging and stimulating training method

- A redefinition of the concept of inclusion of families emerged: inclusion as respect for the different ways of each parent to "stay" and "enter" the educational space.

-The possibility of "welcoming" also on the door is now contemplated, as the door is recognized as a meaningful place that can also lived as a welcoming "place"

-The ability to observe the welcoming and reunion moments as "triadic relationships" between parent, child and teacher

-The ability to think not as a single teacher but as a group of teachers: the importance of coordination between teachers in a given space to allow children to feel safe and be able to explore it independently.

-The concept of "The City is my class": the team of teachers had the opportunity, thanks to the comparison with the practices of other countries, to reflect more on the relationship between school and territory and on the opportunities to organize activities and proposals for children in the neighboring areas of the city:

Educational Practices

-the spaces of the routines (hygiene room) have been made even more child-friendly, in order to promote autonomy

-the welcome/reunion spaces have become more flexible (welcome moments happens also on the door)

- the welcome/reunion spaces have become more comfortable for parents (more supporting surfaces, more sitting...), changes in furnishings have been introduced to allow greater autonomy for children and at the same time more space for intimate greetings between caregivers and children.

- several documentations have been introduced on the autonomy and learning of children, making it visible to parents

Professionals say:

> *"The lockers were moved along the corridor and between them a little table with seats was placed. So when children arrive with their parents they have more space and children learn to manage themselves."*

> *"The space of the class has improved: moving some furniture and the kitchen corner has helped children move better and play neatly."*

FAMILIES

-Parents pay more attention to the spaces of the educational context

-They feel more involved in the design of the spaces

-They feel more involved in the educational projects (e.g.: EDUCAS)

-They dedicate more time to the welcoming moment, they feel less "having to hurry"

-They tend to promote children's autonomy more

Professionals say:

> *"Parents often asked us about EDUCAS project: we interpreted this as a need of families to be more involved in the educational paths. We talked about the development of our CPD Path and many parents were very interested in it."*

> *"The presence of pedagogical documentation on children's autonomies has been important not only for children but for parents too, as they promote children's autonomy more while they often tended to do some actions that the children could do on their own"*

CHILDREN

-Children recognize the different spaces more

-Children move with more autonomy and safety in all spaces of the section

-The children who are in the class while others are arriving or leaving are active participants and involved by the adult in the welcoming and reunion moments of friends

-Children show greater autonomy

-They have internalized some rules that were previously tiring (storing games)

-They learned to regulate their emotions (even positive, e.g.: enthusiasm)

-They have internalized the changes in practices, spaces, games due to the pandemic

Professionals say:

"Now, during the welcoming moment, the children in the class continue to play quietly, being aware that the teacher is ready to come if they need him/her"

«I feel calmer now, because although paying attention to the welcoming moment, I know that the situation in the class "behind" me is well organized and there is no need to intervene"

3 Evaluation and sustainability

3.1 The success factors

The reflections carried out during the case study and the contents that emerged in thefinal focus group conducted with the teachers of the two ECEC centers involved, highlighted different success factors that promoted some of the changes mentioned above.

1. The observation conducted in a **more systematic** way of delimited spaces considered by the team to be critical
2. The use of **"common observation lenses"**(observation grid)
3. The possibility of a change of spaces, not imposed from above, but **shared and negotiated** in the group starting from the observation of the real practices and relationships that were implemented in that particular space.
4. **Repeated and planned** moments of reflection and exchange between all the teachers of the ECEC centers and with the UNIPR researchers. These have been precious places where "you can stop doing and think about doing"
5. The use of **video-observation,** not so familiar to all teachers, allowed the possibility of re-seeing and seeing each other together and from several different points of view.
6. **The direct observation of the UNIPR researchers,** alongside that of the teachers, allowed the introduction of another point of view, completely "external" to the centers that helped to read the complexity by introducing new elements and perspectives in the reading of the spaces and what was observed happening in the spaces.
7. Taking the time to **test together** the effectiveness of the changes introduced in space, in terms of influences on the development of children, families and teachers.
8. The periodic comparison with the reflections and CPD paths of the **other countries involved** in the project, both during the direct visits of the other ECEC centers (Belgium) and in the proposed training activities (in Italy, Belgium and Lithuania).
9. Identifying appropriate **methods to capture children's** and families' point of view on space has helped teachers to decentralise their vision and better understand what changes to implement.
10. The fact that **some meetings for comparison** between the working groups of the two different centers (requested by teachers) allowed professionals to reflect on how "similar educational challenges" (e.g.: the setting of welcoming space during pandemic) had been managed in very

different ways from the point of view of both the organization of the spaces and the underlying thoughts.

11. Feeling **"taken care of" and recognized** as teachers in their daily practices

3.2 The challenges of the process

Throughout the CPD Path process, "challenges" have been set up and faced in different ways:

1. Surely the **Covid 19 pandemic** has represented a great challenge that has prevented the observation of children in the ECEC spaces during the period of school closure. Also at the reopening, the possibilities of observing and video-observing daily practices have been reduced. However, this challenge was faced by working a lot on the psychological experience (emotions, thoughts, expectations) of teachers with respect to the changes introduced with the pandemic in terms of space, practices, organization of materials, furnishings, etc..

1. Another important challenge, that emerged through comparison with other countries, was to realize how often the **learning objectives underlying the Italian practices and pedagogical design of spaces and materials were not so clearly and explicitly understood** by teachers of Belgium and Lithuania. This "criticality" has led a great stimulus for the educational teams of the two Italian centers involved in the project, encouraging them to focus more on these aspects, at the level of both reflections and educational and design practices.

1. Another critical aspect was the **turn over of the teachers,** some of whom could not follow the path continuously. This challenge was partly overcome by trying to document with written and photographic reports (minutes of the meetings, videos, photos, etc ...) all the steps and phases provided by the CPD path (identification of critical spaces, observational reports, shared reflections, redesign, etc ..).

1. The **"isolation"** that teachers experienced after the reopening, due to the re-organization of the classes in "bubbles" (little groups of children) who cannot come in contact with other "bubbles", prevented a total sharing of children's activities and also exchanges between teachers of different sections during the day. According to the teachers, this challenge has transformed the EDUCAS CPD path into a virtual place (the meetings in this period took place online) even more generative and awaited for sharing and comparison between professionals.

1. **The welcoming moment "at the door"** during pandemic represented a very challenging situation for both groups of teachers, at the beginning. The teachers perceived not to welcome parents and children in the right way, with this new reorganization, and they feared that families might experience a sense of non-inclusion. These concerns have been brought into the CPD path and the space of welcoming and reunion moments has become an urgent theme of the last period of work.

1. **The working times** needed for the implementation of the CPD path and above all the time required for teachers to make observations, draw up observation grid reports and read the observations of the colleagues, have been a great commitment for the teachers. Nevertheless, from the final evaluation conducted through focus groups, it emerged that having marked the times in advance (times of observations, times of sharing and times of reflection) and the wealth of stimuli that

emerged from the path represented fundamental resources for the involvement and motivation of teachers.

3.3 The sustainability

The stakeholder group has represented an important resource to link the CPD path and the territory, since the stakeholders belong to institutions that deal with the management of ECEC centers in Italy, both at a regional and national level. Through the meetings with these "critical friends" it was in fact possible to build a "territorial network" that allowed the dissemination of knowledge of the EDUCAS project and specifically of the CPD path carried out in the two Italian ECEC centers. It is expected that this diffusion alongside the weaving of an initial territorial network, can be a generative ground of new projects along the lines of EDUCAS outcomes.

In addition, the **multiplier event** held in Italy on June 21 with the aim of spreading the reflections, methodologies and processes of change derived from the CPD path saw the participation of about 200 professionals, including teachers and coordinators. This seemed a good assumption of sustainability of the project in the future. In fact, some educational structures present at this final event have requested the **possibility of deepening** the methods and contents treated in Italian CPDP path "The Space in Mind" by activating similar training courses.

Another significant aspect, in the perspective of sustainability and continuity of the project is also the fact that the Social Cooperative Pro.Ges, extremely satisfied with the path taken, especially in terms of results achieved, said it wanted **to be able to propose the same experience,** in terms of methods used and processes activated, **also to other ECEC centers 0-6.**

3.4 Contextualized implications for policy and practice

1. To promote further, in line with regulations (Law 107/2015; Law Decree 65/2017), the **construction of children's** poles that include adjacent nursery and kindergartens, in order to allow the realization of the "integrated system 0-6 years": poles for children that can allow the realization of a pedagogical project of continuity, and an integrated working group that includes professionals who deal with both the 0-3 years and the 3-6 age group.
2. To encourage **flexible spaces** in the design of new ECEC centers, in order to adapt the environment to the different needs of children: sliding doors, easily moveable furnishings, etc...
3. To provide in the new buildings also **adequate spaces for adults,** both professionals and parents, in order to encourage both the inclusion of families in the centers and the possibility of activating cultural and social initiatives of public interest, for citizenship or the neighborhood, about issues related to early childhood development, education and care.
4. Create a **multidisciplinary team when working on (re)building ECEC** spaces/infrastructures: architects, pedagogues, families, ECEC staff (and the voices of children), should think/work together in a participatory way when wanting to re-structure existing ECEC spaces or building new ones. It is important that a clear shared socio-pedagogical vision gives identity to the ECEC spaces/infrastructure. Without a clear vision, it's very likely that the precious available budget for renovation goes (at least partly) wasted.

5. To pay attention to **the transitional spaces between the indoors and the outdoors,** in order to favor the realization of educational projects with specific objectives that provide for the possibility of being carried out both in internal and external spaces. The possibility of connection between the indoors and the outdoors is an aspect that has emerged to be very significant, both for children and for families.
6. To invest more in the **construction of outdoor spaces based on** clear and explicit **pedagogical projects** that provide for the possibility of both structured and unstructured activities, the latter capable of stimulating the autonomy and exploration activity of children.
7. Further encourage the use of **natural and unstructured materials** that allow the development of children's creativity and inventiveness.

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