Quality of the early years provisions: European perspectives

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High expectations of Early Childhood Education and Care!

- ECEC is expected to contribute importantly to the innovation, economic competitiveness and sustainability Europe’s welfare states.
- Giving children a good and fair start, laying a solid foundation in early childhood, is expected to benefit children’s wellbeing, development and educational opportunities, to increase equity and social cohesiveness in society, and to improve economy in the long term.
- Can we meet these high expectations?

Barcelona Summit 2002 and new benchmarks in 2009

- Full-day care to support parents in work to at least 90% of children aged 3 to 6 by 2010, and at least 95% of children between age 4 and 6 in ECEC across Europe by 2020.
- Rapid expansion of the ECEC systems in many countries in the past decade, but: remarkably little attention to the quality of education and care, while “poor quality may do more harm than good”.

Many challenges ahead!

- Is the quality of ECEC good enough to meet the high expectations? Can we improve?
- Can we reconcile all interests from many different stakeholders? – Can we serve all the goals set for ECEC equally well and still provide education and care that is feasible, affordable, and – most important – a pleasant experience for children?
- And there are new challenges: increasing linguistic and cultural diversity. How to accommodate this diversity in ECEC and how to lower the cultural thresholds to access good quality ECEC?

Social-cultural differences in learning-related skills (age 2)

- Extensive evidence indicates that quality matters for outcomes, but how quality should be defined is contested – different views and approaches in Europe.
- Universalist vs. relativist views, ‘psychological’ vs. ‘dialogical’ approaches: can we bridge the divide?
- Towards dialogical professionalism: integrating scientific knowledge and cultural diversity.
- Let’s make a beginning.
Quality is a multidimensional concept with different aspects

- **Process quality:**
  - Affectionate, sensitive and responsive teacher-child interactions.
  - Positive classroom climate with happy, engaged children.
  - Opportunities to learn and to develop competences.

- **Structural quality:**
  - Design and furnishing of the indoor and outdoor space.
  - Group-size and children-to-teacher ratio.
  - Teacher education and qualifications, committed and stable staff.

- **Curriculum & pedagogy:**
  - The 'what' and 'how' of activities driving development & learning.
  - Coordination of the developmental and educational goals of parents, school, and society – and the wellbeing of the child.

Process quality and social-emotional development

- Emotional independence and social competence are fostered by sensitive, emotionally supportive teachers, verbal explanations of rules, and by allowing initiative to children to explore and feel competent.

- But: a simple translation of psychological theory in ECEC practice is not unproblematic.

- Views of parents from non-Western communities may differ from the professional view.

- The challenge is to discover what is common (universal, essential) and what can vary cross-culturally.

Curriculum & pedagogy: striking a balance

- Current policies in many countries tend to emphasize academic content and easily measurable outcomes in language, literacy, and mathematics, but this may be at the expense of promoting social-emotional development and 'learning related skills', such as self-regulation.

- We need developmentally appropriate practice, but what is appropriate in view of the multiple interests – child wellbeing, but also parents’ values and ambitions, and the needs of the wider society?

- European social-pedagogy traditions and Reggio Emilia (and related innovative pedagogies): examples of integrating the multiple interests.

Shall we go for the European social-pedagogy tradition?

- Pure forms of social-pedagogy do not exist: cultural adaptations and eclecticism.

- For example, social-pedagogies in Germany and Sweden differ strongly (Sheridan, 2009).

- Immigrant parents do not recognize their interests.

- Most important: lack of evidence on the effectiveness.

Do we need academic content in ECEC curricula?


- It is about "emergent academic skills" or "pre-academic skills" that often are the content of children’s spontaneous activities.

- But there are strong differences between families and communities, leading to the ‘early education gap’.

- A main task for ECEC is to close this gap.
Math-talk in preschool

Well, Ke, I think the children know what kind of game you want to play.

Preschool teachers’ math talk: examples

- Counting: "Alright, Donald, help us count: 1, 2, 3, 4…, 22."
- Cardinality: "But how many crocodiles did he have?"
- Number symbols: "Okay, what number do I have?"
- Ordering: "What comes after nine?"
- Equivalence: "Okay, this and this is the same amount of money."
- Calculation: "We are going to count ten beans for your top teeth and ten beans for your bottom teeth, that makes twenty."
- Non-equivalence: "You have more than twelve teeth!"

Source: Klibanoff et al., 2006

Play and educational dialogues as integrating multiple goals

- Play – exploration, pretend play, sociodramatic play – is related to the emergence of important ("brain-based") cognitive functions and emotional self-regulation.
- Pretend and role-play require children to establish a shared imagined world, to negotiate on goals and plans, to inhibit ego-centric impulses, to update the shared plan as the play evolves, to imagine other persons’ state of mind, to ‘play’ with emotions.
- Frequent episodes of ‘sustained shared thinking’ between teachers and children are particularly effective to raise both social-emotional and pre-academic skills.

Playing together – co-regulating emotions and behavior

- Negotiation about the toys, pending conflict solved.
- Planning the dinner, sharing imagined reality.
- Planned sequence of actions, monitoring progress.
- Verbalization!

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Multilingualism: some facts in a politicized discourse

- Multilingual development to native-like proficiency in both (all) languages is possible, if second (third) language learning starts early and if exposure is of sufficient quantity and quality.
- Multilingualism is an asset and brings several cognitive advantages.
- Parents of minority language communities value support for the first language, but current policies emphasize second language learning, especially in ECEC.
- Be sure: bilingual ECEC programs are double effective!
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Source: Blom et al., 2013

Varying support for linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe

• European countries vary in their diversity policy, from forced assimilation (France) to respectful integration (Scandinavia).
• Supporting mutual respectful integration, with first language support is most effective.
• Diversity support in ECEC: practical difficulties – work with parents is an option.

Source: Berry et al., 2006

Queen Maxima and the Prince Claus chair

Professor Aylin Küntay (Turkey) appointed in our department as holder of the Prince Claus chair to study the assets of multilingualism.

Opstap – multiculturalism in practice (home-based program)

• Stimulating language, cognitive and emotional development.
• Mother works with the child, 15 minutes per day, in the first language.
• Two-year program, providing materials and activities through worksheets.
• Home-visiting.
• Parent group meetings.

How can we improve European ECEC?

• Raising structural quality by, for instance, decreasing group size and children-to-teachers ratio?
• Inclusive evidence, suggesting a complex interplay of structural quality characteristics. No size fits all!
• Using an explicit (comprehensive) education program or curriculum?
• Team- and organisation-based strategies of professional development?
Comprehensive education program supports teachers

- Comprehensive curricula with a developmentally appropriate child-centered pedagogy and holistic approach are most effective.

- In addition to providing rich learning environments, planned activities (with academic content), comprehensive curricula support collaboration between children in play and raise the quality of pretend play.

- Teachers working with comprehensive curricula engage more frequently in educational dialogues with children, create a more positive classroom climate and are better in classroom management.

Innovative professional development strategies

- Should the educational requirements for teachers working in ECEC be raised to the bachelor level?

- The evidence is not conclusive and the focus is too much on the individual practitioner and her/his skills.

- New approaches emphasize continuous in-service learning, mentoring and coaching, and especially an established practice at the team and center-level of continuous reflection (using systematic feedback, observations and child monitoring) and invention.

- The case of Reggio Emilia: investigative pedagogy.

What is really urgent: increasing the inclusiveness of ECEC

- Low income and immigrant families have less access to ECEC, let alone to high quality ECEC.

- Several factors are at play, including the type of funding, the coverage, the costs, and targeted policies.

- Cultural barriers exist as well:
  - The view that young children should be cared for by the mother.
  - Parents' perception of the quality of ECEC.
  - Parents' trust in the ECEC provision and its staff.

- A professional-dialogical approach is needed also to increase the inclusiveness of ECEC.

To conclude

- ECEC has become a sector of central importance in Europe’s 2020 policy, but attention to the quality and curriculum of ECEC is urgently needed.

- Starting with research evidence, it is important to engage in dialogues with all stakeholders to create a European approach to quality and curriculum.

- This endeavour requires creativity in designing curricula that integrate academics with play and educational dialogues and that provide consistency in socialisation practices between the center and the family.

- To increase the inclusiveness of ECEC, dialogue with cultural and linguistic minority groups is essential.

Self-regulation and learning-related skills in ECEC curriculum

- Verbalizing thoughts, plans & evaluations in challenging tasks.

- Pretend play and sociodramatic play, acting out ‘emotions’.

- Collaboration in small groups, negotiating goals and roles, solving conflicts.

- Responsibility to the children.