

# Early childhood education and care: a new direction for European policy cooperation

**Lifelong learning has been on the European policy agenda for at least 15 years. Essentially about the importance of learning from cradle to grave, it has too often been seen as another term for adult education, with the 'cradle' phase a missing link, says Adam Pokorny of the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture**

## The first stage of lifelong learning

Education and training play a crucial role in the European Union's strategic Europe 2020 agenda, and early childhood education and care (ECEC) can contribute a great deal to reaching crucial headline targets such as reducing the rate of early school leaving and alleviating poverty. More and more, research and practice shows

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education and care in the early years can bring long-lasting benefits for later learning, personal development, social integration, and later employability. It can also help avoid later remedial actions, which can be much more expensive and not always successful.

It is not surprising this field is getting more political attention. In 2006 Ministers were very interested in the version of the Heckman

curve published by the Commission, showing ECEC bringing the highest rates of return on educational investment and the highest benefits for disadvantaged families. In 2008 and 2009, Ministers asked the Commission to launch policy cooperation work in this field.

The Commission's Communication in February 2011 is the first part of our response. It sets out, in the Commission's view, the key issues in ECEC where European cooperation could add value.<sup>1</sup> The Communication builds on work such as that of OECD and UNICEF, and the 40 ECEC quality targets produced by the European Childcare Network, and its conclusions are supported by findings from the EU study *Working for Inclusion: the role of the early years workforce in addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion*.<sup>2</sup> It finally fills the gap in the lifelong learning continuum.

## Access without quality is of little merit

The issue of access to childcare has been discussed at European level since the creation of the Barcelona targets in 2002, when the Barcelona European Council established that by 2010 Member States should supply full-day places in formal childcare arrangements to at least 90% of children aged between 3 years and compulsory school age, and to at least 33% of children under 3 years.

The main idea of the targets, alongside other measures concerning parental leave policies, flexible workplace arrangements, and sharing family obligations between men and women, was to help parents with young children – particularly women – reconcile work and family life. Although they triggered important measures in Member States to create more childcare places, progress has been uneven. Moreover, it is increasingly clear that access without quality is of little merit. This was a key message to emerge from a research symposium organised by the Commission in 2008. More childcare places are not enough: services have to be high quality, and go beyond labour market considerations to consider children's and their families' wellbeing both in the present and the future.

Quality can be defined in many ways, but a strong consensus is emerging that staffing, curriculum and the content of programmes are central components, along with the governance of systems. The Communication considers these issues and proposes Member States cooperate to explore good practice, and to get ideas and inspiration on how to improve their systems in terms of accessibility and quality. It argues for a child-centred approach to ECEC that addresses holistically the entire spectrum of children's needs – emotional, cognitive, social and physical. To this end it stresses the need for integration of care and education in all types of ECEC services.

## Universal access

Because high quality ECEC brings major benefits to all children, it is imperative to strive to make it accessible to all. While recognising the major role of the family in the early years of a child's life, the Communication argues it is also crucial to have ECEC services that are close by, affordable and available. This is particularly important for those with disadvantaged backgrounds, who would benefit most from ECEC, as the latest PISA data shows, but who are often least likely to take part. A recent study by the EU's Eurydice Network gives a comprehensive overview of European ECEC systems as a lever for tackling social and cultural inequalities.<sup>3</sup>

It is striking that countries performing better in PISA tables tend to be those with the most accessible ECEC systems. Those 15-year-olds who had attended preschool were on average a year ahead of those who had not.

Universally available high quality services also contribute to closing the disadvantage gap in social terms. They can help migrant children in their cognitive and linguistic



development of children with special needs to integrate into mainstream education.

However, ECEC services cannot compensate completely for family poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage. Children's environments need to be improved, in the first place by offering more support to parents as well as by linking ECEC to other policy areas such as employment, health and housing.

### Quality curriculum

It is true the first years are the most formative in children's lives, and the Communication highlights the importance of providing the right kind of stimulation, education and care in this period. Early years learning must go way beyond developing the cognitive skills, with at least equal emphasis on non-cognitive elements such as perseverance, motivation and ability to interact with others, which are essential for all future learning and social engagement. Learning must happen in an age-appropriate way with a lot of emphasis on play as an essential and engaging way of learning, particularly at a young age.

### Staff quality

The range of tasks performed by ECEC staff is arguably greater than those of teachers in later educational phases. Moreover, the net effect of significant migration

flows affecting many Member States in recent years, and increasingly heterogeneous societies, is that ECEC staff meet the challenge of interacting with children from more diverse backgrounds. The Communication argues for accelerating the process of professionalising the entire staff, including higher salaries, better working conditions and strengthened initial education and continuing professional development. It also urges the development of policies to attract, educate and retain suitably qualified staff and to attract more men into the profession. As a major input to policy development a European Commission study on staff competence requirements has been undertaken across the EU by a consortium led by the Universities of East London and Ghent.<sup>4</sup>

### Quality governance

The Communication argues that good ECEC systems need to be based on a coherent vision of the early years, which cuts across sectoral boundaries and involves a broad range of stakeholders including, centrally, parents and families. Such an approach allows a better response to local needs as well as a clearer definition of roles and responsibilities at central and local level. It also helps facilitate transitions between the family and ECEC services, as well as between ECEC services and the next stage of education. Finally it underpins effective quality assurance mechanisms.

### What the EU will do

The Council of Ministers adopted the Communication's Conclusions on ECEC in May,<sup>5</sup> setting out Ministers' views of the issues raised and the priorities for future work on policy exchange. These explicitly recognise the need for increased collaboration nationally, regionally and locally, within and among Member States; a higher level of investment; and further European research and data collection to strengthen policymaking and programme delivery. Later this year the Commission will start work through the Open Method of Coordination, helping Member States identify, analyse and exchange good ECEC policies and practices. The EU will also support Member States through spending programmes such as the Lifelong Learning Programme, the 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme for Research and Development, and the Structural Funds.

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