



# TRANSATLANTIC FORUM ON INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN FROM MIGRANT AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

First meeting: 21-23 January 2013  
Ghent, Belgium

## Quality Early Childhood Services for All: Addressing Disparities in Access for Children from Migrant and Low-Income Families

***A synthesis report of input papers, conference documents and presentations***

### **Introduction**

The Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years (TFIEY), a 3-year project convened by the King Baudouin Foundation in partnership with several European and American foundations, aims to explore policies and programs supporting the early childhood development of children from migrant and low-income families in Europe and the United States. The Forum brings together leading policy-makers, practitioners, philanthropists and academics for each of its twice-annual meetings held in the EU and the US. These stakeholders have the opportunity to exchange the most recent research, strategies, policies, and innovations surrounding these issues, with the aim of leveraging and scaling up existing knowledge and evidence-based research, and making early childhood education and care (ECEC) for children from migrant and low-income families a priority on the political agenda in Europe, the US, and beyond. Each meeting focuses on a specific theme relevant to the challenges facing these populations in ECEC, and is organized by the [King Baudouin Foundation](#) and the two operating partners for the initiative, the [VBJK Centre for Innovation in the Early Years](#) in Belgium, and the [Migration Policy Institute](#) in Washington, DC.

The inaugural meeting of the TFIEY, “*Quality Early Childhood Services for All: Addressing Disparities in Access for Children from Migrant and Low-Income Families*,” took place on January 21-23, 2013, in Ghent, Belgium, and addressed the issue of accessibility. The meeting sought to explore:

- What existing data reveal about rates of enrollment and access to quality early childhood programming for children from low-income and migrant families;
- What primary barriers continue to impede equal access at the macro, meso and micro-levels, and how they might be addressed;
- What can be learned from examples of successful policies and practices that target these populations; and
- Where challenges of scaling such effective approaches have been overcome, and what elements of these successes might be adopted by others.

This synthesis paper is provided as a means of summarizing the key issues and themes addressed in the Forum’s discussion over the course of the meeting, and is not intended to reflect the views or recommendations of the Forum as a whole or of its operating partners and funders. For those seeking





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additional information, a complete archive of the presentations and papers and the video provided as inputs to the event can be found [here](#).

## Common Points and Starting Assumptions

. A certain set of starting assumptions universal to all contexts, however, can be identified from the background literature as well as an [opening keynote presentation](#) from Joan Lombardi to create a common ground from which the meeting's discussions can follow in a spirit of exchange and shared learning. These assumptions are the following:

- ***High quality ECEC is beneficial for all children, but even more so for children from vulnerable families.***

Recent advances in brain research have shown the critical importance of the early years in laying a strong foundation for future cognitive, social and emotional development. The potential of high quality ECEC services to bolster school readiness for underserved children and the long-term positive effects of these services on academic achievement, which may aid in closing gaps in later school outcomes make these programs critically important in promoting future academic, personal, and economic success for all. Meanwhile, research in the US shows that children of immigrants, particularly those who speak a language other than English in their homes, may benefit disproportionately from high-quality formal ECEC experiences compared to their native peers, as referenced by [Park, Vandenbroeck and Lazzari](#) similarly find in the European context that high-quality ECEC especially benefits the most disadvantaged children, particularly when it is provided in the context of social mix.

- ***Positive effects on development depend on the level of quality of ECEC.***

Studies have shown that ECEC attendance alone does not necessarily have a significant impact on children's healthy social and cognitive development, particularly in situations where service provision may have been of diverse quality. This suggests that not only access to ECEC programming, but access to programming of consistently high quality that meets certain standards, are necessary conditions to produce positive outcomes for children and for society as a whole.

- ***Child-centered investment strategies serve several goals that are critical to the success of society.***

In addition to short-term and long-term positive effects on academic achievement, high quality ECEC programming, particularly for disadvantaged children, has the potential to contribute significantly to larger goals of poverty reduction and increased intergenerational social mobility, benefitting economic development for society as a whole. In the EU, equitable access to high quality ECEC services is considered an important step toward the success of the European Commission's EU 2020 strategy, particularly in making progress toward targets concerning early school leaving and the number of people living at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

- ***Many barriers to access persist beyond obvious economic and supply-related obstacles.***

In both the US and the EU, as elsewhere, differential rates of usage of ECEC programs are often misunderstood to be a result of parental choice and preference resulting, for instance, from cultural





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norms regarding care and family structure. This perception, however, has been largely disproven as evidence indicates that several constraints, including but not limited to availability and cost, influence parents' decisions regarding their children's care. Several of these constraints and barriers are specific to immigrant families, necessitating a more comprehensive understanding and approach to the issue of unequal rates of access.

## The European Context

The background papers written to introduce the issue of accessibility to ECEC in the European context provide an overview of the nature and scope of the challenges facing children from migrant and low-income backgrounds and their ability to participate in high-quality programming in their early years.

Differential rates of access to high-quality non-maternal care and preschools among children from ethnic minority and low-income families have been well-documented in several European countries. Vandebroek and Lazzari show that children from ethnic minority and low-income families are enrolled at lower rates in preschools and formal child care, and that even when enrolled, these children are more likely to be found in lower quality services than their peers. Explanations for these discrepancies include, at the policy level, public policies that lead to greater availability of high-quality ECEC services in more affluent areas, both in market-driven and in more comprehensive welfare systems, indicating the importance of entitlement, funding and affordability of ECEC provision in increasing access. Programmatic design may also discriminate against children from poor and migrant families, by prioritizing working parents or through rigid and limited hours of service that do not meet the needs of parents with irregular schedules. Lastly, characteristics of the families themselves, who often have smaller informal networks, less access to information, and may experience language and cultural barriers, may also impede ease of enrollment.

Reinforcing the above understanding that high quality ECEC particularly benefits those children who are the most disadvantaged, studies also show that vulnerable children stand to benefit most from ECEC services when they are provided in a universal context, with a mixed social demographic. These European findings suggest that universal provisions may be preferable to targeted services in terms of outcomes for the populations in question. Moreover, embedding high quality ECEC services within a system of broader social welfare provisions that work to combat child poverty and increase social equality is necessary to achieve desired goals, as ECEC provisions alone cannot ultimately accomplish all ideal outcomes for child and social well-being.

Vandebroek and Lazarri include in their briefing a framework for successful inclusive practices as recommended structural conditions for increasing access to ECEC for children from ethnic minority and low-income families, outlined below:





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## Policy level

1. Public funding
2. Integration of education and care
3. Entitlement (population-based), possibly with geographical targets
4. Regulations on cost (fees)
5. Quality monitoring

## Provision level

6. Democratic decision making
7. Priority criteria
8. Outreaching
9. Flexible opening hours matching diverse local needs
10. Diverse workforce
11. Inter-agency cooperation

## Parental level

12. Involvement
13. Accessible and meaningful information

## The US Context

The landscape of ECEC services in the US differs significantly from that of the EU, perhaps most importantly in the relatively limited public provision of early learning services for children under age 5. Though state provision targeted to at-risk children in the past several decades has expanded significantly, only 50 percent of 3-year olds and 75 percent of 4-year olds overall are enrolled in formal early learning experiences, with only half of these enrolled in public programs. Without subsidies, full-day child care can cost anywhere from \$4,000 to \$10,000 annually or more in the US, making ECEC access a challenge for many families. Even within this limited environment of provision, in the US, as in Europe, evidence demonstrates that rates of enrollment for children of immigrants compared to their native counterparts remain low. These uneven rates of access, moreover, differ depending on immigrants' region of origin, with children of immigrants in Hispanic and Southeast Asian families having the lowest rates of access, and those of Black African, Black Caribbean, and European families actually exhibiting higher participation levels than children of US-born parents.

These differential rates of access are especially concerning given that disparities in achievement between children of immigrants and native-born children are often demonstrated even prior to kindergarten entry in the US, further emphasizing the importance of reaching these children in their early years at a critical time in their social, emotional and cognitive development.

As in the EU, factors that influence differential enrollment rates in the US are many and include poverty, particularly given the high fees associated with private provisions, as well as related challenges including availability of transportation; parental educational attainment, which is highly predictive of educational outcomes overall and is also strongly associated with preschool participation; language proficiency; and citizenship status; as well as family structure and workforce attachment.

## Key Points Learned through Presentations and Discussion

The speakers and participants for the closed 3-day meeting in Ghent included a diverse group of researchers, policy-makers, practitioners, and philanthropists representing 15 different countries and bringing their varied experiences and expertise to the transatlantic conversation. The following are some of the key points that were raised through both the research and practitioner presentations that provided a starting point for each of the meeting's sessions.





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- **What can be learned from international and comparative study: trends in access and equality**  
[A presentation from Wim Van Lancker](#) of the Herman Deleeck Centre for Social Policy at the University of Antwerp, Belgium, showed using country-level data that higher levels of child care use are positively correlated with lower rates of child poverty internationally, with countries that have higher rates of formal childcare use demonstrating lower rates of child poverty overall, indicating that increasing access to high-quality childcare services is an important part of mitigating inequalities starting in the early years. This presentation also demonstrated that insufficient supply of childcare places, including the issue of distribution across, for example, rural and disadvantaged neighborhoods, is a more likely explanation than insufficient demand in resulting unequal rates of access to ECEC services, reinforcing Vandenberg and Lazzari's assertion that differential rates of use are a result not of parental choice, but rather of environmental constraints on parents' decisions. Maternal employment and family policies are also shown to play an important role in determining rates of access, implying that not only should supply and access to high-quality childcare services be expanded, but that this policy should be embedded through a larger system of social protections, including family-friendly policies that encourage maternal labor market participation, particularly for low-skilled mothers. On the other hand, international data also show that while child poverty is on the rise in almost all OECD countries, austerity measures in most countries are simultaneously leading to less rather than more redistributive policies.

- **What can be learned from long-term longitudinal study: the positive impacts of high-quality ECEC**  
[Edward Melhuish's presentation](#) from the University of London and University of Oxford, meanwhile, illustrated what research can reveal regarding the impact of high-quality ECEC and various factors and variables that are most powerful in influencing outcomes. According to the EPPE study conducted in the UK, aside from the home learning environment and socioeconomic status, quality of ECEC programming as well as its duration (in months) were the most important factors in determining successful outcomes for children's development. This was demonstrated to be true for both part-time and full-time preschool, which were determined to be equally beneficial.

The impact of high-quality ECEC for disadvantaged children was shown to be particularly important as high-quality ECEC was shown to insulate against later low-quality schooling, with the positive effects of preschool persisting through teenage years. Disadvantaged children were shown to benefit most when their early childhood programs were socially mixed, rather than targeting only the disadvantaged.

Overall, the EPPE study alongside results from several other national studies from France, Denmark, Norway and others shows strong evidence that longitudinal gains resulting from ECEC programs are clear in terms of not only achievement, but also behavior, employment, and future criminal behavior.

- **What can be learned from a case study of the Hispanic population in the US**  
The case of the young Hispanic population in the US offers an instructive case study in the significance of the issue of accessibility, as [presented by Professor Eugene Garcia](#). Hispanic children under age 5 account for 21 percent of the total US population under 5; their share of the young child population has grown by 400 percent since the 1960's. High-quality ECEC is of especially great value for this group of children,





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given the achievement gap that opens up between Hispanics and Whites in later years of schooling; yet, Hispanic families in the US are less likely to be using pre-school services. Notably, gaps in immigrant achievement in the US are found not at basic academic levels, as may be expected, but rather in more advanced academic, language and numeracy skills. Similar to the EPPE study, a longitudinal study of the Tulsa pre-kindergarten program shows that high-quality ECEC services have a significant positive impact on later school success, and that these effects are particularly high for the Hispanic population compared to their native peers. In spite of these findings, lack of information and knowledge about services, language barriers, financial constraints and poor geographic distribution all contribute to low levels of access for this population compared to both white and African American children. Garcia's presentation further underscored the issue raised in the US background paper that access to ECEC is not a monolithic issue, but rather that different groups, even among immigrant families, have often dramatically different experiences that must be understood in order to craft successful policies and practices.

- **Lessons learned at the program and provision level**

Beyond academic and research-oriented contributions, several country-level experts offered lessons learned in increasing accessibility for migrant and low-income children in their programs and service offerings. Across all presentations and discussions, there was an agreement that service providers require a deeper understanding of the situation of poverty in order to effectively serve their communities. A need to recognize that children arrive with their own cultures, values and background, and that, conversely, teachers and staff also arrive with these same constructs was raised, indicating that a recognition of these potential clashes and a more genuine embrace of diverse cultures, values and background is needed in ECEC services.

As a means to achieving these conditions, staff diversification was identified as being key to successful outreach and service of diverse populations—not only hiring staff from diverse cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds, but hiring staff who have had the experience of living in poverty can be a key cornerstone of success, and will be examined in greater detail at the second meeting of the TFIEY, which will focus on the issue of workforce quality. [Kind en Gezin](#), an agency of the Flemish community in Belgium, for instance, relies on family supporters as a first point of contact with socially vulnerable families, and these are often employees who have themselves experienced poverty and can serve as effective liaisons between programs and families. The Walloon counterpart, [ONE](#), has implemented an extensive home visiting program for every young family in the French speaking community in Belgium.

Using diverse methods of communication—for instance, the use of films and pictures was another identified strategy to meet diverse needs, given the difficulties low educated parents or speakers of other languages may have in understanding written notices. [Kind en Gezin](#) provides pictographic information regarding nutrition, safety, child care, and pregnancy which is used as an instrument to support communication and guidance. The [Head Start program](#), meanwhile, has a Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness that produces guidance and materials to aid programs in meeting the needs of their diverse families, including, for instance, assessment guides for bilingual learners and professional development resources.





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Another key challenge that was raised by several speakers and participants was that of disparities between city, state, country and federal level policies which can create confusion and inconsistencies at the program level. A lack of alignment and understanding across levels—for instance, between national policy recommending continued support of home languages in programs versus state policy that demands English-only approaches, as is the case for the US *Head Start* program—was a commonly raised concern. Even at the program level alone, an alignment of services and the maintaining of an overall strategy to meet the needs of disadvantaged families, rather than disparate and ad-hoc attempts, was identified as being essential to success. Accordingly, the existence of systems-level standards is seen as being insufficient to achieve high-quality services for marginalized families; rather, internalization of these standards by service staff who are invested and have a deep understanding of their importance is necessary to effectively reach out to these families and children.

An over-arching theme across program discussions was that of the importance of respecting parents and families and building on the skills and capacities that they can offer, taking a true strengths-based approach toward their inclusion in services. A need to focus not only on risk factors but also on the skills, such as bilingualism, that children and their families bring to services was emphasized particularly in a presentation of the [International Step by Step Association](#). Here, the idea that parents themselves are potential leaders and agents of change, as they can be effective, for instance, in reaching out to newly-arrived immigrants and drawing in new families to important services, was discussed. Ultimately, “inclusion” can be viewed not only as a way of adapting families to the existing system, but also and perhaps more importantly about adapting systems to diverse families and a changing demographic reality.





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## Lessons Learned in Policy and Finance, and a Look to the Future

The Forum's three days of discussion culminated in a policy-based discussion in an attempt to learn from past attempts to improve accessibility of ECEC for vulnerable families at local and regional levels, and to examine potential opportunities and threats on the horizon in the policy climate surrounding the possible expansion of early childhood provision for low-income and immigrant populations.

Much of this conversation centered around issues of political will and strategies for translating the now widely available and accepted research on the importance of high-quality ECEC into expanded provisions at the systems level, and approaches and messaging that might move countries and systems closer to a state of universal provision. **Progressive universalism as a strategy toward combining universal and targeted services** and garner broad-based support for redistributive policies was discussed, with the current Flemish education system examined as a model of this approach. Under this system, a baseline of funding is allotted for every child, with additional funding provided based on specific risk factors, such as low household income, low maternal educational attainment, and home language other than Dutch. This has been an effective policy within the context of the education system, which is already widely accepted as being a universal provision that should be publicly available to all. Within the world of childcare, however, where accessibility remains highly variable both within and across countries, this will likely prove a more challenging policy to introduce. Exploring other means of combining universal and targeted approaches to foster political support and provide realistic funding options is an area for future inquiry.

**Maintaining a rights-based mentality** in framing the issue of early childhood services was also intensively discussed as an important strategy that remains critical in making progress on this issue. In order to make strides, ECEC must eventually be envisioned by the public and by policy-makers as an essential right, similar to primary education. A plea was made to continue to maintain a strong focus on democratic values and not resort only to return on investment arguments at the policy level for fear of losing this mindset, particularly in the EU context. Similarly, in maintaining a critical eye toward assessment and evaluation, several participants reminded the Forum of the importance of being mindful of "why we measure what we measure", calling academics and practitioners alike to keep sight of the intrinsic value of ECEC services rather than having a purely outcomes-focused approach.

Also important in successfully messaging and framing the issue of ECEC expansion is that of **winning the middle-class majority's buy-in** to the issue. Particularly given the current economic climate, public sentiment toward investment targeted only toward the disadvantaged may be less enthusiastic overall, and middle class resentment may arise in the instance of limited funding leading, for instance, to scarcity of childcare slots for their own children. Maintaining a sense of solidarity around the issue of ECEC is therefore crucial, particularly as the middle-class majority is often the most influential in driving policy decisions. For this reason, too, mixed universal services, when they can be achieved, are often more likely to be successful than services targeted toward low-income families.

At the same time, as rates of child poverty continue to increase across most OECD countries as illustrated by Van Lancker, **framing ECEC issues within the larger context of child poverty reduction** can also be a powerful strategy in advancing the agenda. As poverty is often viewed not as an individual but rather as a societal problem, and children in particular are seen as being blameless in their disadvantaged position,





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this can be a successful political approach for winning support for investments in ECEC, particularly within the framework of EU2020 goals to reduce poverty and the upcoming social investment package to be released by the European Commission. The Flemish government, for instance, has an integrated and coordinated policy to fight poverty across all relevant departments, addressing over 200 indicators and drafted in cooperation with families experiencing poverty. In this way, not only is ECEC expansion likely to gain more popular political support, but it is also more likely to be part of an aligned strategy that addresses child well-being overall. Moreover, the fact that ECEC on its own cannot eliminate poverty, but rather must be embedded in a larger system of welfare policies, similarly calls for **increased interdepartmental cooperation** as well as **intergenerational solidarity** in an age where Europe is home to a wealthier aging population but an increasingly poor young child population.

## Remaining Questions and Challenges

Taken together, the background papers, presentations and discussions that served as inputs to this event demonstrated that, whether in the US or the EU, accessibility to high-quality ECEC services for disadvantaged children and families remains uneven and problematic, in spite of several instances of good and innovative practice. Moreover, while an established research base makes highly evident the importance of investing in the early years, political motivation and consistency surrounding its funding and provision, particularly for the most disadvantaged, is either lacking or highly variable over time, leading to practices that lag far behind research in most countries. The Forum's discussion illustrated that policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and philanthropists each have an important role to play in raising awareness, forming collaborative partnerships, improving practice, and moving forward the political agenda on this issue.

Over the course of the Forum's debate, key points and recurring themes pointed to several major challenges that remain to be addressed and questions that embody the principal concerns raised throughout the meeting:

- Alignment of services—from the state to federal level, the national to EU level, and from birth through primary school—is lacking and needs to be improved. Increasing interagency cooperation and dialogue is necessary.
- High-quality ECEC services must not only be accessible, affordable, and available, but also desirable and relevant to all families and responsive to changing demographics in order to be successful.
- Parents must be included alongside their children as their first teachers and key partners in their learning and development, and should be drawn in to services in a meaningful and respectful manner.
- Services with a social mix are important for child outcomes and for avoiding “ghettoization”, but are highly challenging to achieve in the face of segregated neighborhoods. Staff diversification in this context also remains a challenge that must be addressed.
- We must find a way for access to high-quality ECEC to be maintained as a social and political priority even through times of economic austerity and frequent administrative and political changes.





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Forthcoming convenings of the TFIEY, of which there will be seven in total, will focus on themes that will seek to explore several of the above issues in greater detail. Future planned themes, all of which will focus on low-income and migrant families in particular, will include: Workforce Preparation and Curriculum Innovations; Parent Engagement and Dual Generation Strategies; Multilingualism and Multiple Identities; the Role of National Governments, Policy Levers, and Effective Decentralization; Integrated Systems; and Evaluation.

