



Peer Review on "Furthering quality and flexibility of Early Childhood Education and Care"

Copenhagen, Denmark, 13-14 December 2018

Executive Summary

The Peer Review provided an opportunity for exploring the challenges and ongoing policy initiatives to increase the quality and flexibility of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The discussion mainly focused on how policies are set in place to improve and assess the quality of ECEC systems, on the measures to ensure the flexibility of ECEC for families and how aims concerning pedagogy, learning, development, well-being and *bildung* are set and achieved.

The starting point of the Peer Review was Denmark's reform package aiming at strengthening and improving the quality of ECEC. Denmark has a long tradition of ECEC and virtually all children aged zero to six years old participate in some form of ECEC on a daily basis for five to seven hours in either childminding, nursery or kindergarten. In June 2017, the Danish Government adopted the political agreement 'Strong ECEC – all children should be included in communities' aiming at increasing the quality and flexibility of ECEC facilities for families. This agreement focused in particular on the following three areas: flexibility and freedom of choice for families with children, better learning and well-being for all children and cohesiveness of children's life, and high quality through professionalism and clear leadership.

Special attention was also paid to the EU Quality Framework for ECEC, its key areas and its ten core indicators. Participants were invited to reflect on which areas and indicators are the focus of their policy measures and initiatives related to improving quality of ECEC facilities and highlight any recent shifts in priority areas and challenges causing these shifts.

The event was hosted by the Ministry for Children and Social Affairs of Denmark and brought together government representatives from six Member States, namely Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Germany, Luxembourg and Malta, as well as an independent expert, a thematic expert, interest organisation representatives (BUPL) and an NGO representative. Other participants included representatives from the European Commission and the Mutual Learning Services team.

The key policy messages from the Peer Review can be summarised as follows:

EU and national approaches to ECEC

- Across the EU in the last years, the focus of ECEC policies has widened in scope from a main focus on increasing labour market participation (of mothers) (EU Lisbon Strategy, 2000) to in addition ensuring that ECEC can actually benefit the child's development and provide children the best start in life.
- Each ECEC system and its reform initiatives, developed with the aim of improving quality, are very much shaped by a country's cultural values (including views on what is in the best interest of the child), institutional framework, historic evolution as well as participation rates, educational attainment at higher levels of education and labour market participation rate of mothers.

- As regards the institutional framework, the unitary system was considered by participants to be a facilitator to building up a comprehensive approach towards improving quality in ECEC. Having only one ministry responsible for ECEC provisions was considered to allow easier coordination between relevant ministry departments as well as facilitating transitions from one setting to another.

The principles of the ECEC Quality Framework proposal

- The priority areas identified in the 2014 ECEC Quality Framework proposal adopted by the European Commission are Access, Workforce, Curriculum, Evaluation and Monitoring and Governance and Funding.
- Among the five key areas, 'access', considered also as a tool for social inclusion, remains a key priority across participant countries. Ensuring quality alongside access increasingly becomes a central point of attention. Workforce, as another priority area, is a challenging area as the quality of the workforce has to be ensured alongside sufficient supply to meet increasing demand.
- Two indicators of the ECEC Quality Framework were considered to be missing from the list of core indicators: indicator 10 (ratio of children to staff) and indicator 11 (time assigned to staff for preparation and reflection).

Policy approaches to improve and assess the quality of ECEC systems

- Quality ECEC requires quality workforce. In order to ensure the quality of the workforce, it is key to raise staff qualifications and skills (raising the qualification standards and organising upskilling sessions for the pedagogues) and improve their working conditions. The profession of pedagogue should be made more attractive and retention can be increased through pay rises amongst other initiatives. Other important aspects with regard to creating more favourable working conditions relate to establishing a balance between contact and non-contact time in order to give the pedagogue the possibility to prepare the activities and keeping children in comfortable group sizes.
- Quality in ECEC is difficult to define and consists of many elements; hence measuring quality in ECEC is very challenging. Moreover, it is difficult to establish causal links between specific measures and outcomes of ECEC which are rather the effects of a combination of several measures, alongside other external factors.
- A lack of evaluation may contribute to the perception that measures introduced by governments are not binding. It is desirable to create an 'evaluation culture' and avoid that evaluation and monitoring are used and perceived as merely control measures. The creation of an evaluation culture involves having a framework legislation reflecting freedom in filling in the concept of quality. This entails a shift in the approach to monitoring and evaluation in which responsibility is transferred to the implementing levels. For instance, it is desirable to promote internal reviews that encourage self-reflection among practitioners. The use of 'critical friends' (e.g. external researcher) can support the process. In some Member States, such as Luxembourg, funding is linked to the performance ('punitive' approach).
- The commitment of various stakeholders is important: for example, parents are considered to be crucial partners for collaboration and it is desirable to engage them closely in a wide range of school activities and more formal collaboration, such as through a Board of Parents, thus creating co-ownership of building quality in ECEC.

Ensuring that ECEC facilities are sufficiently flexible for families

- The main challenges experienced in relation to flexibility of ECEC for families are: the need for care during non-conventional hours; allowing free choice between family-based and facility-based care while promoting ECEC participation among families; and the right of choice between a variety of offers that can cause pressure on the system.
- The measures undertaken by the Member States consist mainly of extending care to early morning, evenings, and weekends, delivered by either flexible centres (such as is

being planned in Malta) or through a combination of these with home-based provision ('combined-care' model such as in Denmark).

- The expected outcomes from flexible ECEC facilities are an increase in the participation of women in the labour market and the ability to meet the fact that families are different and value different things concerning ECEC. On the other hand, it is important to ensure that the benefits of ECEC also apply to children that do not currently attend regular opening hours.

Achieving quality with the pedagogical curriculum

- Across the EU there are different degrees to which a national framework and guidelines can be applied autonomously at local level. A higher level of autonomy is an opportunity to tailor the implementation of national broader guidelines and to adapt to local needs, however there might be issues to ensure the same quality. Several tools are available to support the implementation of the curriculum at local level (e.g. guides, information workshops, local consultants). In any case the cooperation between different levels (central, municipal) is extremely important.
- In a high number of countries there have been recent shifts in the priority themes of the curriculum with an increased focus on the child as the 'co-leader' of his/her own development and a children's perspective. Another element is the change in terms of the focus of the objectives: while previously the objectives focused on the learning results of the child, now the objectives are set in terms of the creation of an adequate learning environment. There is also a focus on the importance of free play, appropriately balanced with pre-academic activities.
- An increasingly prioritised area is language, as well as promoting intercultural skills (understanding of cultural and religious differences). The objectives of the curriculum are usually linked to social relations, communities, personal development, active participation, creativity, movement, natural sciences and technology.
- Curriculum does not usually differentiate for children with additional needs but in some countries, such as Bulgaria and Germany, there is additional funding to help meet 'local' needs (e.g. programme for learning the language of the country).
- Countries use different means to monitor and evaluate curriculum implementation by ECEC providers (e.g. regional agents advising on the content and the formulation of the concept and validation from the Ministry, inspectors checking that the curriculum is implemented in the different settings, survey for the pedagogues on the implementation of the curriculum etc.). The means used across countries differ highly in terms of periodicity and indicators covered.