

toddler

Towards Opportunities for Disadvantaged and
Diverse Learners on the Early childhood Road

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Comenius, ICT and languages**

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Progress Report

Public Part

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Executive Summary

The TODDLER project's is inspired by the Eurydice report (2009) *Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities*. The project elaborates knowledge about the ways in which early childhood education and care (ECEC) for toddlers can enhance a higher degree of equity in education.

The consortium is composed by experts from nine teacher training universities in Denmark, Belgium (French and Flemish), Germany, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Spain and United Kingdom working in the field of early education. They represent countries with unitary and split ECEC systems, different educational traditions and kinds of staff training. Based on the shared knowledge of this team we are producing course modules for pre-service and in-service training of ECEC-staff in Europe.

Project objectives:

We want to raise awareness towards the educational benefits of high quality education for toddlers at risk and improve curriculum and teaching strategies of teacher education and in-service training.

We want to show the educational potential of high quality ECEC for toddlers and contribute to a shift in the way provision for children under three is perceived.

The target groups for this project are:

Students and practitioners in ECEC, teacher educators getting access to course modules offering extended knowledge of recent research and good practice.

Parents in ECEC, as their responses will be part of the guidelines for improved practice on parental involvement

Policy makers, preschool/care authorities having access to seminars, conferences and press articles outlining the work and rationale of this project

Approaches/ strategies used:

We have analysed national documents, conducted case studies, language observations in ECEC and used questionnaires to parents to parents /staff in all partner countries. This material will be analysed and transformed into course modules addressing: The promotion of toddlers' wellbeing and language learning, increased partnership with parents and the education of reflective practitioners.

Major results achieved so far:

- **A State of the Art Report**, comparing systems and approaches in eight countries and identify their strengths and areas of improvement
- **Local Seminars** have been arranged in Portugal and Romania
- **Learning materials "Promoting the Wellbeing of Toddler's within the European Union"** have been collated by reports & case studies in 8 countries
- **Leaflets** about the project have been produced and disseminated
- **Plans for Quality Assurance, Dissemination and Exploitation** are made

- **Two project meetings** have been arranged in Portugal and Romania
- **Presentation of the project** at local, national and international conferences
- **Articles about the project content** in professional journals & newspapers
- **Data collection** (observation, questionnaires, reflective sessions with students) by all partners, as a basis for the elaboration of course material
- **Knowledge** of good practice from many countries and awareness of the diverse conditions for ECEC and teacher training for the early years in the EU

Plans for the future:

- Producing course materials for three topics 1) *Promoting parental involvement* 2) *Promoting the learning of language/s* and 3) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*.
- Transforming the entire course material into a module for pre-service training and in-service training of early years practitioners (Comenius Course)
- Implementing the course modules in the curriculum in our own teacher training
- Final conference in Ghent, Belgium 7.-8. 10 .2013 for all target groups
- Articles in news papers and professional journals in all countries involved
- Presentation of findings and results at professional conferences regional, national and European
- Improved information on the website to communicate findings and results
- Improve efforts to reach stakeholders; policy maker, school authorities

For further information: www.toddlerineurope.eu

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1. Project Objectives

The overall aim is to offer toddlers from disadvantaged backgrounds an enriched learning environment and better support to parents.

- 1.1. We want to show the educational potential of high quality education and care in centre based settings (crèche, day care centre, nursery school) for toddlers (18-36 months).
- 1.2. We want to raise awareness towards the educational benefits of high quality education for toddlers at risk and improve curriculum and teaching strategies of teacher education and in-service training.
- 1.3. We will contribute to a shift in the way provision for children under three is perceived.

We address these objectives by sharing educational knowledge from eight countries and develop a course material for the pre-service training of preschool teachers. In some countries the education of children under three is already a part of the preschool teacher training (bachelor degree), in others this training belongs to the health & care section of upper secondary education. This implies that for some partners the TODDLER-project is an in-depth study topic focusing the improvement of learning for children at risk within their existing curriculum in preschool teacher education, for some it is to introduce a new topic in the existing curriculum or it functions as a starter in the development of a new bachelor programme. The course material in progress presents some key issues in the education and care of toddlers, based on findings in former research as well as investigations undertaken within this project. As the elaboration of this course material is a joint work of teacher educators in eight countries, we are able to test and adapt the teaching material and methods continuously with student teachers in diverse cultural environments. There have been offered seminars and visiting lectures to student teachers (BA) and master students of psychology and education. Practitioners from local preschools as well as school authorities, leaders of health/social care services have participated in local seminars and in focus groups.

General presentations of the projects content, aims and methods have also been presented to the wider professional community at research conferences like European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) and The Comenius Association, which is a self-organised European network of teacher education institutions.

As the project findings still are in progress, just a few feature articles have been published so far. In order to convince stake holders and the public of the benefits of combining education with high quality care, we will link the theoretical educational rationale to selected examples of good practice.

2. Project Approach

The TODDLER project focuses on several characteristics:

A focus on user needs: During the project first meeting, one idea was shared by all partners: *strengthening the education of reflective practitioners to give toddlers a fair chance for lifelong learning*. From this idea, the needs for the final target group, toddlers, were identified, so that the project could effectively answer those needs (language development, wellbeing, parents' participation) and a main aim was then put forward: *To improve existing methods and develop material for increased awareness of toddler's educational needs among student teachers/staff and policy makers*. This aim needs to be reviewed and updated during the project to ensure that the results remain relevant to the targeted users (ECEC teachers, teacher educators, policy makers, authorities and students teachers). Following this line, all partners have involved student teachers and collaborated with ECEC-settings in their work. This enables us to reflect the diverse conditions and traditions of ECEC in Europe. It is essential for us to avoid the reduction of complexity of praxis that may hinder the implementation of new knowledge and methods within the EU.

Shared responsibility: The plan sets out clearly each partner's specific tasks, according to their expertise. Responsibility for the providing and dissemination of results lies with the whole partnership. According to the application, each partner is responsible for producing the course content and to use the final outcomes in the curricula in teacher training and training for early childhood teachers.

Methodology: The construction of the course material is based on several methods of data collection involving all partners. A *document analysis* of the Eurydice report on ECEC in Europe (2009) constitutes the starting point for a more detailed description (text and pictures) in the educational approach from all partner countries. This is compiled in The State of the Art Report followed by a comparative analysis of the strength and weaknesses of the educational systems for toddlers from all nine countries/regions. *Questionnaires to parents* in ECEC-settings and interviews with parents not using a crèche have been used to inform the project about the living conditions, cultural habits, learning environment (especially bilingual) and expectations of toddlers' parents. *Questionnaires to practitioners* in early years settings have been used to get first hand information about the conditions and educational practice in all the countries involved. *Case studies* in toddler settings in each country have been conducted in order to provide visualised narratives about different key items in promoting the children's wellbeing. Three observations are conducted in a multinational ECEC-setting in each country, using a specific *language observation form* which will offer insight in the actual situations in which language learning and enculturation is taking place. These data will be analysed in regard to the applicability and development of the *language observation tool* for this age group, which has been used with older preschoolers in a former European project (ELIAS). A guideline book for practitioners' work in multinational toddler setting will be based on the analysis of these questionnaires and observations. Based on a *case study* in a Norwegian Parent-child group ("Open Kindergarten") there will also be produced a

film identifying 'good practice' in regard to parental involvement. Furthermore each partner conducted a *reflective session*, which is a specific teaching approach based on practical examples from practice, dialogic teaching and the intertwining of practice and theory. Based on the reports from all partners and video-observed sessions in two countries, the concept of reflective session will be analysed and compared in a scientific article and a guideline book for teacher educators will be created.

Evaluation strategy:

We have emphasized continuous internal evaluation by tracking the project activity through the use of *evaluation sheets* during project meetings, *quality monitor reports* based on questionnaires to all partners and the analyses of these reports. The use of evaluation sheets helped improving the quality of our project work but also during the meetings showing what was felt to be improved by the partners. The monitor reports helped mainly identifying problems of organizational aspect: planning activities, time spent, time needed, leadership. Efforts have been made for establishing clear guidelines so that the information to the partners is understandable and comparable. The sparring partners in each work package functioned as "critical friends" providing encouragement and feedback on critical incidents/problems to the lead partners. Often we are contacting partners by e-mail, helping in solving task related problems or communication problems. Knowing that there might evolve conflicts when you work in a large multicultural team, we established an internal conflict solution group during the Kick-off meeting. This group has not been used often, but been successful in coping with arousing conflicts and avoided damaging conflicts within the group.

External evaluation has been provided during our annual project meetings by Professor Paul Leseman from Utrecht University, who is a recognized expert in ECEC and co-author of the Eurydice report 2009. He has offered critical questions during our discussions and has contributed to a more clear view of how well we are approaching our tasks in relation to our goals.

A lot of external feedback has been received in local seminars, focus groups and other kind of conversations with practitioners, professionals of ECEC and toddler parents. They have asked questions and offered their opinions on many aspects that are decisive to the applicability of our work. Working with students in reflective sessions and lectures on the topic, we also got valuable feedback that is and will be taken in account in the production of our course material and teaching strategy.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

During this period the consortium has produced several parts of the course content.

The State of the Art Report is completed. It describes the different national welcoming organisations for toddlers with its strengths and weaknesses, examples of good practices to promote immigrant children's enculturation and language learning (national). A synthetic comparative board of ECEC in these eight countries is also finalised. This report offers detailed contextual information and offers insight in core elements of the educational work. Thus the report may function as complementary information to the existing Eurydice report on ECEC in Europe. The State of the Art report is available at www.toddlerineurope.eu

Learning materials "Promoting the Wellbeing of Toddler's within Europe" have been collated by reports and case studies in toddler settings from all partners in the nine countries. The reading material presents the various ways wellbeing is defined and its implication for the practitioners' interactions with children and parents. The specific approaches and key elements of the pedagogy are explained in photographs and writings; in the 'Story Boards'. Only selected examples of these story boards will be available on the web, according to the parent's decision whether pictures of their child could be published on the internet (public or restricted area) or not. These Story Boards offer a unique possibility to detect similarities and differences of 'good practice' in the ECEC of these eight countries, which may inspire practitioner's work. They will also make visible to parents and policy makers how educators promote the social-emotional care and learning of the very young child. Thus the Story Boards may contribute to reach our goal of showing the educational potential of high quality ECEC and contradict the erroneous belief that caring for toddlers is mainly about safeguarding their health while the parents are at work. The final edition of these learning materials is delayed, due to the fact that it was a more complex task to offer a definition of the concept of Wellbeing than anticipated by the lead partner. Those who had access to definitions of wellbeing in curriculum or legislation could do the task on time, whilst other partners had to do an extended search and analysis for defining the term wellbeing for their country. Subsequently the completion of the other products had to be postponed correspondingly.

Local seminars have been conducted in Santarem, Portugal and in Timisoara, Romania to communicate the rationale of the TODDLER project and discuss the current challenges in this particular country. In Santarem this facilitated a local debate with experts and officials from various departments of social, health and education, childhood educator and students on this issue. In Romania no experts or officials responded to the invitation, so the seminar was mainly attended by master's students of psychology. Some of them also worked as early years practitioners. These students expressed that the seminar was an eye opener for them in regard to ECEC for toddlers, inspiring them to better support to practitioners and their efforts to enrich toddlers' environment. The main message communicated during this seminar was: teachers in ECEC can make a difference! In both countries the seminars addressed the need for better support to the work force in ECEC.

Two project meetings have been conducted in which all partner participated. The kick-off meeting took place in Santarem, Portugal, and the second project meeting in Timisoara, Romania.

A Quality Plan has been used to monitor the progress and to evaluate the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness of the project work. The internal evaluation has taken care of by the project partners during the project meeting, in ongoing internal communication by e-mail, but also by the use of evaluation sheets and monitor report. Additionally Professor P.P.M.Leseman, Netherlands, has participated in all project meetings and given advice and external evaluation of the methods and work.

A Dissemination Plan is completed and to be found at the website. It highlights that every part is responsible for transmitting the outcome of the project within their local networks. In order to use as many channels as possible to reach potential target groups, the cooperation among the partners is essential and the TODDLER website (internal and external pages) is used as the primary tool. The dissemination process was embedded in the project from the very beginning and began during the Kick-off meeting. So far we have presented the project to students and colleagues in our own institution, a European network of teacher education institutes (The Comenius Association), at a European Research conference (EECERA) and at local/regional conferences on early childhood matters in the countries involved. As an example; the project was presented at an educational conference for teacher trainers from The Netherlands and Flanders (organised by VELOV-VELON). The public as well academics and practitioners have been informed by press articles and articles in professional journals. In Germany these presentations were focused on the issue of bilingual language learning, whilst the Portuguese team highlighted the issue of listening to parents' voices and the educational care for toddlers. As we have had few results and finding we could present in this first phase of this project, it has been difficult to reach out to policymakers, school/social work authorities and parents. So far we have managed best to communicate about our project to all targets groups in Portugal.

Leaflets describing the Toddler project have been printed in 1800 copies and distributed by the partners in their own country and to a wider audience during European events. The leaflet can be downloaded from the web.

The Exploitation Plan is developed to ensure the valorisation of the results and functions as a guideline throughout the entire life-span of this project. It depicts how the different target groups can make use of the different products and result. The plan is available on the web.

Alltogether we have initiated many discussions with students, teacher educators and to some extent also with early practitioners, about the need for better education and care in toddler settings in each country. We have inspired to higher professional awareness of importance of intertwining the education and care of toddlers. We have also emphasised the need for improvements in the area of language learning, wellbeing and parental involvement.

4. Partnerships

The consortium is build up by nine partners from teacher education in eight countries (Belgium French & Flemish, Denmark, Germany, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Spain, United Kingdom)). The partners represent countries with different socio-economic, linguistic and cultural conditions as well as split and unitary ECEC systems (split in health care for age group 0-3 and education for age group 3-5, or ECEC for 0-5) and different educational traditions. In Starting Strong II (OECD 2006) these traditions are described as *Readiness for school* or *Nordic tradition*. Due to the geographical spread, we got the chance to learn and experience from both traditions. As Europe consists of different cultures and traditions, we have to be aware of the cultural diversity in the implementation of our project results. Therefore the partners have collected and tested all materials within their educational context and based on their reports, the course materials will be adapted and developed further. This strategy has been chosen to promote the implementation and sustainability of the course content.

The experience of working together in European partnerships has provided the opportunity to share knowledge and understanding in relation to early years practice, legislation, theoretical underpinning and literature. It has been rich to understand better the multiple influences between our different countries and cultures. Collecting 'good practices' on the different topics, evoked discussion on the meaning of 'high quality' in toddler settings. These discussions are valuable for the project as well as for the development of quality of early years' settings in Europe in general. Working on the different WPs has broadened existing knowledge, which has been used with our own students and colleagues. The flexible and participatory approach enabled a good atmosphere. Working together we have extended relationships across Europe which in turn offered opportunities for teaching abroad and hosting visiting Erasmus lecturers. It has been a great benefit for our understanding of the diverse conditions and traditions of ECEC in Europe to visit local institutions during the meetings.

Even though European collaboration is an eye-opener, it is quite demanding to communicate in a foreign language. You need also to develop new skills for problem solving when you work with people from other educational cultures and with different work mentalities. The meetings have been characterized by high spirits and people have been most cooperative. One of the benefits of working in a European team is that we have become more aware of the strengths and weaknesses in our own educational system.

Partnerships outside the consortium with target users:

Two partners have established *focus groups* with *teachers* from toddler settings, *policy-makers* in the field of young children, colleagues from the *teacher training* and *delegates from parent associations*. These groups have enabled us to gather constructive feedback on the development of the course materials drawing on the expertise and experience of the members.

Two other partners arranged working sessions with *coordinators and teachers* from two ECEC settings, which have been of enormous value for the Toddler project

members. Working together and sharing experience, knowledge and reflection has been very enriching and productive for the development of the questionnaires and content. They are very interested in the project outcomes because they feel, and in fact they are, part of the process.

All partners consulted their *colleagues in teacher training* for scientific resources and advice on the different aspects of the project. The demonstration of a reflective sessions for representatives from all partners also offered training to teacher educators in this teaching strategy.

The partners have informed their *students in initial teacher training* about the project and discussed the issue of combining care and education for toddlers. The pictures produced in the project have been used. The teaching materials gathered on the topic Toddler's Well-being have been shared with *master's students* to evaluate their worth and we have used their constructive feedback to improve this unit.

The *distance learner* students in Denmark who took part in the pilot project on reflective sessions did so as an extracurricular activity which was appreciated. So far BA students in five partner institution have been involved in reflective sessions in function of the project, the others will do so in May/June 2012. Three partners have inspired their students to go more deeply into the thematic of the TODDLER project, either for their bachelor thesis or their fourth year final project.

The Flemish partner is involved in the European project 'Wanda' on the reflective practitioner in ECEC settings. A delegate from the TODDLER-project is member of one of the experts group in order to gain mutual stimulation.

The British partner has been able to disseminate information about the Toddler Project at regional and national levels (SEFDEY) to *early year's professionals* and constructive feedback was obtained. The Norwegian partner discussed the project's aims and method in a poster session for *European researchers* at the EECERA-conference in Switzerland.

It has been crucial to collaborate with all these partners outside the consortium, mainly it helped to a better connection between theory and practice, as university research is often lacking the concrete information about the field situation and difficulties. It encouraged further cooperation with target groups. For instance in Romania it helped getting up-to-date with the reality in the school system in the context of the new Education, implemented on 1.01.2011.

All partners experienced that educators and parents were very supportive to the various data collections in our project. Our questions were informative for them as well. In Denmark for instance *the ECEC staff gained new knowledge* about their setting. Initially the educators did not consider their crèche as multinational; it is situated in a town in a rural area and they had not observed any severe language problems. However, it turned out during the data collection that 11 nationalities were represented, still with only few language problems.

As we are still working in analyzing the collected data, there has been little cooperation with *politicians, school and social care authorities, the public in general*. To develop this kind of partnerships will be in scope in the next phase of the project.

5. Plans for the Future

First of all, we have to complete the collection and analysis of the data provided from questionnaires, observations and reports from partners. Based on this work the following items will be produced in order to complete the course material on these four key topics:

- 1.) *Promoting the learning of language/s and cultural communication in multicultural toddler groups* (Combined language & cultural communication tool, research article and guidelines for the implementation of these tools)
- 2.) *Promoting toddlers' wellbeing* (edition of the case studies from the eight countries)
- 3.) *Promoting parental involvement i toddler groups* (guideline book teacher/parents and video)
- 4.) *Educating the reflective practitioner* (Guidebook on reflective sessions - on the web- in Danish, English, Flemish, French, German, Norwegian, Portuguese, Romanian and Spanish. Research article)

All these units will then be used in course modules for initial teacher training and for the in-service training of practitioners. The consortium will implement the course content within the initial teacher training or in-service training courses for early years practitioners in their home institution.

Bachelor and master's students of early education will be involved in writing their thesis about the issues addressed in the Toddler project.

The TODDLER project will be present finding on the topic of promoting toddlers' wellbeing and parental involvement on a Symposium at the Early Childhood Education research Association (EECERA) 29.8.-1.9.2012 in Porto, Portugal

In connection with the next partner meeting in Schwäbisch Gmünd, 11.10.2012, there will be arranged a *Local Seminar* for Early years practitioners, preschool authorities, teacher educators and policy makers. Work title: Promoting bilingual language learning in multicultural toddler groups.

There will be arranged a *Final Conference* in Ghent (Belgium) 7.-8. 10. 2013 for a European audience of professionals, policy makers, practitioners, teacher educators, parent organisation and preschool authorities. There we will present the rationale and major findings of the TODDLER project.

The consortium will *publish articles* in newspapers, professional journals in their own country as well as in international scientific journals on the findings and lessons learnt in this project. There will also be given presentations at regional/national conferences on early childhood education in all partner countries and in European networks, visiting lectures and conferences.

We will successively improve the TODDLER-web site to provide a better insight in the TODDLER project according to the completed products, articles and events.

A monitor report and a final evaluation report will also be made.

The consortium will offer the course content as a Comenius course for practitioners and apply for an Intensive Programme on TODDLER for student teachers in 2014.

6. Contribution to EU policies

Our point of departure is the efficiency of pre-primary education for lifelong learning and its potential for reducing social and cultural inequalities. We address the goal of reducing the number of school failure/early school leavers (long term goal) by answering the question: In which ways can early education in centre-based settings promote children's social-emotional development and language learning, particularly for those from disadvantaged, migrant backgrounds? According to the 2009 Eurydice report on ECEC, there is no evidence-based reason to postpone education until children reach the age of three. In this project we collect research based knowledge and examples of good practice in centre-based settings for toddlers (18-36 months of age) from eight European countries as well as approaches to support parental involvement. Based on the fact that teacher quality is the most important within-school factor affecting children's competence acquirement, we are elaborating teaching materials and methods for the pre-service training of preschool teachers as well as in-service training of practitioners. Therefore the enhancement of quality in teacher training for the early years is an important short term goal.

The project works in close line with the Council conclusions on ECEC: Providing all children with the best start for the world of tomorrow (Official journal of the EU 15. 6. 2011)

These Council conclusions were communicated after we had started our project work. Nevertheless in this text we could clearly recognize the rationale of the TODDLER project. We will outline this by putting in quotation mark the quotations from these Council conclusions:

The TODDLER project collects examples of good practice and reading material in order to contribute to "high quality ECEC" by describing some key issues of high quality education for toddlers. Offering such kind of provision from an early age to all children can "help to close the achievement gap by supporting cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional development". The course material in progress deals with the support of toddlers' wellbeing (social, emotional) and bilingual language learning in multicultural ECEC settings. Our purpose is to promote enhanced support of toddlers' competences, in order to "break the cycle of disadvantage and disengagement that often leads to early school leaving and to the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next". In the longer run the TODDLER project will contribute to the Europe 2020 strategy targets of "reducing early school leaving below 10% and lifting at last 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion."

The project offers an "integrated and holistic approach to the care and education of toddlers, and addresses the issue of how to ensure close collaboration between the home and ECEC". We do so by listening to parents' views and opinions in eight countries continued by the production of a guideline book and film for practitioners. Thus the project will "encourage ECEC services to work in close partnership with parents". The completed course material, articles and project activities will "increase the awareness of the opportunities offered by ECEC for toddlers and learning from this early age" in teacher education, the workforce, amongst stakeholders and researchers. Altogether, the TODDLER project will support the requested "professionalization of ECEC staff".

The TODDLER-project contributes to reach several objectives of the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP)

To contribute to increased participation in lifelong learning by people of all ages, including those with special needs and disadvantaged groups, regardless of their socio-economic background

To encourage the best use of results, innovative products and processes and to exchange good practice in the fields covered by the LLP, in order to improve the quality of education and training.

Comenius programme:

To help young people acquire the basic life-skills and competences necessary for their personal development, for future employment and for active European citizenship,

To enhance the quality and European dimension of teacher training

To support improvements in pedagogical approaches and school management

Transversal programme:

To promote Language learning and to support linguistic diversity in the Member States; Furthermore to promote an awareness of the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity within Europe.

