

# Indicators of Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for Young Refugee Children

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The project *Multilingual Early Childhood Education and Care for Young Refugee Children* (MyREF) received funding from Erasmus+, grant number 2016-1-NL01-KA201-023024

## **Indicators of Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for Young Refugee Children**

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The MyREF project (Multilingual early childhood education and care for young refugee children, funded through the Erasmus+ program) is aimed at documenting existing early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision for young refugee children<sup>1</sup> in four countries: Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway and the UK. What kind of services are provided? What can we say about quality of these services? Are they sufficient to cover the needs of young refugee children?

To be able to assess the quality of specific provision for young refugee children, we will start by looking into what is generally considered as “high quality ECEC”. High quality of ECEC services is important because it leads to higher outcomes in schools and in life for the children who are able to access these services. Although we are aware of the fact that quality is a socially constructed concept and may differ across countries and cultures, we will try to describe some common and widely shared features.

We start by a concise description of the European Quality Framework for ECEC (EQF, 2014)<sup>2</sup>. The EQF offers a comprehensive view on the major elements of quality of ECEC. While it has no legally binding status, the content is highly relevant. We will describe the EQF by sharing some general characteristics of structural and process quality. **Structural quality** is defined by the prerequisites that are partly determined by legislation, funding and the pedagogical policy of the ECEC organisation. Important elements of structural quality are children-to-staff ratio, group size and staff training/education (professional development). **Process quality** is generally described as the processes of children’s everyday experiences. Main ingredients are the interactions that children have with the staff members and with their peers while being involved in play, activities or routines. The richness of interactions can be measured by looking at social, emotional, physical, and instructional aspects.

From general characteristics we will move to specific elements of quality that apply to the project’s target group. At the end of this paper, we will provide a list of indicators of quality for working with young refugee children in ECEC centres, both at the level of the ECEC centre, and at the level of individual professionals or volunteers’ competencies.

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<sup>1</sup> We define young refugee children as children from refugee or asylumseeking families, who have not yet reached the age of compulsory education.

<sup>2</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/eccec-quality-framework\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/eccec-quality-framework_en.pdf)

## **The European quality framework for ECEC**

The EQF was drafted within an EU open-ended working group of governmental and academic experts. It contains 5 principles, each with 2 statements, that cover the current issues at stake in the ECEC debate. All statements are based on research evidence and illustrated by inspiring examples from EU member states. The text of the EQF describes a shared and well-defined view on children and on the role of parents as well as a shared understanding of quality.

The EQF provides an overall view on ECEC quality, while at the same time, leaving a margin for member states to combine this with existing (national) frameworks and quality systems.

An important innovation is that the issue of access is no longer considered as a separate debate as such, but that access is viewed as a fundamental part of quality.

The five principles and their statements are described as follows:

### **Access to ECEC**

#### ***1. Provision that is available and affordable to all families and their children.***

The potential benefits of high-quality universal provision are particularly significant for children from disadvantaged and/or marginalised groups. ECEC provision should be made available from birth to the age at which children start compulsory primary school. To respond to parental circumstances and encourage all families to use ECEC services, provision needs to offer flexibility in relation to opening hours and the content of the programme.

The EQF specifically mentions 'disadvantaged and marginalised groups' as research has shown that the benefits of high quality ECEC are even more clear for these groups than for the average, middle class children so to speak. Additional efforts need to be made to break down existing barriers (financial, cultural, administrative...). Accessibility does not only refer to issues such as availability or affordability; it also refers to provision that is meaningful and useful for families. This includes a certain openness to engage in dialogue with parents with respect to views on child rearing, values and beliefs, and different routines.

#### ***2. Provision that encourages participation, strengthens social inclusion and embraces diversity.***

Successful inclusion in ECEC is based on:

- a collaborative approach to promoting the benefits of ECEC which involves local organisations and community groups
- approaches which respect and value the beliefs, needs and culture of parents
- an assurance that all children and families are welcome in an ECEC setting/centre
- a proactive approach to encouraging all parents to use ECEC services
- a recognition that staff should be trained to help parents and families to value ECEC services and to assure them that their beliefs and cultures will be respected - this training can be supported by parenting programmes which promote ECEC
- close cooperation between the staff in ECEC centres, health and social services, local authorities and the school sector.

For our target group, the benefit of these approaches is that the ECEC provision can be the first step in the 'integration' process, where refugee children and their families can link between their home country, home culture and home language, and the new country, culture and language, for example by having books, music and other media available in different languages. If staff learn how to pronounce the names of children and their parents, this adds to the welcoming feeling. Another function is that ECEC settings serve as meeting places with other children and families. It requires some sensitivity on the part of the people involved. For instance, when speakers of the home language (either volunteers or professional translators) are involved in translating daily matters and questions, they should be instructed not to translate in cases where there are difficult and sensitive issues.

## **The ECEC workforce**

### ***3. Well-qualified staff whose initial and continuing training enables them to fulfil their professional role.***

In general, ECEC staff have a very important influence on children's development. Their specific expertise and competences are key to ensuring the quality of ECEC services. Ideally, ECEC is supported by clear pedagogical frameworks, well-defined professional profiles of ECEC staff's competencies and their pedagogical and educative skills, and by a system of continuing professional development (PD). PD is central to the quality of ECEC services, especially when training and education of staff members is focused on learning and coaching on the job, and peer learning. Through this type of professional development, ECEC providers increasingly become learning organisations, where (self-)reflection and feedback are incorporated in the daily work of staff members.

Recognising the ECEC workforce as professionals is key. Professional development has a huge impact on the quality of staff pedagogy and children's outcomes. Developing common education and training programmes for all staff working in an ECEC context (e.g. preschool teachers, assistants, educators, family day carers etc.) helps to create a shared agenda and understanding of quality. Below, we provide an extensive list of ECEC competencies (skills, knowledge and attitudes) for individual staff members or volunteers. Working with young refugee children requires special attention to working on diversity within the team, making use of multilingualism (for instance by using welcoming words in different first languages), dealing with specific behaviour, mental health and well-being, and being sensitive to emotional distress and possible trauma.

### ***4. Supportive working conditions including professional leadership which creates opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation with parents.***

Good working conditions benefit staff and contribute to their retention. Policy measures affect the structural quality of ECEC provision including locally-determined arrangements for the size of a group; children to adult ratios; working hours and wage levels, which can help to make employment in an ECEC context an attractive option. Good working conditions can also reduce the constant and detrimental staff turnover in ECEC.

A clearly written pedagogical policy plan, adopted and owned by the whole team, contributes to the structural quality of the ECEC centre, since staff know better what they can do to serve all children

and all parents, regardless of their background, culture or physical characteristics. Professional leaders create an environment in which peer coaching and reflective practices are part of the job. For young refugee children it may even be more essential that there are no changes in the team of professionals or volunteers.

## **Curriculum**

### ***5. A curriculum based on pedagogic goals, values and approaches which enable children to reach their full potential in a holistic way.***

Children's education and care as well as their cognitive, social, emotional, physical and language development are important. The curriculum should set common goals, values and approaches which reflect society's expectation about the role and responsibilities of ECEC settings in encouraging children's development towards their full potential. All children are active and capable learners whose diverse competences are supported by the curriculum. At the same time the implementation of the curriculum needs to be planned within an open framework which acknowledges and addresses the diverse interests and needs of children in a holistic manner. A well-balanced combination of education and care can promote children's well-being, positive self-image, physical development and their social and cognitive development. Children's experiences and their active participation are valued, and the significance of learning through play is understood and supported.

### ***6. A curriculum which requires staff to collaborate with children, colleagues and parents and to reflect on their own practice.***

A curriculum (or pedagogical framework) is an important instrument to stimulate the creation of a shared understanding and trust between children; and between children, parents and ECEC staff in order to encourage development and learning. At a system or national level, a curriculum can guide the work of all ECEC settings and contexts – and at a local or setting level, it can describe the practices and priorities in the context of each centre. An essential factor in developing a collaborative approach to the curriculum is the ability of individual staff to analyse their own practice, identify what has been effective and, in partnership with their colleagues, develop new approaches based on evidence. The quality of ECEC is enhanced when staff discuss the implementation of the curriculum within the context of their centre/setting and take account of the needs of the children, their parents and the team. The curriculum can enhance this approach by promoting children's learning through experimentation and innovation, and encouraging cooperation with parents on how ECEC provision contributes to supporting children's development and learning. It combines "play and learn" activities with quieter moments in which children drink, eat, and sleep.

Many young refugee children have been traumatised by their experiences in the home country or during their journey to Europe. High quality ECEC can provide them with a sense of normality and stability.

## **Monitoring and evaluation**

### ***7. Monitoring and evaluating produces information at the relevant local, regional and/or national level to support continuing improvements in the quality of policy and practice.***

Systematic monitoring of ECEC allows for the generation of appropriate information and feedback at the relevant local, regional or national level. This information should support open exchange, coherent planning, review, evaluation and the development of ECEC in the pursuit of high quality at all levels in the system. Monitoring and evaluation are more effective when the information collected at a provider level is aligned with the information collected at a municipal, regional and system level.

### ***8. Monitoring and evaluation which is in the best interest of the child.***

Monitoring and evaluation processes are conducted to support children, families and communities. All stakeholders, including ECEC staff, should be engaged and empowered during the implementation of any monitoring and evaluation process. While monitoring can focus on the quality of structures, processes or outcomes, a focus on the interest of the child and staff engagement strengthens the importance of looking specifically at the quality of the processes used in ECEC settings.

Achieving these statements is easier if the following **governance** arrangements are in place:

### ***9. Stakeholders in the ECEC system have a clear and shared understanding of their role and responsibilities, and know that they are expected to collaborate with partner organisations.***

Given the cross-sectoral nature of ECEC provision, government, stakeholders and social partners need to work together to secure the success of ECEC services. Legislation, regulation and guidance can be used to create clear expectations about the importance of collaborative working which supports high quality outcomes for children, families and local communities.

This calls for clear policy and legislation in relation to ECEC provision for young refugee children, which at the moment of writing is very much lacking in the four countries involved (and in other countries as well (see QUOTE MPI report).

### ***10. Legislation, regulation and/or funding supports progress towards a universal legal entitlement to publicly subsidised or funded ECEC, and progress is regularly reported to all stakeholders.***

Structural or legislative arrangements support access to ECEC by giving families the right to access affordable ECEC provision. Approaches which support progress towards the universal availability of ECEC recognise that providing additional funds to support access for disadvantaged groups can be an effective strategy for increasing access especially for children from migrant, disadvantaged or low-income families. Monitoring the uptake of ECEC ensures that funding is used effectively. In order to make progress towards universal entitlement to provision, measures to emphasise the attractiveness and value of ECEC services need to be in place. In the UK, universal provision is already. The focus on ensuring uptake is important and may need additional funding.

## **Measuring the quality of ECEC**

There are several instruments in use that assess the quality of ECEC. For example, in the Netherlands the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS, see Pianta et al. 2012) has been used since 2017 to measure emotional and educational interaction skills of staff, focusing on the quality of interaction between staff and children. CLASS is being increasingly used across the world, making it possible to compare ECEC systems.

When ECEC quality in different countries and across different age ranges is compared (as measured by using the CLASS), it shows a quite consistent pattern of mid-to-high range scores for emotionally supportive classroom interactions and lower support for children's development and learning across all age ranges and provision.

## List of indicators

Below we present a list of indicators of quality with respect to ECEC provision. We use the list as a checklist for the actual situations that we came across in collecting examples of ECEC for young refugee children. Many of the indicators that are mentioned are the same as for any quality ECEC setting; some are more specific for our target group.

Three functions of ECEC are distinguished:

The **social** function (Vandenbroeck 2009) focuses on social justice issues and therefore is also concerned with parental support and social cohesion. It sees ECEC as meeting places for parents and their children: working towards social inclusion, working towards a social mix and diversity.

The **pedagogical/educational** function is that it provides a safe, warm, stimulating and engaging place for children to play, learn, develop and relate to others (peers and adults).

The **economic** function: ECEC makes it possible for parents to work, and is an instrument that allows parents to be (come) economically active (training, education, job searching, working) and for children to eventually make a positive contribution to the economy. Moreover, failing to address the needs of disadvantaged children at the pre-school stage may require costly remedial measures at a later stage.

We will focus on the social and pedagogical function in our list of indicators. On the level of society at large, there are factors that determine the forms (or forms) of ECEC in a country: political climate, tolerance, views on child rearing, childcare and education. Governments (national or local) are in charge of policy making and policy implementation. They prepare legislation guidelines often based on underlying principles (such as universal or targeted services), and decide on how ECEC is funded. It is remarkable that in the four participating countries there is hardly any evidence of sound and strong policy to establish and organise ECEC for the youngest group of refugee children (although in the Netherlands and in the UK the governments would argue that refugee children are included in respectively targeted programmes (VVE) and universal entitlement).

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| <b>A</b>   | <b>ECEC competencies</b>  |
| <b>I</b>   | <b>Pedagogical skills (and knowledge and attitudes)</b>   |
| <b>I.1</b> | <b>Providing safety and structure in the group</b>  |
| I.1.a      | Being flexible when addressing the needs of children  |
| I.1.b      | Providing the child with their own place and toys in the group to make them feel secure   |
| I.1.c      | Making use of the daily structure, make it visible with pictos and refer to it frequently   |
| I.1.d      | Being consistent about rules and consequences   |
| <b>I.2</b> | <b>Support play &amp; create a playful context</b>  |
| I.2.a      | Introducing play materials  |
| I.2.b      | Introducing yourself and the children in a playful manner   |
| I.2.c      | Playing along with the child, mirroring his/her behaviour, using non-verbal communication   |
| I.2.d      | Introducing new challenges: materials, play ideas   |
| I.2.e      | Not stimulating, but also not correcting undesirable play initiatives (“shooting”), but bending to more desirable play behaviour (e.g. play and seek)                             |
| I.2.f      | Providing play support and knowing the different types of play support: playing along, mirroring, playing and guiding, playing and observing. Introducing different types of play |
| I.2.g      | Having books, music and other media in different languages, referring to different cultures   |
| <b>I.3</b> | <b>Dealing with specific behaviour (e.g. aggressive, rebellion, withdrawn), mental health and wellbeing</b>   |
| I.3.a      | Setting limits to children’s behaviour without judging the child (e.g. not tolerating physical violence)  |
| I.3.b      | Being sensitive to children’s frustration about not understanding what is happening   |
| I.3.c      | Discussing and naming the positive characteristics of a child; not constantly focusing on negative behaviour  |
| I.3.d      | Taking time (children might need several weeks to settle down) and, if necessary, setting very small goals (sometimes a one-on-one teacher-child setting)                         |
| I.3.e      | Using an observation or signalling tool for problematic behaviour   |
| I.3.f      | Involving a behavioural expert if the team’s concern about the child’s behaviour remains  |
| I.3.g      | Being sensitive to children’s emotional distress and possible trauma (from separation, homesickness, conflict)  |
| <b>I.4</b> | <b>Language/ working with absolute beginners</b>  |
| I.4.a      | Not oversimplifying your communication  |
| I.4.b      | Repeating new words to make them sustainable  |
| I.4.c      | Using songs and rhymes  |
| I.4.d      | Labelling objects, action verbs   |
| I.4.e      | Being aware that children start by understanding words and phrases in a second language and are only later able to produce them   |
| I.4.f      | Whenever possible, making use of first language speakers (for instance the parents, bilingual teachers etc.) to communicate   |
| I.4.g      | Making use of gestures, pictures, concrete objects, visual cues, digital resources  |
| <b>I.5</b> | <b>Program</b>  |
| I.5.a      | Working (or not) with a preschool programme or a curriculum, based on pedagogical goals, values and approaches  |
| I.5.b      | Working with specific themes: welcome rituals, interculturality, cultural sensitivity. Being aware of judgemental behaviour   |
| I.5.c      | Having a carefully planned structure of the day: a balanced mixture of circle time, guided activities/ play& learn activities, free play  |

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| I.5.d   | Alternating between full group and small group activities. If necessary also organising one-on-one activities   |
| I.5.e   | Targeting all developmental areas   |
| I.5.f   | Following and observing children  |
| I.5.g   | Differentiating between levels/ developmental needs of children   |
| <b>ECEC competencies (continued)</b>  |   |
| <b>II Parents</b>   |   |
| <b>II.1 Language and communication</b>  |   |
| II.1.a  | Practising the pronunciation of new names of children and their parents   |
| II.1.b  | Realising that the activities you do with children in the centre/ play group, you can do with parents too: learning some basic words in the home language, using pictos and pictures  |
| II.1.c  | Involving speakers of the home language to translate simple daily matters and questions (but not to translate in cases where there are difficult and sensitive issues)  |
| II.1.d  | Making use of film and pictures to show parents how the child is doing in the group   |
| II.1.e  | Encouraging parents to communicate with the child in their home language, or, if possible, in the language of the host country  |
| <b>II.2 Supporting children and parents in separation/farewell processes</b>        |   |
| II.2.a  | Giving space to families to communicate in their own language, with each other and with other speakers of their home language   |
| II.2.b  | Inviting parents to stay in the group to observe the daily practice   |
| II.2.c  | Finding ways to make the farewell/separation as easy as possible: providing space for parents in another room, experimenting with short moments of separation, asking the parent to leave a coat/bag/shawl etc. in the group to show that he/she will return soon |
| II.2.d  | Being aware of the possibility of regressive behaviour in the child after several days or weeks   |
| <b>II.3 Room for parents in the group and in the centre</b>                         |   |
| III.3.a   | Providing space for parents in the group (chance for role modelling) and in the centre  |
| III.3.b   | Inviting them regularly to join activities in the group and outings   |
| III.3.c   | Acknowledging and making use of familiar cultural and individual practices, beliefs and lifestyles in the preschool setting   |
| <b>II.4 Cooperating with parents on child development and educational practices</b> |   |
| II.4.a  | Acknowledging that there are stress factors in many refugee families and be realistic. Knowing that when parents begin to feel safe, their children may feel that too   |
| II.4.b  | Planning a meeting, with an interpreter at hand, to discuss activities that parents can do at home  |
| II.4.c  | Informing yourself about the upbringing/ pedagogical style of the parents and how they respond to certain behaviour   |
| II.4.d  | Discussing openly with parents how they can support the child's development at home   |
| II.4.e  | Involving other adults who are important to the child, such as an older brother or grandmother  |
| II.4.f  | Explaining views on childcare and what positive impact it may have on the child and the parents   |
| II.4.g  | Arranging informal parent meetings, where newcomers are welcomed to engage with others and vice versa   |

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| <b>ECEC centre</b>  |
| <b>Centre policy</b>  |
| Having a sound care policy, extra paraprofessional support, emotional safety  |
| Looking into the different barriers (cultural, financial, emotional, ...) for vulnerable groups and working towards breaking them down.   |
| Reaching out to other services and centres. Cooperating and networking with refugee reception centres, integration centres, preventive health centres, schools, ...                             |
| Being a learning organisation (team learning, professional development, observing each other's work settings, critical reflection)  |
| Reaching and maintaining quality  |
| Developing an explicit policy on parent involvement   |
| Developing a policy in which diversity is considered to be an asset and setting up concrete actions on this issue   |
| Having a carefully planned group composition (inclusive groups with SEN children and or refugee children, versus exclusive groups)  |
| Having a carefully planned group size and adult/child ratio   |
| Having a system in place for following and observing children   |
| Having a specific and adapted intake and familiarisation procedures   |
| Investing in diversity within the team (including e.g. learning trajectories for parents, who have come from other countries)   |
| <b>Sensitive intake</b>   |
| Making parents feel at home. Making it clear that they play an important in the development and education of their child. Making it clear that you are there to help and support them with that |
| Providing professional translation (in person or by phone)  |
| Focusing on essential information concerning the child: safety & health, particularities in the child's development and behaviour, daily habits and routines                                    |
| Gathering essential background data about parents: educational background, literacy level, professional background  |
| Introducing consent forms (privacy of data, pictures etc.)  |
| Obtaining information on the migration history (what happened on the way to Europe), without pushing the parents too much (balancing between 'nice to know' and 'need to know')                 |
| Showing parents what the daily routines in the group are, by using pictures and pictos, and inquiring about daily routines at home  |
| Communicating explicitly about rules, about your expectations towards parents and informing oneself about theirs (allowing some flexibility)  |
| Giving parents time, being patient and flexible (e.g. about irregular attendance)   |
| <b>Preparation of staff and environment</b>   |
| Organising team meeting(s) about what to expect from refugee families and how to relate to them   |
| Having cultural sensitivity, open-mindedness, a welcoming attitude  |
| Appointing one staff member as a steady contact person for a family   |
| <b>Space / furniture / materials</b>  |
| Considering elements in the environment that cause toxic stress (noise levels)  |
| Having a carefully planned "structured" environment (not causing unrest)  |
| Making use of developmental appropriate materials   |
| Having cultural awareness (multicultural materials, furniture, props, books)  |
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