

A meeting place for policy-makers and researchers: the Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years

Jan Peeters* and Ankie Vandekerckhove

Centre for Innovation in the Early Years (VBJK), Social Welfare Studies, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

(Received 13 October 2014; accepted 3 July 2015)

While policy-makers and researchers in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) often seem to speak different languages, overwhelming research evidence on how quality ECEC can play a key role in alleviating the effects of disadvantage can be extremely relevant for policy-makers. In this article, we focus on how philanthropic foundations can facilitate the dialogue and bring together researchers, policy-makers and stakeholders on (particularly quality) issues in ECEC. In this article, we present a comprehensive advocacy project, designed by 13 philanthropic foundations on both sides of the Atlantic, under the leadership of the King Baudouin Foundation (KBF) (Belgium). This group of foundations wants to clarify, discuss and document some of the most relevant issues in ECEC at this point, with a focus on children from low-income and migrant families. Meetings have already taken place on accessibility, professionalisation and curriculum, parent involvement and evaluation. With the fifth forum – on integrated systems in ECEC – on its way, it is time for a short recap. Can meeting opportunities of this kind, for a limited group of policy-makers, successfully influence policy?

Keywords: advocacy; ECEC; ECEC policy; foundations

Introduction

There is increasing scientific evidence that early childhood education and care (ECEC) can yield substantial beneficial effects, even lasting up to adolescence. In doing so, ECEC can contribute to alleviating the effects of poverty from an early age (Vandenbroeck and Lazzari 2014). Recent research taught us that early childhood is a period of uncontested importance for lifelong development and that the cycle of poverty and disadvantage can be stopped by focusing on the most vulnerable young children. Still, not all this evidence makes it to the policy tables. Researchers and policy-makers sometimes seem to speak a different language. The scientific caution of researchers differs somewhat from the language of policy-makers, who most often look for concrete answers to the complex questions they are facing. Policy-makers can sometimes lack a long-term perspective, as their concerns lie with quick impact and their next elections prospects (Staggs 2012). Therefore, the research field needs translators, facilitators – people who can convert the scientific information into

*Corresponding author. Email: jan.peeters@vbjk.be, jan.peeters@ugent.be

useable material and ensure its applicability for policy-makers (Ulkuer and Sherrod 2012). The path from scientific evidence to policy and to practice can be challenging and governments and civil society need a variety of support mechanisms to design and fund high-quality, effective programmes and services for young children and their families (Grover 2012).

But policies also affect those who work with young children; they too need to be aware of policy agendas and developments and how they can try to influence policy. ECEC stakeholders must be able to question the link between scientific evidence and the dominant discourse, and to consider and reflect on the values and the assumptions on which each policy is based (Miller and Hevey 2012, p. 7–8). The New Zealand example showed us that a tradition of democratic cooperation between policy-makers, researchers and stakeholders can lead to sustainable change in the long term. New Zealand's 50-year tradition of constructive cooperation between researchers, policy-makers and stakeholders has resulted in the innovative bicultural curriculum (Te Whaariki) as well as the increased level of professionalisation, with all practitioners on a bachelor level (Boyd 2004; Peeters 2008a).

To facilitate and support such cooperation, we need open dialogue spaces where politicians, administrators, stakeholders and scholars can discuss together and learn to understand each other's language (Moss 2007; Peeters 2012). This raises the question of who could accomplish this translation from evidence to practical policy and how such dialogue between the involved groups can be supported. Neither ECEC researchers nor practitioners alone have the full array of knowledge and skills to move effectively from established principles to specific plans for a specific context (Super, Rebello Britto, and Engle 2012, p. 308). In the past, foundations such as the Bernard van Leer Foundation, Aga Kahn and the Open Society Foundation have played an important role in bringing together policy-makers, practitioners and researchers and their combined input can lead to positive effects in the policy of ECEC at the local and regional levels (Gielen 2004, p. 17–19; Peeters 2008b, p. 12 and 169; Grover 2012, p. 502; Tanckersley, Mikailova, and Sula 2012, p. 122).

The King Baudouin Foundation (KBF) has a long tradition in innovative projects on child poverty and immigration issues in education. The KBF has also built up excellent contacts with Belgian policy-makers. In 2011, a delegation of the foundation took study trips to several countries and were introduced to all the existing research literature on the impact of ECEC in breaking the cycle of poverty and disadvantage. They were influenced by the studies of the Centre of the Developing Child at Harvard University (the USA) (Yoshikawa and Hsueh 2001) and also by the results of studies like the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education project study in England and the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Northern Ireland project study in Northern Ireland (Sylva et al. 2011). A 2011 brochure of the foundations contains the following statement: 'There is a growing body of evidence to show that investment in services for society's youngest children can help improve children's lives now and help prevent more costly interventions later on' (KBF 2011).

Convinced by the scientific evidence of the importance of ECEC for vulnerable and migrant children, the KBF therefore took the initiative in 2012 to set up a common project to translate the scientific evidence towards policy-makers with several North American and European foundations: the Jacobs Foundation (Switzerland); the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian (Portugal); the Lego Foundation (Denmark); the Bernard van Leer Foundation and the Universal Education Foundation (the Netherlands); Compagnia di San Paolo and Fondazione Caripio (Italy);

the Bertelmans Stiftung (Germany); the Foundation for Child Development, the California Community Foundation, One America and Thrive by Five (the USA) and the Atlantic Philanthropies (the USA and UK).

This consortium of foundations then appointed the European VBJK, (*Vernieuwing in de Basisvoorzieningen voor jonge kinderen* [Innovations in the Early Years]) and the US-based Migration Policy Institute (MPI) to organise seven high-level panels with policy-makers, stakeholders and researchers on some of the most relevant and debated issues in ECEC. Both organisations work on the input (background papers, relevant research, contributions and speakers) while the foundations are in charge of inviting all participants.

Working method

The Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years (TFIEY) planned to meet seven times over a period of three years, from January 2013 until January 2016. Each two-day meeting is organised in a different country (five in Europe and two in the US) and focuses on a specific topic. The Forum brings together a group of 50–70 leading researchers, practitioners, civil society representatives, civil servants and political decision-makers or advisors. An advisory board of 15 experts and decision-makers supported VBJK and MPI, designing the content and identifying both the issues to be debated and the most-wanted speakers and participants. The foundations, which all have important networks in their countries, play an important role in bringing the policy-makers to the forum. Before the meeting, all participants receive two background papers on the subject, prepared by leading researchers.

Each meeting starts with two presentations by well-known researchers about the chosen Forum issue. After these plenary sessions, every meeting also has several break-out sessions, to encourage dialogue between the researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. During each forum meeting, the link to daily practice is made in the shape of site visits, during which participants can see examples of interesting practice in the work with young children from migrant and low-income families. These site visits are usually much appreciated because they give participants ample opportunity for dialogue with practitioners. The link with policy is made during the closing debate in each forum meeting, to which civil society representatives and leading policy-makers are invited.

After each meeting a report is published summarising the debates, presenting best practices and formulating recommendations for policy-makers and practitioners. On the basis of video interviews with speakers and video recordings of the site visits, a short film is made in three languages (English, French and Dutch) about the topic. All presentations, background papers and reports can be freely downloaded at the Forum's website (<http://www.kbs-frb.be/partner.aspx?id=293963&back=2067&langtype=1033>).

Some of the foundations (e.g. King Baudouin, Sao Paolo) have been experimenting with organising parallel conferences for a broader audience on the same topics in their own countries and use the translated materials (background papers, reports and films) that are produced for the Transatlantic Forum. The other foundations are also distributing the materials in the countries in which they are active.

Lessons learned from the TFIEY

At the beginning of this project the KBF, together with VBJK and MPI and the advisory board, selected the issues to be debated during the meetings. They are

considered to be the most relevant ones at stake and in need of more concrete policy attention. It should also be clear that these different issues are also linked to one another.

First forum – quality of early childhood services for all: addressing disparities in access for children from migrant and low-income families (Ghent)

Over the course of this first forum some important policy recommendations were formulated. Framing ECEC issues within the larger context of child poverty reduction can be a powerful strategy in breaking the cycle of disadvantage.

Another important lesson was that of winning the middle-class majority's buy-in to the issue; particularly in the current economic climate, public sentiment towards investment exclusively targeted at the disadvantaged may not always be positive. Middle-class resentment may arise in the instance of limited funding leading, for instance, to scarcity of childcare slots for their own children. Arguments need to be made clear why investments towards disadvantaged groups may benefit the whole society. High-quality ECEC services must not only be accessible, affordable and available, but also desirable, useful and meaningful to all families and responsive to changing demographics in order to be successful.

Services with a social mix are important for positive child outcomes and to avoid 'ghettoisation', but are highly challenging to achieve in the face of segregated neighbourhoods. Staff diversification in this context also remains a challenge to be addressed.

Parents must be included alongside their children, as their first teachers and key partners in their learning and development, and should be drawn into services in a meaningful and respectful manner.

Second forum – workforce preparation and curriculum innovations (New York)

At this meeting, the Forum formulated the following policy recommendations:

ECEC curricula should serve children of different socioeconomic statuses. Specific curricula for children with a migrant or low-income background have not automatically led to better outcomes.

Investing in workforce preparation is necessary to cultivate the reflective practitioners that we need in a context of hyper-diversity. We no longer live in countries where there is one obvious majority and one specific, mostly immigrated, minority (e.g. Christians and Muslims, French and Algerian citizens) but in nations in which people from several different religious, ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds all (should) have a place.

Continuous Professional Development and support must be provided to all staff, with sufficient length and intensity to be effective and lead to change. Both pre-service (50% of the staff should be on bachelor level) and in-service training with a focus on changing practices are necessary.

Staff from different backgrounds can increase the awareness of stereotypes and prejudices within the team and move forward in learning to deal with these. In diversifying the workforce, ethnic matching should be avoided: all staff members should work with all children and families. Diversifying the workforce is not only an issue of ethnic background but also an issue of gender.

To attract more people to ECEC, the work in ECEC services will need an upgrade as well. The difference in status, salary and working conditions between ECEC workforce and school teachers is no longer acceptable.

Third forum – successful parent and family engagement in the early years: reaching out to immigrant and low-income families (Lisbon)

While there was a broad consensus in the forum that listening to parents is crucial in order to build good services, the challenge of how to create truly ‘demand-led’ services for immigrant and low-income families is one that must continually be revised. In spite of very good intentions, it still seems quite difficult to engage in a reciprocal relation with parents, to respond to their input and to start co-constructing services and provisions that have meaning to them. Offering services to vulnerable families and hoping they will engage in them is still different from and insufficient for engaging them in the services as such.

The second issue, as a consequence of the first, is that of the specialisation that has grown out of this move toward demand-led services and how to better integrate and align the services that are currently available. The understanding, for instance, that Somali mothers must be treated and approached differently from Hispanic fathers is one that has led to specialised services for many different target groups, with a huge breadth of knowledge on how to work with these specific groups at the practitioner’s level. As a result of these specialised approaches, in many of the countries that attended the forum a ‘labyrinth’ of services has been created. The result is a need for a new era of integration, networking and comprehensive systems built through real collaboration.

Lastly, the matter of what such integration, collaboration and consolidation might mean for grassroots organisations that have proliferated over the past decades is another critical question. Should such effective organisations be scaled up in order to maximise impact, or should their knowledge and best practices be incorporated into mainstream services? And how might each of these strategies be effectively pursued?

Fourth forum – evaluation issues in ECEC: choices and implications for diverse populations (Amsterdam)

The Forum drew the following conclusions:

Any monitoring or evaluating of quality has to be based on a definition of quality and this definition should be a topic of debate with all parties concerned, including the most disadvantaged groups. No matter how high the quality of a service may be, if the targeted audience does not appreciate it or barely knows about it, they will not attend. Meanwhile, quality is never a given and needs to be guarded in a constant and systemic manner. And while evaluations do matter, they alone will not automatically change the quality of ECEC services.

There is no hierarchy among the different evaluation methods: how an evaluation should be carried out is defined by the question of what needs to be evaluated. And what is under evaluation is often linked to the question of why a service or programme is being evaluated. A combination of evaluation methods is advisable. One result will often lead to new questions for which other methods will be more appropriate. There is seldom ‘one’ perfect set-up for evaluation. Overlooking and discussing innovative

evaluative practices, we could conclude that supportive, reflective and participative methods can lead to more culturally sensitive monitoring than standardised evaluative systems, which can sometimes result in more judgemental effects.

And finally, between research and policy stand opinions, political decisions and commitment – which are also needed.

Results

Table 2 shows the details of the different participants. There was a well-balanced ratio between attendance of policy-makers and policy advisors, researchers, practitioners and representatives of the foundations (Table 1). This equilibrium benefitted interesting discussions between the different groups in the breakout sessions. The Forum succeeded in bringing well-known researchers to the meetings and there were also ministers and high-level civil servants (both national and European) attending the forums and taking part in the discussions.¹ The input of these well-placed participants was also integrated in the short reports and in the video footage. This material offers strong opportunities for the dissemination and the relevance of the recommendations for further policy debate and advocacy work.

At the end of each forum participants were asked to give their opinion. These meeting evaluations show, among other things, that many of them highly appreciated the level of the presentations, that most of their expectations were met and that they will use and share the gained knowledge. What is appreciated as well is the work into smaller groups where there is more opportunity for discussion.

Conclusions

The two organisations that put together the programme of the meetings, MPI and VBJK, took a deliberate decision to invite researchers from different research backgrounds and policy-makers from different ideologies. Despite the ideological differences and interpretations of the invited presenters there was a wide consensus among the participants of the four forums on the following statements:

Table 1. Conference overview.

Theme	Place	Date
Accessibility for children from migrant and low-income families	Ghent, Belgium	January 2013
Workforce preparation, curriculum innovations	New York, NY, USA	July 2013
Successful parent and family engagement in the early years	Lisbon, Portugal	January 2014
Evaluation and monitoring of ECEC programmes and assessments in the early years	Amsterdam, the Netherlands	June–July 2014
Integrated systems and effective transitions in early childhood	Dublin, Ireland	January 2015
Multilinguism and multiple identities/belongings in EC programmes	Washington, DC, USA	July 2015
Role of governments, policy levers and effective decentralisation	TBD	TBD

Table 2. Participants.

	Ghent	New York	Lisbon	Amsterdam	Total
Policy-makers	13	33	22	17	85
Researchers	22	15	13	16	66
Practitioners/NGOs	15	7	15	10	47
Foundations	19	13	17	21	70

Most researchers considered *universal access for all children and a social mix among attending children and families* to be strategies that lead to the best outcomes for the children. They made the case for a policy of progressive universalism, based on the conviction that universal provisions addressing a diverse population, with the inclusion of tailored services for disadvantaged children, are more beneficial than targeted ECEC services.

The participants agreed that *quality in ECEC cannot be limited to structure and process*. Focused attention for access quality is needed as well, as it is the bottleneck of the ECEC system: it reveals the capacity of the ECEC services to accommodate the needs of children from low-income and migrant families as they do for others. Affordability, availability and usefulness are seen by the participants as important aspects of access quality. During the discussions the participants stressed that the real problem in many countries was not hard-to-reach parents, but hard-to-reach services.

In several meetings it was stressed *how important it is that different support services for migrant and low-income parents and children are integrated*. If not, these vulnerable groups have trouble reaching all the needed support systems, or they have too many different types of barriers to get across.

Another important conclusion arising from the sessions was the question of who defines 'quality'. *It is not only up to researchers to claim what constitutes 'quality' in ECEC*. Quality of ECEC should be defined through an ongoing process of negotiation and cooperation between researchers, professionals, parents of different backgrounds and children themselves.

The participants in the four forum meetings stressed *the importance of parent participation*, but the meaning of this participation is very different. Some see the active participation of poor and minority parents as providing a support in the education of their children (to stimulate them to read books or tell stories); others define participation as a form of citizenship, in which parents are invited to take important decisions in the ECEC centres.

Participants at the forum meetings also stress *the importance of smooth transitions* – between home and ECEC, between childcare and school – especially for poor and migrant children (in particular second-language learners). Every transition represents an additional challenge and barrier for this group and therefore these children have to be supported during the transition from one part of the education system to another.

During the panel discussions with the policy-makers the *accountability of the governments in fighting poverty* was seen as a critical factor for success.

In general, we can conclude that the forum meetings are responding to a need of policy-makers, who can openly discuss issues with colleagues from other countries and ask researchers more specific questions during the breakout sessions and the more informal social events. In their turn, researchers can get a better understanding of

policy making and the perspective of policy-makers by engaging in dialogue with decision-makers.

The effects of the meetings on the policy in the Foundation's countries have not yet been systematically evaluated. This will be done at the end of the seven forum meetings. But we already know of some countries where participating ministers and policy-makers have taken up the recommendations to develop their policy to tackle problematic issues for the more disadvantaged groups. An interesting example is the Flemish Minister of poverty reduction, Ingrid Lieten, who attended the first meeting and mentioned in several newspapers (*De Standaard*, 20.06.2013; *De Morgen*, 29.06.2013) that childcare and kindergarten are provisions of major importance in any child poverty policy. However, a more systematic follow-up of the policy effects is necessary. This, again, can be done with the help of the foundations that participate in the organisation of the TFIEY.

Recent and upcoming forum themes

The fifth forum – *Integrated services and effective transitions in early childhood* – took place in Dublin in January 2015 and aimed to discuss the advantages of having integrated services and programmes (care, education, parental support and health) as opposed to those that are isolated, or more targeted. The debate also covered the importance of encouraging continuity and smooth transitions in pedagogical approach during the childcare and school career of children and how better alignment can benefit their school careers. The forum also wants to explore strategies to overcome barriers and obstacles to implementation of integration, such as entrenched administrative structures.

In the summer of 2015, the sixth forum was organised on *Multilingualism and multiple identities/belongings in EC programmes*. The advantages and disadvantages of current models of education, such as bilingual education and second-language immersion, were discussed and the competences and resources necessary to effectively support second-language learners will be analysed. The meeting also looked into different attitudes that are needed among policy-makers and practitioners towards the unstoppable increase of diversity in our current societies.

Finally, the closing Forum meeting will be on the *Role of national governments, policy levers and effective decentralisation*. This forum will examine the role that national governments can effectively play in leveraging national goal-setting and regulations to successfully affect early childhood policies on a local level for children from migrant or low-income backgrounds. The participants will also identify and analyse examples of successful national, state and regional policies in key areas of programme practice.

And to end this series of Transatlantic Forums, a synthesis will be drafted with all TFIEY themes and formulated policy priorities. A comprehensive publication of all the meetings will make clear what participants considered to be the most urgent priorities and feasible solutions in the field of ECEC with a focus on the most vulnerable citizens of today. As policy-makers were actively involved, we have high hopes that the Forum's outcomes will also shape future ECEC policies in Europe and the USA.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Note

1. We have included speaker information in an appendix here. All contributions can be downloaded on the website (<http://www.kbs-frb.be/otheractivity.aspx?id=293963&langtype=1033>), on which documents, summaries and videos of all separate meetings are also accessible.

References

- Boyd, R. 2004. "Creating Change – New Zealand's Early Childhood Strategy." In *Learning With Other Countries: International Models of Early Education and Care*, edited by D. Reale, 22–25. London: Day Care Trust.
- Gielen, M. 2004. *From Ghent Out into the World*. Amsterdam: SWP.
- Grover, D. 2012. "Closing Commentary: Implications for Development." In *Handbook of Early Childhood Development Research and Its Impact on Global Policy*, edited by P. Rebello Britto, C. Engle, and C. Super, 501–505. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- KBF. 2011. *Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years, Leaflet*. Accessed August 26. http://www.kbs-frb.be/uploadedFiles/2012-KBS-FRB/05_Pictures_documents_and_external_sites/07_Leaflet/2012_TFIEY_Leaflet.pdf.
- KBF. 2012. *Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years: Investing in the Development of Young Children from Migrant and Low-income Families*. Brussels: KBF.
- Miller, L., and D. Hevey, eds. 2012. *Policy Issues in the Early Years*. London: Sage.
- Moss, P. 2007. "Bringing Politics into the Nursery. Early Childhood Education as Democratic Practice." Working papers in Early Childhood Development 43. The Hague: B. van Leer Foundation.
- Peeters, J. 2008a. *The Construction of a New Profession: A European Perspective on Professionalism in Early Childhood Education and Care*. Amsterdam: SWP.
- Peeters, J. 2008b. *De Warme Professional. Begeleid(st)ers Kinderopvang construeren professionaliteit*. Gent: Academia Press.
- Peeters, J. 2012. "Can Research Realise a Bit of Utopia? The Impact of Action-research on the Policy of Childcare in Flanders." *Early Years: An International Journal of Research and Development* 32 (2): 159–170.
- Staggs, L. 2012. "The Rhetoric and Reality of a National Strategy for Early Education and Assessment." In *Policy Issues in the Early Years*, edited by L. Miller and D. Hevey, 139–152. London: Sage.
- Super, C., P. Rebello Britto, and P. Engle. 2012. "Closing Commentary: The Future of Early Childhood Development in the Global Development Agenda." In *Handbook of Early Childhood Development Research and Its Impact on Global Policy*, edited by P. Rebello Britto, C. Engle, and C. Super, xi–xvi. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sylva, K., E. Melhuish, P. Sammons, I. Siraj-Blatchford, and B. Taggart. 2011. "Pre-school Quality and Educational Outcomes at Age 11: Low Quality Has Little Benefit." *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 9 (2): 109–124.
- Tanckersley, D., U. Mikailova, and G. Sula. 2012. "Supporting Early Years Practitioners' Professional Development as a Vehicle for Democratisation." In *Policy Issues in the Early Years*, edited by L. Miller and D. Hevey, 122–136. London: Sage.
- Ulkuer, N., and L. Sherrod. 2012. "Preface." In *Handbook of Early Childhood Development Research and Its Impact on Global Policy*, edited by P. Rebello Britto, C. Engle, and C. Super, xi–xvi. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vandenbroeck, M., and A. Lazzari. 2014. "Accessibility of Early Childhood Education and Care: A State of Affairs." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 22 (3): 327–335.
- Yoshikawa, H., and J. Hsueh. 2001. "Child Development and Public Policy: Towards a Dynamic Systems Perspective." *Child Development* 72 (6): 1887–1903.