



TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

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

Achieving Integrated and Aligned Services in the Early Years Policy Recommendations

High-quality early childhood education and services are increasingly recognized as being critical to the healthy socio-emotional and cognitive development of all children. Such experiences are particularly important for children from low-income families who face a number of risk factors related to their present and future development and educational attainment. Multidimensional approaches are needed to address child poverty as it poses a multi-faceted, persistent, intergenerational, and both material and immaterial problem. However, policy segregation at all levels within many early childhood programs currently results in scattered and siloed services that fail to address the holistic needs of young children and their families.¹ Fragmented services present a challenge for both children from low-income families and also for children of migrant families who may have more difficulty in navigating available provision and access to resources and, hence, require additional support.

Improving integration in early childhood and family services is a response being pursued in many countries aiming to address common problems in diverse ways and for different reasons in varying contexts. Integration calls for 'whole of government' approaches that are boundary-spanning (i.e. working across government sectors and offices), in which public service agencies work together with key stakeholders in a coordinated way to deliver on shared goals and desired outcomes that cannot be achieved separately. One aim is to avoid different policies counteracting or undermining each other.² Integration of services requires working with existing structures to optimize effectiveness in achieving shared goals with all relevant stakeholders in a collaborative approach. Comprehensive programs have been shown to better serve the needs of children from a holistic perspective,³ and can also ease access for disadvantaged groups.⁴

Both horizontal and vertical networking, or alignment, must be considered in promoting service integration. Horizontal integration refers to connections across disparate services: programs for parents and families, care and education, health, special needs and mainstream service provision. The challenge here is to ensure cooperation, coordination, communication, common pedagogical approaches and joint

¹ Michel Vandebroek, Dept. of Social Welfare Studies, Ghent University, TFIEY, Dublin, Jan. 2015 ([http://www.kbs-frb.be/uploadedFiles/2012-KBS-FRB/05\) Pictures, documents and external sites/12\) Report/TFIEY Michel-Vandebroek.pdf](http://www.kbs-frb.be/uploadedFiles/2012-KBS-FRB/05) Pictures, documents and external sites/12) Report/TFIEY Michel-Vandebroek.pdf))

² Centre for Effective Service, Ireland. TFIEY meeting, Dublin, Jan. 2015 ([http://www.kbs-frb.be/uploadedFiles/2012-KBS-FRB/05\) Pictures, documents and external sites/12\) Report/TFIEY Nuala-Doherty.pdf](http://www.kbs-frb.be/uploadedFiles/2012-KBS-FRB/05) Pictures, documents and external sites/12) Report/TFIEY Nuala-Doherty.pdf))

³ F. Geinger, D. Van Haute, G. Roets & M. Vandebroek (2015) Integration and alignment of services including poor and migrant families with young children, Background paper for the 5th meeting of the Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years, Dublin, January 2015

⁴ Bronwen Cohen, TFIEY, Dublin, Jan. 2015 ([http://www.kbs-frb.be/uploadedFiles/2012-KBS-FRB/05\) Pictures, documents and external sites/12\) Report/TFIEY Bronwen-Cohen.pdf](http://www.kbs-frb.be/uploadedFiles/2012-KBS-FRB/05) Pictures, documents and external sites/12) Report/TFIEY Bronwen-Cohen.pdf))





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further training. Vertical integration refers to the management of various transitions for children and their families through time, from prenatal through to primary school and beyond.⁵

Segregation and fragmentation occur in a number of different ways, including across age, sectors, target groups, policies, and government (national and local) departments and offices. In response, a range of policy strategies can be identified.

A few key issues for consideration:

- **Several different approaches toward achieving integration and alignment of services may be pursued depending on context. A public debate bringing commitment and the support of all key stakeholders (professionals, officials and families) is needed. Additionally, the process must take account of context, community, local connectivity and local decision-making in identifying an appropriate strategy.**
 - In some cases, as in Ireland, the national government can undertake a planned and centralized approach to alignment across services, encouraging collaboration and cooperation (see box below on Better Outcomes: Brighter Futures).
 - A bottom-up approach, as modeled in Switzerland at the city level (Primano program) and national level (Primokiz program) that helps services organize themselves working with consultants, can also influence both horizontal and vertical alignment.
 - In other instances, exemplary services and programs emerge inspired by a place-based need and/or innovative leaders, and inspire the development of new policies and strategies through their success with their local community. Pen Green in the UK is one example of such a program that has promoted collaboration and alignment.

Better Outcomes: Brighter Futures (Ireland)

In Ireland, a new national framework was introduced in 2014 in order to promote shared national outcomes for children across services and for all professionals. It can serve as an example of a planned, large-scale effort to integrate early childhood services. This framework not only provides specific practical guidelines for all professionals to follow, but also includes more general transformational goals to create a foundation of shared values across sectors, such as emphasizing the role of parents and being mindful of smooth transitions. National level targets, furthermore, offer a common language around expected outcomes and a shared agenda.

⁵ Program Primokiz, Jacobs Foundation. TFIEY, Dublin, Jan. 2015 (http://www.kbs-frb.be/uploadedFiles/2012-KBS-FRB/05_Pictures_documents_and_external_sites/12_Report/TFIEY_Philine-Zimmerli.pdf)





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- **Some of the common key challenges often encountered in attempts to align or integrate services that should be considered in the design of policies and programs are:**
 - The tension between effective leadership that brings disparate sectors together and the need to preserve the identity of the staff involved across different professions and sectors, ensuring that the agency of those involved is not lost. This includes ensuring that national level representatives in steering and coordinating bodies understand the constraints of staff working in services.
 - The difficulty of aligning different working cultures and professional statuses, and relatedly, the need to create a common 'language' across fields to promote successful collaboration with shared goals. Participation in joint services may be made mandatory, but it does not mean that cooperation follows. Hence there is a need to think through the consequences of bringing together busy professionals and organize continuing professional development to support integration.
 - Balancing the competing need for efficiency, comprehensive data collection and information sharing across sectors while maintaining the privacy and other rights of families.
- **An important aspect of service integration is the issue of transitions across time. Transitions will always exist as children move through various service provisions. These transitions must be considered not as a single moment in time, but rather a process. Reciprocal adjustment between the service providers and their clients and service users is essential in order to avoid a one-sided transition process.**
 - Research has shown that 'evaluative' testing at moments of transition offers little predictive value. Moreover, such measures may place an over-emphasis on seemingly 'measurable' impacts and outcomes to the detriment of a holistic view of child development.

Nordic Family House Model (Sweden)

Family Centers, as implemented in several Nordic countries, offer a successful country-wide example of integrated service provision. In Sweden, for example, 'the 'familjecentral' provides a complete range of services based in the same location, from maternal and child healthcare to early childhood education and care and preventive social services. These centers are universal and target all new and future parents and children aged 0-5. While no national legislation directly instigated the country-wide growth of Family Centres, their rapid growth and expansion were fueled by local initiative, and national health and welfare policies now promote the type of cooperation and collaboration highlighted by these institutions. Key to their success is the sustained balance between universal policies and targeted approaches that aim to assist the most disadvantaged families. Furthermore, all elements of the system must work harmoniously to move toward shared goals, requiring opportunities for daily communication and self-reflection, which are integrated into the Center model.





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- The issue of transitions is particularly important for children and their families in vulnerable situations, who may need to move between service areas and programs frequently due to a range of needs and precarious life circumstances.
- **An integrated approach to services requires a whole child perspective that seeks to understand children's lives, which entails shifts in thinking and different approaches to gathering information.⁶ Data plays an important role in contributing to an understanding of needs and impact. However, an empathetic and qualitative understanding of children and families is equally important.**
 - Aligned and shared data can provide critical information about whether services are reaching those children and families most in need, and help to ensure that they are not being left out of services.
 - When used wisely, data can also provide the 'common language' or shared starting point needed for professionals across a range of roles to agree on a common needs assessment and reach an understanding of shared goals and objectives.
 - However, it is also important to access other forms of information, for instance, to ensure that a child is not solely adapting to the ECEC setting, but rather that the whole environment is welcoming to the child's changing needs and the needs of their family⁷. One way of understanding such needs can be through direct engagement of children themselves, e.g. taking photos of how they see their classrooms⁸.
- **Providing sufficient resources is key to a successful effort. An investment in integration and alignment is an investment in the people involved, and a recognition of the need for opportunities for different players to connect. In order to sustain collaboration, designated time and resources must be set aside in order for people to receive training and attend related meetings.**

⁶ Elisabeth Canavan, TFIEY, Dublin, Jan. 2015 (http://www.kbs-frb.be/uploadedFiles/2012-KBS-FRB/05_Pictures_documents_and_external_sites/12_Report/TFIEY_Elisabeth-Canavan.pdf)

⁷ Lucia Balduzzi, TFIEY, Dublin, Jan. 2015 (http://www.kbs-frb.be/uploadedFiles/2012-KBS-FRB/05_Pictures_documents_and_external_sites/12_Report/TFIEY_Lucia-Balduzzi.pdf)

⁸ Pascale Garnier, TFIEY, Dublin, Jan. 2015 (http://www.kbs-frb.be/uploadedFiles/2012-KBS-FRB/05_Pictures_documents_and_external_sites/12_Report/TFIEY_Pascale-Garnier.pdf)



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- Often, formal integration may be implemented in theory without true integration being accomplished at the level of service provision. In order to effect real change, commitment must be equally strong at the local level as at the management level, where there is often an entrenched 'silo' mentality, creating resistance to collaboration.

Increasing evidence demonstrates the advantages of services for young children that are integrated across sectorial and administrative boundaries (i.e. horizontally) and across the different transitions from prenatal services through ECEC services to school (i.e. vertically). There are many different ways of making integration work, whether through networking of existing services, aligning objectives and strategies or establishing fully integrated services. Experience from several different contexts and countries indicates the importance of a 'competent' system in order to achieve successful results - from engaging the commitment of all concerned, through political decision-making, steering, shaping and managing services and provision, engaging all staff and families, and working with staff on a longer term basis through coordination and training to build trust and collegial exchange.

