

**Nuovi orizzonti:
Un'analisi comparativa in Italia e in Spagna**

**Bridges of the Horizon:
A Comparative Examination in Italy and Spain.**

Ema Di Petrillo

Universidad de Burgos, Department of Health Science, Burgos, Spain

Graziella Falcone

Universidad de Burgos, Department of Health Science, Burgos, Spain



ABSTRACT

The article proposes a comparison of early childhood education and care policies in Italy and Spain, with a focus on pedagogical coordination and service quality. In the process of aligning the European Union member directives, it is key to note the differences in how these countries manage early childhood education. The Italian model is based on integration and the sharing of responsibilities among various institutions, while the Spanish system is relatively decentralised, with considerable differences at the regional level. The findings highlight the necessity to evaluate and adapt ECEC policies in order to provide equality of access as well as quality for all children.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Pedagogical Coordination, Quality Assurance, Inclusive Practices, Community Engagement

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Il contributo propone una comparazione tra le politiche di educazione e cura della prima infanzia italiane e spagnole, mettendo l'accento sul coordinamento pedagogico e sulla qualità dei servizi. Durante il processo di allineamento delle direttive tra i membri dell'Unione Europea, è particolarmente significativo evidenziare la differenziazione degli approcci tra i due Paesi. L'Italia ha adottato un modello basato sull'integrazione e sulla condivisione delle responsabilità tra diversi enti, mentre il sistema spagnolo è piuttosto decentralizzato con differenze a livello regionale. La ricerca si avvale di recenti modifiche legislative e di evidenze empiriche. I dati emersi evidenziano la necessità di valutare e adattare le politiche ECEC per garantire l'equità d'accesso e la qualità per tutti i bambini.

Parole Chiave: Educazione della Prima Infanzia, Coordinamento pedagogico, Quality Assurance - Assicurazione della Qualità, Pratiche Inclusive, Coinvolgimento della Comunità

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the European Union has prioritised the enhancement of early childhood education and care (ECEC) as a fundamental component of social and educational policy among its member states. This emphasis grows as more research proves that high-level early education can significantly influence a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development, laying the foundation for further academic achievements and successful learning throughout life (Bennet et al., 2012; Dumčius et al., 2014).

To establish a more permanent and sustainable ECEC system, Spain and Italy have both implemented significant reforms. The Spanish and Italian national governments strongly recognise that ECEC is a key component in reducing social disparities. Still, there are major differences in how both countries approach early childhood education, and these differences originate from distinctive social and cultural frameworks as well as from different historical paths. The legal framework in Italy is now evolving towards a standardised approach that favours collaboration among all of these groups, inclusive of local authorities, as well as schools and families.

On the contrary, Spain's decentralised education system permits regional variation in the implementation of policies and provision of services. It creates a heterogeneous landscape that has the potential to both stimulate and hinder access to quality ECEC. The article undertakes a comparative and detailed examination of the ECEC regulatory frameworks in Italy and Spain, with particular focus on educational management models lying at the very heart of these systems. It uses empirical research findings, recent legislative developments, and case studies for contextual validation through content analysis.

2. The Importance of ECEC in Social Policy

Studies on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) most often associate it with the policies of social equity and include high-quality programs as a means component in reducing the impact of socio-economic factors in achieving unhindered equal educational outcomes (Nores & Fernandez, 2018). This is in complete cohesion with several policy documents that have been reported

practices of the European Union by the Member States (European Commission, 2017). The integration of ECEC within broader community development programs emphasises both assistance to children in realising their full potential and the developmental effects thereof. Early childhood education lays the foundation for future learning desires. There is a desire for lifelong learning and development in early childhood. They become some sort of 'pre-competencies' for primary schooling that eventually should pervade them with a love to learn throughout life. The ECEC program will enable the development of critical thinking, creativity, and social skills under a nourishing environment. The program included positive high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) associations between children's later achievements, social competence, emotional regulation, and academic performance with larger household incomes and better-educated parents (Eadie et al., 2021). Viewing results like these, one can conclude that providing early childhood education is not just an educational policy issue but rather crucial for the future workforce and social fabric.

Providing good-quality ECEC for all children is the way forward to reduce disparities and achieve social cohesion. Moreover, families and communities have a significant role in shaping ECEC. Thus, involving families as active participants in the educational process proves more effective in the success of ECEC programs (Otero-Mayer et al., 2021). Children tend to prosper when families come together, as they receive support both at home and in the educational setting. More explicitly, this means that, besides enhancing children's learning, good familial-community partnerships foster goodwill by forming a solid network for supporting holistic child development; they also strengthen cultural ties (Balduzzi, 2021). In conclusion, the role of ECEC in social policy extends beyond short-term outcomes; it also yields long-term benefits, known as societal benefits, which contribute to the well-being of both individuals and the broader community. This factor will determine the success of the Italian and Spanish implementation of the ECEC reform as a transformative social policy.

2.1 A comparison of the legislative frameworks of Italy and Spain

Legislative frameworks remain one of the critical factors in delivering services for early childhood and in the quality of educational experiences. In Italy, reforms have led to the establishment of an integrated early childhood education system, as outlined in Legislative Decree DL 65/2017. This marks a significant shift in the philosophy governing early childhood education within the nation. The decree emphasises a coherent system covering care and education for the 0-6 age group, giving recognition to the interrelationship of these areas in holistic development (Lazzari, 2022).

The Italian model places local authorities in planning and managing Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services at the core of cooperation among municipalities, schools, and families to adjust the service to both children's and communities' needs. In such a cooperative process, the model allows room for regional regulations to adapt any program's implementation by emphasising specific features of each area concerned. Novel ideas on young children's education can be adequately supported through such incidental elaboration.

On the contrary, there is a very high degree of decentralisation of the legislative framework for ECEC in Spain. Every autonomous community has the competence to establish and apply its educational policies, based on the Organic Law on Education (LOE, 2006), which was later codified in the General Law on Education, known as LOMLOE (2020). These, according to Sánchez-Moreno (2021), outline the general principles and objectives of early childhood education in Spain, emphasising inclusiveness, quality, and adequacy of education, as well as critical equity in access. The quality of ECEC is greatly affected by these legislative frameworks. In its general objectives, the integrated system of Finland fosters collaboration as a core operating culture among the various sectors within the system.

It is within this precisely defined program that DL 65/2017 training guidelines in Italy necessitate pedagogical coordinators to organise and pursue

cooperation and communication between teachers, parents, and local authorities. The government will share common goals more closely with kindergartens through documents on the quality system in various aspects of pre-primary education. Some of the significant funding programs initiated by the Italian government are aimed at improving the quality of early childhood education and care, especially in the most under-resourced communities, as an indication of their genuine commitment to both equity and excellence (Balduzzi, 2021).

The decentralised approach adopted by Spain presents both opportunities and challenges. It can be lobbied within a decentralised setting to address individual needs in a particular community, but disparities in quality regarding ECEC services will be somewhat extreme. Some autonomous communities have successfully implemented quality assurance mechanisms and quality education, preservice and in-service pedagogy. Others cannot mobilise such resources and pedagogical infrastructure, resulting in a fragmented system that may hinder educational equity (Molina & García, 2022).

The differences in the quality of ECEC across Spain's autonomous communities harbour deeper ramifications, particularly for the vulnerable population. Research has already proved that children coming from families with a disadvantaged background are exposed to a lower quality of educational settings, hence exacerbating the prevailing inequalities (Dumčius et al., 2014). In the lack of a strong national Early Childhood Education and Care plan in Spain, less rich regions may be assumed to receive support and resources as well as more affluent regions, and consequently highlight disparities in developmental outcomes.

The scenario also implies that when governance of the ECEC is decentralised in Spain, it may be accompanied by problems with application quality standards. This factor leaves educators, for instance, without the professional development opportunities through which they could upgrade their practice. There is no single common standard; without a uniform framework, the quality of teaching varies, and consequently, the quality of children's educational experience also varies.

Today, the two countries must meet their population requirements while respecting European directives on ECEC and ensuring full adaptation to their systems. The Italian Government argues for an integrated model that strengthens large-scale partnerships among stakeholders and fosters pedagogical milestones for high-quality learning services in all regions, including Spain. Quality standards have to be established at the national level, making a vocational training support system a requirement, reducing inequalities and guaranteeing consistency in ECEC service supply..

They should also conduct ongoing research to assess the impacts of their policies on early childhood education and care. By starting with successes and identifying best practices, makers can develop fact-based plans aimed at improving the quality and access to early childhood education, whereby weaker groups will benefit, but also raise the level of ECEC systems in Italy and Spain as a whole.

3. A Multi-faceted Exploration of Cooperative Pedagogical Practices

The pedagogical coordination models practised in Italy and Spain have a significant impact on the effectiveness of early childhood services. This involves the leadership pedagogical coordination task of encouraging the partnership among teachers, families, and the local community in Italy. Pedagogical actions should respond to the needs of the local area. However, national directives should also define the actions of these coordinators (Lazzari, 2020).

This model offers ample opportunities for the continuous training of teachers because it facilitates a process of reflective teacher collaboration and the enhancement of high-quality pedagogical experiences. In Italy, the pedagogical coordination model emphasises the development of close relationships among different participants in the education ecosystem. The work of fostering better group effort fosters an inviting community that motivates people to participate, particularly in preschools' involvement with them. Families, teachers, and local leaders form an innovative yet traditional system by sharing decisions on how best to address children's as well as families' evolving

requirements within a dynamic context; hence, they support the transformation needs for kids and families.

A key factor in pedagogical coordination is continuous professional development for educators within the context of contemporary pedagogical theories and practices. It enables educators to be adaptive and knowledgeable. In Italy, the training and support opportunities for educators are usually organised at the municipal level, thereby permitting a wide network of such opportunities to be formed. Educators can attend workshops and also have the possibility of participating in peer observation and collaboration learning communities (Fonsén et al., 2023).

These initiatives not only lead to improved quality in early childhood education but also foster innovation and reflective practice among educators. In Spain, though, the manner of professional development is uneven. Due to the devolved nature of the education system, some areas have robust plans for training and support. In contrast, others suffer from resource allocation woes and face an additional burden of administration (Egan et al., 2021).

This leaves an open professional competence gap for educators that eventually finds its way into the total quality package of ECEC services.

This shift is necessary to ensure that all settings, regardless of their resources and administrative challenges, have access to the high-quality career development opportunities they deserve. Community engagement is also a significant factor in teaching teamwork. The emphasis in Italy is on building strong links between pre-schools and communities to create a supportive climate where families feel involved in their children's education.

Programs which help parents participate, such as family groups and area shows, offer opportunities for sharing news and collaboration between families and teachers.

This improves children's learning, at the same time, it strengthens community bonds and eventually leads to a cohesive social environment. On the other hand, opportunities and challenges for community engagement are provided by Spain's decentralised system. Some regions are capable of developing initiatives that inform and involve parents, children or wards regarding

education. Others struggle due to a lack of adequacy, both in material terms as well as organisational support (Thorell et al., 2021).

Such activities are largely dependent on the capability of local leaders and the resources available to support them. For instance, where there is good collaboration between community-centred and schooling, families take an interest in education, and academic outcomes improve. The socio-economic environment in which pedagogical coordination occurs is another critical perspective. Both Italy and Spain have considerable disparities to overcome in the high-quality provision of ECEC for children from less fortunate backgrounds, as well as in general

In Italy, the unified approach to ECEC allows targeted interventions addressing the needs of at-risk families who eventually receive the support and resources required (Majcen & Drvodelić, 2022). The government's attention to fair access to quality education is evident through policies that allocate extra resources to underprovided areas, thereby improving social fairness. Spain's decentralised model, however, can bring out differences in wealth. The way local governments allocate resources and deliver services means that children in low-income areas may face challenges in accessing quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services.

Solving these problems requires working diligently to create equitable financial plans and support systems that enable all children to receive a quality education, regardless of their socioeconomic background (Johansson et al., 2021). In its final analysis, the pedagogical coordination models in Italy and Spain are likely to be effective for early childhood educational services. More specifically, while the Italian model is based on a continuously improving and relatively loosely integrated system, the Spanish model is based on a *de jure* decentralised system. The professional development of the workforce, community relationships, and socioeconomic differences should be accentuated to improve the quality of ECEC services to children in need in either country.

4. Quality and Access to Education Services

Education provision and production are the most crucial aspects of early childhood education and care, as they directly impact learning outcomes and overall well-being. Italy and Spain have, over time, continuously demonstrated difficulties in promoting equal access to quality education for children from the poorest families. This is essential for the provision and delivery of educational services. This anomaly, however, has not only undermined these provisions but has also placed quality education in jeopardy. In rural and economically depressed areas, inequality is exacerbated because resources are scarce and widely distributed. One of the main priorities of the Italian government is to periodically implement various funding programs aimed at improving the availability of services, especially in the most disadvantaged areas in the south. This initiative aims to address the historical inequalities that have long characterised the Italian educational landscape, particularly the significant disparities between the northern and southern regions. Not only does the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) emphasise the extension of service availability, but it also emphasises quality. Simply increasing place availability in early childhood settings is not enough to ensure favourable developmental outcomes for all children. Quality ranks first among the imperatives of the Italian ECEC framework because of the qualification and continuous professional development of educators. The Italian model requires that teachers working in these settings hold a degree in early childhood education and undergo continuous training to stay updated on contemporary pedagogical practices and research. The government guidelines establish an advocacy role for holistic education, integrating care and learning to create nurturing environments that enhance the child's emotional, cognitive, and social growth. On the contrary, the allocation of resources to Spain for accessibility assumed myriad forms. It is the most recent initiative taken to lower the economic barriers for families, allowing them to access ECEC services. The program, such as "Centros de Atención Infantil," provides low-threshold services that are easily accessible to those families in which the children may face challenges within the traditional educational setting (Otero-Mayer et al., 2021). Even though such inequalities are made concrete

through most efforts, for example, logistical ones, rural families have encountered an additional administrative obstacle that hinders them from securing the appropriate care and education their children require. Significant focus has been given to the entry of children with special educational needs in ECEC setups in both nations. Italy has taken significant steps in implementing inclusive practices, guided by the principles outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Italian model helps the integration of SEN kids within regular educational settings, underpinned by well-trained staff and resources (Balduzzi, 2021). With the help of inclusive practices, not only can the educational development of children with special needs be improved, but also an environment of acceptance and understanding can be fostered among all learners. In Spain, the commitment to inclusive education is similarly reflected in the LOMLOE, which emphasises the imperative development of educational environments that cater to different learning needs. These inclusive practices depend on effectiveness, which may vary significantly, typically contingent on local resources and the availability of related training opportunities for teachers. For instance, some regions can implement a special-needs children program within regular classrooms, whereas others cannot support them appropriately, thus forming a basis for disparities in education (Egan et al., 2021). One of the critical success factors for the continuous improvement of ECEC policies in Italy and Spain is maintaining a constant balance between quality and accessibility. It is essential to ensure that both countries establish systems that not only expand access to services but also reinforce quality standards. The priority should be establishing systems that promote quality services for holistic child development. The focus of future research should be to test the outcomes of the current initiatives. It should further identify best practices with scalability potential that can be customised in different contexts by member states, ensuring equal access to quality early childhood education for all children. In conclusion, the interaction between quality and access in ECEC services presents a complex issue that requires targeted policy interventions and investment. By addressing the specific challenges faced by each country and building on best practices in both

contexts, Italy and Spain can move closer to creating equitable and high-quality systems of early childhood education that serve the diverse needs of all children.

5. Results and best practices: case studies from a cross-national perspective

Good practices in the implementation of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services are evident through empirical evidence from both Italy and Spain. A considerable amount of success has been achieved in Italy through various innovation projects that focus on creating inclusive environments. These environments support the development of the whole child and involve the family in their educational process. One such endeavour is the Buon Inizio project, which fosters a sense of community around early childhood education. According to Balduzzi (2021), providing parents with the opportunity to work with teachers creates the conditions for building the capacity of families to support children's learning at home, including workshops, parenting classes, and community events that foster stronger relationships between families and schools. Results from the Buon Inizio project have proven quite successful. Greater parental engagement, improved communication between families and teachers, and better learning experiences for children have been reported. These results speak of the value of community participation in enhancing the quality of services provided in the ECEC. The project demonstrates, in practice, how an effective partnership between the family and the scholastic staff can yield positive results in improving the quality of education. The main result suggests the potential for such initiatives in additional regions of Italy and beyond. Community engagement proves to be very formative in developing effective practices in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Italy's project, *Buon Inizio*, has proven successful in involving parents actively in the education process, thereby creating a sense of belonging and investment among parents in the educational process. Research by Nores and Fernandez (2018) supports these findings, suggesting that family participation in early childhood education is associated with higher academic and social performance outcomes in children. It has enabled

the creation of a supportive network, providing benefits for children while simultaneously enhancing community ties, thereby fostering social cohesion. Save the Children has implemented the “Burgos Early Childhood Education Project” in Spain, setting a leading precedent for integrated Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). It initiates the establishment of collaborative networks between different services and needs, such as education, health, or social welfare, for very vulnerable families (Molina & García, 2022). The care model for the youngest children offers an approach that fosters a supportive environment, enabling children to develop both academically and socially. The Burgos Early Childhood Education Project demonstrates how integrated services can effectively address the diverse needs of families. The partnership between learning places and health and social services ensures holistic support to families in matters such as healthcare, social work, and parent guidance. This model not only makes it easy to access important services but also provides a way to monitor a child's development, ensuring that education and social needs are addressed simultaneously. Initial evaluations of the Burgos project have shown positive results in terms of child well-being, educational engagement, and family empowerment. Moreover, the initiative places great emphasis on collaboration, resulting in a supportive community that involves families in their children's education, thereby fostering and sustaining family empowerment. Partnerships within and among the sectors involved have created a powerful support system for families, helping to improve the effectiveness of ECEC services. Both the *Buon Inizio* and the *Burgos Early Childhood Education Project* emphasise the importance of collaboration, inclusivity, and quality among stakeholders in achieving successful outcomes in the ECEC sector. These projects should further demonstrate that, apart from schools, successful results in early childhood education depend on the active involvement of families and community organisations. The results should act as useful guides for the governments of Italy and Spain in further improving and finalising their policies for early childhood development. Both countries should leverage their experiences to learn valuable lessons from the case studies, which they

can then apply further to enhance the quality and accessibility of early childhood education. The case studies should be followed by continuous monitoring and evaluation to ensure that they effectively adapt to the evolving needs of children and families. Africa also requires that collaboration and inclusivity be maintained between Italy and Spain in efforts to develop their respective Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) systems, meeting not only European standards but also addressing the specific challenges these systems pose to stakeholders. In conclusion, the optimal practices from Italy and Spain offer valuable insights into the implementation of effective Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services. The successes of the *Buon Inizio* and *Burgos* projects highlight the importance of community involvement, integrated services, and collaborative networks in promoting high-quality early childhood education. As both countries work to enhance their Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) frameworks, these initiatives will serve as a model for effectively supporting children's development and empowering families through the educational process.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Italy and Spain have updated the requirements for enrolling in early childhood education programs. They've been working on this problem for a while to ensure the education is of high quality. The EU projects proposed may provide services while targeting vulnerable groups, which include low-income families, single-parent families, and families with special needs (Dumčius et al., 2014). Teachers in both countries should be adequately prepared to apply inclusive pedagogy, with a strong emphasis on continuous professional development for early childhood educators. Training programs should focus more on equipping teachers with pedagogical skills capable of addressing the diverse needs of children, specifically special educational needs and different cultural backgrounds (Balduzzi, 2021). An innovation and quality culture based on learning and sharing best practices between the two countries should be institutionalised so as to offer proper support for childcare in any area.

Research investment is another key recommendation for both Italy and Spain. Continuous funding for studies that review the effectiveness of existing ECEC policies and practices, in light of best practices and areas needing improvement, would provide comprehensive insights. The research should adopt a holistic perspective, encompassing the views of the educator, family, and child. Such comprehensive approaches will best inform policymakers on the complexity of early childhood education's impact on child development (Vandenbroeck et al., 2021).

Additionally, an increase in the participation rate of that segment of the public which gets informed through awareness campaigns about families' rights related to ECEC and associated services is observed (Molina & García, 2022). Such campaigns must aim at eliminating the stigma attached to support services, particularly for families from vulnerable groups. The campaigns aim to dismantle the stigma surrounding support services, building on the existing idea in both countries to encourage family participation in early childhood education and highlight its success. Lastly, Italy and Spain should continue to adopt an approach of inclusiveness and quality, applying it as they develop effective Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policies. The aims can be achieved by ensuring continuous improvement in ECEC services through regular checkups to verify compliance with existing quality standards. A robust monitoring and evaluation scheme would enable both countries to identify areas where their ECEC frameworks excel or lack depth, highlighting strengths that need reinforcement and weaknesses that require improvement with dispatch (Silva, 2019). For Italy and Spain to fully leverage the new ECEC systems going forward, what is the path?

They must ensure equity of access to and quality and community participation. Creating ECEC systems that are fully responsive both to the letter of European directives and, more importantly, to the specific needs of their populations-considering the vulnerability of specific populations, support for educators' continuous professional development, and fostering collaboration among regions. Lessons will be derived from the successful implementation of programs such as the Buon Inizio project in Italy and the Burgos Early

Childhood Education Project in Spain. By working for significant social and educational development changes over the long term, it is guaranteed that the children will be able to fully develop to their potential in a caring and supportive environment. Italy's Buon Inizio project and Spain's Burgos Early Childhood Education Project, among other similar programs, will provide lessons to ensure a long-term significant change at the social and educational levels. That would guarantee the full potential development of children within a caring and supportive environment.

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