

INCLUSIVE PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION (IPPE) PROJECT: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

There has been increasing international agreement (EU, OECD, UNESCO) that **Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)/Pre-Primary Education (PPE)** has long-lasting positive effects on children's development and that a quality ECEC/PPE experience is indeed an essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability. It has been further shown that there are greater benefits for children at risk of disadvantage, whether related to social or economic status (Frawley, 2014) or disability (Hebbeler et al., 2007). Indeed, the EU 2020 Strategy in 2009 set as one of its goals that at least 95 per cent of children between the age of four and the age of compulsory primary education should participate in ECEC/PPE. High quality ECEC/PPE is seen as essential to the achievement of two other EU 2020 targets: reducing early school leaving to below 10 per cent and lifting at least 20 million people from poverty and social exclusion.

The Agency has already been involved in two projects related to **Early Childhood Intervention**, one between 2003 and 2004, followed by an update project in 2009–2010. An important conclusion of the second project was that:

Access to universally available, high-quality and inclusive ECEC services is the first step of a long-term process towards inclusive education and equal opportunities for all in an inclusive society. (European Agency, 2010)

The use of the term *high-quality* is very important: research has shown that mere attendance in PPE can have long lasting detrimental rather than a positive influence on children's development (OECD, 2012). It is only when the PPE provision has the characteristics of a *quality* PPE service that positive outcomes are assured for the child.

Project Goals

The main goal of the new Inclusive Pre-Primary Education (IPPE) project is to identify, analyse and subsequently promote the main characteristics of quality



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inclusive pre-primary education for all pupils. Thus the focus will be on structures and processes at PPE level that can ensure a systemic approach to providing high quality Inclusive Pre-Primary Education in mainstream PPE provision that effectively meets the academic and social learning needs of all the learners from the school's local community. At the same time, the project will identify which children are regarded as being at risk of disadvantage and exclusion in the different countries, how these are identified, how their strengths and needs are assessed, and the impact of such procedures, and how they are enabled to participate equally in quality IPPE.

Definitions of main concepts

The main concepts used in this project are: IPPE, children at risk, target groups, quality provision and its measurement.

Pre-Primary Education

The project is focused on IPPE. According to OECD/EU/UNESCO-IUS (2015), ECEC and Pre-primary education refer to a wide range of programmes aimed at the early physical, cognitive, social and emotional development of children, from birth until they enter primary school. However, ECEC is seen as referring mainly to 0-2 years, whereas Pre-primary refers to ages 3 to the start of primary school. This project is focused on PPE provision for ages 3 years to the start of compulsory schooling.

Inclusive Provision

The Agency views inclusive education as a systemic approach to providing high quality education in mainstream schools that effectively meets the academic and social learning needs of all the learners from the school's local community.

Target Groups

The Project is focused on the promotion of a quality IPPE experience for all children 3 years to compulsory schooling. However, it also has a specific focus on the

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improvement of the quality of the IPPE experience of and outcomes for children at risk of disadvantage.

This, however, will be addressed indirectly by targeting the improvement of IPPE structures and processes through IPPE policy makers at EU and national levels as well as the stakeholders in IPPE provision at local levels.

Children at Risk of Disadvantage

The Project adopts the definition given by the EU: 'Children can be at risk of disadvantage because of their individual circumstances or because they, or their families belong to a group which is disadvantaged in society. These children may include those with disabilities, with mental health problems, in alternative care, at risk of neglect/abuse, undocumented child migrants/asylum seekers, those whose families live in poverty or are socially disadvantaged, those whose families have a migrant and/or second language background, those whose families have limited access to services, Roma and traveller children' (Quality Framework, 2014, p.68).

Quality Provision

There is no internationally agreed concept of quality in ECEC/IPPE services. The Project will be seeking to identify quality standards used by the different countries by adopting the EU Working Group's (EC, 2014) identification of 'areas of action for improving quality', alternatively termed 'policy levers' by the OECD (2012), namely: access and procedure, workforce, curriculum/content, evaluation and monitoring, governance and funding.

Measurement of Quality

The Project uses the measurement model suggested by the EU, OECD and other researchers in the area, namely that of Structural, Process and Outcome Quality of the service in relation to the five areas for action identified by – access, procedure and participation, workforce, curriculum/ content, evaluation and monitoring, governance and funding.

Structural Quality refers to how the IPPE overarching system is designed and organised – including standards associated with the accreditation and approval of



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individual IPPE settings, e.g. Inclusive Access to quality services; Well qualified and supported staff; Quality curriculum design; Quality physical environment; Quality health and safety requirements; Quality leadership and management – including monitoring and evaluation.

Process Quality refers to those elements that influence the everyday nature of IPPE settings and directly influence the quality of the education program experienced by each child, e.g. Quality of interactions and relationships between children and IPPE staff; Quality implementation of inclusive curricula that support all children's wellbeing, and active learning and development; Inclusive collaborative connections with family and community.

Outcome Quality refers to the benefits obtained from IPPE by children, families and society. Long term outcomes have been assessed through relating IPPE experiences to school achievement at primary and secondary levels as well as the level of early school leaving and employment (see e.g. European Commission/EACEA /Eurydice/ Eurostat, 2014). The IPPE project will focus on shorter term impact in terms of children's wellbeing, physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional development within the period of PPE itself.

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