

Early childhood education research in Europe: Contexts, policies, and ideas ^[1]

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Introduction

In 2002 the European Council set for the first time targets for the provision of childcare across the European Union, aiming to capture at least 90% of children between the age of 3 and mandatory school age. The emphasis in the 2002 so called “Barcelona targets” was primarily on childcare as a policy mechanism that would increase women’s participation in the labour market. Almost twenty years later, the policy discourse around early childhood education (ECE) has changed dramatically. In the latest Council Recommendation of the EU, ECE is discussed as a fundamental part of the European Pillar of Social Rights, and links high-quality and inclusive early education to children’s rights, acknowledging its role in “laying the foundations for learning at school and throughout life” (Council of the EU, 2019). ECE is seen to benefit all children, with particular references to its impact on children from disadvantaged areas, and children who experience inter-generational cycles of poverty and discrimination. Such policy discourses are now quite common, and reflect (and are often driven by) research debates on the significance of Early Childhood Education. All countries in the EU and increasingly many countries globally have adopted such policy positions, made investments in early childhood, increased access, and have often introduced (or revised) curricula and teacher education for the sector (OECD, 2015).

But, the reality for many children does not reflect the high ambitions of the political discourse. In many countries of the world, access to ECE is still problematic, the quality of the ECE provision is poor, and there are large discrepancies between regions of different levels of development (UNESCO, 2019). Even though these problems are more pronounced in countries beyond Europe, they are certainly also present within the European landscape of early childhood education. In his keynote address to the 2019 EECERA conference, Jan Peeters put the question of “good quality in ECEC” at the centre of his presentation, and made direct connections between policies around “quality and effectiveness”, “equality” and children’s outcomes. Drawing on the pedagogy of hope of Paolo Freire, he called for a more critical approach to the definition of purposes in early education, as well as to who participates in such definitions. Far too many children, within Europe still live in conditions of poverty, face discrimination, and many still have poor access to quality early childhood with highly qualified competent staff (Peeters, 2019). But, even for children who do not face such difficult conditions, the experiences of early childhood education may be defined by an uncertain focus of ECE systems in transition from “care” to “education”, and under constant reform of their curricula and staff development.

In recognition that ECE is a very diverse research field where various methodologies, theoretical and cultural approaches shape the field, it is urgent to keep an open dialogue between practice in the early childhood community, policy and research. This Early childhood education research in different European contexts aims to contribute to this goal and asks the question how do policies as well as cultural and social positions affect early childhood education in the contexts of different countries? It brings together scholars from across Europe who present research in early childhood education in Bulgaria, Germany, Greece and Sweden, and examine ECE from within different education systems and ideological positions towards early childhood. The articles of the special issue contribute to our evolving understanding of these debates across different parts of Europe, and can be read through such prism. They explore social and policy contexts of early childhood in different countries, the rationales and practices that define the parameters of practice for preschools, and how these are experienced by participants who engage in them. We highlight here two core issues that are important in the contributions, and we hope illuminate significant dimensions for further discussion on the future of ECE in Europe.

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