

# **SOCIO-PEDAGOGICAL EDUCATORS AND TEACHERS IN ECEC SERVICES: WHAT IS THE INITIAL AND IN SERVICE TRAINING FOR PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES**

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## **Abstract**

In response to the scenario of national and European political and pedagogical debate, with the introduction and progressive system setting of D.Lgs. n.65 of 2017 born in Italy the integrated system of education and education services 0-6 which is a crucial moment for the education sector of first and second childhood. The quality of services is closely linked to the professionalism of SP (Socio-Pedagogical) educators and teachers, who must have solid pedagogical and methodological preparation to respond to children's needs and development rhythms. Specific and coherent initial training coupled with continuing training processes enables professionals to competently address educational challenges and adapt to educational policies and changes in family needs. What are the professional skills essential for educational practice for socio-pedagogical educators and teachers in ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) services 0-6? And how did they build and consolidate their competencies? The proposed exploratory survey addresses SP educators and teachers in service on the national territory to investigate the issue of the construction of professional profiles in real contexts through the administration of a questionnaire to educational professionals in ECEC services. The study is formulated according to mixed survey processes and aims to initiate a reflection on training experiences that contribute to the development of professionalism. This contribution aims to present the research design and preliminary results of questionnaire administration.

**Keywords:** *Socio-pedagogical educators, teachers, ECEC services, initial training, professional competencies.*

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## **1. Introduction**

While reflecting on the quality of educational offerings is essential, it is not sufficient. It is equally necessary to establish a continuous and direct dialogue with the real contexts of educational work in order to ensure coherence between training pathways and professional practice (European Commission, 2016; 2020). This becomes particularly urgent in light of today's socio-cultural landscape, marked by the growing complexity of educational needs, especially those related to special educational needs. In response, there is a pressing need to promote a unified pedagogical approach within early childhood education and care (ECEC) services for children aged 0–6. At the European level, ECEC is considered a priority area to ensure equitable and universal access to high-quality education from the earliest stages of life. The integrated model, which combines early childhood services (0–3 years) with preschool education (3–6 years), aims to support children's cognitive, emotional, and social development while promoting values such as equity, inclusion, and well-being (Vandenbroeck et al., 2013; Heckman, 2011). The quality of these services depends largely on the initial and continuous training of educators and teachers (European Commission, 2014; CoRe, 2011), making it crucial to rethink professional preparation. Nevertheless, as highlighted by the Eurydice reports (2019; 2023), training systems remain fragmented across Europe. In Italy, for instance, there are still two separate qualification pathways: the L-19 degree for educators and the LM-85 bis master's degree for preschool teachers. Despite Legislative Decree 65/2017, which formally established the integrated 0–6 system, significant challenges persist in aligning training and fostering collaboration between the two professional groups (Sposetti et al., 2024). Educational work itself, however, represents a powerful formative experience, continuously shaping all participants in the pedagogical relationship (Fadda, 2016). Educators and teachers develop their competencies through an increasingly complex process, integrating academic knowledge with strategies refined through practice (Sposetti et al., 2024; Sposetti et al., 2022). Universities, therefore, hold a crucial responsibility in designing training programs that both guarantee educational quality and respond to the evolving needs of professionals operating in diverse and dynamic settings (Rossini, 2020; Fioretti, 2022; Boffo, 2021; Biasin et al., 2020).

## **2. Design, methods and objectives of research**

The research project revolves around two key questions: What competencies do educators and teachers consider essential for their professional practice? And how are these competencies developed and strengthened in the workplace? The aim is to gather the perceptions and experiences of those who co-design educational services for children aged 0–6. By analyzing their reflections on both training and daily professional practice, the project seeks to identify how educational professionalism is developed and to understand which competencies are central to effectively addressing emerging educational and developmental needs. Areas of investigation include the development of professionalism in universities and in service, the competencies they consider necessary to address educational practice, their perception of the level of skills they have developed through training and experience, and levels of self-efficacy in addressing educational work. The research has exploratory purposes and is formulated according to mixed inquiry processes, which initially involve administering a questionnaire to professional educators in service throughout the national territory. The questionnaire, consisting of five sections, aims to explore and collect descriptive statistics—through both closed- and open-ended questions—on the competencies considered essential in educational practice, as well as on the level and type of initial and continuing training. Additionally, it invites respondents to reflect on the collaborative relationship between the two professional groups within the zero-to-six system and to carry out a self-assessment of the competencies acquired. This contribution presents the results of an initial administration of the questionnaire to a small group of professionals in order to conduct a try-out phase and evaluate the effectiveness of the items.

## **3. Results**

The questionnaire, administered using the snowball sampling method, was completed by 63 education professionals, predominantly female (96.8%). Currently, the majority of respondents work in the Lazio region (60%). The most represented professional role is that of educator, accounting for 57.2% of the sample, with an average of three years of service experience. More than half of the respondents believe they have a fair understanding of ECEC, despite 89% holding at least a degree in the educational or pedagogical field. This trend is also reflected in a more specific question regarding the competencies acquired during their studies and later developed through professional practice. Indeed, the professionals are fairly competent in designing interventions, organizing educational spaces, and identifying the educational needs of children in zero-to-six services. In-service training is considered crucial for strengthening professional competencies by 53% of the respondents.

## **4. Discussion and conclusion**

The debate on the professional profiles of educators and teachers within initial training programs is currently a crucial issue for fostering effective collaboration in educational services. The diversity of training pathways calls for a rethinking of educational proposals, which should be grounded in the real-life practices of those already working in the field. It is essential to establish a structured dialogue between universities and the professional world in order to train practitioners who can effectively address real educational challenges (Boffo, 2021). Ensuring coherence between practical contexts and training proposals is key to building solid professional competencies (Perillo, 2023; Balduzzi, 2022; Sposetti et al., 2022). As confirmed by the data briefly presented, universities must incorporate more elements connecting academic learning with real-world educational contexts to enhance the competencies developed through initial training programs. At the same time, it is necessary to expand and ensure ongoing in-service training to foster the development of new skills in response to an increasingly complex educational landscape. Field experience plays a vital role in bridging theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Understanding how competencies develop within educational services allows for the design of more effective teaching strategies for professional development. The integrated training of educators and teachers is considered essential for the 0–6 education system (Lazzari, 2023). The proposed research project aims to contribute to developing both initial and continuing training paths, enhancing real-world experiences as a privileged channel connecting academic knowledge with professional practice (Perillo, 2023).

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