

Conference

Diversity and Multilingualism in Early Childhood Education and Care

Luxembourg, 10 and 11 September 2015

CONCLUSIONS



On 10 and 11 September 2015, 150 experts and representatives from over 30 European countries took part in the conference *Diversity and Multilingualism in Early Childhood Education and Care* organised by the Luxembourg Presidency.

Context

In the context of steadily growing interest in ECEC and recognition of the importance of the early years for further learning processes, as well as for educational and social inclusion, European countries are expanding the number of places available (increasing access) and are also paying greater attention to the quality of ECEC. This is demonstrated by developments at both national level, for instance through the implementation of new frameworks or standards, and at European level, through cooperation aimed at supporting Member States in this area: within the Education and Training 2020 strategic framework, a Thematic Working Group under the auspices of the European Commission has worked to produce a proposal for a "Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care". The document setting out the proposal was presented and broadly welcomed during a conference in Athens in 2014.

At a time when countries - and especially European countries - face important challenges relating to the growing social, cultural and linguistic diversity of their populations, quality in this respect also means taking into consideration the individual starting points and situations of all children in order to provide them with the best possible support in realising their potential.

The daily reality in ECEC settings shows that the efforts required to meet these challenges call for specific knowledge as well as the questioning of established perception and practices, and that they pose pedagogical and organisational challenges to structures and authorities in this field.

Objective

The objective of the conference was to consider the various aspects of the "Proposal for a Quality Framework for ECEC", with a particular emphasis on possible ways to support the language development of young children in multilingual contexts and to value and respect the diversity of children and their families.

On the basis of the ideas and recommendations that emerged during the conference, the Luxembourg Presidency intends to draft a Presidency Paper that will be presented to the Education Ministers during the Council meeting in November.

Main outcomes

Added value of EU cooperation

- The conference confirmed the importance and usefulness of the “Proposal for a Quality Framework in ECEC” and supported the continuing exchange of policies and practices, as well as further cooperation between EU countries. Participants welcomed the Commission’s proposal to discuss the possibility of introducing non-binding indicators for ECEC policies as well as their possible content. Discussions should involve data providers and researchers, and should relate to both policy and practice. The Commission’s proposal to act as an intermediary during peer counselling activities at the request of Member States was very well received. Such activities could include exchange of best practices on how to welcome refugee children in ECEC services with bearing in mind the complementarity to family learning and the possibility of using ECEC provisions as a meeting place for local communities and newly arrived migrants and refugees.

Towards a holistic, child-centred perspective

- For a number of years, discussions on ECEC have revolved around the issue of how to reconcile family and professional life. The conference confirmed the emerging change of perspective in this area: discussions on ECEC are increasingly conducted from the children’s perspective and focus on what is best for their well-being, learning and development.

Respect and acceptance as conditions for further learning

- The transversal themes of the conference – Diversity and Multilingualism - were also discussed from the children's perspective: there is a consensus that ECEC structures have to embrace the different languages that children bring along, and that their diverse cultural, social and family back-grounds should be valued and respected. The feeling of belonging and the establishment of secure and trusting relationships during the early years ***are crucial basic conditions*** for children's further learning and development.

A joint effort

- All participants agreed that living with and respecting diversity are challenges that are continuously faced by all stakeholders, challenges which requires knowledge, patience, high commitment and tolerance. Besides the creation of an adequate institutional framework, empowering individuals is as essential as supporting an ongoing dialogue among all parties concerned.

Through workshops sessions, researchers and experts in the field of ECEC were invited to discuss policy levers and means of achieving these goals in the five quality areas.

The participants of the workshops agreed on a number of recommendations within the five quality areas of the Proposal for a Quality Framework.

Development perspectives for early years curricula: mother tongues, language and cultural awareness

- Taking into account the diversity of children, including their various languages and cultures, in early years curricula (frameworks) is crucial for their development. Language development in the children's home language is an important basis for further learning, including the process of becoming proficient in the main language(s) of the country or the language(s) of instruction.
- Therefore it would be advisable to include linguistic awareness for different languages (and cultures) in ECEC curriculums, as well as to develop programmes that support mother tongue development, programmes that have demonstrated their efficiency in fostering migrant children's progress in the target languages: if appropriate methods and models are in place, ECEC can provide them with the right setting for easily acquiring the language and culture of their new country, thus creating a strong base for their future learning.

Clear language policies providing a framework for local projects and initiatives

- In order for ECEC professionals to become professionally confident to work in a context marked by diversity and multilingualism, they need to be guided by a clear and transparent language policy, which in turn should consider multilingualism as beneficial for all (since monolingualism may become a handicap in the future). Within a clear policy framework it is possible to develop projects at a local level or even at the level of individual institutions and structures. These projects should respond to local circumstances and be developed with local stakeholders, as well as allow for parents' choices.

Developing sustainable relationships

- Collaboration with parents in particular does not only consist of getting central messages across, but is more a matter of developing stable and sustainable relationships by means of common activities and regular exchanges, which will promote mutual learning and understanding.
- A successful parent and family engagement in the early years also means reaching out to and engaging in a reciprocal relation with migrant parents. Their input could be used to start co-constructing services and provisions that have meaning to them.

Preparing and supporting professionals

- These requirements pose/represent a considerable challenge to professionals working within ECEC structures. They are not only called upon to consider parents as partners, but also to be completely transparent in terms of what they do and how they do it, and this includes the need to overcome the distance created by their professional authority. They are called upon to embrace perceptions which may well be different from their own and to make allowances for languages they do not know. It is therefore crucial that initial training curricula for early childhood professionals take account of the need to

develop a capacity for reflection and attitudes which challenge personal thinking and action patterns.

- Working schedules should allow experts to have sufficient space for reflection, discussion and exchanges within the team, with colleagues, parents and communities of practice. Support for professionals through continuous professional development or coaching can help to enhance quality, in particular in complex and diverse contexts.
- Continuous professional development is seen as equally important as initial training. It also needs to include provisions for diversity and language awareness.
- Encouraging the development of diversity within the workforce by integrating people from various social, linguistic, cultural backgrounds contributes significantly to the better management of multilingualism and diversity.
- Greater efforts are needed to enhance social recognition for all professions in the field of ECEC in terms of professional status, salaries and working conditions. At the same time, it is important to consider and combat the inequalities that exist between formal education and structures of non-formal learning.

Competent and governable systems

- Achieving such favourable conditions requires action at system level. The discussion should not only evolve around quality within individual structures, but also at the level of the system. This means considering the interaction of experiences which children accumulate in different types of structures. Countries should be encouraged to create high quality, competent and governable systems and to follow the recommendation of the framework in respect to the development of unitary systems.
- Broadening access and ensuring at the same time the development of high quality ECEC requires the development of unitary and binding quality frameworks. To strengthen the influence of public authorities on quality development in ECEC, it can be helpful to promote public or publicly subsidised provisions.
- In order to ensure the development of sound guidelines and framework conditions, it is important to involve all relevant stakeholders (parents, managers, professionals, local stakeholders, researchers...) in a democratic and collaborative process.

Clear and careful definition of expectations for monitoring and evaluation

- Gathering information at system level on how well this is serving children's development is crucial and it is also legitimate for various levels of governance to find out whether "a good job" is being done and how well the children are doing. Before deciding whether to implement a study or an evaluation programme on children's development and outcomes, the very first question should be: *Who wants to know what, why and when?* Because behind the debate on assessment, there are always questions about objectives, about what children are learning in settings of non-formal education at this young age and what can be considered/assessed as "learning achievements" or outcomes, which of course immediately give rise to further questions about how they should learn.
- Based on the emerging consensus that embracing and respecting diversity and multilingualism are important indicators of quality, particular attention needs to be paid

to the issue of monitoring and evaluation of child development and outcomes.

- A central question with regard to the assessment of learning always focuses on how to square the latter with appreciation of the learner and for what he has learned. This is particularly sensitive in the context of discussions on the recognition and valorisation of cultural diversity. So it is important that assessment processes, if implemented, are not undertaken for the purpose of distributing opportunities or as a means of early selection or screening, but for the purpose of supporting learning and developing social recognition.
- In contexts of diversity and multilingualism in particular, it is important to define what the children's needs are with a view to becoming future citizens in our diverse and multilingual societies. This in turn will have an impact on the formulation of objectives and subsequently the areas of assessment. In this respect, it is regarded as important to help young children to develop their identity, their self-esteem and self-awareness, to foster their well-being, happiness and enjoyment, besides encouraging the development of positive learning attitudes, motivation, important executive functions, creativity and problem-solving skills. Important areas of development are communication and cognitive skills, their physical development, their social emotional and relational competences, such as empathy and participation.
- The importance has also been emphasised of carefully studying the impact of assessment on the orientation of ECEC structures, and the risk of "schoolification" (i.e. making ECEC facilities more like schools) should be taken into account.

With these concrete areas for development, the conference has shown that there is a lot of space and interest for cooperation both at EU and national level with a view to actually shifting perspectives towards child-centred quality development in ECEC. Not only have the challenges and opportunities become clear during the conference, but the event has once again confirmed that there is a lot to gain: high quality ECEC contributes to creating a strong basis for all children's future learning and can at the same time provide an environment for intercultural learning and fostering mutual understanding among socially and culturally diverse groups. Investing in respectful, child-centred and stimulating learning environments for young children is at the same time an investment in education, social cohesion and humanity.