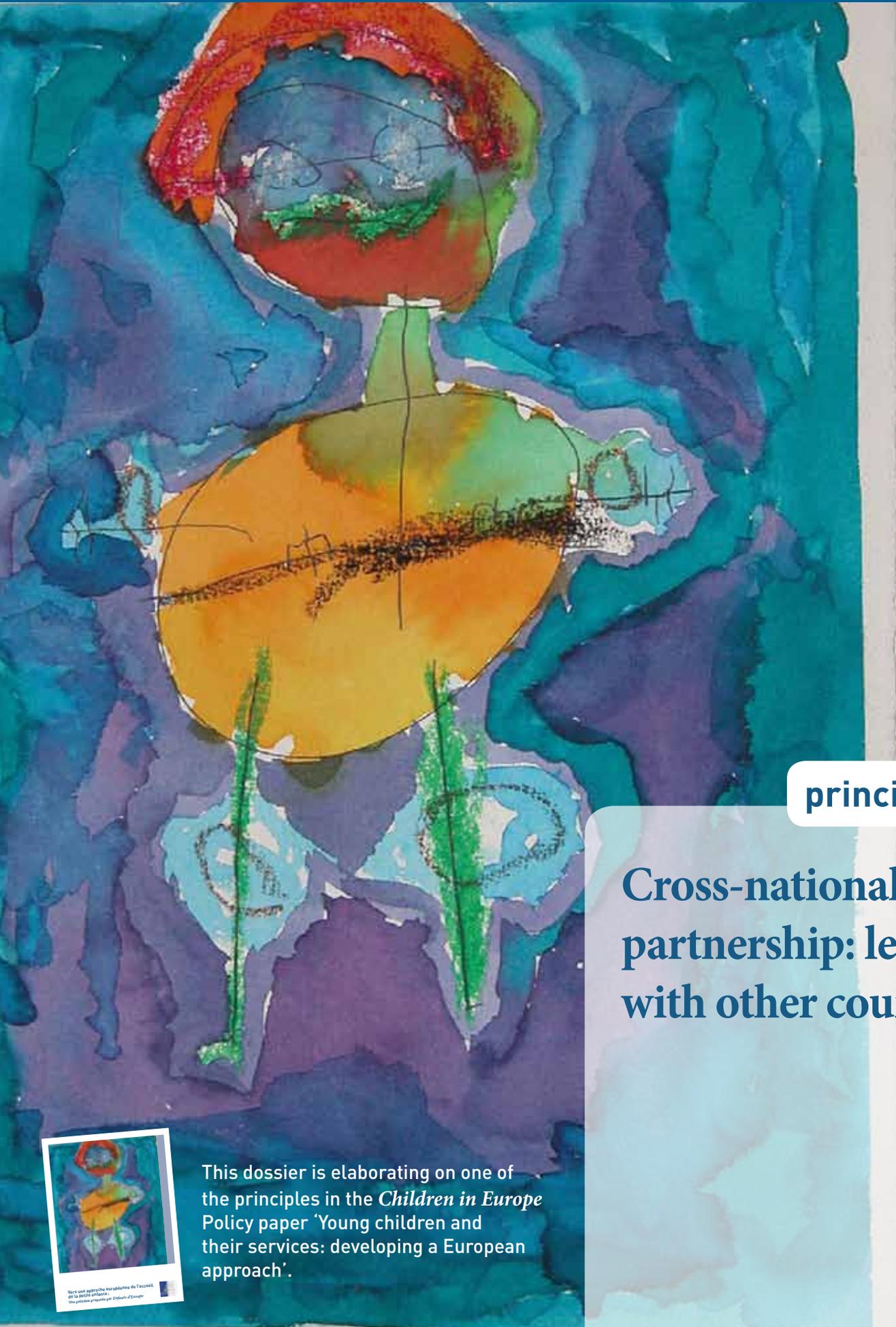


Young children and their services: developing a European approach

A *Children in Europe* Policy paper



principle ⑩

Cross-national partnership: learning with other countries



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'.



Cross-national partnership: learning with other countries

Europe has a rich heritage of innovative and democratic theory and practice in services for young children, continued today in local (and a few national) experiences, some of which are living examples of the principles we have set out here. At the same time, Europe is facing strong forces that put at risk all that is best in our heritage and current experience, replacing them with an impoverished and standardised alternative, an approach that is narrow and atomising, calculating and contractual, instrumental and technical. To contest this approach to services, and to confront it with an alternative European approach, it is important to expand and deepen partnerships across Europe, involving many participants and all levels.

We are not starting from nothing: *Children in Europe* is one of a number of partnerships and networks that already exist. We need to create more cross-national spaces, European places of encounter, where there can be dialogue and reflection and opportunities for border crossing to explore new perspectives, where practice (at all levels, including policy) can be made visible and discussed critically, and where we can learn from each other, co-constructing new knowledge. As part of this process, exchanges of workers between countries should also be further facilitated, both short-term and longer-term.

What does this principle mean?

This principle is about the great value and potential of cross-national relationships and partnerships in creating new knowledge about and new pedagogical projects in services for young children, and by so doing maintaining a rich and diverse European tradition of both theory and practice. In the field of early childhood education, examples of this tradition are legion, including the work of Robert Owen, Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, Alva Myrdal, Emmi Pikler, Susan Isaacs, Loris Malaguzzi and many more. This rich heritage has contributed to important contemporary experiences, many of which (as seen in other dossiers) exemplify the principles proposed by *Children in Europe*. Overall, it can be said that this tradition has played an important part in Europe being the world-leader in the field of services for young children.

It is important to stimulate and sustain democratic, diverse and innovative projects in services for young children, and the learning that they produce, in order to maintain and evolve this proud heritage. There are various conditions that are likely to support this objective. One is local, regional and national governments (as well as European institutions) that actively encourage and facilitate the evolution of such projects. Another is to foster connections and relationships, within and across national borders, so that individuals and organisations can work together, in partnership, to learn together and, by so doing, to create new thinking, new services and new ways of working – individuals and organisations widely drawn, including practitioners, policy makers and parents, as well as researchers and other academics.

The focus, therefore, of this principle is learning through partnership. But not learning as a process of reproduction: simply copying, borrowing or reproducing ‘best practice’ or ‘best policy’ from somewhere else. This is an implausible model of learning: complex phenomena such as early childhood education cannot be packaged up and transplanted from one place to another, from one context to a quite different one. But it is also an inherently static model: it provides no possibility for experimentation and movement, for responding to new conditions and new perspectives, for creating new knowledge and, hence, new practices.

This principle, instead, proposes a model of learning similar to that proposed by many for early childhood education itself: the creation of new knowledge in relationship with others in a process of co-construction. This involves some choice about whom we learn with, about whose perspectives and practices attract our interest and curiosity; different people and organisations will be drawn to different perspectives and partners. Forming such learning partnerships may involve developing relationships with others in the same country, but may equally lead to seeking out relationships with partners in other countries, creating a web of connections spanning national borders; for a person or organisation may feel closer affinity with someone in another part of Europe than someone in the next street.

To foster and sustain such partnerships also requires that attention is given to finding and creating opportunities for partnerships – including cross-national partnerships, what principle 10 terms ‘European places of encounter’. Such ‘places of encounter’ can take many forms, for example: short-term exchanges between workers in services for young children or the creation of longer-term collaborative exchange programmes; building networks of individuals and organisations who share a commitment to working together on a particular subject or a particular pedagogical approach; establishing forums for the exchange and sharing of information, ideas and experiences; funding cross-national research. But these are only some examples, the challenge being to think of other places of encounter and other forms and processes of partnership, proliferating to the extent that cross-national partnerships become a widely accepted and widely expected way of evolving policy, provision and practice, something that everyone in the field has some experience of at some stage in their careers.

The importance of this principle is two-fold. As already indicated, it can help sustain a tradition of innovative theory and practice in services for young children, creating new educational projects. This is about valuing and promoting a rich diversity of approaches – albeit a diversity that can, *Children in Europe* believes, work within a shared framework of values and objectives, such as the principles proposed in our Policy Paper. This is diversity within a common framework, diversity of theory and practice reflecting the diversity of Europe itself, diversity not expressed necessarily in terms of

national differences but rather diversity of perspective, interest and disposition that cuts across national borders.

But the principle is also important for another reason. The rich heritage of European thinking and practice, that has had such an important influence on the Continent's services for young children, is under threat from powerful forces – neoliberal, positivistic and managerial, forces with little time for or understanding of European traditions and innovative projects. These forces seek to define and impose a uniformity and standardisation of approach, rendering services into commodities that can be precisely specified (by experts) on the basis of a decontextualized concept of 'evidence-based' policy and practice, then rigorously governed using powerful technologies to ensure conformity to specification. The aim is predictable and measurable inputs and outputs, an equation that can be applied in any place at any time. This approach to services for young children seeks to minimise diversity and complexity and is imbued with an ethos that is calculating and contractual, instrumental and technical, and that values certainty, predictability and stability. The antithesis, in short, of the sort of dynamic and diverse pedagogical projects proposed here. Cross-national partnerships providing opportunities to learn with others can provide some protection against these homogenising forces.

What is the basis for this principle?

As already indicated, this principle is based on four key concepts. The existence and importance – past, present and future – of a rich diversity of thinking and practice about services for young children in Europe. The importance of creating new knowledge through maintaining experimentation and movement in these services, in response to changing conditions, new theoretical and other perspectives, and the experience gained from existing innovative projects. The creation of new knowledge premised on a model of relational learning, enabled through creating places of encounter where partnerships can be built over time: what has been termed a pedagogy of relationships. And fourthly, the importance of diversity and the generative power of encounters with difference, with unfamiliar ways of thinking and doing things.

Sometimes such encounters may open up a completely new perspective, as for example the recent 'discovery' by some researchers and practitioners in the United Kingdom of the rich Continental tradition and discipline of social pedagogy and the extensive profession of pedagogue, both highly relevant to a search in the Anglo-Saxon world for a more holistic approach to working with children (and adults). (This 'discovery' has also led to a growing understanding of the diverse forms that social pedagogy and the pedagogue profession assume in different countries). Other times, encounters involve gaining an understanding of different approaches to a subject of shared interest, from which may emerge new understandings and knowledge.

Of course such cross-national partnerships could, and do, develop in many different parts of the world. But the European Union, *Children in Europe* believes, does offer a particularly favourable environment for the creation of such partnerships. There already exist strong partnerships among EU member states, networks of connections that go back to shared interest in the work of European pioneers. The EU itself has provided some impetus to further partnerships, through for example its support of cross-national research and networks, the development of information and statistics on services within the EU, and the policy priority it has attached to services for young children, including early childhood education and care. Over a number of years, many people and organisations in member states have become accustomed to visiting, meeting and exchanging with each other, and viewing member states as a natural point of reference: a culture of mutual dialogue and exchange has begun to be established. These are important building blocks for further collaborative partnerships.

A question of language

Cross-national partnerships and learning with other countries raise the question of language. Some people are multi-lingual and can communicate fluently in other languages. Most are not. This may be overcome in two ways: using a translator or adopting a common language, often these days English. Both, however, are problematic, in particular because they risk a failure to understand the Other, so undermining the potential value of cross-national partnership.

We see, interpret and understand the world through language – it is an integral part of our identity and our understanding of the world. Using translators or adopting English as a common language can readily reduce diversity and enhance homogeneity, with important concepts and ways of understanding getting lost in translation and the ever-present danger of making the Other into the Same. To take just two examples. Reference has already been made to the Anglophone world's unfamiliarity with 'social pedagogy' and 'pedagogue', one reason being their often incorrect translation into English as 'education' and 'teacher'. While in Italy, there has been a long-standing dispute about the terminology to use for schools for 3 to 6-year-olds: *scuola materna*, with a clear connotation of being welfare-oriented and substituting for mothers, with staff expected to display motherly qualities; or *scuola dell'infanzia*, asserting an identity that is neither home-like nor motherly, but clearly understood instead as primarily for children and being places of education, a term that has now gained general acceptance. The danger is that both terms get translated into some generic English term – such as 'nursery school' or 'kindergarten' – and lose their cultural and political significance in the process.

The trend towards the hegemony of the English language attracts little critical attention, and is particularly disregarded by its main beneficiaries, native English speakers, who too often take it for granted that everything translates readily and perfectly into English. Moreover, in these hegemonic conditions, native English speakers can avoid questioning the meanings inscribed in taken-for-granted terms widely used in their own language, such as 'day care' and 'childcare'.

Indeed, it is rare to find anyone in the world of research, policy or practice raising questions about the issue of language in cross-national work, and in particular the dominance of English. So these comments from the multi-lingual Austrian scholar Walter Lorenz, commenting on the experience of participating in a cross-national European project, are not only trenchant but unusual:

The actual difficulties, the resources required in acquiring a foreign language in the course of studies have been totally miscalculated at all levels. This has led to a pragmatism of settling for more commonly spoken languages and of course among them for the English language predominantly with all the associated exclusionary consequences ... There is always the need to get results, to be pragmatic, to overcome language differences as barriers, and not enough time and space to explore the subtleties of discovering meaning through non-comprehension, through the pain not only of working through interpreters but of clarifying terminology so that it can be used reliably by interpreters and shared among all participants. This seems to hold up the works, those representing lesser spoken languages come to regard this as their personal problem, their personal deficit, and the whole language project is tilted and distorted. And yet, *it would be precisely the non-understanding which could give us the most valuable clues to differences in meaning, to the need for further clarification of familiar terms and concepts, to the transformation of taken-for-granted perspectives into creative, shared knowledge.* (Lorenz, 1999: 20–1, emphasis added)

Fruitful cross-national partnerships and learning are possible without universal multi-lingualism. But to succeed, issues of language need to be treated as a high priority and fully discussed; procedures and conventions (for example, about which words should not be translated) need to be agreed; and the significance of 'non-understanding' and its potential for challenging the taken-for-granted and provoking new and different questions must be acknowledged and time allowed to realise this potential. Working in a multi-lingual partnership can then become an opportunity, not just a problem, working with diversity rather than treating it as a problem.

What is the EU position?

In many ways, the European Union itself has played an important role in supporting cross-national partnerships and fostering learning with other countries. We go into more detail with some of the examples given below, but here can draw attention to a number of relevant activities that the EU has initiated and supported: cross-national expert networks and working groups; cross-national

reviews of services and statistics; cross-national research projects; cross-national exchange programmes; and cross-national conferences and other meetings. Those of us living and working within the EU may easily take all of this for granted; it is only when meeting colleagues from other parts of the world – for example, from Latin America or East Asia – that the significance and uniqueness of this cross-national work initiated and supported by the EU becomes apparent.

The EU encourages member states themselves to engage in learning with other countries, through the Open Method of Coordination, described by the EU itself in the following way:

The open method of coordination (OMC) in the European Union may be described as a form of ‘soft’ law. It is a form of intergovernmental policy-making that does not result in binding EU legislative measures and it does not require EU countries to introduce or amend their laws.

The OMC, originally created in the 1990s as part of employment policy and the Luxembourg process, was defined as an instrument of the Lisbon strategy (2000). This was a time when EU economic integration was advancing quickly but EU countries were reticent to give more powers to the European institutions.

The OMC has provided a new framework for cooperation between the EU countries, whose national policies can thus be directed towards certain common objectives. Under this intergovernmental method, the EU countries are evaluated by one another (peer pressure), with the Commission’s role being limited to surveillance. The European Parliament and the Court of Justice play virtually no part in the OMC process.

The OMC takes place in areas which fall within the competence of EU countries, such as employment, social protection, education, youth and vocational training.

The OMC is principally based on:

- jointly identifying and defining objectives to be achieved (adopted by the Council); jointly established measuring instruments (statistics, indicators, guidelines); benchmarking, i.e. comparison of EU countries’ performance and the exchange of best practices (monitored by the Commission).
(http://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/open_method_coordination.html)

So the EU recognises the importance of cross-national partnerships and learning, and has supported these in a number of different ways. This has led, in turn, to various European policy statements, based on collaborative cross-national work, formulating common principles and goals, including: the 1992 Council of Ministers Recommendation on Childcare; the 1996 Quality Targets in Services for Young Children (from an expert network set up by the European Commission); the 2012 European Commission Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care; and the 2014 Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (from a working group set up by the European Commission).

What, perhaps, has been lacking in the EU’s position is recognition of the value and creativity that can follow from working with diversity: the desire to produce common frameworks and benchmarking, which carries the risk of uniformity and standardisation, has not been matched by the desire to value, identify and promote innovative local projects and diversity of pedagogical thinking and practice. The tension between the common and the diverse has not been sufficiently acknowledged and worked with in productive ways. Confrontation, contestation and divergence, which should play an important part in cross-national partnerships and co-constructive learning, have not been given the attention they require.

Similarly, the EU has not sufficiently addressed the issue of language, in particular how to work with and benefit from participation in multi-lingual partnerships. This reflects a lack of curiosity and interest in different perspectives, understandings, concepts and practices, in favour of focusing on identifying common principles, goals and indicators – the universal ‘quality’ approach. As a result, compounded by the growing dominance of English within the EU, too much gets lost in translation and a false sense of uniformity disguises the rich diversity of perspectives, understandings, concepts and practices that actually exists between and within member states, a diversity that (as indicated above) can act as a stimulus to experimentation and movement in services for young children.

Some examples of cross-national partnerships

The European Commission Childcare Network

The network was established in 1986 by the European Commission and included experts from each of the then member states. Over its ten year working life, the network undertook a wide range of cross-national work – studies, seminars, reports – on three main areas: services for children under 10 years; parental leave; and men as carers, both as fathers and as workers in services. It also developed, through a process of discussion and consultation covering the 12 member states, a set of quality targets, to be achieved over 10 years and that would ensure the implementation of the 1992 Council Recommendation on Childcare (EC Childcare network 1996a).

Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care

The European Commission established this Thematic Working Group (TWG) in 2012, consisting of ECEC experts and policy makers from across Europe. Working within the Open Method of Coordination, the TWG used the peer learning methodology, i.e. exchanging and synthesising policy experiences, analysing and comparing policy options, drawing on research about successful policies and making recommendations for good policy practice. Using this method, the TWG developed proposals for improving the quality of ECEC within a European context, presented in a report 'Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care' (European Commission 2014).

DECET, Diversity in Early Childhood Diversity and Training

This is another example of a cross-national network, but one that has been initiated by individuals and voluntary organisations, rather than a governmental body. DECET, a membership organisation, consists of a network of 17 European organisations and projects with common goals about valuing diversity in early childhood education and training. One of its objectives is to facilitate exchange among trainers, practitioners, researchers and policy makers throughout Europe. For more information, see www.decet.org.

Reviews of services for young children and their workforces

One of the first tasks of the EC Childcare Network was a review of services for children under 10 years in the 12 member states of the (then) European Economic Community (EC Childcare Network 1988). Since then, mostly under the auspices of the European Commission and European Union, a number of other cross-national reviews have been undertaken, both of services (EC Childcare Network 1990, 1996b; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014; Plantenga and Remery, 2009) and of the workforce (Oberhuemer, Schreyer and Neuman, 2010).

Cross-national research

A number of important cross-national research projects have been undertaken that have included services for young children, mostly funded by EU sources. Two examples are *Care Work in Europe: Current Understandings and Future Directions* (Cameron and Moss 2007), which covered six member states; and *CoRe, a Study on Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care*, which covered a wide range of member and candidate states (Lazzari, van Laere, Peeters, Vandebroek and Urban 2011).

Children in Europe

This cross-national magazine is produced by a network of national magazines, which formed a partnership for the purpose. First published in 2001, the magazine is multi-national and multi-lingual, appearing in 15 languages at its maximum extent, and each issue is built around a particular theme or subject. It provides a unique forum for the exchange of ideas, practice and information, and provided a place of encounter in which was produced 'Young Children and their services: developing a European approach', and its linked dossiers, including this one.

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February 2016

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