

Italy

Auspices

Policy responsibility for ECEC in Italy is split between the Ministry of Education for the *scuola materna* (nursery school) catering for the 3-6 year olds, and the regions and municipalities for the *asili nidi* catering for infants and toddlers. A proposal has been made to give responsibility for the whole age group to the Ministry of Education, and is still under discussion in Parliament. For the moment, the Ministry of Education is responsible for educational orientation, quality inspection and evaluation of the *scuola materna* system, but its regulations are not necessarily applied in non-state *scuole materne*. At local level, in response to community demand, municipalities may provide and operate services, using part of their own funding. The region supplements municipal budgets, through the distribution of the employer's 1% contribution to social funds (devoted, in principle, to infants and toddlers). The region is also responsible for financing buildings and training.

Developments

Though reaching only 6% of children (figures from 1991 Census), several municipal ECEC programmes in Italy for children under 3 are recognised as outstanding. Because of divisions of competencies, these programmes are predominantly regional and local. A concerted effort has not yet been made to bring successful programmes to scale across Italy, although a significant proportion of the children in the age-group 1-3 years are looked after outside the home by relatives and informal childminders. Some important twinning initiatives between municipalities in the north and south of Italy have been launched, with the aim of sharing knowledge and expertise in creating and managing ECEC projects. A major national initiative is the current reform in staff training. In the future, co-ordinators of the *asili nidi* will have a university degree, and other contact staff will require a three-year tertiary diploma.

Developments for the 3-6 year olds are also far-reaching. Again, a staff-training reform is under way: in the *scuola materna* system, and teachers will have in the future a university degree. Enrolment rates in the *scuole materne* are climbing steadily higher, and achieve mass participation, over 90% of the 3-6 age group. The Ministry of Education, municipalities and the private providers are moving toward greater collaboration. A large number of *scuole materne* are now under State control (52%, but enrolling over 57% of children), and enjoy more autonomous management (Bassanini Law). Many *scuole materne*, funded initially through the ASCANIO project, have experimented with new interpretations of school organisation, curriculum methodologies and evaluation techniques.

Context

Expenditure on ISCED Level 0 institutions as a percentage of GDP: 0.4%.

Labour force rates: in 1999, 63% of women aged 25-34 years participated in the labour market. 17.1% worked part-time.

Parental leave: five months maternity leave at 100% earnings and 10 months parental leave at 30% earnings. Incentives are also offered to employers to provide opportunities for part-time or flexible work hours to parents of young children.

Attention to children with special educational needs before their entry into school: a) *Children with disabilities:* general inclusion of children with disabilities into ECEC and schools is the rule, with reduced group sizes and special needs teachers at their disposal; b) *Children from low-income families:* the child poverty level in Italy is 20.5% after redistribution (OECD average is 11.9%), but the national figure covers wide regional variations; c) *Ethnic and bilingual children:* The Ministry of Social Solidarity has increased investment and programmes for immigrant groups, estimated over one million, with many Moroccan, Albanian and Romany children at risk. It is reported that many immigrant children are on waiting lists – with Italian children – for entry into *scuole materne* in Rome and other large urban centres.

Provision

Three main types of provision are found in Italy:

i) The *asilo nido* for children under 3, which enrolls about 6% of children (enrolments are, in fact, declining), and is open 8-12 hours daily. Most of the provision is sponsored and funded by municipalities, generally in the north of Italy, where levels of female work force participation and childcare provision reach northern European levels, e.g. the city of Bologna enrolls 30% of the age-group 0-3 years. Fees differ according to municipality and the ability of parents to pay, and range from 90-460 Euros monthly, that is, on average, 12% of disposable income.

ii) The *scuola materna* for the 3- to 6-year olds which enrolls in the year before entry into compulsory school (age 6) 95% of children. About 57% of *scuole materne* are now under the direct responsibility of the Ministry of Education. The private sector organises and operates 29% of *scuole materne*, most of which are confessional, and funded by parental fees and to some extent by the State and the regions. Municipalities fund and organise a further 14% of early education provision. The *scuola materna* offers a full day programme, from 8.30 a.m. to 16.30 p.m. from September to June, with municipal services generally offering summer programmes. Attendance at state and municipal *scuola materna* (combined, c.71% of provision) is free, except for meals. Modest fees are charged in the confessional *scuola materna* (18% of provision), as these services receive some regional funds. Other private providers (c. 11% of provision) may charge higher fees, but many private services are, in fact, non-profit.

iii) *Integrated municipal services*. Typically, these services combine care and education, and although they may remain institutionally divided, they are considered essentially as educational services for children 1-6. Among the best known are the municipal programmes of Reggio Emilia. Municipal services may also include new service typologies that are characterised by integrated, inter-generational approaches, with outreach to families and children who normally would not have opportunities to interact and socialise with others.

0-1 year: most care is parental, supplemented by informal family care.

1-3 years: children are looked after in the following ways: 27% home care; 48% relatives or informal care; 15% by a child-minder in the home; 6% in *asili nidi* (open full day for 11 months); and 2% each fathers and family care.

3-6 years: from 70%-90% of children (depending on region) attend *scuole materne* from 3 years, reaching a national coverage of over 96% in year 5-6.

Child-staff ratios: the established ratios are: 7:1 in the *nido*, 8:1 for complementary services outside the home, and 3:1 for services inside the home. Ratios are higher in the *scuola materna*: 20-28 children per teacher.

Staffing and training

At the moment, radical reforms are taking place, in the staff training field (see “Developments” above). In the *scuola materna*, teachers are currently paid at the same rates as primary teachers, and conditions of work are good. The State provides them with many opportunities for in-service training. Conditions for staff in the *nidi* are much less satisfactory. Although often as highly trained, these staff have less pay, longer working hours, less status and access to in-service training than teachers in the *scuola materna*. Limited opportunities for advancement can lead to high rates of turnover and little motivation to take on professional development courses.

OECD policy issues

Among the issues for policy attention identified by the OECD Review team for Italy were:

Understandings of childhood and ECEC: in terms of state intervention, the early childhood system in Italy has been focused most strongly on the 3-6 year olds. There is an urgent need for the State to take on greater responsibility to meet the needs of children under 3 and their parents. The recent extension of paid parental leave has been a significant step forward. Further support to municipalities to extend their integrated programmes would help to address the learning and socialisation needs of infants and toddlers, even when being cared for by a parent.

Co-ordination of administrations and services: fragmentation of responsibility has been a longstanding obstacle to the coherence of ECEC services in Italy. A need is perceived for increased co-ordination of policy formulation and planning both vertically (state, regional and municipal levels) and horizontally (across state, municipal and private providers). More collaborative projects between the different partners may be useful, e.g. the creation, both at national and regional levels, of a network of experts drawn from the different constituencies to guide the new teacher training or other initiatives.

The effectiveness of policy formulation and its actual outreach to the municipalities and regions: basic texts governing ECEC services are not necessarily applicable in parts of the private system. More effective monitoring of the system is needed. Standards need to be developed enabling internal evaluation and communication to the public as to how resources and services are managed. Integrated in-service training for administrators and teachers from the different networks is recommended.

After-school provision: the low provision of publicly-funded after-school and leisure-time care needs attention, particularly as in some parts of the country, non-state *scuole materne* and elementary schools are open only in the morning.

Dissemination of research and good practice: Italian early childhood educators have a wealth of knowledge about young children, and many Italian programmes are recognised world-wide for their high quality. To date, however, much of what has been learned in the various cities and schools in Italy has remained in those settings, to the benefit of small numbers of children and their families. In spite of the growing frequency of local, regional, and national conferences for teachers of the *asilo nido* and *scuola dell'infanzia*, there is still no nation-wide system for insuring that all Italian early childhood educators have access to the new understandings and innovations that have been developed in Italy.