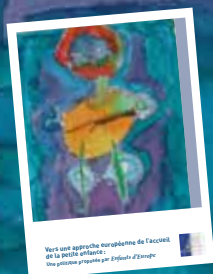# Young children and their services: developing a European approach

A *Children in Europe* Policy paper

principle ③

Pedagogical approach: holistic and multiple-purpose

This dossier is elaborating on one of the principles in the *Children in Europe* Policy paper 'Young children and their services: developing a European approach'.

Young children and their services: developing a European approach

A *Children in Europe* Policy paper

principle 3

Pedagogical approach: holistic and multiple-purpose

Holistic and multi-purpose services should be understood as public institutions and sites for encounter and relationships between children and adults. They should adopt a holistic approach to children and multiple purposes, which recognise the multiplicity of possibilities that these services can offer as well as the diversity of children and families. They should provide safe and secure care ('childcare'); indeed, they should work with an ethic of care, which should be embodied in all their activities and relationships. But the provision of care should be placed in a wider context, as an integral and inseparable part of children's upbringing, a broad goal that recognises the importance of space and play in children's lives and which includes learning, social relationships, ethics, aesthetics, and emotional and physical well-being – 'education in its broadest sense'. As well as existing and recognised possibilities, services should be open to new and unexpected purposes and roles and to outcomes that are not anticipated in advance. Outcomes matter, but not only those that are predicted in advance. The question to ask of any service is not 'has it achieved targets a, b and c?' – but 'what has it achieved?

What does this principle mean?

Three intertwined societal functions of services for young children are now generally acknowledged: an economic function, an educational function and a social function. While the focus here is on the educational function, it is clear that the educational mission of these multiple purpose services cannot be separated from the wider society and thus from its economic and social context. As Paulo Freire (1970) puts it: "The parent-child relationship in the home usually reflects the objective cultural conditions of the surrounding social structure". This goes *mutatis mutandis* also for services.

In particular, the educational mission of services for young children should give coherent and updated answers to the major changes in society. Being confronted by changes in family and work organisations, parental roles and values, and an increasing diversity of families, the educational mission of services for young children goes far beyond the traditional view according to which these services have been assigned the task of complementing or counterbalancing the education provided to children within the private domain of their family. It also goes far beyond the complementary mission of preparing children for schooling.

This principle takes a firm stand on the educational mission of services and asserts their public identity/status in its double sense of being a societal institution and a place for social encounters. Keeping together these two definitions of the word 'public', the principle acknowledges children's right to early education while it stresses the social dimension of early education. Services for young children find their educational purpose in accompanying each and every child as they grow and gain experience within the wider social world, which is composed of a plurality of individuals with diverse cultures, roles and personalities, and where each child will get in touch with a rich diversity of knowledge and values. In the present context of increasing diversities, it is even more important to consider this heterogeneity as a condition for education, rather than as a problem to overcome.

The role of children's families in this educational process acquires a new relevance. Parents and relatives are not customers of the services, nor are the services substitutes for parents and relatives. Instead, family members are partners in the educational process and participants in the children's experience within the services.

The reference to an ethic of care emphasises that care is, first and foremost, about relationships. Care is a relational ethics, combining acts of caring and a general habit of mind that should inform all aspects of life and which includes attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness (Tronto, 1993). This also means respecting everybody's rights and guaranteeing everybody's well-being, building significant relationships with children, and helping them to build further significant relationships within a network of multiple relations.

Translation of these values into educational practices dictates a pedagogic approach that considers the whole complexity of children's experience: sociality and cognition, emotion and reason, body and mind. Such a holistic approach offers an education in its broadest sense, concerned with overall development and well-being, and will support children's agency across the complex network of social relations and diverse cultural events they encounter. It will also help them in finding answers to their own questions, inventing new questions and cultivating their own interests, pursuing them over time and in different contexts, sharing them with other children and adults.

Some important consequences necessarily result from such an approach. First, it leads to the rejection of curricula based on top down transmission of knowledge through predefined schedules and predetermined outcomes, and aimed at children's acquisition of specific predefined skills. Rather, it points to the importance of sustaining children's acquisition of general capabilities and of agency in the processes of interacting with physical and social phenomena and making sense of the world around them. In this approach children's acquisition of knowledge is closely connected to their well-being and sociality, play is not opposed to learning (Vygotsky, 1966/67), nor is communication opposed to cognition (Sfard 2015), body and mind are inseparable (Hamington, 2014; Merleau-Ponty, 1964), and informal knowledge is valued and supported. Thus, early childhood education is to be acknowledged as the commencement of lifelong learning processes in which all children have the right to be involved as early as possible in order to avoid the beginnings of social exclusion.

Secondly, this approach highlights that a divide between time for care and play and time for education and learning is meaningless. Hence, systems that split services for children under and over the age of three years - where

the former are more care and play oriented and the latter more oriented to preparing for school and formal learning - are likely to induce tensions and negative breaks in children's social, cognitive, and relational experience

A further relevant set of consequences concerns professionalism in services for young children, which should not be focused only on child development and disciplinary knowledge but rather be based on competences in observing, listening, understanding, and documenting children's experience and in analysis of practices.

What is the basis of principle 3?

This principle builds on the historical experience of provision in European countries and international debates (e.g. OECD, 2001; 2006), as well as recent attempts from different countries and regions to redefine their pedagogical frameworks (e.g. Kind & Gezin, 2015; Pirard, 2009; Senatsverwaltung für Bildung, Jugend und Sport Berlin, 2004; Skolverket, 2011, Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2012).

There is a general consensus that high-quality services for young children can be provided only on the basis of a balanced shared responsibility between the private domain of the family and the public domain of the state, the region and the local authority. There is an equal consensus that high-quality pedagogical experience should be inspired by a holistic approach (Bennett, 2005; Cagliari, et al., 2016; Hännikäinen, 2015; Musatti et al., 2013; Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2006; Sylva et al., 2014), in which care and education are not considered as separate domains but are combined in a balanced way. This also requires that the meaning of early childhood education cannot be reduced to preparing children for later life or to producing school ready children. Holistic pedagogies consider children as protagonists, agentic beings and proactive meaning makers, rather than reducing them to what they are expected to become. Equally they do not consider education as the accumulation of progress in scattered developmental domains, nor do they define pedagogical quality in terms of what children are expected to achieve in predefined domains. Pedagogical quality is rather defined in terms of what environments and experiences communities and professionals offer to enable young children to flourish and realise their potential.

This means that communities and professionals must take into account socio-economic as well as cultural, gender and other diversities as environments of socialisation, caring and learning. Children's home cultures and languages are respected in order to enable them to build positive and multiple identities and belongings. Equally important is that the acknowledgement of diversities may foster social cohesion and inclusion by standing up against emerging prejudices, stereotyping and other exclusionary processes.

Finally, it needs to be acknowledged that systems that divide children under and over three years of age are less efficient in terms of costs and make planning and organising coherent services more difficult (European Commission, 2013). In these systems processes of social differentiation between children who can and cannot access education in their first years arise at an early age (Garnier, et al. 2016).

What is the EU position?

For many years, the European Commission framed services for young children as belonging to the domain of labour market policies and gender equality. As a result, attention was focused on quantity and accessibility (Penn, 2009). Hence, in 2002 the European Council put forward quantitative benchmarks for member states (the so-called 'Barcelona Targets'), stipulating how many places should be available in services for young children without any recommendation as to the content or quality or governance of these places (Directorate General for Internal Policies, 2013). As a result of a growing body of research studying the impact of structural quality (Burger, 2010; Lazzari & Vandenbroeck, 2012; Sammons et al., 2012), as well as discussions on different conceptions of the content and meaning of services for young children (Bennett, 2005), there is now a raised awareness that quantity without quality makes little sense.

With its strategic framework 'ET 2020' (Council of the European Union, 2009), the EU has acknowledged the importance of services for young children not only as a start for lifelong learning and individual achievement, but also as a basis for inclusive, cohesive and equitable societies. The document attributes the following functions to the educational system:

(a) the personal, social and professional fulfilment of all citizens;
(b) sustainable economic prosperity and employability, whilst promoting democratic values, social cohesion, active citizenship, and intercultural dialogue.

It explicitly mentions a fundamental role for early childhood education in its Strategic objective 3:

> "Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship. Educational disadvantage should be addressed by providing high quality early childhood education and targeted support, and by promoting inclusive education."

Consequently, from an EU perspective services for young children have moved from being merely a labour market issue to being an educational and a social issue, now considered an integral part of the social and educational agenda (Penn, 2009; Urban et al., 2011); they have been recognised as multi-purpose. Furthermore, the European Commission (2011/C 175/03) has stated that *high quality* services are beneficial for all children and the DG Education and Culture has convened a Thematic Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, consisting of delegates and experts from all Member States, using the Open Method of Coordination to elaborate a framework and key principles for the quality of provision (Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014).

The European Quality Framework (EQF), a report from the Thematic Working Group, proposes five domains where actions can lead to better quality and each domain raises two major themes, or challenges, for EU Member States. The EQF explicitly refers to the previous work of the European Commission's Network on Childcare that produced 40 quality targets and argued at the same time that quality is a relative concept based on values and beliefs (European Commission Network on Childcare, 1996). The EQF acknowledges that what is considered as quality is based on an image of the child and the members agreed that children were to be considered as capable, adventurous and active learners, "active participants in their own learning". Early childhood is "a time to be, to seek and make meaning of the world" and services for young children are "not solely a preparation for the future but also about the present" (p. 7). The EQF is also explicit about parents as the most important partners and asserts that they should influence practice in democratic ways.

In sum, the EQF proposes five domains (Accessibility, Workforce, Curriculum, Monitoring and evaluation, Governance) specified in ten sub-themes. Three of the domains share similar perspectives to the principle discussed in this dossier (and also other principles in the *Children in Europe* policy paper):

Accessibility
1. Provision should be available and affordable to all families and their children
2. Provision should encourage participation, strengthen social inclusion and embrace diversity

Workforce
3. Provision should have well-qualified staff whose initial and continuing training enables them to fulfil their professional role
4. Provision should ensure supportive working conditions including professional leadership which creates opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation with parents

Curriculum
5. The curriculum should be based on pedagogic goals, values and approaches which enable children to reach their full potential in a holistic way
6. The curriculum should require staff to collaborate with children, colleagues and parent and to reflect on their own practices

The ET2020 document was updated in 2015 (European Commission, COM/2015/0408) and the public function of services for young children received even greater attention:

> "Today's need for flexibility and permeability between learning experiences requires policy coherence from early childhood education and schools through to higher education, vocational education and training and adult learning."
>
> "*Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is the starting point* and one of the most efficient means for raising proficiency in key competences, but it faces a double challenge of increasing access and quality. Provision of services for children under 3 years is particularly problematic. Building on the ECEC quality framework developed by Member States during the previous work cycle, key issues for further work include the improvement of access, focusing on the disadvantaged, the professionalization of staff and efficient governance, funding and monitoring systems."

The current situation in Europe: Major challenges

Services for young children face some major challenges today: in particular, the increased diversity of European society and a growing pressure for early academic achievements.

Over recent decades, all European countries have faced **increased diversity**. The recent growth of immigration from the Middle East and from Eastern European countries has added to the previously existing diversities. At the same time, social inequalities between and within European countries have increased and the European Union has ceased to be a "convergence machine" (Vandenbroucke & Rinaldi, 2015). While diversity was traditionally presented as the presence of rather large, well-organised "minorities" (e.g. African-Caribbean and South Asian in the U.K.; Turkish in Germany; Turkish and Moroccan in Belgium and The Netherlands; Tunisian and Algerian in France), we live today in what is termed 'super-diversity', s characterised by "a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified" populations (Vertovec, 2007: 1024). In many European cities, there is no majority, as the (various) minorities are the majority. In Brussels, Europe's capital, for instance, the number of frequently spoken languages has risen to 104 and half Brussels' families are multilingual (Janssens, 2016). In addition, it has become increasingly important to identify children and families not only by their past, but also by their present and their future. Families today are marked by hybrid and changing identities, that are (partially) shaped by their adherence to different cultural and socio-economic groups. This (as well as other factors) calls for a fundamental revision of our language policies, looking at emerging multilingualisms as an asset, rather than a problem (Cummins, 2000; Hélot et al., forthcoming).

Historically, the educational system has very often considered homogeneity as a condition for learning. This was the case in the context of the 19th century formation of nation states, with a consequent need to form national identities through the educational system (Anderson, 1991). In this context, early childhood education also had a particular mission of civilising those who did not conform to the prevailing norms (Elias, 1998;

Vandenbroeck et al, 2010). Until now, heterogeneity has all too often been considered as a hindrance for learning, be it diversity in ages, in languages, in cultures or otherwise. But contemporary social conditions call for this myth of homogeneity to be contested, and to embrace heterogeneity as a fundamental pedagogic condition from an early age.

We also witness an **increasing pressure for services for young children to produce specific outcomes expressed in terms of children's early academic achievements**, due to the influence of neoliberal policies and in particular demands for creating 'human capital' from an early age. A strong emphasis on children's school readiness, originating from this perspective, dramatically limits the educational mission of services for young children and reduces the complex and rich learning processes of young children to a mere transition from informal to formal knowledge.

What is happening is an increasing *schoolification* of at least the last part of young children's experience of early childhood education. While in many European countries, a cultural gap between educational services for younger and older children is still perpetuated by separate initial training for professionals to be employed with children under and over 3 years, with a clear trend for the increasing assimilation of to the latter into the initial training of primary school teachers (e.g. in Belgium, France, Italy, and many other countries).

Next steps

The economic and financial crisis that has struck European countries has adversely affected services for young children, which are often not supported by adequate economic investments, while social and cultural changes have often made participation of families and communities more difficult. Under the pressure of economic austerity measures, local, regional and central governments are tempted to outsource provision, contributing to the marketisation and privatisation of this public function. Several studies have, however, shown that marketisation and privatisation often lead to increasing inequalities in access and pedagogical quality (Moss, 2009; Lloyd & Penn, 2013).

Major public investments in early childhood education and care as a public good are needed in each EU Member State

as well as at the European Union level in order to ensure equal access to democratic services from birth onwards and to pursue the major goals indicated in its statements. Failure to do this has the inevitable consequence that someone will have to pay the price: children may pay the price because they lack opportunities to develop their full potential; parents may pay the price because services becomes unaffordable or inaccessible; and professionals may pay the price because of poor working conditions.

Indeed, high-quality experimental projects and professional debates have indicated some of the more central conditions for supporting the implementation of a pedagogical approach that is both holistic and multi-purpose. An obvious condition is adequate material (structures) and social contexts (size of children's a groups, ratio adult/children and stability of personnel) for guaranteeing children's well-being, play ad exploration. These conditions have a strong influence on the capabilities of professionals to be sensitive and responsive to supporting over time children's sociality, learning and emotional fulfilment.

Equally important are democratic procedures for parents' participation and a major involvement of families in services. What constitutes quality and indeed what pedagogy is all about needs to be the subject of dialogue between professionals, parents and local communities. This necessitates not only democratic procedures but also special attention paid to parents and families that may be less acquainted with middle class cultures of negotiation and decision making.

Professionalisation of the educational work in services for young children is a condition of the utmost importance. This entails high-level initial training for all of the adults working in these services, whether teachers, pedagogues or assistants. Continuous professional support and in-service training are equally important, and further requires adequate procedures, such as child-free time for meetings and reflection within participative and collegial contexts.

There is now a European Quality Framework that enumerates a number of clear goals, including the ones that are mentioned above. It is to be expected that the European Commission continues this work and elaborates benchmarks on each of the EQF's domains. These benchmarks should not be about what children are expected to achieve, as this would displace responsibility onto the shoulders of individual children and families. Yet, in the spirit of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, benchmarks need to engage Member States in ensuring the best possible conditions for sharing educational responsibility between the public and private domain.

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