



INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (IECE) FROM 3 YEARS OLD TO THE START OF PRIMARY EDUCATION – PROJECT PLAN

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Abstract

This new 3-year thematic project will build upon the main outcomes of the previous Agency Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) projects (2004, 2010) and will be the interface between ECI and primary education. The project will focus upon the fact that early childhood educational experiences have an important impact on a person's life. In line with The Commission Communication – Efficiency and Equity in European Education Systems – provision of high quality early childhood education has the highest rates of return in terms of achievement and social adaptation of children. It is also the basis for lifelong learning, preventing school drop-out and promoting equity of access and outcomes.

For all children and in particular for those with SEN/disabilities or at risk the early childhood stage is critical because the different learning needs of children become clearer as the child enters the educational system. This is often where 'labelling' begins and the early identification of SEN can be beneficial or also 'limit the options' the child has from this point onwards. Quality early education programmes result in early detection of emerging problems and risk factors. Early childhood education programmes improve the life of children and influence the social equity.

Furthermore, taking into account the latest data about provisions of children with SEN/disabilities or at risk in Europe from birth to seven years of age, the OECD (2004) reports that only ¼ of the children with special educational needs are physically included in ordinary early settings.

The goal of the project is to identify and analyse the factors (facilitators-challenges/barriers) that enable high quality and equitable early childhood education of pupils in inclusive settings. It will address all pupils, including vulnerable pupils such as pupils with SEN/disabilities and/or at risk, as a means to improve the lives of children and influence the social equity. Co-ordination between health, education and social sectors as well as the active involvement of parents is considered very important.

The analysis of these factors will be the basis for the development of a 'practical tool/guide' and 'recommendations' aimed at pre-schools and policy makers. A practical tool/guide, addressing pre-schools, on how to make quality inclusion work at early childhood education level, with provision of practical advice on key issues



(access and procedure, workforce, curriculum/content, evaluation and monitoring, governance and funding).

The added value of the project will be a focus on recommendations for practice and recommendations on how to make inclusion work at early childhood education level. The project will also contribute to the discussion on developing indicators to monitor quality in inclusive early childhood education in Europe.

Preparatory activities have started in 2014 and the project activities will run from 2015 to 2017.

Introduction

According to UNESCO (2005), Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and pre-primary education refer to a wide range of programmes, designed with a holistic approach, all aimed at the early physical, cognitive, social and emotional development of children before they enter primary school, from birth until, in certain countries, the age of 7 or 8. They are guided by a framework of common goals linking education and health in the first educational stages of childhood.

In line with the UNESCO International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED, 2011), there are two categories of ISCED level 0 programmes: early childhood educational development and pre-primary education. The former has educational content designed for younger children (in the age range of 0 to 2 years), whilst the latter is designed for children from age 3 years to the start of primary education (p. 26). The project will mainly focus on early childhood education programmes, addressing children from the age 3 years to the start of primary education.

ECEC is a policy priority in most countries and major international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2014a) and the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2014) have had specific departments and research teams working on this topic for the last twenty years.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that early childhood educational experiences have an important impact on a person's life (Barnett, 2011). It is assumed that during this developmental stage, major developments in physical, socio-emotional and cognitive areas occur and meaningful educational experiences during these years can have an impact upon a child's future in positive ways (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000).

In April 2000, the World Education Forum from UNESCO met in Dakar, Senegal to share the vision of preventing problems once they develop rather than 'compensating' during the first stages of education. It also specified the importance of ECEC that should also contribute to identify and enrich the care and the



education of children with special needs. In this forum, 6 goals were established named EFA (education for all goals). The first one was related to this educational stage and stated that governments should 'expand and improve comprehension within early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children' by 2015. Its importance was highlighted in September 2010, when UNESCO organised the 'First World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education' in Moscow (UNESCO, 2010).

In 2012, the OECD published 'Starting strong III' which defines quality in ECEC including the 5 key policy levels: 'setting out quality goals and regulations', 'designing and implementing curriculum and standards', 'improving qualifications', 'training and working conditions', 'engaging families and communities and advancing data collection, research and monitoring.'

The Commission Communication – Efficiency and Equity in European Education Systems – (2007) argues that early childhood education has the highest rates of return in terms of achievement and social adaptation of children. It urges member states to invest more at this stage as a basis for lifelong learning, preventing school drop-out and promoting equity of access and outcomes.

The Council of the European Union developed the Barcelona Declaration in 2002, in which members states agreed to provide full day day-care to support parents of at least 90% of children between the age of three and compulsory school age by 2010. In 2009, the Ministers of Education set a new benchmark for early education: at least 95% of children between the age of 4 and compulsory school age across Europe should be able to participate and improvements in the accessibility to ECEC should be made by 2020.

Background

In line with the 2010 Agency Country Survey and the 2014-2020 multi-annual work plan, inclusion in early childhood education for all children with a focus on children with SEN/disabilities and/or at risk, was identified as being a priority within member countries for a 3-year thematic project.

The project will build upon the main outcomes of the previous Agency Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) projects (2004, 2010) and will be the interface between ECI and primary education. The project will focus upon the issue that early childhood educational experiences have an important impact on a person's life.

The Agency analysis in the area of ECI has highlighted a model of ECI in which health, education and social sectors are directly involved. This model highlights the shift from a type of intervention mainly focused on the child to an extended approach involving the child, their family and the environment. Within this ECI



model, five key elements – availability, proximity, affordability, interdisciplinary working and diversity – were identified as essential factors that require effective implementation. The project findings will provide a basis for more in-depth work in the field with a focus on early childhood education programmes addressing children from 3 years old up to the start of primary education.

The project will also draw on recent Agency work in addition to the ECI projects. In particular, the work on Teacher Education for Inclusion and the Profile of Inclusive Teachers, Multicultural diversity and Special Needs Education, the Organisation of Provision to support Inclusive Education and the Raising the Achievements of all learners in inclusive education, will be relevant.

The project will contribute to achieving two of the Europe 2020 headline targets: reducing early school leaving to below 10% and lifting at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion (European Commission, 2012).

Management

The project will follow the agreed Agency project management and quality assurance procedures. A team of Agency staff will manage the project, together with a Project Advisory Group (PAG) made up of representatives from Agency Representative Board Members and National Co-ordinators. The PAG will be actively involved in project planning and monitoring the implementation of project activities. An extended Project Advisory Group (PAG) will also be set up, to meet a few times throughout the project to ensure consistency with other European and international initiatives in this area of work (e.g. Commission, OECD, UNESCO, etc.). Two external project consultants, with international long research experience in the field of inclusive early childhood education, will be appointed to support the project team and the PAG in project planning, information collection and analysis activities, effective monitoring and feedback of project activities.

Aims and key questions

The overall goal of the project is to identify and analyse the factors (facilitators-challenges/barriers) that enable quality and effective early childhood programmes for all pupils in inclusive settings. It will address all pupils including those with SEN/disabilities and/or at risk, as a means to give children a good start in education, build their resilience and influence the social equity.

The aim is to collect information about all pupils in inclusive settings with a focus on the most vulnerable ones in early childhood education in Europe and to describe where those pupils are located during early childhood education. The project will also explore which resources are allocated to meet their needs and to describe the main characteristics of the educational contexts where these pupils are included.



In line with the European Quality Framework in ECEC, produced by the European Commission Thematic Working Group on ECEC with a view to support Member States to develop quality ECEC systems as part of the education system, the project will focus on five thematic areas:

- Access and procedures in early year's education for all children , including the most vulnerable ones such as children with SEN/disabilities and/or at risk, children with severe disabilities, immigrants and newcomers, information for families and parent participation, etc.
- Workforce -roles and staff, organisational status of the professionals, initial and in-service staff training, values and attitudes, leadership, the role of the support teacher, collaboration with parents, co-operation with external personnel, collaboration with health and social services
- Curriculum/content - focus on all aspects of the child's development (cognitive, social, emotional and physical), learning, participation, pedagogy, pre-school environment and relationships, and child perspectives
- Evaluation and monitoring – crucial role of early identification and first assessment process, ongoing assessment of children and teacher work
- Governance and funding – role of leadership, accountability, funding models

The key question for the project will be:

'What are the main characteristics of quality inclusive early childhood education for all children?'

Some areas, relevant to the project that need further investigation, include:

- All children benefit from inclusive education in early childhood education. What benefits do children who are not vulnerable or at risk get from inclusive education?

Participants and target groups

The project activities and outputs will mainly target policy/decision makers at national and local levels.

The project will explore the needs of all children from 3 years old to the start of primary education (6-7) including vulnerable children such as pupils with SEN/disabilities and/or at risk (i.e. marginalised, socially disadvantaged, immigrants, etc.). The project will also examine the transition process from home or nursery to pre-school and from pre-school to primary education.



All Agency member countries will be invited to participate to the project activities with the nomination of 2 experts per country.

The profiles of experts to be nominated for the project should be:

- a pre-school teacher/professional or a pre-school leader
- a researcher in early childhood education

Both experts should be able to provide information on early childhood education programmes and examples of good practice at national level as well as to disseminate project findings.

The factors that enable quality early childhood education programmes for all pupils in inclusive settings, will be analysed and these factors will be translated into 'a practical tool' to support pre-schools and conclusions and recommendations for families, practitioners, schools and policy makers.

Methodology and activities

The main areas of project activities will include:

Preparatory phase (2014)

- Set up the Project Advisory Group, made up of two representatives from the Agency Representative Board Members and two representatives from the National Co-ordinators, to be actively involved in project planning and monitoring the implementation of project activities. An extended Project Advisory Group (PAG) will also be set up to meet a few times throughout the project to ensure consistency with other European and international initiatives in this area of work (e.g. Commission, OECD, UNESCO, etc.).
- Appointment of two researchers with long European/international experience in the area of early childhood education as project consultants to support the project team and the PAG in project planning, information collection, analysis of activities, effective monitoring and feedback of project activities.
- Nomination of two project experts by the Agency member countries that wish to be involved in the project activities (one pre-school teacher/professional, or pre-school leader and one researcher).

Main project activities (2015-2017)

- A literature and policy review will be conducted by the project team providing the conceptual framework for the project and including a review of post 2000 international and European research literature and policy papers on the



project themes. Countries will be requested to send information on key national literature.

- A project kick-off meeting was held in June 2015 with the participation of the nominated project experts and representatives from international/European organisations that are involved in the field of early childhood education, to discuss the focus and main themes of the project, as well as the methodology and the expected outcomes.
- A background document will be developed, including the conceptual framework of the project, clarifying key concepts, methodology to be employed and main project activities, to be presented and discussed in the project kick-off meeting.
- Support for project implementation needs to be considered throughout the project planning-implementation-dissemination-evaluation cycle. Emphasis will be placed on identifying countries priorities for project outputs and tools. In the Spring 2015 biannual meeting, time for discussion of the project team with RBs and NCs will be allocated, focusing on project implementation issues and in particular to discuss about countries priorities, proposals for using project results, identify what tools are needed and how they may be used, etc.
- In order to explore the key themes, a questionnaire will be produced to collect country information on policy and practice in relation to early childhood education for pupils with SEN/disabilities and/or at risk. The questions will be based on issues emerging from the literature review, the European Commission 'European Quality Framework in ECEC', and discussions in the PAG and the project kick-off meetings. Project experts will be requested to complete the questions with country information. The information provided in the questionnaires will be the basis for the country reports.
- Countries will be requested to identify and describe innovative examples of good practice in early childhood education for all pupils including pupils with SEN/disabilities and/or at risk, at national level.
- Selection of a small number of examples for more in-depth investigation by the project team in co-operation with the PAG members and the external project consultants, on the basis of some 'quality' criteria in early childhood education, emerging from Agency past work and the information from the literature review.
- Organisation of a number of study visits (5-6) in the selected sites for case studies analysis with the participation of country experts, PAG members and



Agency staff to see in practice how early childhood programmes work, visit pre-school settings, discuss with key personnel and local stakeholders and explore in-depth the project themes.

- The conceptual framework based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model will be used to analyse the information provided by the country questionnaires and the case studies, taking into account the three levels of the model (micro- meso- macro: i.e. family and child level, classroom and school level, policy level). This theoretical model will be employed as a practical tool to study the processes that support the implementation of inclusion for pupils at early childhood education level. The analysis of the information will lead to the formulation of a number of conclusions and recommendations addressed to policy makers. The project will also contribute to the development of indicators to monitor quality in inclusive early childhood education.
- Analysis of the information provided in the case studies and development of a practical tool/guide, aimed at pre-schools, on how to make quality inclusion work at early childhood education level, with provision of practical advice on key issues (access and procedure, workforce, curriculum/content, evaluation and monitoring, governance and funding).
- The final project meeting will be held in 2017 to explore in detail the project themes, finalise the project outcomes, conclusions and recommendations and contribute to the debate on improving the quality of early childhood education in Europe.

Evaluation

In order to assess the impact of the project activities in participating countries, an on-going evaluation of the project activities will be conducted, by the project team.

Different feedback forms will be used to assess the usefulness, quality and efficiency of project meetings, project materials, methodology of working, etc. Analysis of the evaluation/feedback information provided will be used to improve the project activities in terms of organisation and content issues.

The PAG will continuously monitor the suitability and applicability of project activities and outcomes. This could be a fixed item on the PAG agenda. Different PAG members could have a different focus within the project to not only evaluate but to ensure quality of project outcomes



Dissemination strategy (2015-2017)

The dissemination strategy will cover four phases to keep information flowing over the three year period.

Phase 1: Dissemination of actual project aims – news items, maybe an article for the Director’s blog with input from the external experts, an overview flyer for the experts to disseminate on a national level. Building of a project website.

Phase 2: Dissemination of project meetings and case studies, publication of literature and policy reviews.

Phase 3: Publication of country reports

Phase 4: Publication of final results, summary flyer or information for national dissemination

Project outputs will include:

- A literature and policy review providing the conceptual framework for the project and including a review of international and European research literature and policy papers on early childhood education.
- Country reports providing information on policy and practice in relation to early childhood education for pupils with SEN/disabilities and/or at risk at national level.
- A synthesis report on ‘the state of the art’ in Europe in relation to policy and practice in early childhood education for pupils with SEN/disabilities and/or at risk. This report will be based on information provided in the country reports.
- Description of a number of country examples of good practice in early childhood education.
- Detailed reports of the selected case study sites, including analysis of the key project themes investigated.
- The project synthesis report will draw evidence from all project activities. The key issues/factors facilitating quality inclusion in early childhood education will be analysed and translated into recommendations designed to meet the needs of policymakers.
- A practical tool/guide, aimed at pre-schools, on how to make quality inclusion work at early childhood education level, with provision of practical advice on key issues (access and procedure, workforce, curriculum/content, evaluation and monitoring, governance and funding).