

PROVISION OF CHILDCARE SERVICES IN REGGIO EMILIA, ITALY

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1. INTRODUCTION : PROVISION OF CHILDHOOD SERVICE IN ITALY, EMILIA ROMAGNA AND REGGIO EMILIA

Local policy has always been based on the premise that the quality of regional and local-community development depends in part on the provision, widespread availability and quality of services for families and individuals.

Services for individuals are essential for people's wellbeing and for social cohesion, which brings development and new jobs in addition to improving the balance in the distribution of wealth.

The development of a system of services (including crèches and nursery schools) dovetails with objectives of economic and social growth with a view to increasing the number of women in employment and enhancing their jobs; our region – Emilia Romagna - has already, some time ago, achieved and exceeded the goals set by the European Council for 2010.

Indeed, in the Province of Reggio Emilia, women already account for over 60% of the working population.

In Reggio Emilia, service development has always been a fundamental factor in public policy, which has succeeded in striking a complex, delicate balance. This balance has enabled early childhood facilities to offer both social and educational services, providing the necessary childcare facilities and, at the same time, fostering development, knowledge and personal fulfilment.

An educational community as such should provide for the social, cultural and emotional well-being of its members. A community should therefore strike a balance between individual requirements, multiculturalism, differing needs and economic sustainability.

What is the backdrop to regional and local policy, however? Italy is a country which is distinguished by its low expenditure on families with children. While in 2003, EU-15 countries spent an average of 2.2% of GDP on families with children, Italy spent less than 1%.

The birth rate in Italy is one of the lowest in Europe but, strangely, the number of women in employment is also on average among the lowest. Gender inequalities remain more marked than in other European countries: the bulk of caring roles fall to women.

As regards the provision of early childhood services, the Italian system is not uniform: there are major gaps in childcare facilities for 0-2 year-olds, while substantial provision is made for 3-5 year-olds.

1.1 Childcare provision for children aged 0 - 2

Until 2000, only 7% of children between 0 and 2 years old were enrolled in public facilities (the figure is now about 10%), as opposed to 11% in France, 24% in Finland, and between 40% (1 year-olds) and 80% (2-3 year-olds) in Sweden. In Italy, informal support, particularly part-time childcare provided by grandparents, fills many of the gaps left by inadequate service provision.

There are also substantial disparities between the different Italian regions. In the south of Italy, the proportion of service requirements which are met for children aged 0-2 varies between 1% and 5%. In the northern regions, the figure is higher, peaking at 25.5% in Emilia Romagna. However, even in more developed regions and local areas, a substantial part of demand is not met by public crèches. In Emilia Romagna, 5% of children of eligible age are on the waiting list to be enrolled in early childhood services. Demand for crèches continues to rise, in any case, because of the growing number of women in employment, the increasing doubts about childcare provided by the family and the declining availability of grandparents, more and more of whom are working.

1.2 Childcare provision for children aged 3-5

In Italy, **in the 3-5 age group**, almost all children have access to a public (state or municipal) or private (in some cases faith-based) facility. Nursery schools tend to be seen as an educational facility, unlike crèches, which are supposed to be first and foremost childcare facilities. Developmental psychologists continue to disagree over the best age to start communal interaction. Some authors emphasise the impact of communal facilities on the development of children's cognitive, motor and social abilities, whereas others believe that this impact is highly disputable and that individual care from the mother or a baby-sitter is much more effective. In actual fact, the deciding factors are not the type of care but the quality thereof (whether it is communal, individual or provided by the family), and the balance struck between time spent in the family and time spent outside it. Many studies reveal that high-quality care outside the family has a positive impact on the learning abilities of children from poorer backgrounds, because the facilities give them attention and stimulation appropriate for their age and needs which their families do not. This means they start compulsory schooling with less of a disadvantage with respect to their peers.

Welfare policy on early childhood and educational facilities for children in this age range must not overlook social and economic trends affecting regional society which require an increasingly strong, stable partnership to be forged over time between regions, local authorities and private non-profit operators.

2. THE EXPERIENCE OF REGGIO EMILIA

In recent years, the Emilia Romagna region has experienced the reversal of a trend: the birth-rate, which was falling in many areas, has now substantially picked up.

In Reggio Emilia, where the trend is even more accentuated and consistent, between 1995 and 2005 the number of children aged between 0 and 2 years old rose by over 5,500, from 10,232 to 15,753 (+ 54%). The 3-5 year-old age-group followed a similar trend, with numbers rising from 10,338 to 14,969 (+ 44%) over ten years.

As has already been said, the local authorities in our Province have provided a system of social schemes which have enhanced the lives of many individuals and families and brought social cohesion and stability, focusing on quality, training and innovation. This system is characterised by the creation of integrated services, not least by means of joint development of networks of systems, where public and private bodies, third-sector and private non-profit operators, self-help organisations, families and associations work together not just in management but also in planning and development.

In this connection, it should be mentioned that the Province of Reggio Emilia has 130 facilities for 0-2 year-olds overall: 53 municipal crèches, 19 associated¹ private crèches, 30 nursery groups² and crèches run by the *Federazione Italiana Scuole Materne* (Italian federation of infant schools), two private crèches, 25 municipal supplementary facilities and one approved private supplementary facility. This is in addition to a pilot scheme of home-visiting teachers and small home groups in small upland municipalities. There are very few municipalities which are still without services, and many are introducing new projects to implement them.

29.34% of the total number of children in that age group frequent facilities for 0-2 year-olds, a figure approaching the 33% set at Barcelona.

Provision of nursery schools for children aged 3-5 (state, municipal, private with equal status) is particularly extensive, with room for 91.15% of the children who apply.

All this has been made possible by a combination of factors: a culture of mutual support attentive to women's needs which has developed since the end of the Second World War; interest from officials in local municipal and provincial authorities; and the existence of proper regional regulations providing for funding.

All these factors have contributed to the development and enhancement of many different services, including crèches, new kinds of childcare facilities and nursery schools (municipal, state and private with equal status), which are seen as facilities fostering the personal development and well-being of the individual from his or her earliest years.

At the same time, they provide tangible support for the (widely differing) needs and skills of parents, with whom they share responsibility for children's growth. They offer places where children can interact with each other and enjoy themselves, and a practical response to more general needs to enhance the region's social fabric.

3. "CITIES FOR BOYS AND GIRLS"

For a long time, the Province of Reggio Emilia has been known for its strong commitment to this area. This is borne out by the way some of the province's municipalities, including the provincial capital, have joined the **"Cities for boys and girls"** project.

The project invites leaders of local authorities to change their philosophy on the urban environment, **taking children as a parameter for sustainable development and urban improvement**. Rather than introducing new early childhood services, it invites administrations to see things from a child's perspective, to be able to take on board and respond to the needs of all sectors of society. The premise is that **an urban environment which caters for children will provide a better quality of life for all people**. Along with officials, children lead the way in this project as they can help adults to see the mistakes made when developing cities.

"Cities for boys and girls" proposes to set up a municipal think-tank which will work on two principal measures:

1 Which have an agreement with the public sector.
2 For 2-3 year-olds, attached to nursery schools.

- giving children a chance to express their views, so that they can play an active part in the urban improvement process, by setting up a children's council - a consultative body of the think-tank which will make officials aware of children's views, and by involving groups of children who, together with experts, will study and plan potential uses for areas of cities under development;
- meetings between children and the municipal council; teaching adults to listen to children, to take into account their ideas and proposals, through training programmes for officials, experts and the various people who work with children.

The aim of these measures is genuine improvement of the urban environment. Taking children as a parameter means democratically facilitating the mobility of all people, from the smallest upwards, making streets the meeting places that they once were, taking care of the aesthetic aspects of cities, starting with suburbs, seeing security as to do with getting people involved rather than as a matter of defence, etc.

The primary objective of the project is to make it safe for children to go out alone, at least to travel to and from school. Although this initiative is only an initial response to the need for children to be self-sufficient, its implementation requires the involvement of many sectors of society (children, families, teachers, the elderly, the police, shopkeepers etc.) and far-reaching, if gradual, improvements in our cities.

Local authorities are being asked by the community both to meet the need for a **wider range of services** and to continually **enhance these services, make them more flexible and customise them**, to ensure widely available, high-quality educational facilities for children.

It is this **demand from the community** and its **high expectations** which are laying down a clear path for our local community's development model, which should combine:

- high levels of prosperity and economic growth;
- increasing numbers of women in employment, among the highest in Italy (over 60%);
- new elements in social provision, social cohesion and endeavours to meet the expectations and needs of individuals, families and children.

Access to an early childhood service **is often seen as:**

- **a citizen's right**, a social and educational facility which is essential for families, whose prospects and those of the children themselves are diminished **when it is not available**.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

To sum up, the confirmed increase in the young population in our region over the past 10 years and the demographic forecasts predicting substantial growth in the coming years require officials and experts to make political choices and related investments which will at least maintain the quality of socio-educational services provided to assist new generations in their development and to support parents in their tasks.

This prompts a number of questions:

What responses are expected from local authorities by the growing numbers of families with small children who have new kinds of requirements and are making new demands?

How can we address the demands for new services taking into account international agreements and EU recommendations?

What new organisational/management procedures can be established to continue to invest in early childhood services when funding looks set to fall? Who else can be involved? What partnerships can be forged? What quality guarantees should remain inviolable in an overhauled system of services?