

EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION (ECI) KEY POLICY MESSAGES

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the main conclusions and recommendations of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (the Agency) analysis on Early Childhood Intervention (ECI). This includes a summary of the progress and key developments that have taken place in this field at both policy and practical level within the participating Agency countries since 2005.

At global and European levels, it is recognised that there is a clear link between a poor or disadvantaged background and low educational achievement; families from such backgrounds have been shown to benefit most from access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services. The European Council's targets for 2010 were to provide childcare to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and to at least 33% of children under 3 years of age (European Parliament, 2011).

Early Childhood Intervention Trends at European and International Level

The results of the Agency's work take into account the most recent developments in the field of ECI at European and international level (European Commission, 2010 and 2011; European Parliament, 2011; United Nations, 2006; WHO, 2011) and the Agency analysis has equally been recognised within several key policy documents (for example European Parliament, 2011; European Commission, 2011).

The current trends in the area of ECI highlight a number of key issues. High quality early childhood education and care can make a strong contribution – through enabling and empowering all children to realise their potential – to achieving two of the Europe 2020 headline targets in particular, namely reducing early school leaving to below 10% and lifting at least 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion. The Europe 2020 strategy cannot be achieved unless all children are given an adequate start in life.

The main priorities and key elements of ECI policies and practice focus upon:

Access to universal and inclusive ECEC: Access to universally available, high-quality and inclusive ECEC services is beneficial for all. ECEC offers the potential for greater inclusion of children with SEN, paving the way for their later inclusion into mainstream schools (European Commission, 2011).

Governance of ECEC: A systemic approach to ECEC services means strong collaboration between the different policy sectors, such as education, employment, health and social policy. This requires a coherent vision that is shared by all stakeholders, including parents, a common policy framework with consistent goals across the system and clearly defined roles and responsibilities at central and local levels (European Commission, 2011).

Quality of ECEC: ECEC services should be designed and delivered to meet the full range of needs of all children: cognitive, emotional, social and physical. Acquiring non-cognitive skills (such as perseverance, motivation, ability to interact with others) in the early years is essential for all future learning and successful social engagement. High-quality ECEC services are complementary to, rather than a substitute for, a strong welfare system (European Commission, 2011).

Child-centred approach: The early years of childhood are critical for cognitive, sensory and motor development, affective and personal development and language acquisition, and for laying the foundations for lifelong learning (European Parliament, 2011).



Engagement with parents: Parents, both mothers and fathers, are equal partners in ECEC. ECEC services should be fully participative, involving all staff, parents and, where possible, children themselves (European Parliament, 2011).

Staff: Staff competences are key to high quality ECEC. The range of issues tackled by ECEC staff and the diversity of the children in their charge requires continuous reflection on pedagogical practice as well as a systemic approach to professionalisation of the staff involved (European Commission, 2011).

The Agency Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) Project¹

The 2010 ECI project involved 35 experts from 26 countries², including policy makers responsible for early childhood intervention and professionals in the area.

The aim of the project analysis was to build upon the main outcomes of the first Agency analysis (2003–2004) and provide an overview of the main progress and developments in the area of Early Childhood Intervention at the European level since 2005.

The 2005 Agency project analysis highlighted the importance of ECI at both policy and professional levels and proposed a model of ECI in which health, education and social sectors are directly involved. This model of ECI focuses on child development and the impact of social interaction upon human development in general and on children in particular. It also constitutes a shift from the traditional form of intervention that principally focuses on the child, to an extended approach involving the child, their family and the environment. This shift corresponds to the evolution of a broader range of concepts in the disability field, namely a move from a medical to a social model.

In line with this emerging model, the following operational definition of ECI was proposed and agreed upon by the group of experts who worked on both the first Agency analysis and the project update: ECI is a composite of services/provisions for very young children and their families, provided at their request at a certain time in a child's life, covering any action undertaken when a child needs special support to:

- Ensure and enhance her/his personal development;
- Strengthen the family's own competences, and
- Promote the social inclusion of the family and the child.

The five elements identified in the analysis as relevant to this model and requiring effective implementation are all interconnected and cannot be considered in isolation from each other:

Availability: A shared aim of ECI and a general priority in all countries is to reach all children and families in need of support as early as possible.

Proximity: Support services should reach all members of the target population and be made available as close as possible to families, both at local and community levels.

Affordability: Services should be offered free of charge or at minimal cost to families by means of public funds from health, social or education authorities, or through non-government organisations including non-profit associations.

¹ More information is available from: <http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/early-childhood-intervention>

² Austria, Belgium (French speaking community), Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom (England and Northern Ireland)



Interdisciplinary working: Professionals in charge of direct support to young children and their families belong to different disciplines (professions) and consequently have diverse backgrounds according to the service they are connected with. Interdisciplinary work facilitates the exchange of information among team members.

Diversity of services: This element is closely connected to the diversity of disciplines involved in ECI. The involvement of three services – health, social services and education – is a common characteristic in various countries, but also constitutes one of the main differences.

The results of the 2005 Agency analysis highlighted that 'ECI relates to the right of every young child and their family to receive the support they might need. ECI aims to support and empower the child, the family and the services involved. It helps to build an inclusive and cohesive society that is aware of the rights of children and their families' (p. 3).

Project Findings and Recommendations

The main findings from the analysis in 2010 clearly support the three priorities highlighted in previous work:

The need to reach all populations in need of ECI: This priority relates to the common aim and priority across all participating countries to reach all children and families in need of support as early as possible.

The need to ensure equal and quality standards of provision: This priority relates to the need to have clearly defined quality standards for ECI services and provision. Furthermore, the development of mechanisms to evaluate and ensure adherence to quality standards would improve the effectiveness of ECI services and ensure the same quality of service provision nationwide, despite geographical differences.

The need to respect the rights and needs of children and their families: This priority relates to the need to create family focused and responsive services. These services will work for children and families and involve parents at every level of planning and developing ECI services for their children.

Four concrete recommendations emerge from the ECI project work. These relate to:

1. Legislation and policy measures: A significant number of acts, regulations, decrees and other policy measures have been adopted since 2004/2005, which illustrates the active involvement of policy and decision-makers and their commitment to ECI. Legislation and policy are the first steps in the process, however, the effective implementation and monitoring of policy measures are as important as the measures themselves.

2. Role of professionals: The key role to be played by professionals involved at different levels of the ECI process was identified. This role relates to:

- The way information is provided to families;
- The training programmes undertaken in order to be able to work in a multidisciplinary team, share common criteria and objectives and work effectively with families.

3. The need to have an ECI co-ordinator or key-worker between several services: This would guarantee co-ordination between services, professionals and with families.



4. Improving co-ordination across and within sectors: There are a number of possible reasons for the insufficient co-ordination of ECI services. Provision involves various sectors (health, social, education) with different working cultures, philosophical differences and funding systems and professionals from a range of disciplines and backgrounds. The family should be at the centre with services co-ordinated around them.

Areas for Further Policy Development

Despite the progress that has taken place over the last few years in Europe, in terms of the implementation of favourable ECI policy measures, the design and delivery of quality ECEC services and the provision and enhanced co-ordination of services, there remain a number of key policy issues that require further examination. In considering the European level policy priorities along with the findings of the ECI project, it is argued that more work is required to ensure that ECI is implemented in an equal and efficient way. The following areas require particular attention:

Comprehensive strategy: ECI services, however good, can only partially compensate for family poverty and socio-economic disadvantage. In order to increase the long-term benefits of high-quality ECI for children from a disadvantaged background, ECI must be linked to initiatives in other policy areas as part of a comprehensive strategy (employment, housing, health, etc.).

Quality standards: There should be clearly defined quality standards for ECI services and provision to improve ECI across the EU by complementing the existing quantitative targets. Mechanisms for evaluating ECI provision and ensuring that quality standards are met would improve ECI services.

Public spending and investment: ECI tends to receive less attention and lower investment than any other stage of education, despite clear evidence that ECI is more effective and cost-efficient than intervention at a later stage. It is necessary to ensure that funding is used in the most efficient way.

Qualified staff: Attracting, educating, and retaining suitably qualified staff is a great challenge as trends in the integration of childcare and education are increasing staff professionalisation. Professional standards should be increased by introducing recognised qualifications for those working in the ECI field. There should also be a focus on the issues of curricular quality and appropriateness and ways of analysing and learning from good experiences.

Concluding Comments

The main message from the ECI project is that despite efforts made by all countries and progress appearing at all levels, more work needs to be done to ensure that the main principle is reached – the right of every child and her/his family to receive the support they might need. 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.

References

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