Inclusive Early Childhood Education

New Insights and Tools – Contributions from a European Study

INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Full version
ECE:	Early Childhood Education, refers to educational programmes for children from 3 years to around 6–7 years
ECEC/ECCE:	Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) or Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE is used in UNESCO documents) are terms usually applied to provisions related to children from birth to 3 years
ECI:	Early Childhood Intervention
ET 2020:	Education and Training 2020 strategic framework
EU:	European Union
IECE:	Inclusive Early Childhood Education (the project title)
JRC:	Joint Research Centre
OECD:	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UN:	United Nations
UNESCO:	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF:	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO:	World Health Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Quality in early childhood education is a prominent concern for policy-makers, and has recently become a priority concern for many international and European organisations. These include the OECD, UNESCO, UNICEF, the European Commission, Eurydice and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, among others.

Over the past three years (2015–2017), the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) has examined the latest policy documents and relevant research in this field. This has been a springboard for exploring the main characteristics of quality inclusive early childhood education (IECE) for all children from three years of age to the start of primary education.

The project data from across Europe has provided an opportunity to closely examine how, within the inclusion perspective, early childhood education provisions are addressing the quality principles set out by the European Commission and the OECD.

Sixty-four inclusive early childhood education experts from across Europe contributed to the project. They participated in data collection and analysis through descriptions of example provisions, as well as observations and discussions during field work and case study visits.

This report first sets out the **main policy and practice developments towards inclusive early childhood education**, with particular reference to European policy issues (Chapters 2–3).

It then presents the **project's three new contributions towards improving quality inclusive early childhood education** (Chapters 4–6). These are:

1. A **clear rationale for and an analysis of the implications of adopting an inclusive vision and goals** as the main standards of inclusive early childhood policy and provision. The project found that high-quality services that benefited all children were guided by an inclusive vision and worked towards inclusive goals. As their primary outcome, they sought to ensure each child's belongingness, engagement and learning. This reflects the changes in early childhood intervention in recent

decades. The focus has shifted from 'working with the child' towards a holistic approach that creates an inclusive environment for all children's engagement and learning. The report thus refers to quality early childhood education (ECE) as 'inclusive early childhood education' (IECE). It only uses the terms 'early childhood education' (ECE) or 'early childhood education and care' (ECEC) when referring to the literature.

2. A **new Self-Reflection Tool** for improving inclusive early childhood education settings. This enables practitioners to review their service's quality in terms of the inclusiveness of the physical, social and other learning environments it offers to children and families. The tool has been validated by project experts and additional ecological studies. It is ready for use by practitioners in inclusive early childhood education settings in different education systems and countries across Europe and beyond.

3. A **new Ecosystem Model of Inclusive Early Childhood Education** for policy-makers and other stakeholders wishing to collaborate towards effective action in this field. This model can support policy-makers and practitioners to collaborate in planning, reviewing and improving quality IECE services. The model is founded on the project data. It is inspired by three major frameworks for quality IECE, namely:

   (1) The structure-process-outcome framework used by European and international policy-makers (European Commission, 2014; OECD, 2015; European Agency, 2009)

   (2) The ecological systems framework (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006)

   (3) The inclusive education perspective (European Agency, 2015).

   It incorporates all the principles of the EU and OECD frameworks for quality early childhood education. However, it enhances their applicability by locating them at different ecological levels (inclusive early childhood education setting, home/community and regional/national levels).

Finally, the report gives an account of the **lessons learned during the three-year project and the resulting recommendations** (Chapter 7). These are presented within the framework of the new Ecosystem Model of IECE. They are mainly directed at policy-makers, but they also point to the implications for practitioners. Indeed, they are formulated in terms of how policy-makers can support practitioners to ensure quality provisions.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is wide international agreement that early childhood is a crucial period of learning and development. It prepares children for lifelong learning and participation in society (European Commission, 2011; 2014; OECD, 2015). More recently, the Council of the European Union invited Member States to:

… encourage high-quality early childhood education and care as an important early measure, including supporting measures for children with special needs, taking into account, where appropriate, the Key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care. Evidence shows that high-quality early childhood education and care stands out as a policy measure that can reduce inequalities throughout one's life-long learning path (2017, p. 6).

Reviews of relevant research show that participation in pre-primary programmes has a major positive effect on children's intellectual (Pianta et al., 2009), social and emotional development (Barnett, 2011). Moreover, the potential benefits of high-quality ECE 'are particularly significant for children from disadvantaged and/or marginalised groups' (European Commission, 2014, p. 9). Furthermore, such children benefit most from ECE 'when it is provided in contexts with a social mix' (ibid., p. 14).

In addition, an extensive cost-benefit analysis examined the impact of a quality programme for 0–5-year-olds from disadvantaged families in the United States. It reported a 13% per child, per year return on investment. This was through better outcomes in education, health, social behaviour (less crime) and employment, leading to reduced public costs down the line and enhanced workforce competitiveness (García et al., 2016).

Consequently, over the past several years, many international and European organisations (OECD, UNESCO, UNICEF, European Commission and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, among others) have made the provision of quality ECEC one of their priority concerns. For instance, the OECD's reports and publications (2001; 2006; 2011; 2015) have greatly contributed to helping countries develop efficient and effective

policies in education and learning during early childhood. The UN Sustainable Development Goals reflect the international prioritisation of investment in ECEC:

By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education (UN, 2015, Goal 4.2).

Closer to this project's work, the Thematic Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care – which the European Commission established in 2012 – developed a *Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care*. This aimed to 'identify and review key policy actions which have led to improvements in ECEC quality and access' (European Commission, 2014, p. 4). These are:

- Access to quality ECE for all children
- Workforce quality
- Quality curriculum/content
- Evaluation and monitoring
- Governance and funding.

1.1 Agency project on Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE)

Given the above-mentioned international concerns, the Agency undertook a three-year project (2015–2017). It aimed to identify, analyse and subsequently promote the main characteristics of quality IECE for all children from three years of age to the start of primary education.

The project focused on pre-primary education for children from three years of age to the start of compulsory education. Hence it was mainly concerned with IECE settings, rather than childcare. It provided an opportunity to examine more closely how, within an inclusive perspective, IECE provisions across Europe are addressing the quality principles that the European Commission and OECD identified.

Sixty-four IECE country experts from across Europe contributed to the project. They participated in data collection and analysis, as well as observations and discussions during the case study visits and other project meetings.

The project was grounded in:

- the relevant research and policy literature;
- the data collected through observations of example IECE settings in several countries and descriptions of examples from practitioners across Europe;
- questionnaires on national developments in IECE in all Agency member countries.

All data analysis underwent regular feedback through meetings and emails from all project participants and stakeholders during the three years.

The main project activities consisted of:

- A literature and policy review, which provides the project's conceptual framework and includes a review of international and European research literature and policy papers on IECE (European Agency, 2017a)

- The collection and qualitative analysis of 32 examples of IECE settings from 28 Agency member countries (European Agency, 2016a; please also refer to individual descriptions on www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/inclusive-early-childhood-education/country-focus)

- Detailed individual site visits to eight of the examples of IECE settings in eight different countries (please refer to reports on www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/inclusive-early-childhood-education/casestudyvisits)

- Individual country questionnaire responses providing information on policy and practice in IECE for all children at national level in the Agency member countries (please refer to accounts on www.european-agency.org/inclusive-early-childhood-education/country-questionnaires)

- Developing a Self-Reflection Tool for improving IECE settings. This was constructed through stakeholders' participation in each of the eight visits to IECE examples and through additional ecological validation studies in three different countries (European Agency, 2017b).

All these project outcomes are available on the IECE project web area: www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/inclusive-early-childhood-education

1.2 Report structure

This report brings together the main findings from all the above-mentioned activities. It focuses on the project's three new contributions to policy-making, research and practice in IECE.

It first sets out the main policy and practice developments towards IECE. It particularly refers to European policy issues in the search for quality and inclusive provision (Chapters 2–3).

The following three chapters (4–6), present an account of each of the project's three contributions towards improving quality IECE. These are:

- The rationale for and implications of adopting an inclusive vision and goals as the main standards of IECE policy and provision

- The development and use by practitioners of a Self-Reflection Tool for improving IECE settings

- Developing a new Ecosystem Model of IECE.

These chapters are followed by an account of the lessons learned about IECE during the project and the resulting new recommendations for policy-makers and stakeholders in IECE.

2. FRAMEWORKS FOR QUALITY IECE

This chapter first describes the importance of ensuring **quality IECE** provision and the three major theoretical frameworks for addressing quality issues. It then describes, from an inclusive perspective, the key principles for improving the quality of early childhood education that the European Commission's Working Group published recently (European Commission, 2014).

2.1 Quality issues in IECE

Quality in ECE is a prominent concern for policy-makers for ECE. This is because a growing number of European and international studies have shown that the positive benefits of ECE directly relate to and depend upon 'quality' issues and aspects (for example, please refer to European Commission, 2014). At the same time, there are no agreed definitions of what constitutes quality in ECE. Nor is there agreement regarding which elements of ECE have the greatest bearing on positive outcomes for children (European Commission, 2014; Pianta et al., 2009). In addition, there is a general lack of quality indicators related to inclusion in ECE.

There are cultural and societal differences in the perspectives on quality in ECE. Nevertheless, the dimensions of high quality probably share enough features to assert that the general dimensions of high quality are universal (Guralnick, 2011; Janus and Brinkman, 2010; Sheridan et al., 2009; Simeonsson et al., 2012).

ECE programme evaluations and quality indicators tend to focus on general structural elements: funding, standards, safety, staff-child ratios, enrolment rate, indoor/outdoor space, staff qualification levels, and so on. They also focus on general process elements, like the pedagogical approach and parental involvement, rather than on outcomes such as children's participation, well-being, functioning and everyday life learning in pre-school (e.g. European Commission, 2014; OECD, 2015). Evaluations often seem to capture the

availability, accessibility and affordability of ECE, measured by quantitative methods. Comparative studies also tend to focus on a macro perspective (e.g. OECD, 2013; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014).

Research does show that process factors close to children's everyday life in ECE have the greatest impact on the quality of children's experience and outcomes. Such factors include relationships, interaction between children and adults in pre-school, and between the children, play, forms of learning and participation. However, the standards guiding practitioners in ECE do not emphasise these processes to the same extent (Pianta et al., 2009).

Moreover, there is still too little research that explores how to create and evaluate **inclusive** ECE provisions that enable all children – including those vulnerable to exclusion – to actively participate and learn:

The challenge for the next decade is to collect evidence for meaningful and efficient participation interventions that improve participation both in terms of being there and engagement when there (Imms and Granlund, 2014, p. 292).

2.2 Three conceptual frameworks for improving ECE quality

This project used three theoretical frameworks. Each of them has been applied separately to improving ECE quality in policy, research and practice.

A common way of looking at quality features is to use structural, process and outcome indicators. **Structural** indicators focus on conditions in the ECE setting and in the surrounding community, region and country that influence the quality of children's experiences (e.g. ECE staff's qualification levels) and laws that regulate ECE provision. **Process** indicators represent the interactions between children and the staff and peers and the ECE setting's physical environment. **Outcome** indicators reflect the impact that the structures and processes have on the children's well-being, engagement and learning (European Commission, 2014; Pianta et al., 2009; European Agency, 2009).

This project has also used the ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006; Odom et al., 2004) to study the quality features in IECE. This considers the complex evolving influences on children, arising from their interactions and interrelations with all the surrounding systems in the school/home, community and region/country – termed micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems – in which they function and grow. However, many studies within this framework tend to limit the focus of the ecological influence to the micro-system around the child – represented by the mother/parents/family and the early childhood education setting. The influence of the wider systems in the community and region or country policy has been considered to a lesser degree (Fenech, 2011; Odom et al., 2004), has been applied to one curriculum area only (Chau-Ying Leu, 2008), or applied to 'special education' provision only (Hebbeler et al., 2012).

The third framework is that of inclusive education. The Agency believes that quality provision must be inclusive. Its 'ultimate vision for inclusive education systems' is to:

… ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers (European Agency, 2015, p. 1).

The OECD (2017) and the European Commission (Flisi et al., 2016) have recently endeavoured to develop key comparable international indicators for quality ECEC. The OECD highlights the need for comprehensive and comparable international information to assist in improving ECEC services and systems in the countries. The indicators are based on resources that are available in the ECEC system. They focus on structural factors, such as access and governance, equity, financing, curriculum, the teaching workforce and parental engagement. Similar results can be found in a Joint Research Centre (JRC) technical report from the European Commission (Flisi et al., 2016), which compares different methods to account for indicators. Both the OECD and the JRC technical report refer to 'participation' in ECEC, but it is an administrative term related to intensity or duration, i.e. 'being there'. There is no reference to 'being engaged while being there'.

The IECE project recognises the importance of the structural indicators, particularly for enhancing learner enrolment. However, the project takes note of research that indicates that it is the 'process' quality of the children's direct experience in the provision that has a major influence on the quality of their learning and development (Pianta et al., 2009). Moreover, the existing key indicators make scant reference to the challenge of ensuring all children's attendance, engagement and learning by removing all barriers – of which affordability is just one.

That said, in the United States, the National Early Childhood Inclusion Institute (no date) – one of the premier advocates for and providers of support for care, intervention and education of young children with special needs in inclusive settings – seems to be more focused on children with disabilities and vulnerable children in inclusive settings. A comprehensive system of inclusion indicators is used related to legislation about inclusion. However, it is difficult to compare this system to the European perspective, where the key focus of inclusion is inclusive settings for all children.

This project regards quality ECE as **inclusive** ECE (**IECE**). It uses the term 'IECE' for its findings and recommendations, while continuing to use 'ECE' or 'ECEC' when referring to the relevant literature. Furthermore, the project developed a single IECE model inspired by all three above-mentioned frameworks. This will enable more collaboration and effectiveness among policy-makers, researchers and practitioners in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating quality IECE.

2.3 EU key principles for improving ECE quality from an inclusive perspective

As its starting point, the project used a review, from an inclusive perspective, of the European Commission's proposed *Quality Framework for ECEC* (2014). It noted the five key action areas for improving quality in ECE. It also observed the proposal's emphasis on three 'transversal issues [that] are fundamental to the development and maintenance of high quality ECEC' (European Commission, 2014, p. 7). These are also very important for ensuring IECE:

- There should be a holistic approach based on an appreciation of each child as a *unique … curious, capable and intelligent individual. … a co-creator of knowledge who needs and wants interaction with other children and adults. … ECEC services need to be child-centred, acknowledge children's views and actively involve children in everyday decisions in the ECEC setting* (ibid., p. 7).

- Services should seek close partnership with the family, which is 'the first and most important place for children to … develop' and 'should be fully involved in all aspects of education and care for their child'. ECE services can 'complement the family and offer support as well as additional opportunities to parents and children' (ibid., p. 8).

- Quality cannot be left to chance. There must be quality standards while also allowing for diversity of provision: 'A balance needs to be found between defining certain common objectives, applying them to all services, and supporting diversity between individual services' (ibid.).

The *Quality Framework for ECEC* lists five key action areas towards improving ECE quality: access to quality ECE for all children; workforce quality; quality curriculum/content; evaluation and monitoring; governance and funding. Here, these key areas are briefly summarised from the point of view of quality **inclusive** provisions:

- Access to quality ECE for all children. From the project's perspective, this refers to facilitating access for all children in the community, particularly the most vulnerable. These may include children with disabilities and special educational needs, immigrants, newcomers and other at-risk children and their families.

- Workforce quality. This calls for appropriately trained staff with access to continuous training and adequate working conditions. It also calls for appropriate leadership and support staff inside and outside the pre-school. Adequate resources, positive parental collaboration and inter-disciplinary and inter-agency collaboration are also necessary.

- Quality curriculum/content. This underlines the need for holistic and flexible curricula and pedagogy that are child-centred and promote child well-being and learning needs. This includes those which relate to social, emotional, physical, linguistic and cognitive development. They meaningfully and actively engage children in a safe but open and stimulating environment.

- Evaluation and monitoring. This refers both to how children's development and learning are monitored, and to evaluating the ECE provision's effectiveness in meeting established quality standards that ensure a quality learning environment for all children.

- Governance and funding. This considers how public funding and leadership models are used accountably to ensure that a quality ECE service is available to all children. The service must be managed with a constant focus on enabling each child's holistic growth and learning.

These key areas for improving quality IECE formed the basis for designing a questionnaire sent to all Agency member country representatives. The country responses (which are published online: www.european-agency.org/inclusive-early-childhood-education/country-questionnaires) describe how each country is trying to address the above-mentioned structures, processes and outcomes from a regional and national policy perspective. The project country experts, together with the Agency country representatives, completed these questionnaires. The responses illustrate each country's efforts and achievements regarding national regulation and opportunities for access to IECE, workforce quality, curriculum quality, monitoring and evaluation, and governance and funding for quality IECE.

This macro or national level is most useful when reviewing individual countries' national policies and practices. It often reflects data submitted to Eurydice and processed in the resulting comparative European studies (e.g. European Commission, 2016). The present report highlights the project's findings about these same key areas for improving IECE from data arising from the IECE settings across Europe. The data was supplied by the IECE practitioners themselves or observed during site visits.

3. EUROPEAN POLICY AND PRACTICE DEVELOPMENTS TOWARDS IECE

In order to better appreciate current concerns about IECE, it is useful to first consider important developments in policy-making and practice towards IECE in Europe in recent decades.

3.1 From supporting women's employability, to ensuring optimal child development

Originally, and according to the *Council recommendation on child care* (Council of the European Communities, 1992), EU policies for the provision of ECE were associated with policies to support employability and equity. In the first place, ECE was promoted so that women could have equal access to jobs. Secondly, ECE was seen as the most appropriate way of preventing school failure, dropout and unemployment. Thirdly, ECE was considered a way to reduce disadvantage and social exclusion, since it provided children with quality, equitable educational opportunities.

Over the past decade, the focus of European policies has shifted. In the past, they promoted increased pre-primary places, so that more parents could access the labour market. Now, they focus on the positive effects on children's development by recognising ECE as the basis for lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and employability (Council of the European Union, 2011).

At the same time, there is increased attention on the fact that many European countries still lack access to quality IECE for children vulnerable to exclusion (UNESCO and Council of Europe, 2014). This vulnerability may be due to social reasons, economic reasons or disability. In this respect, ET 2020 (Council of the European Union, 2009) encourages Member States to develop more measures that promote inclusion and personalised

learning in education. Such promotion would take place through appropriate supports and by identifying children's special needs as early as possible.

3.2 From rehabilitation work with the child, to creating holistic inclusive environments

It has long been understood that children with disabilities and other children vulnerable to exclusion should have their needs identified and addressed as early as possible. However, important changes have occurred in how those children's needs are addressed. Initially, the focus was on **working directly with the child**, mainly in a rehabilitative way. However, in research and practice the focus changed during the second half of the 20ᵗʰ century to **include the family** in ECI (for example, please refer to De Moor et al., 1993; Meisels and Shonkoff, 1990). This has been described as the first and second generation of ECI (Guralnick, 1997).

Today, the third generation of research and practice reflects a shift to a **holistic approach focusing on the child, the family and the child's everyday environments**. For more and more children in Europe and elsewhere, pre-primary school (pre-school) constitutes a large part of the everyday life environment, where support is provided in IECE settings.

The Agency identified this shift and, indeed, undertook two projects on Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) (2004; 2010). The first Agency project highlighted an ECI model in which the health, education and social sectors are directly involved (European Agency, 2005). It highlights the shift from intervention mainly focused on the child, to an additional focus on improving factors in the child's everyday life, i.e. the family, health and educational environments.

This has now been followed by a greater focus on inclusive educational provisions. ECI is seen as consisting of a combination of services for young children and their families. These aim to support the child's development and learning, strengthen the family's own competences and promote the social inclusion of the family and the child. Within this model, the main conclusions of the second Agency project were on the importance of inclusive early childhood education provision:

Access to universally available, high-quality and inclusive ECE services is the first step of a long-term process towards inclusive education and equal opportunities for all in an inclusive society (European Agency, 2010, p. 37).

3.3 IECE provision remains a major policy and practice challenge

The Agency's 2010 recommendation for IECE is currently the main challenge for policy-makers and practitioners. The UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 1990) and *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UN, 2006) emphasise that children

vulnerable to exclusion, including children with disabilities or special educational needs, have the same rights as all other children.

However, as the recent publication by the WHO and UNICEF (2012) observes, in many countries, general programmes and services aimed at promoting children's development ignore these children. This is despite such children being more vulnerable to problems in their development. These children do not get the necessary support regarding their educational development and in accordance with their rights. These children and their families face barriers that hinder their opportunities. Consequently, if these children do not receive the necessary support and appropriate protection during their first years of life, it endangers their chances of achieving integral development.

There is evidence of the importance of IECE provision to ensure equity and social justice. Nevertheless, a lower proportion of children with disabilities and from disadvantaged backgrounds actually access ECE services. A recent retrospective Eurydice report on ECE attendance in Europe found lower rates of attendance among disadvantaged children. Among current 15-year-olds, there was a 12% difference in ECE attendance rates between those from a disadvantaged background and those from a higher socio-economic background (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014, p. 73).

The situation does not seem to have improved. A recent study on Roma children in Europe reported that 'less than 50% of Roma children access ECCE services across Europe before the age of 4 or 5 years' (UNESCO and Council of Europe, 2014, p. 15). Statistics on ECE access among children with a disability are hard to find. However, the *Early Childhood Development and Disability* discussion paper (WHO and UNICEF, 2012) estimated that one third of all primary-aged children who are not in school are children with disabilities.

Therefore, all countries must develop active policies. These policies should promote the participation of children vulnerable to exclusion in community environments and, particularly, in quality IECE as a source of healthy development from a cognitive, emotional, social and lifelong perspective. Moreover, active policies are needed to avoid the emergence of further problems that may hinder children's later learning during their school years and throughout their lives.

The IECE project has addressed this challenge. It focused on examples of successful IECE practice in order to identify and describe ways of implementing and improving IECE. As the Introduction indicates, it started with a review of the research and documents on policy-making and practice for IECE. It then collected qualitative data on cross-European practice in IECE, both through descriptions from European practitioners and through visits to eight examples in different countries.

The present report is intended for policy- and decision-makers and stakeholders in IECE. The recommended actions complement the European Commission's (2014) and OECD's (2015) frameworks for quality principles in ECE. The project findings are constructed around the structures, processes and outcomes that the above-mentioned international policy documents raise. At the same time, the ecological systems approach and the project's particular focus on inclusion have also influenced the findings.

The next chapters describe the three main contributions arising from the collective analysis of all the data available to the project towards policy-making and practice for developing and improving IECE:

1. First of all, the project found that the high-quality services that benefited all children were guided by an inclusive vision. As their primary outcome, they sought to ensure each child's belongingness, engagement and learning.

2. The IECE project's second new contribution is a **Self-Reflection Tool**. It can support practitioners to review their service's quality in terms of the inclusiveness of the physical, social and other learning environments it offers to children and families.

3. The project's third new contribution is an **Ecosystem Model of Inclusive Early Childhood Education**. This is founded on the project data. Three major frameworks for quality IECE have inspired it, namely the structure-process-outcome framework, the ecological systems framework and the inclusive education perspective. It can support policy-makers and practitioners to collaborate in planning, reviewing and improving quality IECE services.

The next chapters explain and link these findings to the literature on IECE.

4. ENABLING ALL CHILDREN TO PARTICIPATE ACTIVELY IN IECE

This chapter presents the IECE project's first contribution, namely the need to focus on children's active participation as the main inclusive outcome of IECE.

4.1 Accessing IECE

Participation, often also termed 'engagement' as used in this document, entails two processes: '**Attendance**: defined as "being there" and measured as frequency of attending, and/or the range or diversity of activities in which an individual takes part' and '**Involvement**: the experience of participation while attending, including elements of **motivation**, **persistence**, **social connection**, and **affect**' (Imms et al., 2016, p. 36, emphasis added).

The analysis of the project data strongly suggests that, from an inclusion perspective, the most important outcome of quality provision is to enable all children to participate actively in IECE. In this way, all children – including those vulnerable to exclusion – are equally valued, supported and enabled to progress along with their peers.

For this to occur, the first obvious requirement is that each child is enabled to attend IECE regularly in the setting and during the daily social and learning activities (to 'be there'). This is greatly influenced by national and regional statutory provisions for accessible IECE. These include entitlement to and availability of affordable (and for certain categories, free) IECE places.

The project found that universal attendance is only possible if the local setting pro-actively reaches out to all parents in the community. The setting must offer flexible arrangements to meet the various needs of every child and family. The qualitative analysis of 32 examples of IECE settings (European Agency, 2016a) showed the lengths to which settings went to

secure attendance in the setting, as well as in all its activities (being there). They strove to ensure they had suitably flexible structures and support for parents to bring their child to the IECE setting for the appropriate number of hours.

However, coming to the setting and being there during activities was only the first step. The foremost challenge for the settings in the project examples was twofold:

- how to ensure that the child was actively and positively involved in the social and learning activities;

- how to develop a supportive environment where all children were enabled to be active participants.

Participation can be regarded both as an outcome and as a process of inclusive education. This is because both quality of life and learning are presumably enhanced if each child's optimal, positive participation is ensured (Imms and Granlund, 2014; Imms et al., 2016). Each child's well-being and learning is related to being actively engaged in the IECE setting's social and learning activities.

4.2 Belongingness and engagement

The data analysis showed that the main objective of the project's most inclusive examples was the child's participation and involvement in learning and social activities, as well as their belongingness to the group. These had priority over any performance targets that were to be achieved.

Indeed, some of the examples visited stated that they do not set performance targets for their children. Instead, they focus on ensuring the child is a significant member of the group and is meaningfully and actively engaged in the learning and social activities. They closely monitor each child's curiosity, interests and ambitions to enable them to work towards their own goals. Within the inclusive perspective, both progress and equity are achieved by ensuring the highest participation level for each child in the IECE setting's learning and social activities.

The evidence thus suggests that inclusive policy-makers and practitioners need to be wary of the emphasis on achievement. Here, 'achievement' is meant in the sense of scores on developmental targets, tests or examination results, as is currently being sought to apply at national and international levels, even for pre-primary children (Moss et al., 2016; but please also refer to Mackey et al., 2016).

The European Commission's Thematic Working Group commented that, in early childhood education:

… children's outcomes … often include measures of children's emotional, moral, mental and physical development; children's social skills and preparation for further learning and adult life; children's health and their school readiness (European Commission, 2014, p. 7).

This defines holistic education as being wider than merely mental development or academic learning by adding other aspects of development. The IECE project data points to a deeper definition of holistic education. It qualifies achievement as learning across all areas, accompanied by the experience of belonging to the peer community and by enhancing the child's motivation and skills for engaging positively with the physical and social world. Another part of the European Commission's proposal – specifically, its first fundamental transversal issue of quality ECE – better reflects this approach. It states that 'a clear image and voice of the child and childhood should be valued', considering that 'each child is unique and a competent and active learner' (2014, p. 7).

Along this approach, the practitioners in the IECE data underlined that children differ in many ways. From the point of view of inclusion, it is essential to attend to each child's progress, rather than the absolute levels of competence achieved by any individual. This allows all children – whatever their level of achievement – to be valued equally as active participants and learners with their peer group and to get the support they need to progress. Thus, as one of the examples describes, they 'accompany' the child in their participation, opening up a 'variety of possibilities for learning' and the 'opportunity for new experiences with oneself and with others on a daily basis' (European Agency, no date, p. 1).

The challenge for IECE policy-makers and stakeholders is thus how to ensure such 'optimal positive participation' for all children (Imms and Granlund, 2014, p. 291). The IECE examples sought this explicitly by firstly welcoming and valuing each child within a creative, supportive learning community. In the learning community, everyone belongs and enjoys positive relationships with both the staff and peers. Within this welcoming atmosphere, children are then invited and enabled to:

- use their strengths;
- make choices, particularly in play;
- exercise their curiosity and self-direction;
- express interests and goals and engage in problem-solving accordingly;
- be motivated for and engage in valued activities alongside and in interaction with their peer group, with guidance and relevant support as necessary.

(Please refer to European Agency, 2016a; Bae, 2010; Ghirotto and Mazzoni, 2013; Granlund, 2013; Imms et al., 2016).

4.3 Summary

The project data, based on the perspective of inclusive education, pointed strongly towards a focus on each child's active participation. This was a way of ensuring that each child was a valued member of the pre-school community and was enabled to progress.

Most examples described a focus on ensuring each child's belongingness and active participation in learning and social activities. Indeed, this was observed during the site

visits. Some parents whom the IECE visit participants met provided additional evidence. They described their children's eagerness to go to pre-school as the main source of their own satisfaction (please refer to the reports on the eight site visits on www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/inclusive-early-childhood-education/casestudyvisits). Enablement of active participation was seen as the best evidence that each child was learning and progressing, while being prepared for lifelong learning and participation.

Such outcomes were strongly linked to inclusive processes and structures within the IECE setting, as represented in the Self-Reflection Tool which the next chapter describes. However, structures within the surrounding community and regional and national policies also greatly influenced these outcomes, as shown in the Ecosystem Model of IECE that Chapter 6 describes.

5. A SELF-REFLECTION TOOL

The project's second contribution is the development of a Self-Reflection Tool. It allows practitioners to describe and reflect on processes within the IECE setting. This is to ensure that the inclusive aims of each child's belongingness, engagement and learning are being reached.

5.1 Development of the Self-Reflection Tool

This tool was designed to provide an overall observer-rated picture of the pre-primary environment's inclusiveness, with a focus on child participation. It provides a snapshot of the pre-primary setting's environment from the perspective of the project's key question: 'What are the main characteristics of quality inclusive early childhood education settings for all children?'

Early in the project, it became clear there was a need for an instrument for observing IECE settings which focused on the social, learning and physical environment. The initial stages of developing the tool included analysing several instruments that focus on the pre-primary environment. These included the:

- Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Curricular Extension (ECERS-E) (Sylva et al., 2010)

- Measure of Environmental Qualities of Activity Settings (MEQAS) (King et al., 2014)

- Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (Pianta, 2015)

- Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP) (Soukakou, 2012).

The project team combined the inspirations from these instruments with the project's quest to describe the main characteristics of quality inclusive ECE for all children. Based on

this, it developed a set of statements for observing the IECE environment's relevant features.

The content of the Self-Reflection Tool focuses on the pre-school as a place for participation and learning. It is meant to make visible the proximal processes that children experience in the IECE environment (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006; Pianta et al., 2009). It also pays attention to structural factors within the setting that influence the children's experiences.

The tool addresses eight aspects:

1. Overall welcoming environment

2. Inclusive social environment

3. Child-centred approach

4. Child-friendly physical environment

5. Materials for all children

6. Opportunities for communication for all

7. Inclusive teaching and learning environment

8. Family-friendly environment.

A set of questions covers each aspect. These aim to support practitioners' reflection. They include space for noting strengths and weaknesses in the service's inclusiveness, as well as for setting improvement goals.

The Self-Reflection Tool thus captures the inclusive processes and structures that the project identified as constituting a quality IECE setting. As already explained, 'Process quality refers to children's direct experiences with people and objects in the child care setting' (Pianta et al., 2009, p. 66). These proximal processes vary systematically according to the child's characteristics, the environment where the processes take place, and the nature of expected outcomes and changes occurring over time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). This means that pre-primary teachers and other IECE staff who are truly in tune with the children's communication and needs can have a significant impact on children's belongingness, engagement and learning. At the same time, peers and the physical environment also strongly influence each child's engagement, development and learning.

5.2 How stakeholders can use the tool

The project participants regarded the Self-Reflection Tool as a very useful instrument for improving IECE settings' quality service. One reason for this is that the settings in the site visits were constantly striving to improve their service's quality – and reflective practice was one of the main ways in which they sought to do this. It was a regular part of staff activity and was undertaken collaboratively (European Agency, 2016a).

The Self-Reflection Tool provides IECE staff with a set of questions that aid reflective practice. The questions focus on the provision of an inclusive physical, social and learning environment. Staff can use the tool to improve the quality of the experiences they offer to children. The version is short enough to serve for a general review of the IECE setting's structures and processes. However, an IECE setting can also opt to focus on one or more of the eight above-mentioned areas for specific reflection and action.

The Self-Reflection Tool may be used for numerous purposes:

- To provide a picture of the state of inclusiveness in the pre-school

- As a basis for stakeholder discussions about inclusion

- To identify and describe problem areas, set improvement goals and plan interventions to ensure inclusive provision

- As a way to evaluate ways of working inclusively

- As a basis for instilling inclusion indicators in any national standards for a quality early childhood education.

The questions' relevance, appropriateness and usefulness were assessed during the eight visits to IECE settings in different countries. They were also assessed through an ecological validation process. This included focus groups and cognitive interviews with practitioners, parents, student teachers and academic staff in teacher education in three other countries. The results suggest that this could be a very useful tool for pre-primary practitioners all over Europe and beyond to improve the inclusiveness of their IECE setting.

5.3 Summary

The Self-Reflection Tool serves as a practical support for IECE settings seeking to improve the participation levels of all children. Policy-makers who share the vision of IECE can also promote such a tool as a regular procedural standard for improving IECE provisions' quality.

The Self-Reflection Tool is being published as a separate document, in the form of a manual explaining its development and how to use it (European Agency, 2017b). It is being translated into all official Agency languages. As the project participants and focus group members suggested, it will be made available to all IECE settings. This will allow local stakeholders to use it to improve the inclusiveness of their environment.

Collaboration among policy-makers and practitioners across the wider structural factors within the community and regional and national levels also influences the improvement of IECE provisions. Another tool – namely the comprehensive Ecosystem Model of IECE – can support such collaboration. The next chapter describes this tool.

Pёrshёndetje
Albanian

Здравствуйте
Ukranian   Russian

Dia dhuit
Irish

مرحب
Ara

Cześć
Polish

Merhaba
Turkish

Hello
English

هيلو
Urdu

హలో
Telugu

Hallo
Afrikaans

6. AN ECOSYSTEM MODEL OF QUALITY IECE

The IECE project's third contribution is the development of an Ecosystem Model of IECE. It can serve as a framework for planning, improving, monitoring and evaluating IECE quality at local, regional and national levels (please refer to Figure 1).

6.1 Construction of the Ecosystem Model of IECE

Major relevant policy documents and research on IECE tend to use either a structure-process-outcome framework (European Commission, 2014; OECD, 2015; Pianta et al., 2009) or an ecological systems framework (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006; Odom et al., 2004) (please refer to Section 2.2 above). However, the present work has combined the two frameworks into one model. Moreover, the model is built around the principles of inclusive education (European Agency, 2015).

The model is founded on the project data, from which outcomes, processes and structures for quality IECE were identified. These were then placed into an ecosystem framework. This has the IECE outcomes for children at its centre, surrounded by the pre-school processes and surrounding structures in the micro-system, the structural factors in the home and community at the meso-system level, and the regional/national structures at the macro-system level. This new combined model provides a clear, comprehensive and situated portrayal of the issues related to improving quality in IECE.

The model brings together all the important IECE issues that emerged from the data obtained from the different example IECE settings. However, not every setting equally highlighted or showed evidence of every issue. For instance, collaboration with the family was evident in all settings, but its form and function varied across settings. Similarly, a response to the children's backgrounds was evident in all settings, but fewer settings demonstrated an explicit culturally-responsive approach. For this reason, and as suggested for the Self-Reflection Tool, the model is best used as a framework. Using this framework,

policy-makers and practitioners can consider their own priority needs and goals within the model's comprehensive picture of the relevant issues for quality IECE.

6.2 The five dimensions of the model

Figure 1 presents the Ecosystem Model of IECE outcomes, processes and structures in diagrammatic form. They are clustered into five dimensions:

6.2.1 Dimension 1: Outcomes

The centre of the model contains the three main **outcomes** of IECE, namely 'Child belongingness, engagement and learning'. These are generally described as active participation and are discussed in Chapter 4.

6.2.2 Dimension 2: Processes

Directly surrounding the outcomes are the five major **processes** that the child is directly involved in within the IECE setting. These are highlighted in the Self-Reflection Tool:

- Positive interaction with adults and peers
- Involvement in play and other daily activities
- Child-centred learning
- Personalised assessment for learning
- Accommodations, adaptations and support.

6.2.3 Dimension 3: Supportive structures within the ECE setting

The major processes are, in turn, supported by **structures within the setting's physical, social, cultural and educational environment.** The structural inclusive factors that operate within the IECE setting, and which are also represented in the Self-Reflection Tool's questions, include:

- A welcome for every child and family
- Family involvement within the IECE setting
- A holistic curriculum designed for all children's needs
- An environment designed for all children
- Staff who are appropriately qualified for IECE
- A culturally-responsive social and physical environment
- Inclusive leadership committed to respect and engagement for all individuals, and collaboration and shared responsibility among all stakeholders.
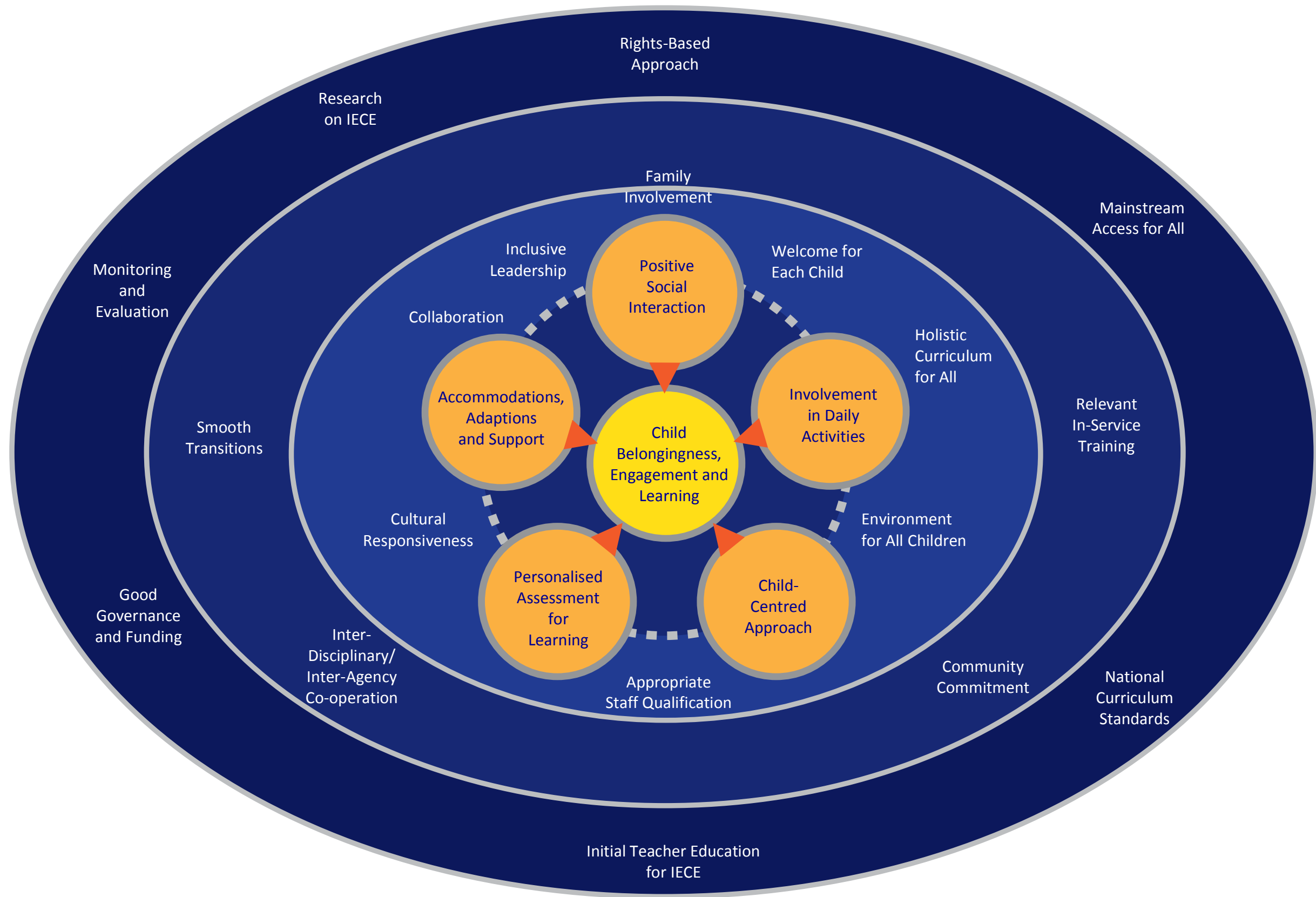
Figure 1. The Ecosystem Model of Inclusive Early Childhood Education

6.2.4 Dimension 4: Supportive structures within the community

In addition, more distant **structural factors in the home and community** surrounding the IECE setting also impact on the inclusive processes that the child experiences. These include:

- Collaboration between the IECE setting and the children's families

- Relevant in-service training for IECE staff

- Wider community commitment and support for serving all children

- Inter-disciplinary and inter-agency co-operation of services from outside the IECE setting that serve the children in the pre-school

- Smooth transitions between home and the IECE setting, and between the IECE setting and primary school.

6.2.5 Dimension 5: Supportive structures at regional/national levels

Finally, the model's outer layer presents **structural factors operating at regional/national levels** that also influence the processes within the setting. They are:

- A rights-based approach to IECE

- Provision of mainstream IECE access for all

- Setting up regional/national standards for a holistic and inclusive curriculum

- Availability of initial education for teachers and other staff for IECE

- Good governance and funding systems for IECE

- Procedures for regular monitoring and evaluation

- Research on what facilitates and what hinders the development of quality IECE.

A previous report (European Agency, 2016a) provides a detailed account of the above-mentioned outcomes, processes and structures at setting, community and national levels identified in the Ecosystem Model. This report was based on a qualitative analysis of 32 examples of European IECE settings submitted to the project. It is particularly useful for practitioners, as it provides relevant descriptions of each of the dimensions through illustrative quotations from practitioners.

6.3 Collaborative use of the model by policy-makers and practitioners

The project's analysis, description and use of the project findings illustrate use of the Ecosystem Model for reviewing and improving quality IECE. As already indicated, the project has published detailed qualitative data. The data illustrates the outcomes,

processes and structures within the Ecosystem Model of IECE that can communicate the relevant issues to stakeholders and practitioners (European Agency, 2016a).

As already discussed, the model highlights the central importance of focusing on the IECE outcomes of child belongingness, engagement and learning (Dimension 1) for the attention of policy-makers, practitioners and researchers (please refer to Chapter 4). The model also highlights the importance of the processes close to the child in the IECE setting (Dimension 2), which have the greatest impact on the quality of the child's experience (Pianta et al., 2009). It has also enabled the development of the Self-Reflection Tool. This tool incorporates both the processes and structures within the IECE setting (Dimension 3) that influence the child's belongingness, engagement and learning and that practitioners can thus act upon to improve their services.

The model also highlights, from a practitioner's perspective, the structural factors at the meso- and macro-system levels that influence the IECE provision's quality. In this way, it can enhance collaboration among policy-makers and practitioners for developing and promoting structures and processes at all levels. Such collaboration can lead to more effective action towards enabling all children to participate actively in IECE.

Indeed, policy-makers, researchers and practitioners in IECE may find that this model complements the EU and OECD frameworks for key action areas towards improving IECE quality. The model incorporates all the principles of the EU and OECD frameworks. Moreover, it enhances their applicability by locating them within the IECE setting, or the home/community and regional/national levels. The model could indeed be a very good basis for instilling inclusion indicators within national standards for early childhood education.

The Ecosystem Model clarifies the overlap of local and regional/national responsibilities. For instance, regional/national policy-makers are mainly responsible for legislation and funding that entitle all learners to access mainstream provision. However, ensuring that all children and families can actually access the local provision is a concern of the leadership, ethos and action in the IECE setting.

Similarly, initial teacher education for IECE may be primarily a regional/national responsibility (outer circle in Figure 1). Nevertheless, the employment of qualified staff and their continuous up-skilling is more closely linked to the responsibilities of IECE settings (inner circle in Figure 1).

Along the same lines, every child's entitlement to quality provision must be part of the national ethos and legislation ('Rights-based approach' in the outer circle). However, it must be equally reflected in the 'Welcome for each child' ethos and provision of the local leadership and setting (inner circle).

6.4 Using the model to focus on particular priority IECE issues

As has been suggested, the model can help policy-makers, researchers and practitioners to focus on particular quality issues in IECE. At the same time, it gives them a more comprehensive picture of the provision.

For instance, each of the following particular issues can be regarded as a potential priority target for action. The brief reviews of these issues – which emerged from the project data – are placed within the model's relevant dimensions. Lengthier accounts are available in other IECE project documents, namely *Inclusive Early Childhood Education: An analysis of 32 European examples* (European Agency, 2016a) and the case study visit reports on www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/inclusive-early-childhood-education/casestudyvisits.

The issues addressed here focus first on one of the processes (Dimension 2 with relations to Dimension 5) that is very closely related to supporting the engagement of children with additional needs. They then focus on some of the inclusive structures within the setting (Dimension 3, but also sometimes related to Dimension 2 processes).

6.4.1 Providing access to and participation in IECE for children vulnerable to exclusion

As stated throughout this report, the project data consisted of practitioner descriptions and observations of examples. These examples endeavoured to be as inclusive as possible in terms of accessibility for attendance, as well as active participation by all children in the community. This rights-based inclusive attitude is reflected in such statements as: the pre-school 'is proud of its inclusive ethos and has never turned a child away' (European Agency, 2016a, p. 55). Throughout the project, there was only one instance where a setting reported it had once been unable to meet the needs of a particular child with very severe behavioural difficulties. At the same time, during the visits it was also evident that this inclusive attitude was not very common. Children with additional needs had often been rejected by other services in the region before their parents found a place or chose to place them in the example setting.

As the Ecosystem Model of IECE shows, the rights-based approach that entitles all children to quality IECE is firstly the responsibility of national- and regional-level governments (Dimension 5). In this respect, half the EU states already provide a guaranteed place in IECE (European Commission, 2016). The responses to the project questionnaires show that this development – including that of increasing participation among 'disadvantaged groups' – is proceeding as per the EU's specific recommendations to several states.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, for the parents of children with disabilities, difficulties in finding a mainstream pre-school place for their child were not due to a lack of funding. Rather, they were due to exclusionary attitudes among the leaders and ethos of the education settings the parents approached. This may become a foremost challenge for including all children in mainstream pre-schools. Indeed, a recent United States survey asked pre-primary co-ordinators about the challenges affecting the inclusion of children with disabilities in pre-school. The most commonly reported challenge (30%) was 'attitudes and beliefs' (Barton and Smith, 2015). Thus, there is a need to address exclusionary mentalities at national and policy-maker and practitioner levels. For the latter, inclusive education training must be a part of initial staff training and of continuous professional training, to enable the development of IECE provision.

The project found that IECE examples' readiness to welcome all children – whatever their needs – was bolstered by a determination to upgrade staff skills and resources whenever new challenges arose. Thus, a distinguishing feature of these examples was to remove any

barriers to attendance and participation and to provide additional support for children who needed it. At the same time, they tried to avoid labelling and classifying children into categories of disability.

Thus, the setting's regular resources supported teachers to meet all the children's needs. The setting planned support for the participation of children with additional needs so as to enable the children to be full participants in their peer group's activities. Therefore, the children were seen as full members of the group in the same way as their peers.

During one of the site visits, the visit participants observed that the support person for a child with visual impairment had been instructed to spend the first month helping the child feel comfortable in the setting. However, at the same time, she was to work towards having the child supported and engaged in group instruction and in peer activity, rather than in one-to-one activity with the support person. The visit participants did indeed observe this child interacting with and engaging in a group task with her peers independently, though the support person was in the room. This is an essential feature of inclusive support for children with disabilities (Soukakou, 2012).

6.4.2 A warm welcome for every child and family

In the IECE examples described to, and visited by, the project, one striking feature of inclusiveness was the importance they gave to offering a warm welcome and a caring environment to each child and family (please refer to European Agency, 2016a). Several examples described how they prepared for each child's inclusive engagement. This was both in the transitional phase and during the child's attendance. They had explicit procedures (structures) for each child's smooth transition from home to the IECE setting. This included firstly ensuring that all parents in the community were aware of the need for and availability of the IECE service. This was through dissemination activities by local agencies, such as the parish church and local council.

Centre staff may also work closely with families of infants through a range of interesting and innovative services, such as infant massage sessions, nursery rhyme sessions and toddler playgroups. Particularly for those vulnerable to exclusion, many programmes are offered in partnership with other support organisations and services in the community to ensure the children's needs are understood and catered for from the beginning and to settle children and their families into the pre-school. Home visits by centre staff serve to create a link between the child and family and the centre staff. The child and family may attend a toddler group run by the centre for them to become familiar with the pre-school environment, staff and other families.

Initially, the staff, including the setting's leader, dedicate time to get to know each child and family as individuals. Parents may be allowed to initially accompany the child, including into the classroom. Particular activities may be held to build a relationship, such as playing 'What's in a name?', where the family shares the meaning behind their child's name. Then care is taken to ensure the child feels welcome, safe and comfortable in the pre-school environment and peer group. These example IECE settings truly understand the importance of a welcoming and caring atmosphere as an essential process of inclusion (please refer to Booth and Ainscow, 2011).

6.4.3 Family involvement

All relevant policy documents underline family involvement in IECE. What the project data added was the different possible forms of such involvement. There were very clear examples of enhancing children's engagement in meaningful learning by involving parents in the IECE outdoor and indoor setting ('Family involvement' in the first circle of Figure 1).

One of the site visits was to a pre-primary setting that emphasised the importance of linking pre-primary learning to everyday life. Here, the visit participants observed parents collaborating with teachers in developing and delivering the curriculum. For example, an Italian immigrant mother conducted a hands-on session for four-year-olds on how to make dough and use a spaghetti machine. This involved a lot of incidental learning about dough and about eating pasta. This is a special kind of parental involvement that is inspired by the widely-known Italian Reggio Emilia approach to IECE (McNally and Slutsky, 2016). This approach is also associated with the IECE setting striving to involve families in ensuring and documenting how each individual child is actively engaged and making adequate progress.

In addition, many examples described how they reached out to work with families in the community (second circle of Figure 1). This was so the child could access IECE, and benefit from enhanced relationships, care and education at home (Vakil et al., 2003). The IECE examples encouraged families to join outreach and community/parental involvement programmes prior to taking up a placement. Centre staff supported the local community to establish parent and toddler groups in local neighbourhoods. One exceptional example felt the need to organise a family therapy service for families in conflict so as to improve children's family relationships (European Agency, 2016a).

6.4.4 A holistic curriculum

All the examples highlighted a holistic curriculum as another important component of quality IECE. However, each example implemented it in a different way. The examples described (and, in some cases, the visit participants observed) how to include each child through a holistic curriculum. The curriculum was primarily based on following each child's personal learning journey through active engagement motivated by curiosity, interests, strengths, choices and struggles. There was a particular focus on play, especially with a balance of choice between indoor and outdoor play. The examples underlined the importance of flexibility in the curriculum, adjusting it to fit all children's needs. This means that, for some children, structured play is important for participation, while others are most engaged in free play.

Most importantly, a holistic curriculum was seen as preparing the child for learning and participating in school and also related to 'life in society' (European Agency, 2016a, p. 39). This is very much in line with the Commission's Working Group. It underlined that 'evidence shows that putting academic learning at the forefront does not pay-off' (European Commission, 2014, p. 40) and recommended that 'Children's experiences and their active participation are valued, and the significance of learning through play is understood and supported' (ibid., p. 10).

6.4.5 Inclusive leadership and collaboration

During the site visits, the importance of inclusive leadership always struck the visit participants. Setting leaders were committed to respect and engagement for all individuals. This was reflected in a spirit of collaboration and shared responsibility among all stakeholders. The examples demonstrated that quality processes were enabled by a deliberately chosen leadership structure. This leadership structure enabled the different types of staff and parents to participate collaboratively in ownership and distributed management of the system. For instance, staff met daily to discuss planning in relation to children's interests, skills and next steps in learning and to evaluate the teaching process and results. The pre-school's management intentionally planned and set these opportunities to meet. Every staff member was listened to during the daily sessions. Staff rotated around the setting each fortnight and worked within different learning zones (European Agency, 2016a).

Literature on the importance of leadership in IECE is scarce. Nevertheless, two other Agency projects for leadership in inclusive compulsory education reported similar findings: Organisation of Provision to Support Inclusive Education (European Agency, 2014) and Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education (European Agency, in press).

6.4.6 Cultural responsiveness

Cultural responsiveness is another highlighted principle that resonates with current needs across Europe. Most of the examples explicitly pointed out that, for them, diversity includes all children in need of support. That is, it includes children with disabilities and other children vulnerable to exclusion, particularly those from immigrant families who lack knowledge of the host country language and those from deprived socio-economic backgrounds.

The examples addressed these challenges in different ways. In a few examples, they employed diverse staff and represented and celebrated the children's and families' different cultures in the pre-primary environment and activities. Others enabled children with a different mother tongue to engage and interact with adults and peers and become, together with their families, full members of the pre-school community (European Agency, 2016a; please refer to Ojala, 2010).

6.5. Development of indicators for IECE

Finally, the Ecosystem Model, together with the Self-Reflection Tool, can serve as a resource to fill the lacuna in inclusion indicators for ECE provision (please refer to Section 2.2 above). The IECE project's approach, focusing on both structure and process factors and on inclusion of all children, can inspire researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to account for processes in addition to structure in developing quality indicators for IECE. The Ecosystem Model and the questions in the Self-Reflection Tool can inspire further conceptual work on inclusion and the development of indicators based on a holistic perspective of inclusion.

For instance, the latest OECD report on ECE raises the issue of 'equity in access to ECEC' (2017, p. 13), though merely focused on 'attending'. It also refers to one of the concerns regarding diversity raised in the first IECE analysis document (European Agency, 2016a), namely 'the failure of pedagogical teams to reflect the diversity [...] they serve' (OECD, 2017, p. 34). Similarly, national and international indicators of quality IECE can embrace several other issues of inclusion raised in the Ecosystem Model and Self-Reflection Tool, particularly regarding inclusion processes. Take, for instance, Sections 2 and 7 of the Self-Reflection Tool on 'Inclusive social environment' and 'Inclusive teaching and learning environment' (European Agency, 2017b). The first questions in these two sections already highlight the issues that quality inclusive provision must consider, namely 'Do staff build an interpersonal relationship with every child?' (ibid, p. 13) and 'Do all children participate in the regular learning activities?' (ibid, p. 23). Similarly, the issue of a 'holistic curriculum' in the Ecosystem Model can inspire indicators on engaging each child's curiosity and motivation for learning as part of the criteria for quality IECE provision.
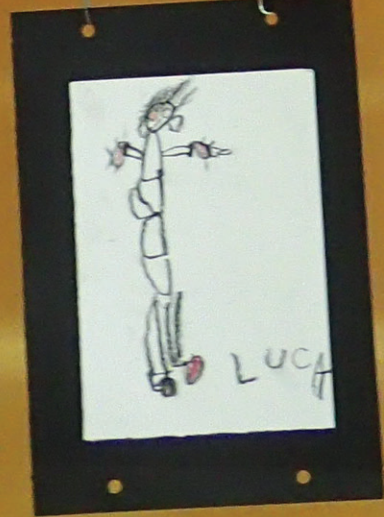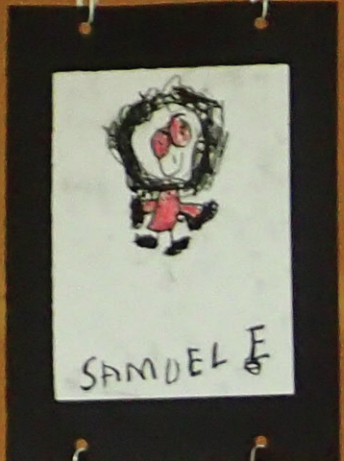
6.6 Summary

This chapter has described the Ecosystem Model of IECE. It has provided examples of how the model can support policy-makers and practitioners to collaborate on developing, improving and reviewing IECE provisions. It showed how the Ecosystem Model can support policy-makers and practitioners to envisage the overlap of their roles. This is both for general reviews of the IECE system, as well as for focusing on priority areas for improving quality IECE through collaboration between different levels of policy and practice. It is essential to keep in mind the complexity of the policy-practice issues that impact upon the services that young children and their families experience.

The next chapter uses the Ecosystem Model to frame the lessons learned about IECE through the whole project and the resulting recommendations for ensuring quality in IECE.

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7. CONCLUSION – LESSONS LEARNED AND RESULTING RECOMMENDATIONS

This project aimed to identify, analyse and subsequently promote the main characteristics of quality IECE for all children from three years of age to the start of primary education. The project data has confirmed some of the existing understandings and recommendations for enhancing IECE. It has also added new insights or emphases.

Experiences from project site visits and data analysis revealed the need to develop a framework that enables a systematic way of understanding IECE's complex, multi-layered dimensions. Integrating an ecological systems theory approach (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) with the structure-process-outcome approach (European Commission, 2014) and the inclusive education perspective (European Agency, 2015) led to the development of the Ecosystem Model of IECE. The model incorporates all the principles of the EU and OECD frameworks. Moreover, it enhances their applicability by locating them within the IECE setting, or the home/community or regional/national levels. The model allows for overlaps at different ecological levels regarding such issues as accessibility and curriculum. Thus, it enables policy-makers and other stakeholders to collaborate towards effective action.

The project has produced a comprehensive literature review on IECE for policy-makers, researchers and practitioners (European Agency, 2017a). It has also produced an illustrative account of each of the issues included in the Ecosystem Model (European Agency, 2016a). This includes citations from each of the 32 examples of European IECE that stakeholders in the field provided. The project also offers practitioners a Self-Reflection Tool for improving the quality of the IECE environment and services they provide to children and families (European Agency, 2017b).

7.1 Lessons learned and resulting recommendations

The following lessons learned and project recommendations are organised according to the Ecosystem Model's five dimensions. The lessons learned from the project reflect both the literature review and the project findings. However, the recommendations nested in boxes within each dimension of the model are fewer and mainly reflect the project findings.

There was an attempt not to reiterate recommendations already made in many other reports that have preceded this project. Instead, the recommendations below are based on the additional insights arising from the IECE project. Naturally, they endorse the recommendations from earlier reports, but they reflect the new insights.

The project recommendations are mainly directed at policy-makers, but they also point to the implications for practitioners. Indeed, they are formulated mostly in terms of how policy-makers can support practitioners to ensure quality provisions.

7.1.1 Dimension 1: Outcomes of inclusive early childhood education

1. The literature review and project findings show that **participation** in quality IECE particularly benefits children vulnerable to exclusion. The project underlines the importance of action to secure their attendance and participation. These must be in the sense of both 'being there' and 'being engaged' while being there.

2. There is wide recognition of the importance of a national curriculum based on children's cognitive, social/emotional, physical and language development and on learning. In an inclusive holistic approach, the **primary curriculum target should be that each child is enabled to belong, be engaged and learn**, following their curiosity and interests, making choices and engaging in self-initiated indoor and outdoor play, both on their own and with peers.

Recommendations

To ensure that children's active participation and learning in IECE becomes a main goal of IECE provisions, policy-makers should:

1. **Support local IECE providers to reach out pro-actively to children and families and listen to their voices.**

2. **Create the conditions for IECE settings to secure not only children's attendance, but also their engagement once they are there.**

7.1.2 Dimension 2: Inclusive processes within the IECE setting

1. The child's daily interactions in the IECE environment are of great importance. Therefore, the project calls for prioritising evidence-informed strategies and practices for ensuring child engagement and learning in IECE settings.

2. Assessment should go beyond merely developmental competencies. It must also consider child participation in the IECE setting's learning and social activities, social interaction with adults and peers, and opportunities for independent, self-initiated and social play and other activities.

3. The project findings confirm the importance of identifying as early as possible any social, environmental or other barriers that hinder any child from participating actively in IECE settings' learning and other activities.

Recommendations

To ensure that children's active participation and learning in IECE becomes a main goal and process of IECE provisions, policy-makers should:

3. **Ensure that a holistic national curriculum sets as its primary goal and standard that all children are enabled to belong, be engaged and learn, both independently and with peers.**

4. **Ensure that assessment of children also accounts for the level of child participation in learning and social activities and of social interaction with adults and peers and for any support needed for this to take place.**

7.1.3 Dimension 3: Supportive structures within the IECE setting

1. The project findings confirm the importance of collaboration between professionals and parents in the pre-school's activities for the children's belongingness, engagement and learning in everyday life.

2. The project further highlights the need for local IECE providers to pro-actively reach out to families and children.

3. The project findings confirm the importance of understanding cultural backgrounds as a factor for enabling children and families to participate in IECE.

4. The project highlights the need for continuous professional development to enable practitioners to work inclusively. This may be through adopting a rights-based approach, enabling each child to participate actively in the regular learning and social activities, providing support as required, establishing positive relationships with children and their families, and managing the curriculum flexibly to enable each child to make the best possible progress.

5. The project further recognises the need for tools to assess the quality of interaction and the inclusiveness of the pre-primary environment, as exemplified in the Self-Reflection Tool.

6. The project findings confirm the importance of collaboration among teachers and collaboration with external professionals to support all children's learning and development.

7. The project findings confirm that leadership is a key factor in promoting quality in IECE.

8. Leaders of IECE settings who have a vision of and commitment to inclusion should have the competence to create a welcoming, caring ethos and to enable collaborative responsibility for the benefit of each child's engagement.

Recommendations

To ensure that IECE settings have the capacity to welcome and involve all children, policy-makers should:

5. **Ensure that initial and continuous education for teachers and support staff allow them to develop the competences necessary for welcoming and engaging all children in the IECE daily activities.**

6. **Ensure that practitioners are prepared to understand the cultural backgrounds of children and families as a factor for enabling their active participation in IECE.**

7. **Create the conditions for leaders of IECE settings to adopt an inclusive approach, to have the competence to create a welcoming, caring ethos and to enable collaborative responsibility for the benefit of each child's engagement.**

8. **Prioritise the development and use of tools for improving the inclusiveness of the IECE physical and social environment, as exemplified in the Self-Reflection Tool.**

7.1.4 Dimension 4: Supportive structures within the community

1. The local community should provide the resources and expertise to ensure that every child is able to attend, be part of the peer group and participate actively in the learning and social activities.

2. The project findings confirm the need for cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary collaboration to meet all children's needs.

3. The project further underlines IECE's potential for facilitating families' understanding of and support for their children's learning and development.

4. The project findings indicate IECE settings' potential to provide a space and opportunity for including the family and the child in the local community.

Recommendations

To ensure that IECE settings have the capacity to meet all children's additional needs, policy-makers should:

9. **Ensure that the local community provides the expertise and resources to ensure that every child is able to attend, be part of the peer group and participate actively in the learning and social activities.**

10. **Promote collaboration among all sectors and disciplines, together with practitioners, families and local communities, to enhance the quality of all children's belongingness, engagement and learning.**

7.1.5 Dimension 5: Supportive structures at regional/national levels and across levels

1. The project findings confirm the importance of investment in high-quality IECE. The significant economic and social returns include improved educational attainment, equity and social cohesion.

2. To ensure that all children benefit from quality IECE, the project confirms the importance of providing available, accessible, affordable, adaptable and acceptable IECE services.

3. The project confirms the importance of national teacher education for IECE at basic and advanced qualification levels. The findings further underline that these qualifications should incorporate both theoretical issues and practical experiences of inclusive education.

4. The project findings confirm the importance of clearly defined quality standards for IECE. The project highlights the need to develop quality indicators for IECE.

5. Commitment and collaboration by policy-makers in different sectors and at different levels are needed to ensure the quality and inclusiveness of IECE services.

Recommendations

For quality assurance to really centre on ensuring quality service to children in IECE, policy-makers should:

11. **Ensure that statistical information collection includes an account of the number of children who are denied entitlement to quality IECE and of the types of barriers that prevent them from accessing it.**

12. **Ensure that service evaluations account for how far all children have opportunities for active participation, independent, self-initiated and social play and other activities.**

13. **Ensure the development of *inclusion* quality indicators for early childhood education by using, among other resources, the IECE project's Ecosystem Model and Self-Reflection Tool.**

To ensure that policy-making impacts on the quality of IECE practice, policy-makers in different sectors and at different local, regional and national levels should:

14. **Collaborate among themselves and with service providers to guarantee the quality and inclusiveness of IECE services through a shared understanding of inclusive quality issues, as exemplified in the Ecosystem Model of IECE.**

Finally, it should be noted that the above-mentioned project conclusions and recommendations confirm the importance of the European recommendations related to the EU 2020 target on IECE. They also confirm the importance of the Agency's Country Policy Review and Analysis work on a specific measure: 'to increase participation in good quality inclusive early childhood education and care and enrolment rates in pre-school education' (European Agency, 2016b, p. 12).

It is hoped these recommendations will lead to further action to ensure all children can access and participate actively in quality IECE across Europe and beyond.

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