

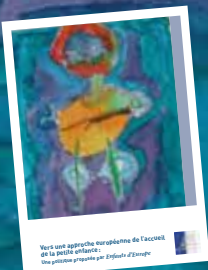
Young children and their services: developing a European approach

A *Children in Europe* Policy paper



principle ⑨

Services for young children and compulsory school: a strong and equal partnership



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'.



Services for young children and compulsory school: a strong and equal partnership

Services for young children and compulsory schools should work towards what OECD terms a “strong and equal partnership”, being treated as equal parts of the education system. This partnership should be based on a shared understanding of the image of the child, of services for children and of education. Education, in this shared understanding, is a process of constructing knowledge, values and identity, concerned primarily with emancipation and the growth of healthy, competent and moral people. It should be organised not around academic subjects, but around areas that are important for individual flourishing, a democratic society and a sustainable environment: communication; culture; science and technology; health, the environment and sustainable development; democracy and citizenship; creativity and curiosity; and care.

Compulsory schooling has much to learn from services for young children, especially as envisioned here [in the *Children in Europe* principles]. Pedagogical ‘meeting places’ are needed where both services can dialogue and co-construct new values and practices that enable both to provide education in its broadest sense, recognizing that narrowly stated academic achievement is not the only or necessarily the main goal of education.

There are a number of conditions that will promote a ‘strong and equal partnership’, including a strong and self-confident early childhood sector. This is more likely to be achieved where children do not enter primary school until at least 6 years of age.

What does this principle mean?

With increasing provision of services for young children, so that most children in Europe today receive early childhood education in these services for at least 2 and often 3 years, and with increasing attention given to the concept of ‘lifelong learning’ understood as starting from birth, the relationship between early childhood and compulsory education has moved up the policy agenda.

An influential policy discourse frequently heard, both internationally and nationally, says that the relationship should be one of preparation or readying – early childhood education preparing young children for compulsory school and its particular regime of education. In this relationship, early childhood education assumes a subordinate role of preparing young children to perform well in compulsory school education: readying for primary or elementary school, by ensuring the child acquires the knowledge, skills and dispositions required to be a successful learner in compulsory education, for example ready for the rapid acquisition of literacy and numeracy and able to participate in classroom regimes. Early childhood education is, in this hierarchical formulation, the lowest rung on the educational ladder, the first step of a linear process of educational progression, consisting of a sequence of predefined stages, each needing to be achieved before moving on to the next. Primary or elementary education becomes the frame of reference for early childhood education, especially the nearer children move to compulsory school age; just as ‘secondary’ or ‘high’ school becomes the frame of reference for the upper years of primary education, and university or college becomes the frame of reference for the upper years of secondary school. Not just standards and expectations, but pedagogical ideas and practices cascade down the system, from top to bottom; while the value and status of education, educators and institutions increases with each successive stage of education. In this way, each level looks down on the level below it, setting goals for the lower level and ignoring its particular competences and strengths.

Starting Strong, OECD’s cross-national review of early childhood policies, noted the international spread of this relationship in its final 2006 report: ‘in the early childhood field, an instrumental and narrow discourse

about readiness for school is increasingly heard’ (OECD 2006, p. 219). It found this type of relationship to be most prominent in countries that have adopted what it terms a ‘pre-primary approach to early education’, for example France, the Netherlands and several English-speaking countries including Australia, Canada, Ireland, the UK and the US: ‘These countries tend to introduce the contents and methods of primary schooling into early education’ (p.61). For example, a 2011 report on early intervention commissioned by the UK government recommends that ‘the United Kingdom should adopt the concept of the *foundation years from 0 to 5* (including pregnancy)... Its prime objective should be to produce high levels of “*school readiness*” for all children regardless of family income’ (Allen, 2011, p.46; original emphasis). While the Early Years Foundation Stage, the English pre-school curriculum, ‘defines what providers must do... to ensure [children] are ready for school’ (English Department for Education, 2012, p.4). But no country today seems immune from this way of thinking about the relationship of early childhood to compulsory education.

Principle 9 contests this relationship, in which early childhood education is subservient to compulsory schooling, for reasons discussed below. But as well as contesting, it offers an alternative, drawn again from OECD’s *Starting Strong* review: ‘the strong and equal partnership’. This is one of eight policy lessons that, OECD contends, taken together constitute key elements in a successful policy in services for young children (OECD, 2001). The way this particular policy lesson is expressed – not only a strong partnership, but equal too – recognises that the relationship is not just a matter of closeness, but also one of power. A strong partnership may not necessarily be an equal one, especially given the powerful gravitational pull of the compulsory school: the partnership can bring benefits, but it may also entail dangers.

The first *Starting Strong* report describes in more detail the strong and equal partnership it advocates, emphasising that early childhood education in services for young children has much to offer compulsory school education:

Strong partnerships with the education system provide the opportunity to bring together the diverse perspectives and methods of both ECEC [early childhood education and care] and schools, focusing on the strengths of both approaches, such as the emphasis on parental involvement and social development in ECEC and the focus on educational goals and outcomes in schools... ECEC and primary education could benefit from the knowledge and experience of young children accumulated in each sector, and in the process help children and families negotiate the transition from ECEC to school (OECD, 2001, p.129: emphasis added).

There is, in short, a mutually beneficial dialogue to be had between early childhood and compulsory school education in a strong and equal partnership – not a monologue, but an exchange of ideas and practice.

This ‘strong and equal partnership’ can be conceptualised in a rather different way, which is the meaning given to it in Principle 9. Taking the best from each type of education and mixing them up, rather like baking a cake, may not work so well where the two types of education have very different traditions and very different understandings – of the child, of the school, of education and its practice. Rather than a beautiful cake, you may end up with an inedible mess in which the ingredients have failed to blend. An alternative type of partnership may be called for, one based not on the exchange of knowledge but on the co-construction of new knowledge. This is the thinking behind another important discussion of the relationship between early childhood and compulsory education.

In 1994, two Swedish academics – Gunilla Dahlberg and Hillevi Lenz Taguchi – wrote a report for a Swedish government committee: *Preschool and school – two different traditions and the vision of a meeting place* (Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi, 1994). While the focus of the report is on Sweden, its analytical method is more widely applicable, and its proffered solution to the problem that the method reveals can inform discussion well beyond Sweden. One of the authors comments that while ‘[o]thers said you should take and mix the best of both pre-school and school... we said you should start out from analyses of dominant discourses and common traditions, deconstruct them – and then construct something totally new’ (Dahlberg, 2013, p.82).

In their paper, Dahlberg and Lenz-Taguchi note the same general tendency in the relationship between early childhood and compulsory school education as Starting Strong: ‘one can clearly see internationally... that the education system tends to go further down in age’. The core of the problem, as the authors see it, is that the two fields of education have different traditions, leading to quite different understandings of education and learning. In particular, in Sweden they have two separate images of the child – ‘the child as nature’ and ‘the child as a re-producer of culture and knowledge’ – so that ‘the pre-school [what Swedes call early childhood centres] has taken a position opposite to that of the school’.

In a later book, Dahlberg describes this image of the child as nature. She or he is ‘an essential being of universal properties and inherent capabilities whose development is viewed as an innate “natural” process – biologically determined, following general laws... [in] a standard sequence of biological stages that constitute a path to full realization’ (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2007, p.46). This tradition and image values a holistic view of the child; free play and creativity, giving rise to free and self-confident people; free expression of ideas and feelings; fun; and the here-and-now.

By contrast, the Swedish school is ‘dominated by the reproduction of the prevailing culture and knowledge’, and hence an image of the child as a ‘re-producer of culture of knowledge.’ This child is understood as starting life ‘as an empty vessel or tabula rasa... [needing] to be filled with knowledge, skills and dominant cultural values which are already determined, socially determined and ready to administer – a process of reproduction or transmission’ (Dahlberg et al., 2007: 44). There is a greater emphasis, than in the pre-school’s image of the child, on the future and economic life. The school is subject centred, meaning that ‘the basis for all activities is linked to the learning of concrete subject knowledge... with the transfer of concrete and assessable knowledge as the goal.’ These subjects are mostly decided and organized by others, and not the children, in contrast to the ‘pre-school’s tradition of child-centredness, where the ideal is that the child, as much as possible, should choose the contents and forms of expression’.

Having deconstructed these two traditions to show their deep differences, what is to be done? Not one sector colonising the other as in readying. Nor each sector simply taking on the better bits of the other as in the OECD *Starting Strong* report. Instead Dahlberg and Lenz-Taguchi propose early childhood and compulsory education coming together in pedagogical ‘meeting places’ to create a new and shared ‘common view’ about education. This, the authors suggest, might be based on a new and shared image or understanding of the child not as nature, not as re-producer – but as a constructor of culture and knowledge and an investigative child:

The idea that the child is a constructor of culture and knowledge builds a respect for the child as competent and curious – a child who is filled with a desire to learn, to research and develop as a human being in an interactive relationship with other people. It is a rich child. A child who takes an active part in the process of constructing knowledge.

In Principle 9, we take the OECD concept and goal of ‘a strong and equal partnership’ between early childhood and compulsory education. We suggest, however, that this partnership should be formed not on the basis of the partners adopting some good points from each other, but rather through a process of democratic dialogue and deliberation in pedagogical meeting places, leading to the co-construction of new and shared understandings: of the image of the child, of services for children and of education. On the basis of such understandings, new and shared educational practices may also be constructed. In this relationship, early childhood education does not orient itself to the needs of a conservative and taken-for-granted compulsory education; instead both types of education are at issue.

Both in Principle 9 and in other parts of our policy paper, *Children in Europe* proposes what these new and shared understandings might be: the image of the rich child; services as “a forum and a children’s space, a site for encounter and relating”; education-in-its-broadest-sense, a ‘process of constructing knowledge, values and identity, concerned primarily with emancipation and the growth of healthy, competent and moral people’; and a thematic, rather than subject-based, education, ‘organised around areas that are important for individual flourishing, a democratic society and a

sustainable environment’. But we recognise that these understandings are neither necessary nor objectively true; other understandings are possible and might emerge from pedagogical meeting places, which should be places of and for democracy where conflicting alternatives can be presented, contested and negotiated.

What is the basis of Principle 9?

The basis of this principle is the view that early childhood education in services for young children should be respected and treated as an equal partner in the whole lifelong education system. It has its own traditions, its own identity (or, more accurately, identities since there is no one uniform and monolithic early childhood education), and today (as in the past) includes some of the most innovative and exciting pedagogical work to be found anywhere in education. In short, as Principle 9 says, '[c]ompulsory schooling has much to learn from services for young children', a point made forcibly by OECD:

Organisation, curriculum and decision-making in [compulsory] schools continue to resemble 19th century patterns: curricula imbued with the certainties of the past, formal testing of discrete skills and knowledge items, and the "balkanisation" of teachers into separate classrooms and disciplines. The school as an education institution cannot continue in this way. Knowledge is inter-disciplinary and increasingly produced in small networks. In the future, it will be constructed through personal investigation, exchange and discussion with many sources, and co-constructed in communities of learning characterised by team teaching. This approach to knowledge can begin in early childhood and, in fact, fits well with the child's natural learning strategies, which are fundamentally enquiry based and social (OECD, 2006, pp.220-221).

Furthermore, Principle 9 acknowledges that children are learning from birth – they do not need to be 'prepared' for learning. Moreover, all European countries have schools or similar centres for children from at least 3 years of age and often earlier – young children do not need to be 'prepared' for school. It is true that many members of the early childhood workforce, in some countries at least, are poorly educated and very low paid; they are treated as 'second class' educators or not even as educators at all. But the proper response to this is (as set out in Principle 8) to value the work, developing a 0-6 profession and parity with school teachers. Moreover, an increasing number of early childhood workers are well educated to graduate level, and sometimes beyond.

So the basis for Principle 9 is that early childhood education should be valued in its own right and has much to contribute to the whole education system; learning begins from birth and so too should education. But there is another reason underpinning Principle 9 and its argument for a strong and equal partnership: deep concern for the damage that can be done by the 'preparing' or 'readying' relationship. For the advocacy and implementation of this hierarchical relationship contributes to a widespread trend, what has been termed 'schoolification', an expressive term for compulsory education 'taking over early childhood institutions in a colonising manner' (OECD, 2006, p.62). This downward pressure can lead services for young children 'to adopt the content and methods of the primary school', with a 'detrimental effect on young children's learning' (OECD, 2001, p.129): inappropriate practice and a narrowing of education to fit the demands of a conservative and cognitively-focused compulsory school sector. It undermines an understanding of the child as a competent learner from birth, willing and able to participate in education; the implied assumption is that education proper only starts at 5 or 6 years, and only in primary school – and that the main task of early childhood education is to ready children 'to progress' to that experience, providing a sort of induction training course.

Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi also warn of the potentially serious consequences of 'schoolification', the downward pressure on early childhood education, for children, for curriculum and for pedagogical work:

There is a great risk that children may be labelled at an earlier age than today, if they are not able to manage the increased requirements. In this situation, the problem is put onto the children, in terms of their lack of ability and competence... Many children learn even when they are thought not able to learn, and unfortunately what they are going to learn at an even earlier age is that they cannot learn...

From international studies, we know that national tests and evaluations seem to be standardising not only the curriculum, but also the teaching content and working methods... [T]he demand for measurable learning outcomes at such an early age can easily lead to a very narrow and simple view of knowledge. One fears that increasing emphasis on evaluation of the child's competence is going to change the view of what is indicative of good pedagogical activity. There is also a fear that the upper levels of the education system would, to an even greater degree, be able to define the content and way of working in the lower levels.

As well as downward pressure on the curriculum and pedagogical methods of early childhood education, 'schoolification' and a readying relationship are today apparent in another way: the spread of compulsory attendance from primary or elementary school to early childhood education. Several European countries have moved in recent years to make attendance compulsory in services for young children, usually for one year preceding the start of school and usually justified in terms of ensuring children's 'school readiness'. Countries that have lowered the age of compulsory attendance in this way are mainly from Central, Eastern and Southern Europe and include: Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Luxembourg, Poland and Romania. But since September 2009, a new measure has been adopted by the Flemish government in Belgium introducing de facto compulsion: a child cannot enrol in the first year of compulsory school (at age 6), unless she has attended *kleuterschool* for at least 220 half days - if she has not, she will need to do a language test and, failing that, will have to attend *kleuterschool*, regardless of having reached the primary school age.

[C]hildren whose home language is not Flemish will have less chance of passing the test. This new measure implies not only that *kleuterschool* is formally expected to prepare children for CSE [compulsory school education], but also that CSE is no longer expected to be able to deal with the diversity of home languages. It also implies that enrolling in the first year of CSE is not an unconditional right anymore, but dependent on earlier attendance at pre-school; a de facto lowering of compulsory school age has been introduced, a measure that is likely to affect ethnic minority children in particular (Vandenbroeck, De Stercke and Gobeyn, 2013, p.181).

The arguments given in favour of such compulsory attendance emphasise 'school readiness', especially for 'disadvantaged' children who, it is argued, are in particular need of additional support to be ready for primary school; under a voluntary system, attendance in services for young children may be over 90 per cent but the small group of children not attending usually includes disproportionate numbers of such 'disadvantaged' children. The arguments against, with which *Children in Europe* agrees, emphasise parents' right to choose whether or not to send their children to early childhood education; and the need for these services to work on reforming themselves to become more responsive and welcoming, so making themselves attractive to all families including those who feel alienated or excluded by unreformed services. Compulsory attendance removes the need for services to be self-critical and innovative.

One final point should be clarified. A strong and equal partnership, as advocated in Principle 9, does not mean that early childhood education need have no interest or role in areas such as literacy and numeracy. It should. But Principle 9 places literacy and numeracy into a wider context of the multiple or 'hundred languages of childhood'¹, which together contribute to rich learning by a rich child; and it argues that what matters is the approach taken to them, recognising that literacy and numeracy call for 'theoretical perspectives and didactical tools that align themselves and are closer to children's own strategies for engaging' with these particular languages (Olsson, forthcoming).

The danger under a 'schoolification' regime is the adoption of a simplistic and narrow approach, which treats literacy and numeracy as if they were the only languages that matter and attempts to instil them in children in an inappropriate and, for many, an ineffective way. The point is made forcefully by Gunilla Dahlberg, the co-author of the 1994 Swedish report, but speaking here about contemporary Sweden:

¹ The 'hundred languages', a theory full of democracy and a metaphor for the extraordinary potential of children, refers 'to the different ways children (human beings) represent, communicate and express their thinking in different media and symbolic systems; languages therefore are the many fonts or geneses of knowledge' (Vecchi, 2010, p.9). These many linguistic possibilities range from mathematical and scientific languages to the poetic languages, 'forms of expression strongly characterized by expressive or aesthetic aspects such as music, song, dance or photography' (ibid.). The choice of a hundred does not denote a precise count, but is intended to be 'very provocative, to claim for all these languages not only the same dignity, but the right to expression and to communicate with each other' (Rinaldi, 2006, p.193).

This preparation for school discourse, which starts in Sweden today, has led in recent years to more talk about mathematics, language, natural sciences – but again in a very simplified way. I mean the idea of learning as transmission of facts, of reproducing knowledge that is already known; rather than learning as a process of meaning making. With this simplified approach, we don't listen to and work with children's strategies for learning, how they make meaning, so we lose a great amount.

Of course, maths, language and science are important. But if we only looked and listened, we'd see, for example, that children in pre-school were using maths all the time. We prefer to test and diagnose at a distance rather than participate to better understand what children are actually doing, for example through pedagogical documentation. We then easily miss the possibility to challenge, deepen and extend children's learning processes. This is why our 1994 paper has sections on 'the investigative child and the investigative teacher' and 'documentation and the reflective teacher' (Dahlberg, 2013, p.88).

What is the EU position?

Children in Europe is not aware of any EU work on or statement about the relationship between early childhood and compulsory education, except for the 2011 Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care, which refers to '[t]he smooth passage from one institution to another (eg pre-primary to primary school) requir[ing] efficient communication between the institutions as well as continuity in terms of content and standards' (European Commission, 2011, p.6). 'Continuity', however, does not define the relationship; it can be achieved in both a readying relationship and a strong and equal partnership – but with very different meaning and implications.

How do we work to create a strong and equal partnership?

A 'strong and equal partnership' will not happen by itself. Indeed it seems that, left to its own devices, the relationship between early childhood and compulsory education will tend to become one of 'readying' or 'preparation', with early childhood education settling into a subservient role, at the beck and call of the demands of a narrow and conservative compulsory education. So to implement a 'strong and equal partnership', careful attention needs paying to what conditions are needed to develop and sustain such a relationship. Two are particularly important.

The first condition, as Principle 9 states the matter, is 'a strong and self-confident early childhood sector', one that has the confidence and capacity to develop and articulate a strong identity expressed through distinctive pedagogical ideas and practices. As a basic precondition, this means a sector that covers a significant period of childhood education, which is why we emphasise the importance of children not entering primary school until they are at least 6 years old. This is the compulsory school age in most EU member states today, though in a few it is younger, at 5 years, whilst in England many children as young as 4 years are admitted to primary school. As noted above, there is also a worrying trend towards lowering the age of compulsory education.

A 'strong and self-confident early childhood sector' also needs a strong and self-confident workforce, able to explicate and contest pedagogical theories and practices; able to adopt research and experimentation as an attitude of mind and a way of approaching their everyday work; and able to work with diversity, democracy and participatory means of evaluation (Principles 4, 6 and 7). A graduate 0-6 profession, enjoying parity in education and employment, with school teachers, is an important first step towards building such a workforce; though while being a necessary condition, it is not sufficient.

Last but not least, a strong and self-confident early childhood sector is more likely in a fully integrated education-based early childhood system for children from birth to 6 years, such as is found today in a number of European countries (e.g. the Nordic

countries and Slovenia). More commonly, though, the early childhood sector in Europe remains divided into separate ‘childcare’ and ‘early education’ parts, the former exclusively or mainly for children under 3 years, the latter for children over 3 years. Such ‘split systems’ produce inequalities and discontinuities, and weaken the sector making it impossible for services for young children to offer a coherent front to compulsory schooling. This is why Principle 5 calls for a ‘single and coherent framework that ensures a common approach and shared conditions across all services for young children in certain key areas.’ An integrated system is no guarantee of a strong and equal partnership, but without it, such a partnership will always struggle to come into being.

As a second condition, serious thought needs to be given to developing the idea of pedagogical meeting places. Where and how could a co-constructive relationship take place between early childhood and compulsory education, through which new and shared understandings might begin to emerge? Where might be the meeting places and how might they be facilitated? To state the question is to recognise the paucity of dialogue and mutual knowledge that currently exists between the two sectors, at least in most countries. Neither shows much interest in or wish to engage with the other.

Furthermore, the meeting place need not be, should not be, confined just to educators. If the vision of a meeting place is a preferred alternative, then participation in that process of constructing new understandings and practices should be as wide-ranging as possible; as well as educators, families and communities, politicians and policy makers need to be part of the relationship and the dialogue – not to forget children and young people. Widening participation in a meeting place may be easier said than done, but the principle should not be in question. The relationship is an issue of democratic politics, not of technical expertise.

Experiences of ‘a strong and equal partnership’

Children in Europe would welcome examples, past and present, of efforts to develop strong and equal partnerships between early childhood and compulsory education.

Next steps

Of all the ten principles in the *Children in Europe* policy paper, none starts from a lower base than Principle 9. Very little serious thought or attention has been given to the relationship between services for young children and compulsory schooling, between early childhood and later forms of education. Or rather little thought or attention has been given to the alternatives that might be considered. In the absence of democratic debate about alternatives, one relationship has been taken-for-granted, early childhood education preparing young children for compulsory education.

So the first and next step must be to open up to the idea that there are alternatives and that these merit careful examination and widespread democratic debate and deliberation. Part of this involves deeper analysis of both forms of education – early childhood and compulsory – to better understand their traditions and identities, their current relationship and what factors may constrain or facilitate future relationships. The 1994 Swedish paper, commissioned by a government committee, provides one example of how such an analysis might be done, organised as it is into two main parts, the first dealing with the ‘pedagogical traditions’ of pre-school and school, and containing an ‘analysis of the defined problem’; the second setting out a possible new relationship, ‘a vision of a possible meeting place’. But there could also be other approaches and other analyses, all feeding into the democratic process of debate and deliberation on the relationship and leading to a negotiated agreement on the preferred relationship.

If the result of this debate and deliberation is agreement to subscribe to Principle 9 - that there should be a strong and equal partnership based on the construction of new and shared understandings in pedagogical meeting places – then the next step must be to create such meeting places and facilitate participation in

them, both by educators from early childhood and compulsory education but also, as we have already said, by others with an interest in and responsibility for public education, a group that potentially includes all citizens. There are many places that could serve as pedagogical meeting places: within formal democratic structures, such as municipalities and parliaments; and outside, through for example the creation of public seminars, 'summer schools' and other public spaces for the practice of a democratic politics of education. Hatcher (2012) proposes one such example, Local Education Forums: 'a body open to all with an interest in education... to discuss and take positions on all key policy issues... and developing, perhaps in a two-year cycle, an Education Plan for the local system of schools and colleges' (p.37-38). While Porto Alegre's School Constituent Assembly, a democratic, deliberative and participatory forum 'to construct the principles that would guide the actions of the municipal educational system' (Gandin and Apple, 2012, p.624), provides an actual example of such a public space.

There should be, too, a place for universities and similar institutions of higher education in this process, both through creating meeting places for academics working in early childhood and compulsory education, but also through providing another source of public space for participatory debate and deliberation.

Last but not least, individual early childhood centres and schools might partner up to create their own local meeting places. One way of using such meeting places would be for educators and parents from partnered centres and schools to work together using pedagogical documentation (see Principle 7) as a means to discuss and analyse their respective images of the child, understandings of learning and pedagogical practices, as a first step towards exploring new and shared images, understandings and practices.

How these meeting places would function, how they could function as spaces for debate and deliberation and construction of new understandings, and how these new understandings could be implemented into educational practice – all these very complex issues need far more work, and above all work based on doing, on people and organisations prepared to experiment with this democratic project of creating a genuinely public education from birth to 18 years and beyond.

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May 2016

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