

# **Leadership and Organizational Roles in Ensuring Educational Continuity in the 0-6 Integrated System of Early Childhood Education and Care: A Study in Milan, Italy**

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In a contemporary era defined by substantial economic and social disparities, it is necessary to guarantee that every child has access to high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). The Italian national education system has established the 0-6 integrated education system as a pivotal element, with the aim of ensuring equitable opportunities for children's growth and education, while simultaneously addressing and surmounting existing inequalities and obstacles, as stipulated by law 65/2017.

The recent pandemic crisis was grafted onto a system of 0-6 services that was highly unequal with regard to age group, social class, and geographic location. The suspension of the 0-6 services during the pandemic crisis, which lasted longer in Italy than elsewhere, emphasised their significance, given the overburdening of parents and the educational loss endured by children, particularly the most disadvantaged. Now, in the unprecedentedly expansive post-pandemic conjuncture, a unique combination of factors is taking place. The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) allots, at last, considerable attention and resources to the expansion of 0-6 services, recognising the value of investing in equal opportunities for the youngest as well as in supporting female employment, whose growth can serve as a recovery engine. The European Commission's Child Guarantee Recommendation (June 2021) identifies these services as privileged instruments to decrease child poverty and social exclusion.

The introduction of the law supporting the creation of 0-6 integrated systems (law 65/2017), in which nurseries and kindergartens are combined within the same organisational boundaries, triggered further reflections about the continuity and accessibility of these services. To facilitate the transition, coordination among leadership roles is a necessary condition that primarily involves top leaders and is facilitated by middle management positions. While the expansion of services through the allocation of PNRR resources creates new opportunities for children, families, and workers, it also raises significant issues related to the organisation, programming, and design of these services. The existence of alternative ownership models makes the picture even more scattered but provides the possibility to compare leadership roles across private-, municipal-, and governmental-led nurseries and kindergartens.

Starting from these premises, the main question addressed by the current research is the following: How can leadership roles best interact to ensure educational continuity

as well as the highest quality and accessibility of ECEC services in the 0-6 integrated system?

In this context, educational continuity is intended as the creation of a homogenous path along the preschool educational services (from nurseries to kindergartens to primary schools), also in connection with other services on the territory, by encouraging service synergies.

The research is based on a pilot study in the city of Milan (Italy) and uses a qualitative methodological framework, in which semi-structured interviews and site visits have been adopted for data collection. Several roles have been interviewed in the study, ranging from the municipality managers in charge of 0-6 services to private- and public-school leaders. Nurseries and kindergartens involved in the study are located in the same neighbourhood characterised by averagely low socio-economic conditions and educational poverty, factors that make the intervention particularly meaningful in light of the intended aim of greater equality of opportunity.

The study shows how accessibility and quality are interdependent dimensions and how private and public ECEC services can be compared and transformed towards the creation of an integrated system for 0-6 years old children. The study contributes to the literature by providing theoretical and empirical insights into the dilemmas and critical issues related to the implementation of the 0-6 integrated system at a local scale before reaching a national level.