

2. Territorial Pedagogical Coordination: a policy tool to counter educational poverty from early childhood.

A focus on Basilicata and Veneto regions for data-based decision making of TPC hubs.

Cristina Stringher

1. Introduction

In this contribution, I put forward a proposal for the strengthening of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as a tool to counter educational poverty in Italian rural areas, by linking its development to Territorial Pedagogical Coordination (TPC). This policy tool is one of the levers that Legislative Decree 65/2017 establishes for the local governance of the recently integrated ECEC system in Italy. Given its recent implementation, the main question that I would like to address in this theoretical contribution is how TPC hubs could serve the purpose of reducing educational poverty in Italian rural and internal areas.

Educational poverty concerns several aspects of deprivation within the domain of instruction and training. Yet, a search in Scopus reveals that this concept is not frequently used in the international literature, concentrating mostly on educational inequality or inequity, disparity, divide, gaps, according to Scopus key words. It is thus vital to define educational poverty to propose solutions for its overcoming.

Since decades, sociological and economic research has consistently shown that family socio-economic status is a determinant of educational outcomes, and education seriously affects earnings (Van der Berg, 2008), because it affects

personal capabilities to function well in society, in work and beyond, as already Sen maintained (Alberici, 2008). Therefore, inadequate education may be considered a form of poverty, especially in developed countries, where low income, social marginalization, low education levels and low language skills concur to prevent people from being fully integrated (Van der Berg, 2008), with considerable losses in human capital (World Bank, 2021). With its Human Capital Index (HCI), incorporating aspects of health and education affecting human capital development, the World Bank recently estimated that in 2020 a child in full health and with complete education could expect to attain approximately 56% of her future productivity, before the outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic, with wide HCI variations among different countries, ranging from as low as 0.29 in Central Africa, to 0.88 in Singapore, and with Italy placed in the upper side of the distribution (0.73). As the World Bank explains, “education accounts for roughly 90 percent of the difference between high and low performers in the high-income economy group” (pp. 5-6). Consequently, the other side of the coin is to ensure better education for all, like the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 requires (UN SDGs, 2015).

Educated people generally fare better in terms of health, have a greater probability of being employed, are economically more productive, and therefore earn higher incomes. Concisely, quality education impacts economic growth (Hanushek, 2020; World Bank, 2021), which in turn reduces poverty rates. UNESCO has recently estimated that global poverty could be more than halved almost within a generation if all adults completed secondary school (UNESCO, 2017).

Combating educational poverty becomes a top priority, thus, how to achieve this goal is key. Research has shown that interventions at scale are needed to produce appreciable results. Given the importance of family background on educational outcomes, several interventions concentrated on this factor to reduce

(educational) poverty, including remedial education measures, community social work, attempts to involve poor parents in education (both for themselves and for the spillover on their children's education), among others (Van der Berg, 2008), but the investment in early childhood education seems one of the most promising, according to several scholars, and the sooner is this investment made, the better and more efficient it is (UNICEF, 2019; Heckman, 2008; 2013; Tamburlini, 2019; UNESCO, 2017), as "capabilities beget capabilities" (Heckman, 2008: 34).

This is why in Europe the development of a system of quality ECEC has received increased attention since the publication of the European quality framework for ECEC in 2014, subsumed in the EU Council recommendation of 2019. In addition, the European Council has proposed new targets for children's participation in ECEC within Europe: by the year 2030, at least 45% of children under three years of age should attend ECEC (ISCED level 0.1), and the Union-level target for children's participation in ISCED level 0.2 (pre-primary education) between age three and the start of compulsory education is 96% (European Council, 2022). Both targets have an intensity threshold of at least 25 weekly hours. What's more, the Council underlines the importance of children's attendance especially for those at risk of poverty or social exclusion, who should be granted "*free and effective access to key services, including ECEC, in all regions, including remote and rural areas*" (European Council, 2022: 6).

In the following paragraphs, I will first define educational poverty and its contours in the Italian landscape. I will then examine TPC's characteristics and its concrete implementation in two quite different Italian regions (Basilicata and Veneto) according to official normative documents and official statistics. The methodology is theoretical, yet a simulation of what a TPC could consider doing is what I would like to suggest within this logical framework, as an example of how TPC hubs could use the available analyses and evidence to inform their

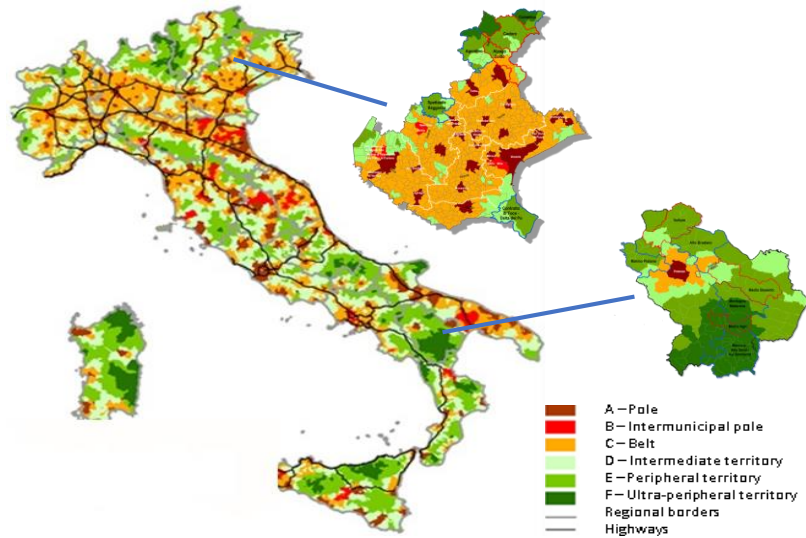
choices. Finally, I will advance a roadmap for a TPC program of work and point to implications of using TPC to counter educational poverty for local policy and practice.

2. Basic coordinates of educational poverty in Italy

Educational poverty is particularly pronounced in rural and internal areas. Internal areas in Italy have been defined and mapped within the National Strategy for Internal Areas (SNAI, Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2019). Mapping areas of educational poverty implies to take a preliminary look at the definition of Italy's internal areas, per the European social cohesion policy: according to Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale (2019), internal areas are characterized by a significant distance from urban poles offering key services, such as health, education and mobility, and also important environmental resources (water, agricultural systems, forests, natural or human landscapes) and cultural resources (archeological and historical sites, abbeys, small museums, craft centers). Figure 1 illustrates Italy's internal areas.

Within the SNAI Strategy, Italy has produced national statistics on key dimensions of poverty, characterizing these areas. These dimensions include main geographical characteristics; demography; agriculture and sectoral specialization; digital divide; cultural heritage and tourism; health; accessibility; education; inter-municipal associations.

Figure 1 – Italy’s internal areas.



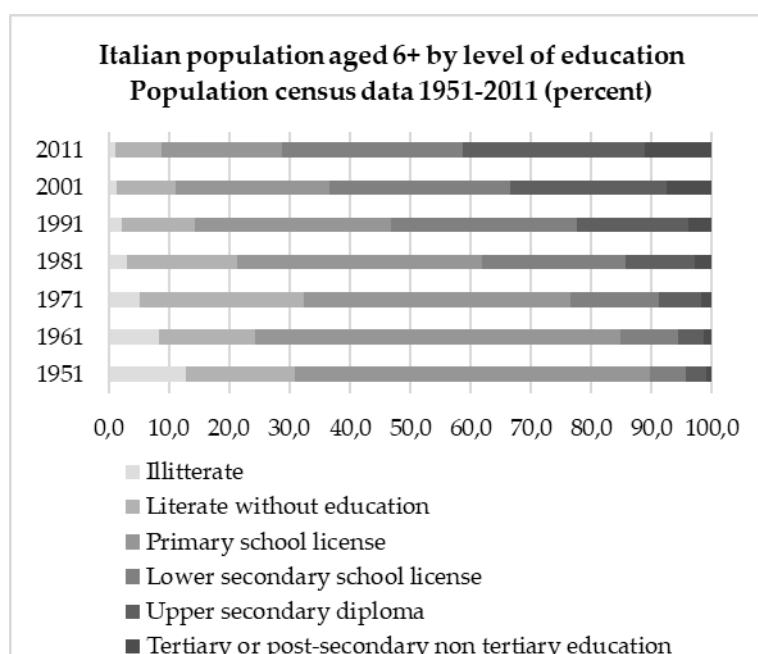
Source: own elaboration from Agenzia per la coesione territoriale – PON Governance 2014-2020 and from OpenKit for Basilicata and Veneto regions.

In this contribution, I will primarily concentrate my arguments on the education sphere, yet the multi-faceted character of educational poverty is influenced by the above-mentioned general dimensions of poverty.

Educational poverty, as indexed by lack of education or low educational attainment, is especially pronounced in Southern Italian regions and this North-South divide has historical roots in the very creation of the country, at the end of the XIX century (Stringher, 2022). At that time, educational poverty essentially coincided with lack of basic education and high illiteracy rates of the adult population, particularly sharp in Southern Italy. With the advent in 1962 of lower secondary education, ample segments of the Italian population could enter the system and enormous progress has been made since then in mass schooling. In 1867, according to ISTAT time series, 69,5% of the married couples did not sign

their marriage certificate due to illiteracy, with females reaching 79,1%⁵³. In 1965, this proportion dropped drastically to 0,3%, with no gender gap. The evolution of educational attainment in the Italian population is evident from Figure 2: darker bars get longer in recent decades.

Figure 2 – Evolution of educational attainment in the Italian population.



Source: ISTAT time series.

Despite massive progress, the latest census data reveal that almost 60% of the Italian population holds at best a lower secondary degree, and almost 30% reaches primary education only. The issue of low levels of educational attainment in the population is thus persistent, and nowadays this phenomenon is conceptually linked with high drop-out rates, especially in the South. Within

⁵³ Data are available here: https://seriestoriche.istat.it/index.php?id=1&no_cache=1&tx_usercento_centofe%5Bcategoria%5D=7&tx_usercento_centofe%5Baction%5D=show&tx_usercento_centofe%5Bcontroller%5D=Categoria&cHash=1b020e5419ca607971010a98271e3209

the SNAI Strategy, the open kit offered to regional territories includes data on all the aforesaid dimensions⁵⁴. For education, INVALSI (national Italian institute for the educational evaluation of instruction and training) and the Ministry of Education (MoEM) are data providers. Indicators are available on primary and secondary education only on the number of schools; student in-take of each school and relevant characteristics; teachers' contractual arrangements and mobility; classroom organization; school dropouts; students' competences as measured in national standardized tests. Worth mentioning within the SNAI Strategy is the notable absence of data on availability of and children's access to ECEC services and on the educational attainment of the population.

Notwithstanding, these indicators introduce a focal point: educational poverty is not only a quantitative matter of lack of education or of low attainment, but it also concerns low achievement, that adds a qualitative perspective on educational outcomes. A definition of educational poverty by Save the Children is useful in this respect: children's and adolescents' deprivation of the opportunities to learn, experiment, develop and let freely flourish capacities, talents, and aspirations (2016: 4)⁵⁵. This broad definition is not only confined to schooling but widens the contexts of educational poverty to embrace also informal and non formal educational opportunities. A similar approach in Italy is adopted by OpenPolis (2020). Cultural activities, play and sports offer important occasions to develop one's talents and when they are scarce, like in disadvantaged contexts, healthy development may be harmed. Key is the cultural capital of the disadvantaged areas, that needs thorough improvement.

⁵⁴ See here for an example: <https://politichecoesione.governo.it/it/strategie-tematiche-e-territoriali/strategie-territoriali/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne-snai/le-aree-interne-2021-2027/openkit-delle-aree-progetto/>

⁵⁵ The translation is mine.

This aim is hard to achieve, and a promising avenue is to provide new generations with a good start in life, by investing in early years education, in line with the European Council's Recommendations (EU Council, 2019; 2022). Compared to the 2022 Recommendation targets, Italy lags behind, according to the latest data available. The attendance of 0-2 services in the educational year 2020/2021 is of 27.2%, slightly raising in one year also for the constant decrease in births, and the European objective for 2020 (33%) is achieved only considering children's anticipated enrollments in preschool, but it is considerably far from the new 2030 target of 45% (CNEL, 2023). Children's preschool attendance is on target (96% is the new target for the EU 2030 strategy) only considering 5 year-olds, including those with anticipated enrolment in primary education, while the trend is declining for younger children (CNEL 2023).

That's why the new Italian integrated ECEC system and its organization is in focus. Legislative decree 65/2017 provides for a complex ECEC governance, devolved to different layers of government: state, regions, and municipalities. TPC hubs are to coordinate the intermediate local level, from regional to municipal, and their configurations are left to regional territories to decide, based upon the extant ECEC offer in each region. The following paragraph gives an overview of this policy lever within the Italian ECEC system.

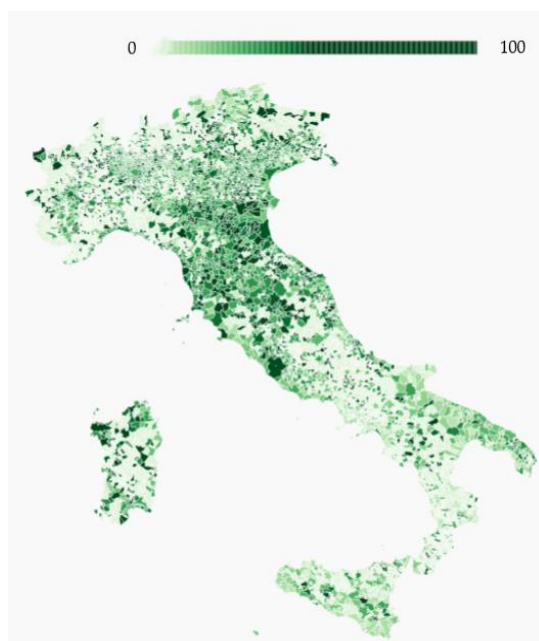
3. Territorial pedagogical coordination and its implementation

According to Legislative Decree 65/2017 for the organization of the integrated Italian ECEC system for children from birth to six years of age, a relevant aspect of system development is its qualification. The integration of the 0-2 and 3-5 segments under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and Merit (MoEM), however, presents several challenges, for their differentiated historical and geographical development, not to mention the legal status of different forms of provision (state, municipal, private subsidized; ISTAT, 2020; Nunnari, 2022; Stringher, Sandre, Donà, 2023). ISCED 0.1 services are mainly concentrated in

“Nidi” (literally nests, or childcare centers), catering for the needs of children aged 0-2 in premises that are offering fulltime access to learning and care environments, particularly suitable for this age group. Other forms of service exist, integrating this basic form of offer with home-based care and education, with centers for children and their families, or with “Spring sections”, catering for the needs of children aged 24-36 months and generally located in preschools. The territorial diffusion of ISCED 0.1 services is quite diverse, and mainly concentrated in Central-Northern regions, as Figure 3 shows. Just 27,2% of the in-age population has access to ISCED 0.1 services (ISTAT, 2022a), and this percentage increases to 33% considering anticipated enrolments in preschool.

For children aged 3-5, instead, preschool is the only type of ISCED 0.2 service in Italy and it can be run by state, municipal or private publicly subsidized entities. It is accessed by 91% of the 3-5 population and access reaches 96% for children aged 5 (ISTAT, 2022b).

Figure 3 – Territorial diffusion of ISCED 0.1 – ECEC places for residents aged 0-2 in Italian municipalities.



Source: Author's elaboration on OpenPolis/Con i Bambini 2022 visualization based on ISTAT 2020 data⁵⁶.

Considering this diverse offer, Territorial Pedagogical Coordination has been foreseen as a policy lever to locally develop and manage the 0-6 system. Currently, 309 TPC hubs are in operation or will be shortly created in 11 regions concentrated in Central-Northern Italy (Stringher, Sandre, Donà, 2023 with own update on Basilicata). Their aim is to coordinate public and private ECEC provision in local territories within each Italian region and generally they tend to coincide either with provinces or with socio-health districts. According to Ministerial note 404/2018, their functions are quite ample and range from coordination of all types of ECEC provision within their territory, to pedagogical

⁵⁶ Data are available here: <https://www.openpolis.it/esercizi/lintervento-su-asili-nido-e-servizi-prima-infanzia/>

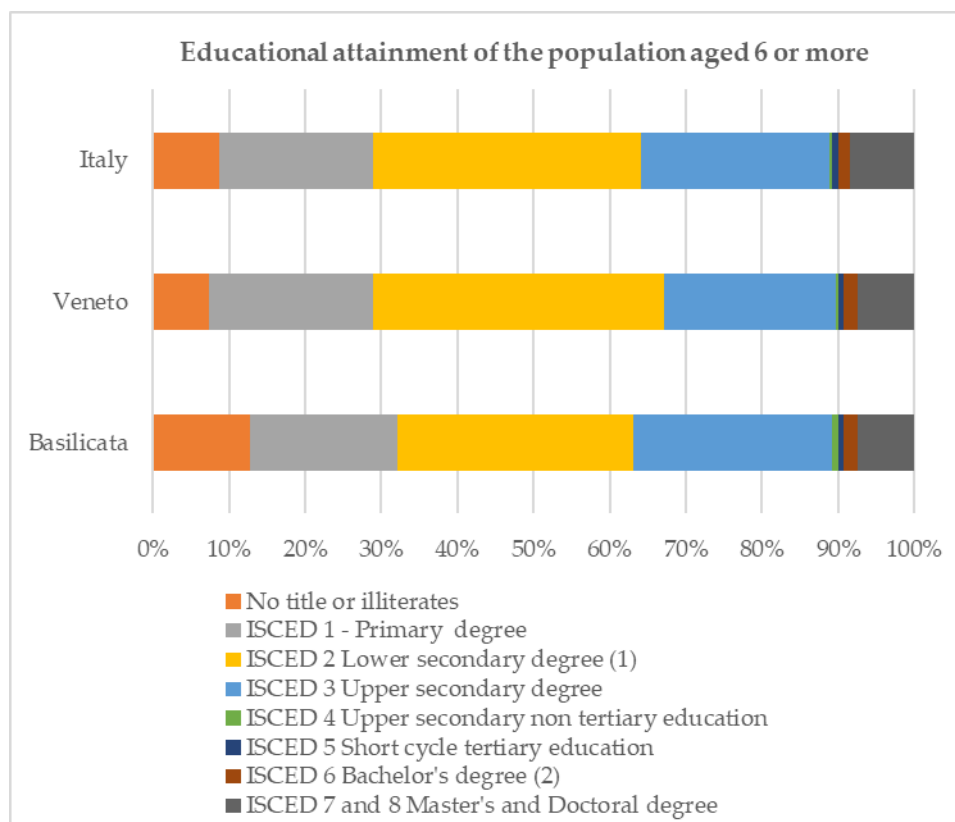
and didactic supervision of such provision, through in-service training of staff in collaboration with tertiary education institutions. TPC hubs promote research on their territory for innovation, organization and pedagogy. Worth underlining is the political nature of some TPC configurations, centered around a periodic consultation among the mayors within their territory, who provide guidelines for the expansion and qualification of ECEC provision, according to demographic trends and family needs. In this model, local policy makers are at the center and promote local partnerships, implement local policies, and support local experimentations of provision entrusted to pedagogical entities (Chitti, 2022). In more technical TPC models, preschool leaders and ECEC coordinators convene within their territory to ensure quality of provision (Stringher, Sandre, Donà, 2023). Ideally, the local policy and the local technical-pedagogical levels should dialogue effectively to ensure both reach and quality of provision.

In the following sub-paragraphs, I examine two Italian regions in greater detail, to support the claim concerning the importance of TPC as a tool to contrast educational poverty. The choice of these regions lies precisely in their very different formative offer and organization of ECEC services, along with their distinct territorial features, such as their extension, which configure two opposite situations in many of the dimensions of poverty examined by the SNAI strategy. The commonality in these diverse cases, is the possibility to flexibly employ the TPC as a tool to adapt a national strategy to local contexts, like Legislative Decree 65/2017 suggests.

3.a Basilicata's and Veneto's basic territorial features: differences and commonalities

Educational attainment of the population is a key indicator of a country's human capital (World Bank, 2021). For this reason, it seems important to provide the current situation in terms of population attainment levels within the two regions in focus (Figure 4).

Figure 4 – Comparison in educational attainment of the population aged 6 years or more between Basilicata and Veneto, within Italy.



(1) Includes "avviamento professionale" and upper secondary short cycle of 2 or 3 years

(2) Includes short cycle tertiary degree lasting at least 3 years (laurea breve)

(3) ISCED 7 includes tertiary degrees lasting 4 or more years (laurea magistrale o a ciclo unico o laurea vecchio ordinamento)

Source: Author's elaboration based on ISTAT 2011 Census data.

In this comparison, Basilicata differs from Veneto in the tails of the distribution: the proportion of illiterates is above national average, as is the population reaching secondary education or more. Veneto, in contrast, has the highest proportion of population under the level of secondary education, compared to the Italian and Basilicata data.

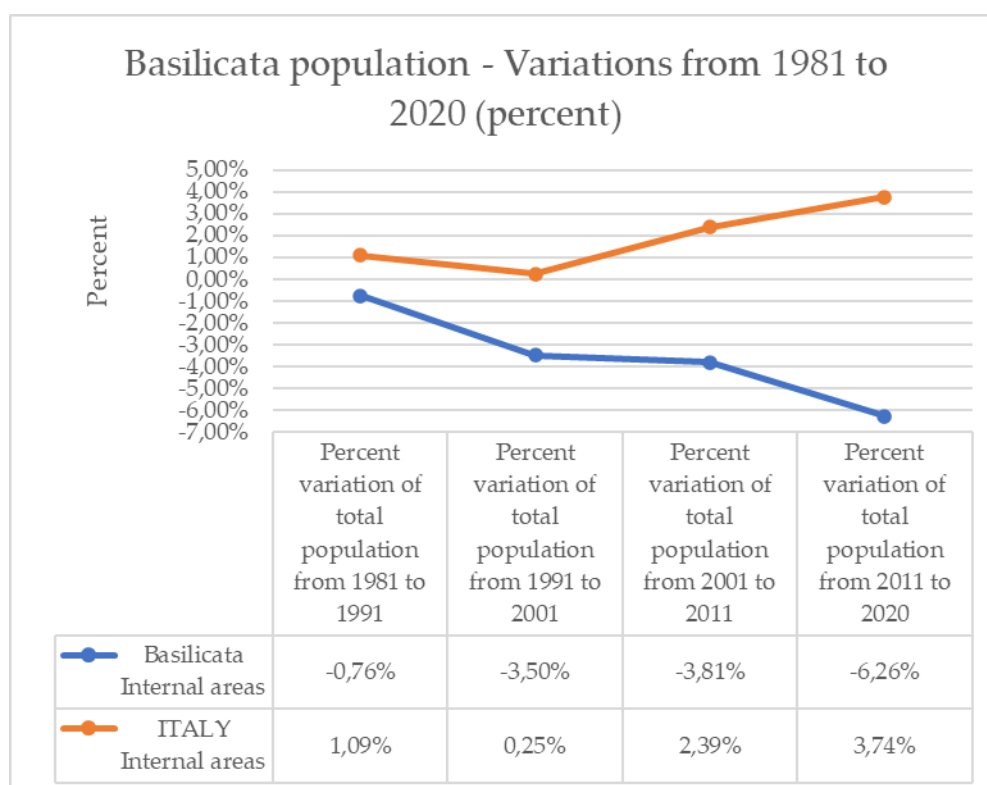
3.b. The case of Basilicata region

Basilicata is considered among the Italian regions with the highest density of ultra-peripheral territories (see Figure 1, green areas). Located in Southern Italy, its only urban poles are the two cities of Matera and Potenza. This means that the average time distance of an internal area from its pole is approximately a one-hour drive, compared to half an hour of the national average. According to OpenKit data⁵⁷, 126 out of 131 municipalities (96%) in the region are located within internal areas, compared to 51% nationally. In these areas, between 2011 and 2020, the depopulation gap is marked (-6,26%) compared to Italy's internal areas data (-3,74%) and it has been particularly sharp since 1981 (Figure 5). Data on territorial production are scant, yet in 2010 Basilicata had approximately 52% of its territory dedicated to agricultural usage, compared to almost 39% in Italian internal areas. Entrepreneurship is quite lively in Basilicata, with 111 enterprises per 1000 inhabitants in 2020 compared to almost 90 in Italian internal areas. However, the per-capita income in Basilicata's internal areas (approximately 13.7 thousand in 2018) is below the national average (15.9 thousand) in the same type of areas. Although tourism could be an important source of income in Basilicata, with its high percentage of State and non-State cultural sites located in internal areas (81% compared to 40% in Italian internal areas), the region has a very low accommodation rate, with only approximately 80 beds every 1000 inhabitants in 2020, versus 169 in Italy's internal areas. In contrast with Italy's percentages, in Basilicata there is a low level of association among internal areas municipalities (19% versus 44% nationally in 2021), and this could be interpreted as a difficulty of mayors to collaborate for the common good of a certain area, something vital instead for TPC hubs. Female employment rates in Basilicata's provinces are low compared to the Italian rate: 39.4% in Potenza and 40.7% in Matera among 15–

⁵⁷ See <https://politichecoesione.governo.it/it/strategie-tematiche-e-territoriali/strategie-territoriali/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne-snai/le-aree-interne-2021-2027/openkit-delle-aree-progetto/regioni-del-sud/>

64-year-olds, versus 51,1% in Italy (ISTAT data for 2022)⁵⁸. Although illiterates are over 12% of Basilicata's residents, educational attainment in the region is in line with that of the Italian population over 6 years of age (ISTAT census data of 2011, latest year available). However, INVALSI data on student outcomes confirm that the region lags behind national averages in all school levels where data are collected.

Figure 5 – Percent variation of the population from 1981 to 2020 in Basilicata internal areas compared to Italy's.



Source: Author's elaboration on OpenKit data.

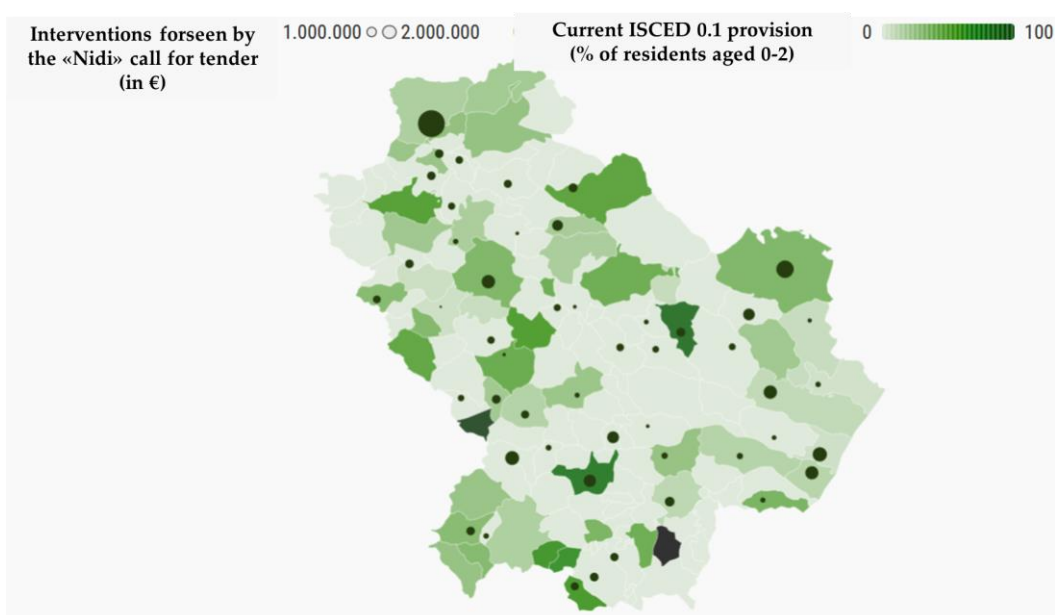
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See http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCV_TAXOCCU1

A good start in life, with the availability of quality ECEC services, could be one of the key solutions to ensure richer learning environments for children’s extant developmental needs, empower children and families for future optimal scholastic and life outcomes, contrast depopulation, and support women’s employment, thus improving the overall wellbeing and economy of the region.

Data on ECEC provision, divided into ISCED level 0.1 (for children aged 0-2) and 0.2 (for children 3-5) are provided hereunder. The current provision of nidi in Basilicata is pictured in Figure 6, which also illustrates the new nidi to be funded by Italy’s Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF) of Next Generation EU.

Figure 6 – New RRF interventions in Basilicata Region (in euros) versus current coverage of places in ISCED level 0.1 (percentage of residents aged 0-2 in year 2020).

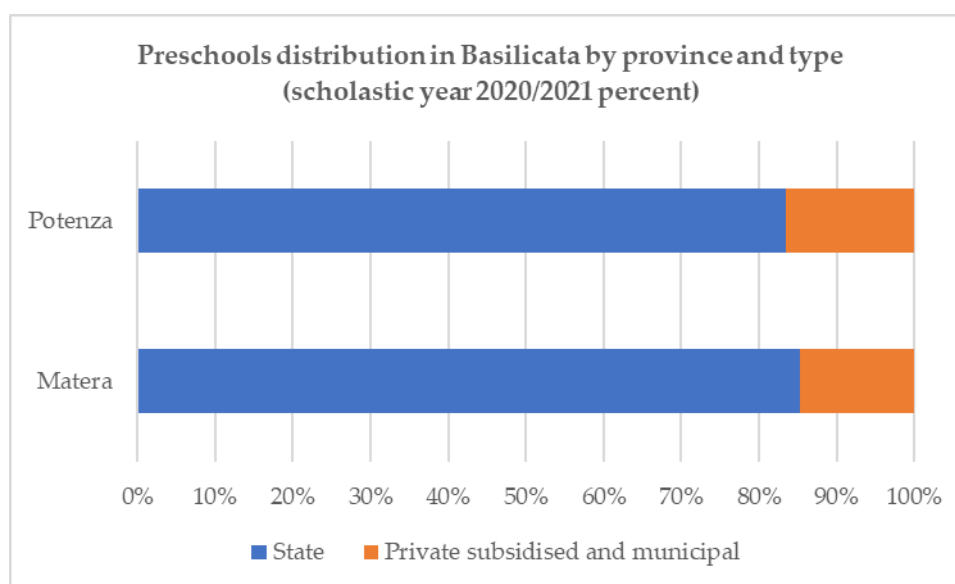


Source: Author’s translation of OpenPolis visualization based upon MoEM and ISTAT data published in the year 2022 .

Current ISCED 0.1 provision is quite sparse within the region and municipalities in Basilicata did not take full advantage of RRF, possibly for social (low demand of these services) and cultural reasons (lack of capacity in small

municipalities to handle complex call for tender procedures). Concerning the ISCED 0.2 segment, pictured in Figure 7, Basilicata is characterized by the prevalent presence of state preschools in both provincial territories.

Figure 7 – Preschools distribution in Basilicata by province and type (percent). Scholastic year 2020/2021.



Source: Author’s elaboration of data from the Regional Scholastic Office.

The type and density of offer within a region or territory is crucial to decide the configuration of a TPC: where private provision is prevalent over public provision (like in Veneto), in fact, there are more entities to be coordinated and the TPC should consider the market dynamics affecting the ECEC system. In territories like Basilicata, where the public provision is prevalent, the TPC could support state comprehensive institutes in broadening their formative offer with “Spring sections” and/or through agreements with private providers covering the 0-2 segment. Considering the structural difficulty of State preschools to hire stable personnel for the 0-2 segment, Basilicata’s TPC hubs could take advantage of private provision at least for the arrangements aimed at children aged 0 and

1. The State preschools could then concentrate their efforts on broadening access to Spring sections and on improving the quality of this type of formative offer.

Recently, Basilicata issued the regional deliberation 201/2023, in line with Legislative Decree 65/2017, providing guidelines for the implementation of the integrated 0-6 system and detailing the following key aspects: a) TPC definition, functions, organization, composition and parental involvement; b) territorial planning of resources, with aims and criteria for resource allocation; c) provision of ECEC leaders and staff in-service training, expressly oriented towards the overall aim of reducing educational poverty; d) institution of “ECEC Poles”, i.e. the integrated provision of 0-6 services within a unique setting or in nearby premises. Worth mentioning is the deliberation’s overall aim of freeing these services from the assistance dimension to usher the intentional educational sphere, making ECEC emerge from the category of public services at individual demand and introducing them into that of public services of a social nature. By doing so, Basilicata’s regulatory framework underlines the core value of Legislative Decree 65/2017, that is the right to education starting from birth, and contextually identifies the integrated 0-6 system as the first segment of education, fully coherent and functional to the national education system.

Within this legal framework, Basilicata’s TPC hubs are meant as a strategic lever for the local development of the ECEC system in the region and, following the National plan for the new integrated ECEC system, Basilicata allocates 5% of the State available resources for ECEC to TPC hubs and staff in-service training. Basilicata intends the TPC organization as an aggregate of education practitioners responsible for the promotion, qualification, monitoring and quality evaluation of ECEC services and educational activities within a territory, much like what the Marche region has foreseen (Stringher, Sandre, Donà, 2023). In other words, the TPC is not a mere network or aggregate of practitioners representing different types of provision, but it is the body responsible for

implementing key aspects of the ECEC local system. In fact, among the tasks of a TPC hub the regional legal framework includes: analyses and research on children's quality of life and on families' needs for their children; pedagogical support to ECEC leaders, also for the constitution of "ECEC Poles"; exchange of good practices, pedagogical documentation and research; in-service training of staff based on needs analyses; elaboration and implementation of methods and tools to evaluate the quality of ECEC services; pedagogical guidelines for the 0-6 offer vertically coherent with primary school; activation and diffusion of initiatives and services for parental support; inclusion of children with special needs; support to the inclusion of families in the planning and evaluation of ECEC services; support to decision-makers in their planning and regulatory activities. Given these complex tasks, each TPC hub may collaborate with experts and its composition includes 6 preschool leaders (of which 3 from State preschools), 3 leaders of 0-3 services and 1 representative of local social services and coordinator of the TPC.

In view of the considerable investments that the Italian government is placing on the expansion of the newly integrated ECEC system through the RRF, TPC hubs could play a vital role in the analysis of the territories, in order not only to map demographic changes of the 0-2 population where ECEC services are available, but also to support a cultural shift needed in this region, still characterized by poor quality labor market opportunities, emigration, and depopulation.

3.c. The case of Veneto region

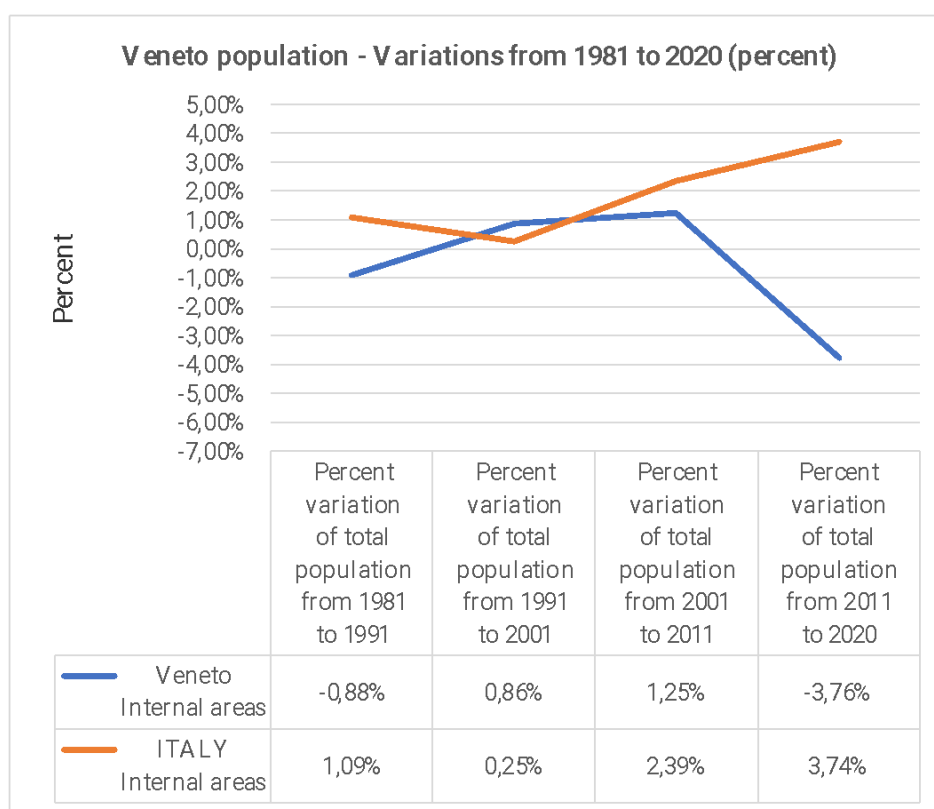
Veneto has a lower density of internal and ultra-peripheral territories compared to Basilicata (see Figure 1's green areas). Located in North-Eastern Italy, it has several urban poles and intermunicipal areas of attraction. According to OpenKit

data⁵⁹, 192 out of 581 municipalities (33%) in the region are located within internal areas, compared to 51% nationally. The average time distance of an internal area from its urban pole is approximately a 40 minutes' drive, but it reaches almost 70 minutes in the Comelico area (Belluno province), compared to half an hour of the national average. Within these areas, between 2011 and 2020, the depopulation gap (-3,76%) is in line with that of Italy's internal areas (-3,74%). The Veneto population dynamics in these areas followed a particular pattern, with an initial increase from 1981 through 2011 and a subsequent sharp drop (Figure 8).

Data on territorial production show that Veneto's internal areas are particularly dedicated to manufacturing activities (1.20 on the index of specialization, with Italy set to 1). Entrepreneurship is quite lively too in Veneto, with 110 enterprises per 1000 inhabitants in 2020 compared to almost 90 in Italian internal areas. In fact, the per-capita income in Veneto's internal areas reaches 18.2 thousand euros in 2018, well above the national and Basilicata averages in the same type of areas of 15.9 and 13.7 respectively. In addition, Veneto developed a prosperous touristic market, and has a very high accommodation rate, with approximately 761 beds every 1000 inhabitants in 2020, versus 169 in Italy's internal areas, almost 10 times higher than in Basilicata, even though the number of State and non-State cultural sites located in Veneto's internal areas are just 17% compared to 40% in Italian and 81% in Basilicata's internal areas. In contrast with Italy's percentages, in Veneto there is a high level of association among internal areas municipalities (62% versus 44% nationally in 2021), and this could be interpreted as an exceptional opportunity of mayors to collaborate for the common good of a certain area, a positive basis for TPC hubs as well.

⁵⁹ See <https://politichecoesione.governo.it/it/strategie-tematiche-e-territoriali/strategie-territoriali/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne-snai/le-aree-interne-2021-2027/openkit-delle-aree-progetto/regioni-del-sud/>

Figure 8 - Percent variation of the population from 1981 to 2020 in Veneto internal areas compared to Italy's.



Source: Author's elaboration on OpenKit data.

Female employment rates in Veneto are high, ranging from 54,4% in Rovigo, 55,0% in Treviso, 59,8% in Padua, 61,3% in Verona, 61,3% in Vicenza, 61,8% in Venice, up to 64,3% in Belluno (the province where one of the farthest internal areas is located), compared to the Italian rate of 51,1% (ISTAT data for 2022)⁶⁰. This is a remarkable achievement, also considering that the educational attainment of Veneto's residents is in line with that of the Italian population over 6 years of age (ISTAT census data of 2011, latest year available). In addition, the

⁶⁰ See http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCV_TAXOCCU1

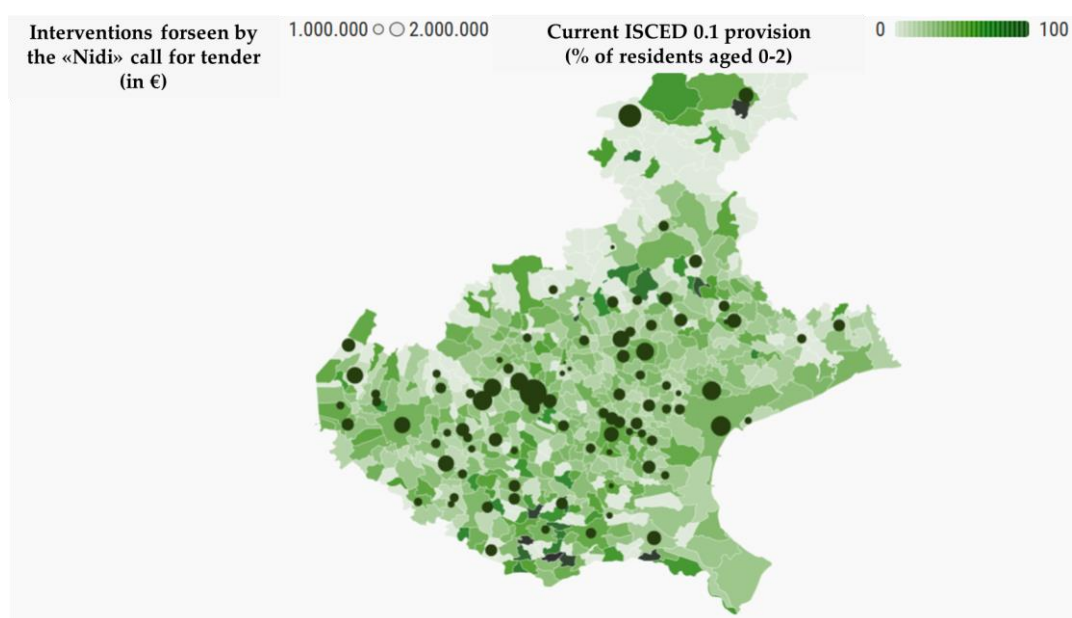
Veneto school system is of good quality also in internal areas and INVALSI data on student outcomes confirm that the region's averages in less privileged areas outperform national averages in all school levels. However, recent analyses carried out within the Regional Scholastic Office indicate that in the provinces of Belluno and Rovigo high dropout rates are a widespread phenomenon, together with parental education starting from first grade⁶¹.

Within the Veneto context, according to the data just presented, conditions generally seem more favorable for children to have a good start in life, compared to Basilicata. Therefore, the challenge in these territories is mainly to contrast depopulation also with the aid of widespread ECEC services, while keeping a good level of quality to serve children's wellbeing and to support parenting. In fact, Veneto's internal areas are also those where such services are less dense, namely in the North-Eastern part of the region (Belluno) and in the Southern province of Rovigo.

Data on ECEC provision, divided into ISCED level 0.1 (for children aged 0-2) and 0.2 (for children 3-5) are provided hereunder. The current provision of nidi in Veneto is pictured in Figure 9, which also illustrates the new nidi to be funded by Italy's Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF) of Next Generation EU.

⁶¹ Personal communication of Inspector Laura Donà to the author on July 9th 2023.

Figure 9 – New RRF interventions in Veneto Region (in euros) versus current coverage of places in ISCED level 0.1 (percentage of residents aged 0-2 in year 2020).

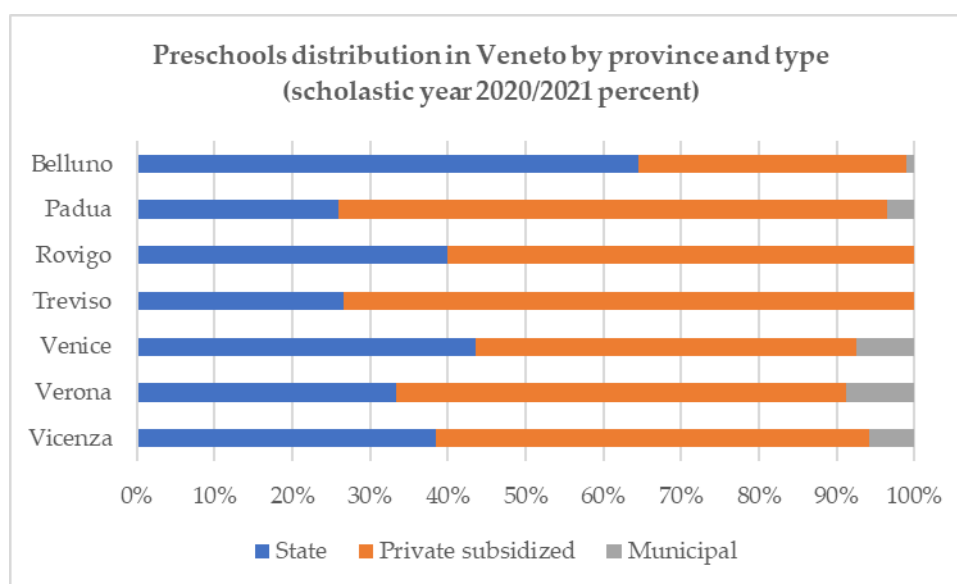


Source: Author's translation of OpenPolis elaborations based upon MoEM and ISTAT data published in the year 2022 .

Current ISCED 0.1 provision is quite dense within the region and municipalities in Veneto took advantage of RRF to increase this type of offer. A historical reason for the widespread diffusion of ECEC services in Veneto derives from the role of catholic private providers, that have been strongly linked to these territories and have established the first preschools even before the introduction of State preschools with Law 444/1968. Being well positioned on these territories, private providers were in a favorable position to also introduce nidi and the offer of services for children aged 0-2, hence their diffusion in Veneto today. However, historically, the private provision of preschools has had considerable impact on the costs for families and particularly on those in difficulty. The territories with the highest proportion of State preschools in Veneto are precisely those with more disadvantaged families, namely the provinces and internal areas of Belluno and Rovigo, besides Venice, as evident in Figure 10. Private preschool provision

is particularly dense in the provinces of Treviso (73% of the total preschool offer) and Padua (70%).

Figure 10 - Preschools distribution in Veneto by province and type (percent). Scholastic year 2020/2021.



Source: Author's elaboration of data from the Regional Scholastic Office.

In Veneto, since 2021 a regional coordinating body has been set up with representatives from regional and municipal authorities and the regional scholastic office. However, TPC hubs were created well before, one for each province, in 2019 and in 2020, with specific directives (*delibere*) of the municipalities hosting the provincial TPC, but with no internal regulation for their functioning. Currently, their main activity is in-service staff training on themes that have been freely selected by each TPC, ranging from children's neurobiological development to quality assurance (Prospettive Zerosei, 2022)⁶². Yet, the exchange of information among the coordinators is another feature of

⁶² Newsletter of the Regional Scholastic Office of Veneto, freely available here: https://istruzioneveneto.gov.it/20220119_15398/

Veneto's TPC hubs, organized by the Regional Scholastic Office within its 0-6 Newsletter, hosting contributions coming from the 0-6 segment on several themes, such as small schools in internal areas or state preschool networks.

A reflection on the first three years of experience in the coordination of the territorial 0-6 offer has led to a provisional conclusion: the political and the technical levels of the ECEC system local governance need to be both present and in dialogue for the TPC to be successful (Donà, 2022; Stringher, Sandre, Donà, 2023). The mere aggregation of representatives from different providers is not a guarantee of success *per se* but needs to be nurtured in ways that imply a strong leadership and an appropriation of the vision that each TPC needs to have, in order to make progress. The advocacy and agency of its members seems to be of paramount importance to aid the strengthening of the integrated ECEC system, both in terms of its wide diffusion and of its qualification, considering the potential frictions between educators and teachers working in the 0-2 and 3-5 segments respectively due to their very different contractual arrangements.

4. Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter, I have defined educational poverty and I have advanced the hypothesis of strengthening the education segment for children aged 0-6 to tackle educational poverty from birth. In this perspective, considering Italy's strategy for internal areas (SNAI), I have examined two Italian regions in greater detail, aggregating data from different sources to offer a snapshot of two different cases of areas with educational poverty.

Basilicata needs to allow more women into the labor market, boosting the region's economy. This aim could be achieved with a broad diffusion of ECEC services, supporting children's holistic development in an area with cultural resources that are not fully exploited. The distribution and qualification of ECEC

services has to consider the current preschool offer, organized primarily by the State, that cannot hire personnel to employ for ISCED 0.1.

Veneto, instead, already has a considerable 0-3 offer on its territory and yet the limited presence of the State in the market of services for children implies that families incur in costs that would not be charged in State institutions, thus introducing a distortion in favor of wealthier families for children's access to 0-6 services.

TPC hubs in both regions could be a viable option to qualify the ECEC system locally. To draft a program of work, TPC members could start from the collection of pertinent information within the area of reach in order to discover patterns of diffusion of ECEC services, but also of key territorial features and assets, such as population dynamics, economic and cultural resources, specific characteristics of educational poverty and its possible reasons. I have provided an example of statistics that could be useful in picturing the mosaic of the extant situation of a territory, especially in internal areas, but more information could be available that the TPC could consider, once the basic characteristics of a territory are explored. Examples of further information are ECEC costs to the community, number of children attending within a specific municipality or community versus the resident in-age population, location of ECEC services and their distance from internal areas.

A second step in the drafting of TPC program could be a logical framework from the extant situation to the desired state to be achieved. For an example matrix, TPC hubs could access the European Commission website⁶³. Allocating specific responsibilities to parts of the program and to overall coordination is necessary for it to progress. Finally, monitoring the execution of a plan in time and evaluating its impact on a local basis is essential to improve overall goals attainment. An evidence-based plan of this sort could inform the allocation of

⁶³ <https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-11/2023%20CBHE%20-%20Logical%20Framework%20Matrix%20table.docx>

resources for the local ECEC system, considering that children need nurturing care, but also their parents, families, neighborhoods, and educators or teachers, especially in deprived areas, need support (Tamburlini, 2019) and training to help children's learning thrive (Hanushek, 2020).

Within the TPC a solid relationship among the participants within the TPC community is key to take full advantage of the material and immaterial resources available and to serve the purpose of contrasting educational poverty. The TPC could act like community educational pacts, already in place in Italian primary and secondary education. According to OpenPolis (2022), community educational pacts concern the local education system as a whole, from primary to secondary education, and potentially comprise diverse public and private actors of the social and cultural sphere. These "pacts" have a wider perspective than TPC hubs, and yet, if these two different entities could dialogue, much could be achieved to tackle educational poverty. Central as they are, adult relationships seem of paramount importance for the improvement of children's lives and learning.

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