

# Croatia and Italy: national curricula and artistic music education in the 0-6 years system\*



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## **Abstract**

This article compares the national educational systems of Croatia and Italy concerning early childhood (0-6 years) within the framework of the European Union legislation. The critical-comparative analysis of the curricula of both countries aims to highlight the educational potential of music education, with a historical and cultural focus on "art music".

The relevance of the eighth key competence promoted by both curricula underlines the crucial role that art music can play both in the development of cultural awareness and a sense of belonging to a wider European community, and in the education for creative and innovative expression. By promoting the pedagogical strategy of problematization, the two curricula support the child's potential for developing critical thinking and open up a privileged pathway to "art music" not only for the purposes of artistic and aesthetic education per se, but also for the training of reflective thinking. Based on these assumptions, the study investigates the integration of pedagogical-didactic competences and musicological and technical-musical competences of teachers and educators within the university training programs for future music teachers offered by the Croatian and Italian tertiary education and training systems.

In this perspective, music education that focuses on culturally relevant artistic content can significantly contribute to the cognitive, social and emotional development of children, promoting the first steps towards active citizenship. This paper aims to stimulate a debate in the scientific community on the relevance of artistic music education in the construction of a vertical curriculum, aligned among European countries, as a coefficient of "quality" for education, starting from the *European Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)* system (0-6 years).

### **Key words:**

*Critical-comparative analysis; ECEC music curricula; Music pedagogy and didactics; Music teacher training; Quality of music education.*

## Introduction

This review is the first result of a six-month study carried out for my Master's thesis in Music Pedagogy and Didactics, at the Arts Department of the University of Bologna, and in collaboration with the Faculty of Teacher Education of the University of Zagreb. The study, carried out under the supervision of Prof. Carla Cuomo of the Arts Department of the University of Bologna, included a research period in Croatia (September-December 2023) under the supervision of Professors Tamara Jurkić Sviben and Martina Mičija Palić, belonging to the aforementioned Faculty of the University of Zagreb.

The theoretical and methodological basis of the study is the model of music education developed by the research group of the Arts Department of the University of Bologna. The model aims to educate for the understanding of music in history and culture and has an orientation towards democratic education. (La Face Bianconi, 2008; La Face Bianconi, Frabboni, 2008; La Face Bianconi, Scalfaro, 2011; La Face, Bianconi, 2013; Cuomo, 2018; Cuomo, La Face, 2020; Badolato, Cuomo, 2024). Based on these epistemological assumptions, my discussion proposes a critical-comparative analysis of the Croatian and Italian educational systems in relation to music education. The perspective adopted is that of the vertical music education curriculum, starting from the integrated zero-six system – hereafter referred to by the identifier *ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care)* – up to tertiary education.

This comparative analysis of the two systems of school music education in Croatia and Italy is a more in-depth version of the study already carried out for my Master's thesis. The aim is to show how the two basic disciplinary fields of music education, namely educational science on the one hand and musicology on the other, are integrated into the national school curricula and consequently into the training programmes of music teachers. The study takes into account the broader European regulatory framework for the *ECEC* system.

Since Croatia and Italy are being discussed here, the pedagogical-didactic paradigm is not simply any model of music education, but, on the contrary, a specific model defined by its orientation. Croatia and Italy come from different historical, political and cultural – and therefore educational – traditions. Since 2013, the year of Croatia's accession to the EU (Official Journal of the European Union, 2012), these histories have developed a mutual link after Croatia's entry into the European community: "united in diversity" (Curti Gialdino, 2005, pp. 99-127), they are gradually adapting to the European Education Area (European Commission, 2020). The comparison between the two countries offers various insights into the aspects that need to be worked on in order to harmonise the different national education systems of the European Union countries.

European legislation on early childhood education (0-6 years) has made progress (European Council, 2019), but is not yet sufficiently reflected in internal EU educational practice (Cuomo, 2023). The annual comparative report shows that the ambitious target of setting the participation rate of children in *ECEC* at least at 96% has been achieved by only six countries (Belgium, Denmark, Spain, Lithuania, Iceland, Sweden), although the EU average seems to have stabilised above 92.5% (European Commission, 2023a, p. 23). Both Italy and Croatia are below this rate, with 91% (European Commission, 2023c, p.7) and 77.8% respectively (European Commission, 2023b, p.9). In Italy, has declined since 2012, with less than a third of children participating in formal care services (*ibid.*). Similarly, in Croatia, although the rate has increased compared to 2012 due to investments in infrastructure, participation in *ECEC* is one of the lowest in the EU (*ibid.*, p. 8). Furthermore, according to the Eurydice 2023 report, countries still face numerous discrepancies: universal access, high quality and integration of *ECEC* services have not yet been achieved in many

European countries (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2023). According to the 2019 Recommendation of the Council of the European Union (European Council, 2019), the indicators for assessing the high quality of *ECEC* systems are: accessibility, professionalisation of staff and educational guidelines.

In terms of 'inclusive' accessibility, while only seven Member States guarantee a place in *ECEC* for young children from 6 to 18 months, almost half of the countries do so for children from 3 years (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2023, p. 8). Despite the fact that both Croatia and Italy are not among the countries that guarantee a place from 6 months to 3 years, Croatia makes it available from the age of 4 until the last year, which is compulsory (Eurydice, 2019, pp. 44-48). In the last year before primary school, demand is considered to be higher than supply in Italy (*ibid.*, p. 64). In terms of 'fair' access and thus affordability, the Italian offer of free, income-based *ECEC* starts at the age of 3 (although it is not accompanied by a guaranteed place and is hampered by long waiting lists with complex priority rules), while in Croatia there is no free offer for the whole stage (*ibid.*, p.59).

In terms of educational guidelines, the *Proposal for Key Principles of a Quality Rramework for Early Childhood Education and Care* includes coherence and unity for the 0-6 curriculum and integration of this segment with the next school segment as a pedagogical means to improve the quality of the service, to be achieved according to high-level guidelines promoting common, history-oriented and clearly organised pedagogical objectives and content (European Commission, 2014). However, one third of European systems do not have pedagogical guidelines for children under three years of age, although this has become more widespread in recent years (Eurydice, 2019, p.94).

Although Croatia and Italy have different organisational structures, they both have educational guidelines for the entire 0-6 segment, in continuity with primary school (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2023, p.18).

The Italian *ECEC* system, referred to as the 'integrated zero-six system', is organised on two levels, both of which are non-compulsory. The first level, for children between the ages of zero and three, is provided by 'servizi educativi per l'infanzia' (early childhood education services), which are not the responsibility of the public education authorities, but are organised by the regions according to their own legislation (Eurydice, 2019, p. 178), or by private institutions. The second, for children between the ages of three and six, is provided by the 'scuola dell'infanzia' (children's school), under the full responsibility of the current Ministry of Education and Merit, and in some cases, when the school is run by municipalities or the State, does not involve the payment of fees (*ibid.*). Compulsory schooling in Italy therefore begins at the age of six, with the start of the first course of study, known as 'scuola primaria'.

The Croatian *ECEC* system is organised in three educational courses: from six months to one year, from one to three years, and finally from three years to the start of primary school, which is set at around the age of 7. All courses are under the responsibility of the Ministry of Science and Education (Eurydice, 2019, p. 177). The main difference with Italy is the compulsory attendance of the one-year 'preschool programme', which is a compulsory institutional form of education for all children aged 6-7 and is fully funded by the state (*ibid.*).

Therefore, as a starting point for the critical-comparative analysis of the two countries' education systems, I will consider three guiding documents to analyse how the Croatian and Italian curricula claim quality music education since *ECEC*, in line with the expectations set by recent European legislation, which recognises "the role of music, arts and physical activity" for a balanced

"social-emotional and cognitive development", starting from this pre-school age group (European Council, 2019).

## Methods

My analysis proposes a comparative framework of the ECEC systems of Croatia and Italy, through a problematising approach that identifies the aspects of progress and the aspects that are less aligned with EU legislation in the field of music education. The analysis is developed on two levels: on the one hand, the theoretical study of European and international legislation, as well as the national regulatory frameworks of the two countries considered and their respective music education programmes; on the other hand, the methodology of participant observation (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2018, pp. 253-263), which has allowed to consider my University of Bologna and the University of Zagreb as a specific case. The study of this circumscribed example has made it possible to deepen and highlight, in a practical way, the observations and criticisms derived from the theoretical study, as well as to understand the two educational systems within their particular cultural characteristics, favouring a more holistic view.

Therefore, for the sake of illustration, I will refer to:

- the *Croatian National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education*, adopted in 2014 and still valid today;
- the *Pedagogical Guidelines for the Integrated Zero-Six System*, published at the end of 2021 as part of the European call for a unitary curriculum for 0-6-year-olds, which complements the *National Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool and First Course Education* that frame the 3-6 segment of the school education pathway.

The analysis will first focus on the similarities and differences between the aforementioned guidelines, highlighting their potential, and then move on to the specifics of teacher education.

## Results

There are many similarities between the principles, values and educational objectives of the two countries. Among these, I believe it is appropriate to highlight three in particular for the purposes of music education, both in general and specifically in relation to *ECEC*.

1. In both countries, the integral development of children, as a balanced combination of different aspects, is the primary aim of education.

Table 1

*Curricula purpose comparison*

Croatia, (Ministarstvo znanosti, obrazovanja i športa, 2011, p.8)	Italy, (Linee pedagogiche per il sistema integrato zerosei, 2021, p.22)
Intellectual	Cognitive
Social	Relational and affective
Moral and spiritual	Aesthetic, ethical and spiritual
Motor	Bodily

A child's harmonious development is closely linked to her or his psychophysical well-being. This is achieved through the development of identity, self-esteem, self-management, education and social well-being.

2. Integral development is pursued through the acquisition of competences. In implementing the 2006 Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences, all three documents refer to the fundamental role of music education in relation to the eighth key competence on 'cultural awareness and expression'. Although the wording is different, the two education systems tend to be similar:

Table 2

*Curricula objectives comparison*

Croatia, (Ministarstvo znanosti, obrazovanja i športa, 2011, p.8)	Italy, (Linee pedagogiche per il sistema integrato zerosei, 2021, p.22; Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo di istruzione, 2012, p.27)
Preservation and development of the national, spiritual, material and natural <i>heritage</i> of the Republic of Croatia.	Development of several <i>expressive and representative forms</i> (2021)
	Interest in <i>music listening</i> and <i>artworks enjoying</i> ; explore its own music-expressive and symbolic-representative possibilities (2012)

3. Cultural development, i.e. education in the understanding of music, is integrated with cognitive development, and education through music is integrated with the mental *habitus* of intelligent thinking (Baldacci, 2012).

Table 3

*Curricula objectives comparison*

Croatia, (Ministarstvo znanosti, obrazovanja i športa, 2011, p.8)	Italy, (Linee pedagogiche per il sistema integrato zerosei, 2021, p.22)
Reflection and self-assessment of one's activities and achievement.	The initiation of critical thinking, through the extension of cognitive, reflexive and metacognitive processes.

Therefore, both the Croatian and the Italian ECEC programmes recognise a number of key points in line with the expectations of the European legislation, such as:

- linguistic development: based on the child's "need to communicate", it concerns not only the development of verbal language, but also the internalisation of other symbolic languages, such as music, in order to develop expressive and communicative abilities, which also manifest themselves at the productive level of creativity;
- learning through experience, as a way of getting to know the world, and the key role of the educator in guiding the child along the path of exploration, discovery and experimentation in order to promote cognitive and metacognitive development and autonomy;
- the importance of music in identity, relational and social development to build a sense of belonging to a knowledge-based society;
- the role of the learning environment as a "third educator" in stimulating, encouraging and promoting the child's contact with the musical language and leading to emotional enjoyment and development.

The normative documents of both countries are consistent in recognising the important role of music in the socio-emotional and cognitive development of the child. However, they are not in line with European legislation on preschool and primary education, in particular on the quality of

education and teaching, in terms of the training of educators and teachers in music education. This is because, at tertiary level, the two education systems either lack adequate musicological training, i.e. appropriate historical and cultural preparation in music – especially in the field of art music – or are uneven in terms of training in the required pedagogical and didactic competences. If we consider Croatia and Italy as two possible examples of educational, school and teacher training pathways in the European Union, the weakness, in short, lies in the lack of harmonisation of educator and teacher training systems with regard to the principles, values and educational goals highlighted here.

## Discussion

However, these noble goals are not pursued through any model of music education. The scientific, i.e. academic, disciplines of music pedagogy and didactics express their formative potential in education in general when they are based on a cultural-historical approach (La Face Bianconi, 2008; Cuomo, 2018). In other words, both the pedagogical approach in the ECEC system and the transmission of knowledge in the subsequent school phases, i.e. teaching, should promote awareness and understanding of music in its different forms, in the context of their history and culture. This idea of music education in schools should be supported and consolidated both by the disciplinary contents of all musicological disciplines and by the theoretical and methodological concepts of educational sciences, and therefore by the various educational systems.

From this point of view, the quality of musical education in early childhood directly involves, first of all, the pedagogical and didactic competences of the teachers, coordinators and educators; it also directly involves both general historical-cultural competences, and therefore historical-musical competences, and a good level of musicological and technical-musical competence, at least on the part of the teachers, as well as basic training in all these areas on the part of the coordinators and educators. In short, it is essential to have a high level of pedagogical and musicological *savoir savant* (Cuomo, 2023).

Countries must support quality in early childhood education by developing the musical and musicological competences of educators, and by training them in methodological-didactic innovation, as well as through continuous professional development. Therefore, among the three possible areas of intervention proposed by the Italian music pedagogical and didactic literature to improve the quality of ECEC services – the musical training of staff, the historically and culturally oriented organisation of the curriculum, and the creation of the learning environment (Cuomo, 2023; see Cuomo, in this volume) – I will focus on the first, namely the training of teachers.

According to Article 12(3) of *Law on Amendments to the Law on Preschool Education (Zakon o izmjenama i dopunama Zakona o predškolskom odgoju i obrazovanju)* No 57 /2022, the profession of teacher for children from the age of six months to the beginning of primary school may be exercised in Croatia by persons who have the following qualifications: first level university studies (*preddiplomski sveučilišni studij*) and first level vocational studies (*preddiplomski stručni studij*); second level university studies (*diplomski sveučilišni studij*) and specialised vocational studies (*specijalistički diplomski stručni studij*). In Italy, Presidential Decree No. 19/2016 stipulates that those who have completed a four-year course in Primary Education – Childhood Specialisation (*Scienze della formazione primaria - indirizzo infanzia*), as well as those who hold a 'Diploma magistrale', 'Diploma socio-psicopedagogico di scuola superiore' and 'Diploma linguistico sperimentale' awarded for the 2001/2002 school year, as stipulated in the Ministerial Decree of March 1997 (Official Gazette, 2008), are qualified to teach in kindergartens. Since 1999, when the

Bologna Process was launched with the Sorbonne Declaration, the higher education system has been increasingly moving towards coherence in Europe through the creation of a "European Higher Education Area" and the promotion of the European higher education system worldwide. Therefore, both Croatian and Italian universities offer a three-year course in pre-school education (at the end of which 180 ECTS points are awarded). I will analyse a sample of such courses in three locations: Split, Rijeka and Zagreb; Rome, Padua and Bologna.

An examination of teacher education programmes at universities has revealed certain discrepancies with regard to the goal of integrating these two scientific-disciplinary fields and thus overcoming the age-old dichotomy between 'knowing' and 'doing'.

The first consideration stems from the terminological choice for the names of the two faculties: the Faculty of Teacher Training (*Učiteljski fakultet*) in Croatia and the Faculty of Educational Sciences (*Scienze dell'Educazione*) in Italy. The Croatian university focuses on the training of teachers, in contrast to the Italian system, which focuses on the training of individuals and thus on the educational process, rather than specifically on teachers. This approach is reflected in the courses for early childhood and pre-school education. The role assigned to music seems to be irregular and divergent. On the one hand, Croatian courses provide students with both theoretical competences ("theory and history of music, acquisition of basic musical culture", etc.) and practical competences ("acquisition of musical skills") in the early years; these are then followed by methodological competences of music teaching, also through practical exercises in schools, aimed at acquiring the teaching abilities to transform this knowledge into knowledge to be taught. But not only that. In the specific case study I have considered, concerning the University of Zagreb, students are required to attend classical and jazz concerts offered by the "music scene" as an integral part of the courses on musical culture, thanks to a cooperation with the music production of the Croatian Radio and Television (Jurkić Sviben, Mičija Palić, 2023). From the beginning, these courses have a pedagogical and didactic focus, not aimed at professional-performance training, while the Italian courses do not necessarily include musical or musicological courses.

Table 4

*Comparison between the curricula of degree programmes in early childhood and pre-school education*

University of Split - Croatia				Sapienza University of Rome - Italy			
	1 <sup>st</sup> semester	2 <sup>nd</sup> semester	ECTS		1 <sup>st</sup> semester	2 <sup>nd</sup> semester	ECTS
1 <sup>st</sup> year	Basics of Music culture	Music Practicum I	4	1 <sup>st</sup> year	//	//	0
2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Music practicum II	Music in Early and Preschool Education I	7	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	//	//	0
3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Music in Early and Preschool Education II	//	5	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	//	//	0

Table 5

*Comparison between the curricula of degree programmes in early childhood and pre-school education*

University of Rijeka - Croatia				University of Padua - Italy			
	1 <sup>st</sup> semester	2 <sup>nd</sup> semester	ECTS		1 <sup>st</sup> semester	2 <sup>nd</sup> semester	ECTS
1 <sup>st</sup> year	//	Music Art	4	1 <sup>st</sup> year	//	//	0
2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Music practicum I	Music Teaching Methodology in Integrated curriculum I; Music practicum II	6	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	//	//	0
3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Music Teaching Methodology in Integrated curriculum II	//	5	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	//	//	0

Table 6

*Comparison between the curricula of degree programmes in early childhood and pre-school education*

University of Zagreb - Croatia				University of Bologna - Italy			
	1 <sup>st</sup> semester	2 <sup>nd</sup> semester	ECTS		1 <sup>st</sup> semester	2 <sup>nd</sup> semester	ECTS
1 <sup>st</sup> year	Music culture	Piano I / Guitar I	4	1 <sup>st</sup> year	//	//	0
2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Piano II / Guitar II	Instrumental accompaniment while singing I	7	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	//	//	0
3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Methodology of Musical culture I; Instrumental accompaniment while singing II	Methodology of Musical culture II	6	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	//	//	0

The two national curricula analysed are consistent in promoting cognitive, cultural and communicative development through, among other things, musical activities. These must focus on two axes of musical experience, receptive and productive, in order to learn to perceive, listen, seek and discriminate sounds (i.e. active experiences) and to explore one's expressive and symbolic possibilities. In summary, the documents seem to address the complexity of children's development, while taking into account the complexity of the musical discipline.

As recommended in the 2006 Road Map for Arts Education, high quality music education needs to be supported by government ministries and policy makers by ensuring both «a permanent central place in the educational curriculum, funded appropriately, and staffed by teachers of appropriate quality and skill» (UNESCO, 2006, p.18). The European Union's commitment to music education, with the Declaration of 2011 (EMC, 2011), makes a number of recommendations to address the issue of quality education, among which I believe it is important to highlight:

- the employment of «high quality music education practitioners [...] at the earliest stage (already at pre-kindergarten and pre-school education)»;
- the inclusion of «pedagogical training» in the professional training of «all musicians entering music education» and, conversely, the inclusion of «musical training» for «all educational professionals [...] to understand the value of music»;
- «continuous professional development» and «high quality evaluation systems» (European Music Council, 2011, p.3).

In short, in order to effectively promote the eighth key competence on cultural awareness and expression (Official Journal of the European Union, 2018), «culturally educated teachers are needed who are able to make students culturally aware, and guide them towards the reception of works of art, pointing out their aesthetic components and encouraging creativity for the benefit of children and young people's development» (Jurkić Sviben, 2023, p.152).

## Conclusions

The aim of this critical-comparative analysis of the general and music education system of Croatia and Italy was to offer an initial theoretical framework to **reflect** on the relationship between music education — particularly artistic music— and the quality of education within the European *ECEC* system. The analysis, according to its exploratory character which does not claim to be exhaustive, intended to open a space further scholarly discussion on the need for harmonisation of national education and training system, in line with the expectations of European legislation and strategic documents.

The comparative analysis of the two national curricula, Croatian and Italian, highlights a normative convergence in recognising the importance of music education for the cognitive, social and emotional development of children already within the *ECEC* system, as well as in promoting the eighth key competence, namely cultural awareness and expression. At the same time, the study has pointed to significant differences and shortcomings in the field of teacher and educator training, particularly with regard to the integration of pedagogical-didactic competences with musicological, historical-cultural, and technical-musical knowledge. It is precisely in this area that the main structural problem emerges: a discrepancy between declared ambitious curricular objectives and the actual educational pathways through which future educators and teachers are prepared to implement them.

From this perspective, the paper advances a working hypothesis according to which music education, grounded in the integration of musicological and pedagogical-didactic competences, with a specific emphasis on a historical-cultural approach to artistic music (Cuomo, 2018, 2023, and 2026 in this same Proceedings), may represent one of the factors contributing to the improvement of quality in *ECEC* systems. At the same time, artistic music education – by affirming the value of music in its historical and cultural context – does not represent only a field of aesthetic education, but rather a fundamental element of the child's holistic development and integral formation, as well as of education for democracy. In this sense, artistic music education can be

regarded as one of the key starting points for the construction of a vertical, European-aligned curriculum that promotes cultural participation, active citizenship and European identity building from early childhood.

This hypothesis requires further theoretical elaboration as well as empirical validation through comparative studies, pilot projects, and the analysis of educational practices in different European contexts. Accordingly, this contribution should be regarded as a starting point for future research aimed at the development of vertical curricula in music education and at a more systematic reflection on teacher and educator education within the European educational area.

\* This article forms a conceptual unit with the previous one, *The quality of education in the ECEC (0-6 years): the contribution of art music*, by Carla Cuomo, in this same volume. The English translation of both articles is by Dr. Elisabetta Zoni.

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**Stvoreno 2 veljače 2026 22:30:30 od Martina Gajšek**

**Ažurirano 2 veljače 2026 22:33:40 od Martina Gajšek**