

Governing quality early childhood education and care in a global crisis: First lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic ^[1]

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Source: Network of Experts working on the Social dimension of Education and Training (NESET)

Format: Report

Publication Date: 14 Jul 2021

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[Access summary \[FR\]](#) ^[5]

Excerpted from executive summary

This report explores the different ways in which European Union (EU) Member States (MS) have attempted to ensure high-quality ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) for children and families in the era of COVID-19. The rationale for the report builds on the Conclusions of the European Council concerning the fight against COVID-19 in education and training, which stipulate that Member States should share information and best practices and continue exchanging information about possible ways to adapt to this new situation at the level of education and training (Council of the European Union, 2020).

All children, and particularly those who are most societally disadvantaged, risk being among the biggest victims of the pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020; Muroga et al, 2020) due to both the socio-economic impact of the crisis on their families, and the consequences of the measures taken to contain the virus, which affect their learning and wellbeing (United Nations, 2020). By interconnecting its functions – educational (investing in children’s wellbeing, learning, participation); social (supporting families in the upbringing of their children); and economic (helping parents in combining work and household responsibilities) – ECEC can play a key role in supporting all children and families to face the crisis, and especially those at risk of social exclusion. ECEC can greatly contribute to breaking the cycles of poverty and discrimination, as already stated in many EU documents (European Commission, 2013; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2018; European Commission, 2021a; 2021b). The COVID-19 situation may, therefore, represent an opportunity for the ECEC sector to revisit its identity and evaluate the lessons learned, both in terms of its daily practice after the emergency, and as a possible preparation for future crises.

The central aim of this study is to examine what measures have been taken by selected EU member states – two countries (Sweden and Croatia), as well as three regions (Flanders in Belgium, Berlin in Germany and Emilia-Romagna in Italy) – to deal with the COVID-19 crisis during the first year of the pandemic (March-December 2020), in order to ensure quality ECEC for children and families. It is expected that this analysis of coping strategies and lessons learned will be relevant to other EU Member States and regions.

The European Quality Framework (EQF) on ECEC (Council of the European Union, 2019) has been used as a lens with which to explore aspects including accessibility, workforce, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, finance and governance. After an introductory first chapter, Chapter 2 analyses the effects of the pandemic on children and families, to explore what role ECEC can play in addressing their needs in times of crisis. Chapter 3 focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on the societal functions of ECEC. Chapter 4 explores in greater depth the various aspects of quality that may have been affected during this crisis, while Chapter 5 reports on the relevant lessons learned and policy guidelines.

The data analysed show that ECEC played a crucial role in countering the negative effects of the pandemic on children, families and communities. However, compared with other levels of education, ECEC appears to have been one of the sectors most vulnerable¹ to the policy decisions taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in line with the findings of other research (Gromada, Richardson and Rees, 2020). This highlights the need to raise the profile of ECEC within the field of education/care sector policies. In addition, the importance of ECEC must be recognised as part of emergency response strategies, in order to urgently accelerate efforts to address gaps in access, as underlined in the last Unicef/Innocenti Working Paper (Muroga et al., 2020).

Region: Europe ^[6]

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- [3] <https://nesetweb.eu/en/resources/library/governing-quality-early-childhood-education-and-care-in-a-global-crisis-first-lessons-learned-from-the-covid-19-pandemic/>
- [4] https://nesetweb.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/NESET_AR1-2021_exec_summary_EN.pdf
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- [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/accessibility>
- [8] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/workforce>
- [9] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9090>
- [10] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding>