



The *Tuscan Approach*  
to children's education  
an experience open  
to dialogue

Istituto  
degli  
Innocenti



Tuscan Approach Learning for  
Early childhood education and care

**TALE**





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# The *Tuscan Approach* to children's education

an experience open to dialogue

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# The *Tuscan Approach* to children's education an experience open to dialogue

edited by

*Aldo Fortunati and Arianna Pucci*

Istituto  
degli  
Innocenti



Lifelong  
Learning  
Programme



ΠΕΡΙΟΔΙΚΟ ΙΝΣΤΙΤΟΥΤΟΥ



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Tuscan Approach Learning for Early childhood ed.



# Summary

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an experience open to dialogue

## Presentation

The child education is not at the centre of interest of the politicians, although it is clear that the children themselves would allow us to design our future as a project open to possibilities, instead of being stuck into the everyday problems.

So, even though the economists tell us that investing in the early years is a marker to predict the future economic development and well-being in our societies and communities, the policy-makers are not forward-looking enough to realize it and the education services - especially those for the youngest - are floating in between an assistance-approach and the lack of a clear identification of the education as a child right.

The early years education and care services are still few, and they are not yet clearly recognizable as services where the education and the care are complementary, in a way that both the simple assistance-approach and the early inclusion in the school education are abandoned.



In this frame, the *Tuscan Approach* to children's education is interesting – we think – because it demonstrates how three of the following elements – which not always are in relation – can be well balanced:

- . a clear and durable policy commitment in the field of child education;
- . an updated and accurate pedagogical research;
- . an active and constructive involvement of the local resources in developing the experiences.

With *TALE*, this experience is at the centre of an exchange and innovation project which gathers Istituto degli Innocenti of Florence and other organizations from Bulgaria, Lithuania e Slovenia. We are all doing a path together reflecting and learning mutually about the quality of the education and care services for children.

From this point of view the Tuscan Approach – exactly as an approach, not a model – can be seen as an opportunity to reflect over what are the indispensable conditions for building quality in the services for children and families.

*Alessandra Maggi*  
President  
Istituto degli Innocenti





**TALE**  
*Tuscan Approach*  
Learning for **E**arly childhood  
education and care  
a Leonardo da Vinci project  
transfer of innovation

## Main contents

The Project *TALE – Tuscan Approach Learning for Early childhood education and care* – in the context of the Lifelong Learning Programme *Leonardo da Vinci, transfer of innovation*, has been selected and launched in October 2013.

It ends on September 2015.

The project is intended to carry out a trans-national training program for teams of educators, pedagogues and managers of ECEC services from Slovenia, Bulgaria, Lithuania who are interested in knowing the *Tuscan Approach*, as part of their individual and in-service learning.

The training module includes lectures, study visits, observations, discussions by Istituto degli Innocenti and by other services in Tuscany.

The training is preceded by a series of workshops in those countries, aiming to present the *Tuscan Approach* to a network of national/local professionals and stakeholders, and to design a publications and other dissemination materials, involving experts and professionals identified by the Partners.

A final follow-up participated by a selected representative help evaluating the initial results in terms of individual skills and organizational impact of the training/learning.





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Two main general project's features are particularly suited to the Leonardo da Vinci Programme's objectives:

- . The issue of the quality in the early childhood education and care services is highly relevant for the European Commission, and it is mentioned in several EU policy documents and programs, including "ET2020", the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training.
- . The opportunity to reflect and learn mutually between national experiences in the ECEC sector may draw from the European debate about child policies, quality assurance, and tools for vocational training. Such broader reflection will provide guidance in designing the training cycle, with the ambition to experience a kind of European in-service training.

## Activities

The activities are organized around three work packages:

- . **Transferring and re-interpreting the *Tuscan Approach***

Presentation of the *Tuscan Approach* to a national/local network in Bulgaria, Lithuania, Slovenia. 3 workshops and 3 publications

- . **Designing the Pilot ECEC learning**

Theoretical and methodological design, contents and programme of a European Pilot Learning Course

- . **Launching the Pilot ECEC learning**

A one-week session of training/learning in Tuscany, addressed to educators, pedagogues, managers from Bulgaria, Lithuania and Slovenia. A two-day follow-up, evaluation and supervision on learning, transfer on-the-job, skills development, policy strategies in local and national contexts

Complementary dissemination activities are envisaged to guarantee the sustainability of the project: paper and publications, web platforms for internal and external communication, e-contents, networking initiatives.

Project Management and quality procedures ensure coordination and decision-making, self-assessment administration accounting and reporting activities.



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## Leading Coordinator

### **Istituto degli Innocenti**

#### **Six centuries of commitment for the rights of the child**

Under the High Patronage of the President of the Italian Republic, Istituto degli Innocenti is a public body which works independently under its Board of Direction appointed by the Tuscan Region, the Province and the Municipality of Florence.

The Institute implements activities and services for children, adolescents and families.

Beside the traditional and the new education services for the children of Florence – early education, residential care – the Istituto is a centre of research, documentation and training.

In this area Istituto degli Innocenti runs programmes, consultancies and collaborations on child policies and services at local, regional, national and international level.



## Partners

### **University of Florence**

#### **Department of Education and Psychology**

With 60.000 students the University of Florence is one of the biggest in Italy. The Department of Education and Psychology has now 3 new three-year long graduate degrees (Bachelor) and 3 new five year-long graduate degrees (II level degree). The didactic offer includes 7 Master degrees, 13 post-graduation degrees and 2 Ph.D courses.

The Department of Education and Psychology, recently instituted under the direction of Enzo Catarsi, has a long history of participation in national and international research projects.

### **International Step by Step Association**

ISSA was founded in 1999 to unite 29 national NGOs implementing early education reform based on high quality, child-centred methodology. Designed to implement community engagement and reforms of systems that prepare early childhood educators, this initiative has grown into a network encompassing a range of interventions, serving children aged birth-10 and their families.

Since its inception, ISSA has grown into a vibrant learning community, a robust association with broad international links and partnerships, management of a significant roster of EU-funded early education projects - the leading professional network for early education and care in the region of Central/ Eastern Europe and CIS. An important part of ISSA's mission is to build capacity of its members to promote early childhood quality and equitable services.

**Step by Step Program Foundation - BG**

The Step by Step Program - Bulgaria was established as an NGO on March 1998 and is a member of the ISSA network.

Its main aims are: encouraging the family involvement in education; providing equal access to quality education for minority children, with disabilities and children in social isolation; developing projects for infants and toddlers, preschools, mainstream and special schools and pedagogical faculties for training faculty teachers, students, principals, teachers and parents.

**Pedagoski Institut - SI**

The Educational Research Institute is the central research institution in Slovenia for research in education undertaking basic research, development and applied projects on issues of current interest in all sectors of education and related areas.

Its aim is to ensure quality education and equal opportunities in education for all children and involve families and community members into the educational process. The Centre's programs are based on principles of democratic civil society, child centred approach, contemporary knowledge of child development and learning abilities and introduction of changes into the educational system.

**Centre for Innovative Education - LT**

The Center for Innovative Education (CIE) is an NGO established in year 2000 as continuer to the International Educational project Step by Step operating in Lithuania since 1994.

The mission of the Centre for Innovative Education is to support and affect the process of change in education and to promote the values of open society and equal access to a quality education for all children in Lithuania. The Centre has developed a high reputation in Lithuania as provider of quality educational services and active participant in the reform of educational system in close cooperation with the Ministry of Education.





# The *Tuscan Approach* to children's education an experience open to dialogue

by Aldo Fortunati

*"The dissemination of the  
Tuscan Approach seems very helpful  
and appropriate to us, over any  
egocentric regionalism, because we are  
convinced that the Tuscan early years  
education services are a precious good,  
issued by a forward-looking policy,  
characterized by the professed will to  
promote the democracy also through the  
children's education experiences"*

*Enzo Catarsi*

## Introduction

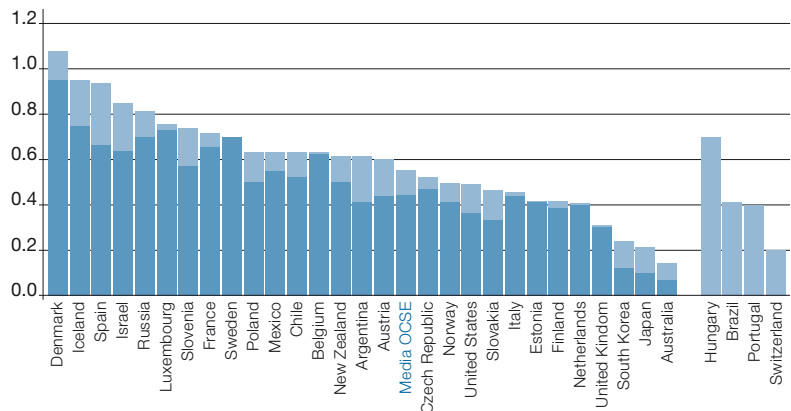
Although there are many reasons for recalling the twentieth century for its story of shame – let's think of the wars and the persecutions, and their impact in the lives of the children – it is meaningful that at the conclusion of that century the United Nations approved a document formally stating for the first time the capacity of the child to be recognized as a person. The United Nations' Convention for the Rights of the Child<sup>1</sup>, which has been ratified by more than 200 countries, is a landmark of our capacity to consider the children as legal actors.

Nevertheless, although many economists have recently explained that investing in the early years of life has a clear effect on the economy and on the well-being of our societies, international reports<sup>2</sup> say that in the rich countries such investments are often not adequate, not to mention what happens in the poorer countries, where other priorities are set on the agenda (*Figure 1*).

1. The United Nations' 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child
2. OECD (2012)

Figure 1  
Expenditure on early childhood educational institutions as a percentage of GDP (2010)

■ Public expenditure  
■ Private expenditure









The revindication of the children's right to education by statement of principles is a long way ahead before moving to deeds.

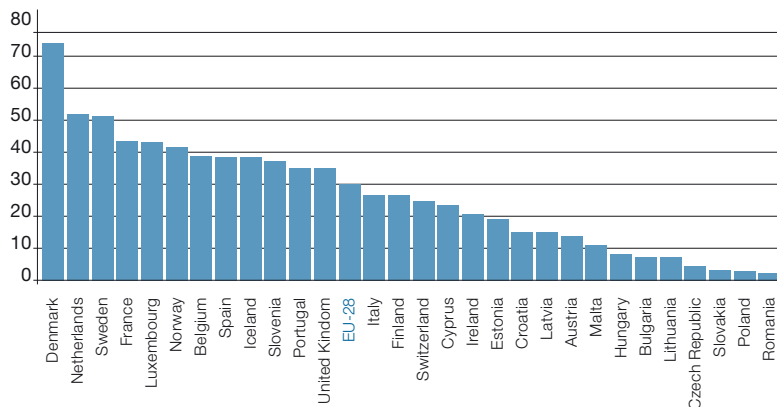
If zoom in on Europe, we welcome those recent EU policy documents<sup>3</sup> affirming the importance of promoting the education services for the young children as a key element of social inclusion, and also – mainly – as the acknowledgement that education is a right of all the children, and a primary issue on the public agenda.

Nonetheless, in this case the words do not match the facts. Especially when we talk about the youngest children, it turns out that the distribution of the education services<sup>4</sup> is pretty uneven (*Figure 2*), as well as the educational quality of the facilities open to children and families.

3. Communication from the Commission "ECEC: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow" (2011/66/EU)

4. Eurostat (2013)

Figure 2  
Participation rates of children under the age of 3 in ECEC (2011)





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Italy is not an exception in this respect, standing in an intermediate position in the international compared statistics (*the same Figure 2*), and presenting in the meantime many differentiations in the levels of accessibility and availability of such education services within the Country and across the Regions.

In this context Tuscany has a privileged position. The 33% target in the early years education services cover rate is achieved and consolidated, not by chance but as a result of a couple of converging factors which have been acting in synergy in the last decades.

The Tuscan Region's policy awareness and continuity in this field has positively matched the activism of the local municipalities. This has enhanced an original pedagogical thinking and practise, which has grown lively by connecting the private and public resources into a network of education services, and by involving actively the families. These are the very ingredients of what we have started to call the *Tuscan Approach* to child education.

## Some data on the situation in Italy

Childhood policies have never had an easy life. In Italy – as in many other countries – they are part of broader social policies which have been developed in differentiated ways in the local territories.

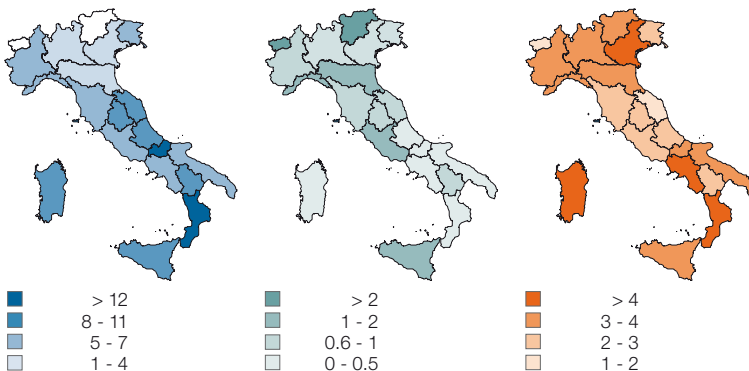
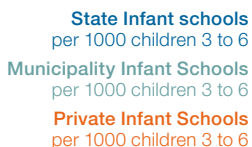
Although the Italian law (n. 1044/1971)<sup>5</sup> instituting the early years education and care services envisaged a balanced implementation all over the Country, today we are still in front of a multifaceted frame of investments by regions and municipalities, within a quite lacking policy initiative at national level.

In fact the Infant schools (attended by children from three to six) are widely spread all over the Country. This is due partly to the State intervention in the field since the end of the sixties of the twentieth century<sup>6</sup>, when the service provisions which were already on at that time by initiative of the municipalities and of private religious bodies were reinforced up to covering 2/3 of the overall supply.

5. Law 6/12/1971 n. 1044, Five-Year Plan for the establishment of NIDI cofunded by the State.

6. Law 18/3/1968, n. 444, Regulation of the State Infant school. The data presented in these figures come from ISTAT (2012)

Figure 3a  
Percentage of infant schools,  
according to management:



7. The Law n. 53/2003 had already provided the possibility for the children completing the third year by the month of April to be admitted to an Infant school.

The implementation of this law had been restricted to children completing the third year of age by the month of February. After being applied for the last time in the education year 2007-2008, this provision had been then abrogated by the finance bill (Law n. 297/2006).

Finally the "anticipation" has been reintroduced by later regulations (D.P.R. n. 89 /2009) and has started again with the education year 2009-10.

8. The data presented in this paragraph come from Rapporto di monitoraggio del Piano nidi al 31 dicembre 2012, <http://www.minori.it/minori/rapporto-di-monitoraggio-del-piano-nidi-al-31-dicembre-2012>

On the other side, the services for children from 0 to 3 could not count on a similar action plan and commitment at central level. Therefore, today the situations are diverse according to the activism of the Regions and the local territories.

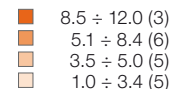
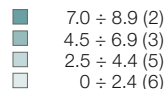
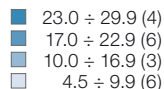
Another part – not very relevant – of the early years education system is represented by the so-called "integrative services": play centres, centres for children and families, domiciliary services; whereas more important is the "anticipation" option<sup>7</sup>, by which children under three may be accepted in the Infant schools.

The anticipation is particularly important in the South, where it provides an alternative to the very scarce number of Nidi<sup>8</sup>. (Figure 3).

Figure 3b  
Places in the Nidi  
children 0 to 2

Places in the complementary services  
children 0 to 2

"Anticipators" in the Infant schools  
children 0 to 2



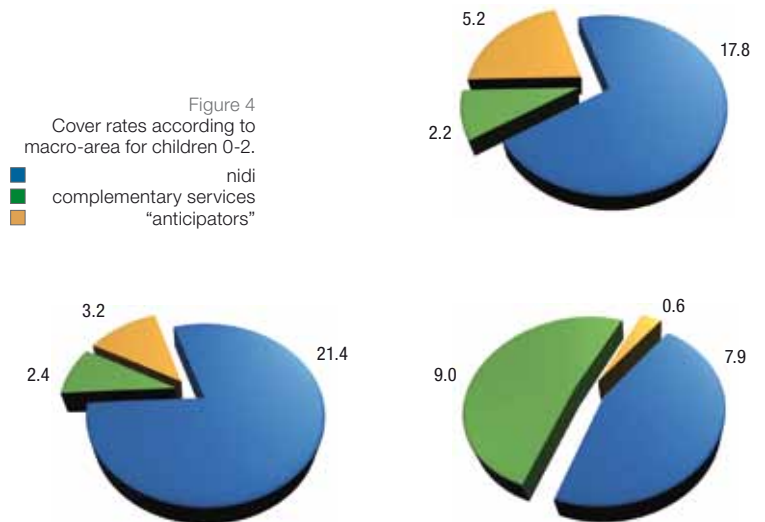






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Generally speaking, while the infant school is potentially universal, the early years education services are available to one child out of four in the North-Centre, and to less of one child out of ten in the South, where the children under three hold the only alternative to attend an education service as “anticipatory” in an Infant school (*Figure 4*). This solution hardly meets the very specific needs connected to the child’s age - let’s only think at the high children-adults standard ratios, or at the adequate care setting for the youngest, which is unlikely to be found in the infant schools.

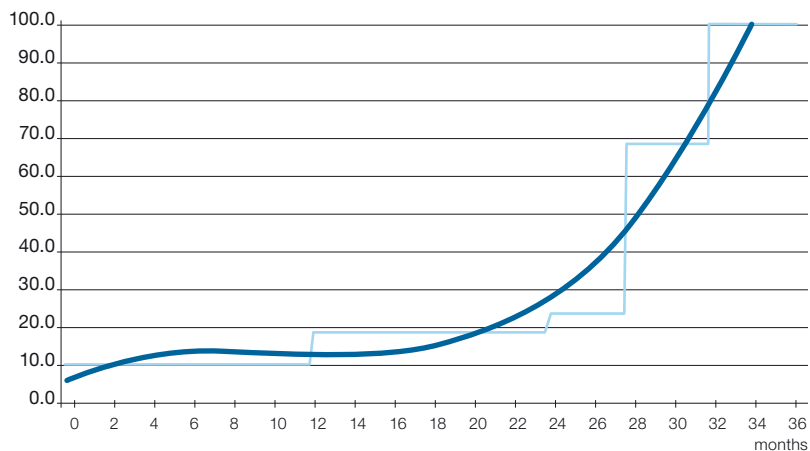


If we look at the different opportunities of access according to the children's age (*Figure 5*), we can note that these are effective for the children over three, and largely guaranteed to the children in the third year, while still available to one child out of five in the second year, and less than one child out of ten in the first year.

More detailed data analysis – at level of Regions and Autonomous Provinces – shows and confirms the strong diversities in the areas and territories under observation.

The last remarkable data explain the situation of the ownership in the early years education services and the financing system. From the first aspect the Nidi – the most relevant service – is owned by public authorized as for the 60,3% of the place available, whereas the remaining 39,7% is owned by the private sector (public authorized providers).

Figure 5  
Coverage percentage  
of education services, according  
to age in the 0-2 years







In this case, too, the situation is multifaceted among the Regions, though it should be observed that in the most cases the private co-operate with the public by offering places to the publicly acceded lists, and being funded in return (Figure 6).

	Cover rate in the education services for children 0-2
Piemonte	20,5
Valle d'Aosta	17,6
Lombardia	20,7
Liguria	21,3
<b>Italia Nord-occidentale</b>	<b>20,6</b>
Provincia di Bolzano	10,2
Provincia di Trento	20,1
Veneto	18,6
Friuli Venezia Giulia	21,1
Emilia-Romagna	31,2
<b>Italia Nord-orientale</b>	<b>23,3</b>
<b>Toscana</b>	<b>27,3</b>
Umbria	26,6
Marche	23,8
Lazio	15
<b>Italia centrale</b>	<b>20,8</b>
Abruzzo	7,7
Molise	19,7
Campania	-
Puglia	8,8
Basilicata	10,2
Calabria	6
Sicilia	5,1
Sardegna	15,1
<b>Italia meridionale e insulare</b>	<b>7,9</b>
<b>Totale</b>	<b>17,8</b>

Figure 6  
Cover rate in the education services for children 0-2. Year 2012. Nidi users in percentage of total population 0-2, at the date of 31/12/2011







The *Tuscan Approach* to children's education an experience open to dialogue

Attempts of reforms were also launched in the past, aimed to coordinate and harmonize the scenery of services across the Country. Unfortunately the lack of unity in the political impulse, together with the budget constraints, have resulted in little impact<sup>9</sup>.

9. A bill (n. 1260) is under discussion in the Italian Parliament concerning "Provisions on an integrated education system from birth to six, and equal learning opportunities for the children".

## The tuscan case: a privileged experience

The Tuscan network of early years education services (*Figure 7*) gives an opportunity to one child out of three, thus performing at the top ranks in comparison with the other Italian Regions<sup>10</sup>.

In addition to this quantitative achievement, the good policy coordination, its continuity and the intense commitment in planning and innovation have allowed Tuscany to become a quality benchmark.

In fact:

- . First among the Italian Regions, Tuscany has issued a legislation – which can be dated back to the end of the Nineties of the last century - which sets up the “integrated system of education services”<sup>11</sup>. The main elements of this system – Nidi and integrative services - have been identified, and their characteristics have been defined: typologies of services, space standards, organization and qualification of the staff, easy and good collaboration between the public regulation and the private entrepreneurship.
- . Second, Tuscany has set rules about environmental standards, and has established models and guidelines aiming to implement the education services under principles of realistic economic sustainability<sup>12</sup>;
- . Finally, the long-lasting investment on quality<sup>13</sup> has pushed towards a general improvement and growing up in the service system. This has been realized through applying evaluation methods, continuous learning programmes for the educators, and setting up locally-based managerial and pedagogical coordination functions.

10. The data presented in this paragraph come from Rapporto sui servizi educativi per la prima infanzia in Toscana. Analisi e commenti ai dati del sistema informativo SIRIA aggiornati al 31.12.2012: [http://www.minoritoscana.it/sites/default/files/Rapporto\\_Servizi\\_educativi\\_2013.pdf](http://www.minoritoscana.it/sites/default/files/Rapporto_Servizi_educativi_2013.pdf)

11. Region Tuscany Law 14 April 1999, n. 22, “Interventi educativi per l’infanzia e gli adolescenti” (Education measures for children and adolescents), followed by Region Tuscany Law 26 July 2002 n. 32 “Testo unico della normativa della Regione Toscana in materia di educazione, istruzione, orientamento, formazione professionale e lavoro”, (digest of laws concerning education, instruction, mentoring, training and work, recently modified by law 23 January 2013, n. 2, and later implementing regulations).

12. In this connection, we recall the “study of prototypes”, as guidelines for the design of the early years education services, in Fumagalli, G., Masotti, F., Melograni, C., Catarsi, E., Fortunati, A., Galardini, A.L., Rauch, A., Servizi educativi per la prima infanzia: guida alla progettazione, Pisa, Plus, 2003.

13. After publishing a “Guidelines for the quality in the Nidi” in 1993, and an “Evaluation tool for the quality in the Nidi” in 1998, the Region Tuscany has issued in 2004, in collaboration with Istituto degli Innocenti a new “Evaluation tool for the quality in the Nidi and in the complementary services.

	Users/place			Percentage of total population 0-2
	Nidi	Services	Anticipators	
Piemonte	20,5	3,5	3,6	27,6
Valle d'Aosta	17,6	9,1	-	26,7
Lombardia	20,7	1	3	24,6
Liguria	21,3	2,6	4,6	28,6
<b>Italia Nord-occidentale</b>	<b>20,6</b>	<b>1,8</b>	<b>3,3</b>	<b>25,7</b>
Provincia di Bolzano	10,2	8,3	-	18,5
Provincia di Trento	20,1	3,2	-	23,3
Veneto	18,6	2,8	4,2	25,6
Friuli Venezia Giulia	21,1	3,1	3,9	28,2
Emilia-Romagna	31,2	2,3	1,6	35,1
<b>Italia Nord-orientale</b>	<b>23,3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2,8</b>	<b>29,0</b>
<b>Toscana</b>	<b>27,3</b>	<b>4,3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>34,6</b>
Umbria	26,6	6,7	-	33,4
Marche	23,8	2	4,3	30,2
Lazio	15	1,6	3,6	20,2
<b>Italia centrale</b>	<b>20,8</b>	<b>2,8</b>	<b>3,7</b>	<b>27,2</b>
Abruzzo	7,7	0,6	8	16,4
Molise	19,7	0	9,5	29,2
Campania	-	-	9	9
Puglia	8,8	0,3	8,7	17,8
Basilicata	10,2	0	9	19,3
Calabria	6	-	12,1	18,1
Sicilia	5,1	-	8,6	13,8
Sardegna	15,1	1,5	7,8	24,4
<b>Italia meridionale e insulare</b>	<b>7,9</b>	<b>0,6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>13,4</b>
<b>Totale</b>	<b>17,8</b>	<b>2,2</b>	<b>5,2</b>	<b>24.4</b>

Figure 7

Cover rates in the education services for children 0-2. Year 2012. Users in the Nidi and in the complementary services, and "anticipators" in the Infant schools at the date of 31/12/2012 in percentage of total population 0-2.

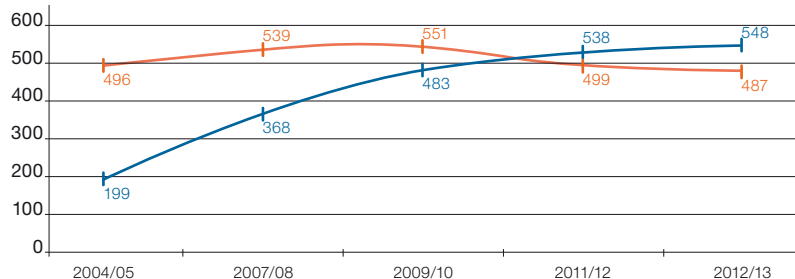
- . Today, the public-private cooperation is a deeply rooted feature in the Tuscan experience (*Figure 8*), in a scenery where most of the private service providers – two out of three - are contracted by the Municipalities. By that:
  - . The access to the service is delivered after public selection;
  - . The private providers may count on some business stability;
  - . The fees are not too high and vary under equity principles.

This way, the pluralistic community of providers encounters a high-profile governance including:

- . Setting the rules and standards (Region);
- . Budgeting and programming the system of services (Municipalities, with the support of the Regions);
- . Quality control, assistance and development (Municipalities, in the frame of Regional rules and standards).

Figure 8  
Early years education services,  
according to ownership:

- public  
- private











The *Tuscan Approach* to children's education an experience open to dialogue

## Il *Tuscan Approach* to children's education: the fundamental elements

The *Tuscan Approach* has not to be considered just a model which has been applied in Tuscany. Rather, it should be seen as the composition of the most relevant cross-cutting results coming from the varied and diverse experiences in the Tuscan early years education services.

In other words, some elements constitute the minimum standard which can be found in most early years services. The following can be seen as shared lines founding the *Tuscan Approach*:

- . The importance of space design in the education setting;
- . The effectiveness of an open and flexible curriculum;
- . The acknowledgement of the families as co-actors in the education project.

In the next chapter the elements above will be rapidly reviewed. The video-dvd alleged to this publication will also add an opportunity of visual comprehension.

## Space into relation

The idea of a space supporting constructively the child experience belongs to the most recent pedagogical reflections, as long as these prove sensitive to offering the child stimuli and opportunities already within the education context and before the initiative of the single educator.

This kind of attention to sustaining the child's exploration, learning and relations via a good, warm and challenging environment embraces many options and choices at disposal of the adult, taking into account the children's age and the level of their autonomy.

With these premises, in Tuscany the space is an important term of reference for the interior design of the education services for the young children. It makes them cozy, warm and beautiful for the children as well as for the adults, and immediately connoting the "good taste" of the education and growing up.

As a matter of fact, in the *Tuscan Approach* the spaces must first of all be hospitable, and corresponding to the strong need in the early years of life for safety and affectivity. They have to sustain and encourage the wish to know and explore, and allowing progressively the children's enrichment, expanding their experiences, promoting their learning capabilities.

The children have to feel at their ease, safe and confident to move in an environment which is not their home, but which has soon to become familiar and lived actively, originally and ever more in autonomy. Therefore the feeling of good reception has to be evident at first glance. It has to shine through the arrangement of the furniture, from the choice of the colours, from the materials at hand, from the attention to create corners





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for the moments of tranquillity. The children need spaces which respect their boundaries and favour the experimentation of their autonomy and their relations with the adults and the other children.

The outdoor spaces should be easily accessible and also visible from the indoor. They are excellent places where the children are guided to active and constructive explorations.

The workshops, as well, are settings where additional opportunities for supporting creative small group works take place, and complement what is normally done within the class-section.

In the *Tuscan Approach* the spaces for the educators and for the parents are also important, because they reveal that a quality experience need a proper place to stay, to meet, to reflect between adults. More, the documentation activities, which are the base for the collective self-monitoring of the education project by the staff, request an appropriate place to be regularly done.

The quality of the work – and the overall wellbeing of the workers – is a guarantee for the wellbeing of the children.









The *Tuscan Approach* to children's education an experience open to dialogue

## Toward a curriculum of possibilities

A pedagogy of the education context affirms that the education process should be less dependent on the asymmetries between children and adults, and relying more on the constructive and original contribution from all the protagonists, by interpreting the environment as an asset supporting positively the relations between adults and the children themselves.

The education project, which is the shared result accurately pursued within the team of educators, focuses on the attention to opportunities and to the effective processes, instead on targets and achievements. It aims to a "curriculum" which is necessarily different from that of a school, so that the children's potential can be cultivated starting from their own individual resources.

Moreover, offering to children an experience open to creativity – main feature of the *Tuscan Approach* - is the starting point of a flexible curriculum open to possibilities.

This way, in the Tuscan experience the old dilemma between education and care – which are supposed to be distant if not opposed - is overcome in the direction of a "radical complementarity" of the two terms.

Starting from this point, a possibility is offered to interpret in a flexible way the project-making in education. This is a complex field where the attention to the opportunities, the empowerment of the individuals, the analysis of the processes and the investment on documentation are permanent tools for reflection and innovation.

An active and constructive experience can be cultivated starting with offering the children interesting stimuli; it goes on with supporting the autonomy and the self-organization in the daily routines, until understanding the children's capacity to act within real micro-cultures. In this frame the symbolic play soon becomes the ground where imaginative stories are shared among the children, and common initiatives and activities are undertaken thus giving sense and value to the daily time spent together.

The manipulation activities occur after identifying the appropriate natural and recycled materials. As these are unstructured and neutral, they are perfect for being shaped personally and originally.

Finally, a book rather than being an instrument only in the hands only of the adult is a cultural object to explore, to learn from and to have immediately available. Its value will be appreciated even more when the adult uses it as a pretext of exciting and engaging stories.

As the open and flexible curriculum is based on the recognition of the role played by the children, the documentation and reflection over the experiences are the necessary complement of it, meanwhile being a real habitus of the early years services educators.

Working on these aspects allows getting to know a child not only in the usual routines, rather and above all on the reflection about the educational action and its results, with a direct involvement in the discussion among the staff, about the most appropriate initiatives to be taken, then shared with the families, and their continuous renewal.







The *Tuscan Approach* to children's education an experience open to dialogue

## Participation and family education

Although in the *Tuscan Approach* the central role of protagonists is given to the children, on the other end nobody should underestimate how crucial is the involvement of the families in the implementation and development of the education project.

The step taken in Tuscany in this case had been, first of all, freeing the participatory approach from any bureaucratic obligation or political manipulation, to give it back to a genuine parental co-operation in the undertaking, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the education project of the service.

The education services welcome and meet the families as soon as the annual call for registration is issued, so that the education offer can be well explained to everybody.

A meeting is scheduled between educators and parents to the purpose of starting to know each other, while during the year the exchange of information at the daily moments of the arrival in the facility and of departure will be absolutely precious.

The relation with the family includes a number of other meetings when the planning of the children's activities is explained and discussed, or when parents and educators work together in reorganizing the materials documenting the children's experiences, then reflecting over these.

Additional individual interviews are arranged at the moment when the diary is delivered. This is a valuable document witnessing each child's story, after a year spent in the education service.

The involvement of the families in the education service is also enriched by the numerous occasions of spontaneous meetings and exchanges, which can be considered themselves a sort of peer-educational context.

In that case each parent's personal experience is not under scrutiny of an expert; rather it may be seen as a node in a durable network of horizontal relations which is reinforced in the awareness and self-reliance on the parental role.







## Looking at a sustainable future

In a time when the economic crises bites also in the education sector, threatening the keeping and development of the network of services – if we only think at the difficulties in the public budgeting process, or at the families not in condition to pay the fee - the positive exception of Tuscany stands out in its capacity to interpret originally the possible future developments.

Defining clear guidelines for quality and effective standards: these issues are at the centre of the international and Italian debate over how to regenerate legislation and regulations, and what are the conditions for a sustainable policy in the sector. On the other hand, the discussion about the professional requirements is always on and permanently swinging between the concern about how to qualify the education staff and how to contain the budget.

The governance issue is on the agenda too. This entails answering to such questions as how to set up and consolidate the appropriate network coordination which can guarantee the demanded quality in the management and in the professional practise in the early years education services.

In Tuscany the investment on the updating of standards focused on realistic quality goals, the provision of initial and continuous training to the education staffs, and the pledge to locally-based network coordination functions shall hopefully push the debate forwards and shall encourage new developments in this policy sector.

## Conclusions

When we tell a positive experience we tend to embellish and transform it into a model.

As a matter of fact, every experience sets its roots in the pre-determined place and time, and this applies mostly when we talk about education. That is why it makes little sense trying to “translate” directly such experiences from a place to another.

On the other hand – and again it surely applies in education – the dialogue and the sharing of points of views are the basis for growing up, as our experiences is then returned by those who had the chance to accompany us in our path.

This kind of dynamics also fits to the varied and multiple experiences which can be brought back to the concept of *Tuscan Approach*. Exactly this open attitude to match the diversities is a motive to disseminate the *Tuscan Approach* and to keep on feeding it with new future developments.





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