



TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

Accessibility of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for children from ethnic minority and low-income families

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Introduction

This background paper wishes to inform participants of the first meeting of the Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years to be held in Ghent in January 2013. It gives a concise summary of what we know regarding the issue of access to high quality education and care provisions for immigrant families and families living in poverty with children of preschool age. As early childhood systems vary substantially from one country to another, no general formulas can be given. However, this paper also draws on analyses of successful projects to outline possible ways forward.

The paper draws to a large extent on an extensive literature review of European research and policy documents, that was commissioned by the European Commission DG Education and Culture and published as

Lazzari, A., & Vandebroek, M. (2012). Literature Review of the Participation of Disadvantaged Children and families in ECEC Services in Europe. In J. Bennett (Ed.), *Early childhood education and care (ECEC) for children from disadvantaged backgrounds: Findings from a European literature review and two case studies, Study commissioned by the Directorate general for Education and Culture*. Brussels: European Commission.

The problem

There is a growing concern about accessibility of ECEC for children from ethnic minority and low-income families. This concern is expressed in international policy documents (e.g. European Commission, 2011; European Parliament, 2002), as well as in international reports (e.g. Eming Young, 2007; Naudeau, Kataoka, Valerio, Neuman & Elder, 2011; OECD, 2006, 2012; Unicef Innocenti Research Centre, 2008). At the European level, this concern is rooted in a broader commitment toward the reduction of child poverty rates across the Member States and accompanied by the recognition that high quality ECEC has an important role to play in tackling disadvantage from an early stage (European Commission, 2006; **Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency**, 2009). Along this line, the provision of generalised and equitable access to high quality ECEC is advocated in order to reduce early school leaving and counter the risk of poverty and social exclusion (Council of European Union, 2011).



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Despite this consensus at the policy level, it is well documented that children from ethnic minority and low-income families are less often enrolled in non-maternal care and preschools, and that – when enrolled – these children are more often to be found in provisions of poorer quality than their more affluent peers. While detailed figures are not available for all countries (e.g. France does not officially record ethnicity in the statistics on the use of ECEC), there is an abundance of evidence that this is a global phenomenon. This has been demonstrated in the U.S. (Hernandez, Takanishi, & Marotz, 2009) and in several European countries (Brabant-Delannoy & Lemoine, 2009; Büchel & Spiess, 2002; Del Boca, 2010; Driessen, 2004; Ghysels & Van Lancker, 2011; Noailly, Visser, & Grout, 2007; Sylva, Stein, Leach, Barnes, & Malmberg, 2007; Wall & Jose, 2004).

What happens in pregnancy and the early years of a child's life has a profound impact on the rest of his or her life. Experiences in the early years influence children as they grow, through primary school, secondary school and into adulthood (Bowers et al, 2012). More children are born with low birth weight in poorer communities than those that are wealthier (Roberts, 1997). Children born with very low weight are less likely to enter post-secondary education than their peers (30 per cent versus 53 percent) (Hack et al., 2002). Children raised in poverty are likely to get a relatively inferior education, a lower paid job and live shorter, unhappier and unhealthier lives. A child in the lowest social class is twice as likely to die before the age of 15 as a child in the highest social class (Roberts, 2000). Furthermore, they are also at greater risk of being admitted to a hospital for breathing or other health problems, poor dental health, being exposed to harmful tobacco smoke before and after birth and becoming overweight or obese (Marmot, 2010). As they grow older, children from poor backgrounds are more likely to become teenage parents and more likely to die at a young age from heart attacks, strokes and cancer (Marmot, 2010).

Reasons for differential enrollment

While initially, this problem was (and sometimes still is) predominantly understood as a result of parental choice (Hofferth & Wissoker, 1992; Peyton, Jacobs, O'Brien, & Roy, 2001; Shlay, Tran, Weinraub, & Harmon, 2005), it is now clear that environmental constraints influence parents' decisions and that a more ecological approach is necessary, acknowledging a multitude of factors (Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 1999, 2000; Sylva, et al., 2007). In this first briefing note, we will very briefly outline a number of factors that potentially mediate the differential use of high quality provisions in the early years.

Policy

It is documented that policy measures, regarding the availability of services as well as general quality regulations and monitoring affect the accessibility for immigrant children and children living in poverty (Sylva, et al., 2007). ECEC systems that operate on the market, even when accompanied by a voucher system for poor families, seem to be less effective in attracting poorer families (Lee, 2006; Moss, 2009). One salient example is that in The Netherlands, the number of provisions decreased in rural and poorer areas since marketization in 2005, while it significantly increased in more affluent urban neighborhoods (Noailly, et al., 2007). This of course does not mean that the problem of unequal access is limited to market-oriented systems. It is clearly demonstrated that in more comprehensive welfare systems – typical



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of continental Europe – high quality ECEC is also more available in more affluent areas (e.g. Vandebroek, De Visscher, Van Nuffel, & Ferla, 2008; Del Boca, 2010). In this sense entitlement, funding and affordability of ECEC provision are considered crucial factors for increasing the access of children from ethnic minority and low-income families (Children in Scotland, 2011). Public policies that address comprehensively the issues of availability, entitlement and cost of childcare provision – within a general regulatory framework for quality – are proven to be the most effective in reducing inequalities in ECEC participation rates. In this regard, the implementation of the ‘maximum fee’ reform – that was introduced in Sweden between 2001 and 2003 – provides an interesting example of how the impact of background factors, such as parental occupation and migrant background, can be reduced by extending entitlement to free preschool attendance to certain groups of children (Skolverket, 2007).

Characteristics of the provisions

In many countries, there is a shortage of provisions for the early years and in most split systems, the shortage is more salient for the youngest children (0 to 3) compared to pre-school age children (3 – 6 years). In case of shortages, provisions might be rationed according to priority criteria that – not always deliberately – discriminate children from ethnic minority and poor families, such as, for example, priority given to working parents or to those who subscribe early on waiting lists (Felfe & Lalive, 2011; Ghysels & Van Lancker, 2011). Indeed, immigrant parents and parents in precarious working conditions can hardly plan their need for non-maternal care very far in advance (Vandebroek et al., 2008).

Moreover, the fact that immigrant families have less access to care through informal networks (Wall & Jose, 2004) and more often work irregular hours, demands more flexible opening hours of services that are rarely available within traditional publicly-funded ECEC systems (Del Boca, 2010; Hernandez, et al., 2009; Wall & Jose, 2004).

Characteristics of families

Immigrant families and families living in poverty more often have smaller informal networks and less access to information about ECEC and enrollment procedures. In addition, language and cultural barriers might prevent them from fulfilling the bureaucratic procedures that may be necessary to enroll their children (Leseman, 2002). The most striking example in this regard is represented by the case of Roma communities, where families’ lack of trust toward authorities and public services combined with discrimination and hostility encountered in educational environments tend to undermine children’s participation to ECEC programmes (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2010).

Principles of good practice

Despite these recurring obstacles, there are many examples of practices around Europe that have begun to overcome these difficulties and noted significant progress in the enrollment of children from ethnic minority and poor families (for additional information on networks, working on these issues in practice across Europe, see for instance www.decet.org and www.issa.org and reports from the Roma Education Initiative: www.osi.hu/esp/rej/). An analysis of several successful projects reveals five crucial criteria for structural accessibility.

Availability



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As families living in poverty are often less mobile than more affluent families, it is crucial that high quality services are to be found in those neighborhoods where poor families and ethnic minority families reside. This is not to say that ECEC provisions are to be targeted to families “at risk”. Quite on the contrary, structural provisions addressing the general population (but with specific attention for specific needs of families) are more successful than targeted provisions (OECD, 2006). In other words, policies based on a (children’s) rights perspective tend to be more effective than policies based on a needs (or risk) framework. However, in cases of shortages, policy makers might decide to first invest in poorer areas, such as was the case with the Integrated Centers in the U.K.

Affordability

In cases where public funding is structurally available, provisions are usually free, or parents’ fees are molded according to income and are therefore more affordable (Del Boca, 2010). The criterion of affordability, however, does not only refer to material resources but also to more “symbolic” forms of payment. For instance, when provisions are targeted to specific populations “at risk”, parents have to pay a symbolic prize, such as being labeled or giving up part of their privacy, which may represent a significant threshold (Roose & De Bie, 2003). For this reason, structural provisions addressing the overall population - either free of costs or according to income-related fees – tend to have an higher equalising potential than those in which entitlement is targeted to the poor (Children In Scotland, 2011).

Accessibility

The availability and affordability of provisions does not necessarily make them accessible, as many forms of thresholds may implicitly exclude children from poor and immigrant families: language barriers, knowledge of bureaucratic procedures, waiting lists, or priorities set by the management. For this reason, ECEC access policies should be carefully planned – especially at the local level – starting from the analysis of the barriers that prevent children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds to avail of ECEC provision. This might also entail outreach to families whose presence tends to be less visible in the local community in order to build trust between marginalised groups and ECEC centres (Bennett, 2012; Broadhead, Meleady & Delgado, 2008).

Usefulness

As explained above, unequal enrollment needs to be considered as a result of the reciprocal (bi-directional) relations between policies, characteristics of families and of services. Services also need to be useful, meaning that families experience the service as supportive and attuned to their demands. Firstly, this refers to practical issues, such as opening hours, considering the fact that immigrant families are more often employed in low-skilled, low-paid, jobs with irregular hours (Del Boca, 2010; Leseman, 2002; Wall and Josè, 2002). Second, it also means that the ways in which ECEC provisions are run must make sense to the different parents and local communities. For this reason, the management of ECEC centres should encompass democratic decision-making structures that allow the differing needs of families to be expressed and to be taken systematically into account in order to tailor ECEC provision to the demands of local communities. ECEC centres that – starting from these premises – develop policy-making capacity and actively participate in local consultation processes (policy advocacy) are found to be the most effective in engaging with disadvantaged communities (Open Society Institute, 2006; Zyllicz, 2010).



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Comprehensibility

Finally, this criterion refers to the extent to which the meaning of ECEC provisions is matched with the meanings that parents attribute to these provisions. This implies that values, beliefs and educational practices of the provision need to be negotiated with families and local communities (Vandenbroeck, 2011). Mono-cultural provision that does not take diversity into account in everyday practices often fails to gain the trust of ethnic minority groups and may therefore generate segregation and discrimination (Driessen, 2004; Leseman, 2002). On the contrary, services that involve parents and local migrant communities in democratic decision-making processes and that are committed to the recruitment and training of personnel from minority groups are found to be more successful in fostering participation of children from diverse backgrounds to ECEC (DECET, 2007; De Graaf & Van Keulen, 2008; Peeters, 2010). There is evidence to suggest that the provision of integrated services combining care and education, early childhood and family support programmes, special needs and mainstream provision within the framework of inter-agency collaboration might be most effective in answering the demands of local communities in contexts of diversity (Children in Scotland, 2011; Open Society Institute, 2006; Whalley & Pen Green Centre Team, 2007).

Furthermore, it needs to be noted that the impact of broader socio-economic factors associated with welfare policies should not be underestimated. In fact, it is no coincidence that the effects of family background on children’s participation rates to ECEC provision tend to be more limited in Scandinavian countries where universally accessible childcare is provided and socio-economic differences in population are less marked than elsewhere (Ghysels & Van Lancker, 2011). This leads to the conclusion that *universal entitlements to publicly funded ECEC provision within integrated systems that combine care and education* – along with a flexible allocation of funds that *target additional resources* toward children and families experiencing disadvantage – may contribute to overcoming the social stratification in the use of early childhood services with the greatest benefit for disadvantaged groups (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2009; Unicef-Innocenti, 2008; Leseman, 2002).

A framework for successful inclusive practices

In light of the principles of good practices presented above, certain structural conditions for increasing accessibility of ECEC for children from ethnic minority and low-income families are identified. Action toward the implementation of such conditions can be undertaken at several levels: through legislative support of national governments or within the framework of regional and local administrations as well as in the wider context of international cooperation. As said in the first part of this paper, accessibility needs to be considered as the interplay between policy, provision and parents. A framework for the implementation of structural conditions promoting successful inclusive practices could be outlined as follows:

Policy level	Provision level	Parental level
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1. Public funding 2. Integration of education and care 3. Entitlement (population-based), possibly with geographical targets 4. Regulations on cost (fees) 5. Quality monitoring	6. Democratic decision making 7. Priority criteria 8. Outreach 9. Flexible opening hours matching diverse local needs 10. Diverse workforce 11. Inter-agency cooperation	12. Involvement 13. Accessible and meaningful information
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1. Public funding: the way ECEC services are financed influence the differential enrollment, and funding provisions in that perspective seems to be more efficient than funding parents. The provision of structural services for all and the streaming of additional funding toward disadvantaged areas seems to be the most effective strategy for making ECEC accessible, especially for children from immigrant or low-income families.
2. Integrating education and care: systems where education and care services are integrated under one administrative department usually tend to have higher access, especially for the youngest age group (0 to 3 years).
3. Entitlement: policies that accept that ECEC is an entitlement for *all* children yield better results than targeted policies. In case priorities need to be set (e.g. for financial reasons), these should be framed within geographical areas: in fact, ECEC services targeted toward disadvantaged children and families tend to be perceived as stigmatizing with a negative impact on their attendance.
4. Policies that regulate parental fees according to income may more easily avoid financial barriers, while voucher systems for the poorest often entail financial barriers for the lower middle class.
5. Quality monitoring: centralized systems regulating and monitoring the structural quality of ECEC settings are the essential precondition to ensure equal quality for all (e.g. in terms of adult-child ratio, space, facilities, staff qualification levels and professional support,...).
6. Democratic decision-making: it is important that pedagogical policies in provisions reflect diverse standpoints about care, education and upbringing of young children by engaging with families and local communities..
7. Priority criteria: although in cases of shortage of places setting out priority criteria becomes inevitable, it is important to scrutinize their effects on different populations in order to avoid the unintentional marginalization of children with a disadvantaged background.
8. Outreach: developing pedagogical policies claiming that everybody is welcome does not suffice. In order to ensure equal access, ECEC providers should make efforts toward outreach to low-income families and ethnic minority children in local areas. This means engaging with those marginalized groups that tend to be less visible within the local community and taking into account their concrete needs in the organisation of the service.
9. Flexible opening hours: the fact that ethnic minority parents, as well as low-income families, more often are employed in irregular jobs for long working hours and that newcomers often have less access to care by kin should be considered when setting out criteria for the organization of ECEC provision at the local level.



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10. Diverse workforce: a workforce reflecting ethnic and cultural minorities gives a clear welcome message to diverse communities. It also helps to broaden the understanding of the team in respecting diversity.
11. Inter-agency cooperation: integrated centers or provisions that cooperate across sectoral and institutional borders (e.g. education, health, housing, adult education, ..) yield better results both in the short term – by addressing the complex needs of children and families living in difficult conditions – and in the long term – by contributing to the regeneration of local community.
12. Involvement: parents with diverse backgrounds should be listened to and space should be intentionally created in order to facilitate dialogue and understanding of implicit needs. In this sense, ECEC services should be committed to constantly negotiating practices and values in contexts where contrasting values and beliefs might emerge.
13. Accessible and meaningful information: we cannot assume that mainstream information is readily available and meaningful for all. Multilingual information that deals with concrete questions of diverse parents needs to be considered.

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