

EARLY MATTERS

European Symposium on Improving Early Childhood Education and Care

Organised in cooperation with the EENEE and NESSE networks of experts

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Symposium Conclusions

Investing in quality ECEC is crucial, as it is at this stage that the foundations are laid for subsequent learning and achievements, and also because investing in quality ECEC provision is shown to contribute to breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Within the EU, different realities can be observed across Member States in enrolment rates, supply, quality, resources, approach and governance of ECEC. This symposium left little doubt that ECEC is crucial and requires more funding and support.

Since 2006, a series of European policy documents and events¹ have highlighted the importance of quality ECEC provision. Drawing on evidence from research, these initiatives have called for generalised implementation, supported by investment. They have encouraged Member States to support all forms of early childhood intervention and to improve their quality. In this context of growing momentum, **this symposium aimed to:**

- underline the importance of quality ECEC, not only as a means to facilitate the participation of mothers in the labour force, but also as a way of fostering children's well-being, social, emotional, physical and cognitive development and of promoting equality and inclusion;
- raise awareness of the variety of provision across EU Member States and to point to evidence that can help all the actors involved to promote sound policy-making in this field;
- debate with the research community, EU Member State authorities and other important actors the most critical factors and issues in improving access, funding and quality, and thus to identify priorities for future European policy cooperation, particularly through mutual learning.

This symposium brought together European and national policy-makers, representatives of European stakeholder organisations, practitioners, other actors, international organisations and members of the research community. The following are some **key conclusions** emerging from the symposium:

1. **Quality ECEC is at the heart of the Lisbon Strategy.** Improving pre-primary provision and widening access to it are potentially the most important contributions that school systems can make to improving opportunities for all and for achieving the Lisbon goals of sustainable economic growth and social cohesion.
2. **The benefits from high-quality ECEC are wide-ranging and multilevel,** economic and social, for individuals and for societies.
3. Evidence shows that **quality early childhood interventions** can bring the highest rates of return (for individuals) over the whole lifelong learning process, especially for the most disadvantaged. Moreover, it shows that investing in quality pre-primary education generates **the highest medium and long-term returns for public budgets.**
4. **Quality ECEC can contribute to long-term economic well-being,** although these claims may be exaggerated and cannot be considered in isolation from other societal factors.
5. **Quality ECEC provides a solid foundation for more effective future learning.** It has long-lasting benefits in terms of achievement and socialisation during individuals' schooling and careers.

¹ These include: the 2006 Commission's Communication [Efficiency and Equity in European Education and Training Systems](#) (and the relevant [Council Conclusions](#)); the 2007 [European Parliament Resolution](#) on the same topic; the [2008 Joint Progress Report](#) of the Commission and the Council on the implementation of the "Education & Training 2010" Work Programme; the 2008 Commission [Communication "Improving Competences for the 21st Century: an agenda for European cooperation on schools"](#); and the 2008 [Green Paper](#) on "Education & Mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems".

6. **Quality is crucial:** Evidence shows that ECEC services can enhance children's subsequent school performance if they are of a high quality but may impair it if they are of a low quality. Poor quality ECEC may do more harm than good and increase inequalities.
7. It is not only the disadvantaged who benefit from ECEC. While it reduces negative effects for the disadvantaged, **quality ECEC produces positive effects for all young children** and socialises them for starting school, especially children from poor or migrant families.
8. Ensuring equity of access for all in quality ECEC is essential. However, **improving access without quality is of little merit.** Quality ECEC provision means a lot more than simply creating more places.
9. Universal access to quality ECEC for all seems to be **more beneficial than targeted interventions** focused on vulnerable groups. Targeting often raises problems of boundary and stigmatisation.
10. **Child poverty impacts severely** on children's well-being, on their educational performance, and on their sense of self-worth. ECEC services, however good, can only marginally compensate for family poverty and exclusion.
11. According to the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**, all young children have the *right* to protection, provision and participation in ECEC services. The UNCRC requires rethinking of the nature of ECEC services provided and of how children experience them.
12. There is a need to **integrate childcare provision and pre-school education** (and also other services to support child well-being) in a holistic way covering ages 0 to 6. The aim should be holistic (cognitive, social, physical and emotional) child development and well-being rather than early "scholarisation".
13. The outcomes for young children are multi-causal. **ECEC policies cannot proceed effectively without coordination with other sectors** (such as family policy, improving equality, employment, housing, or access to healthcare). Investments should be made on the whole spectrum of policies that affect young children's lives.
14. ECEC provision crosses administrative barriers. **Coordinated policy development is a challenge.**
15. **An important factor for quality in ECEC provision** is the good training, good pay, good working conditions and motivation of staff and the support they are given. Attracting, training and retaining suitably qualified staff is a key challenge.
16. In order to identify what matters most for quality and possibly develop indicators in the future, several **other key elements in promoting quality** improvement in ECEC provision need to be considered, including:
 - the content/curriculum of provision, including issues of dealing with diversity and personalisation
 - the child/staff ratio
 - the involvement of parents and of the wider community
 - the organisation of care/education in terms of age of entry, and the full-time/part-time and compulsory/voluntary nature of systems
 - the governance structures necessary for regular programme monitoring and assessment, system accountability and quality assurance.
17. **Funding models impact on system quality.**
18. **There is a need for more European, collaborative research on ECEC** (quantitative and qualitative) to support policy-making in this field. European comparative and longitudinal research could enhance our perspectives both at a European and national level. Its aims should include the collection of comparable data across *all* Member States.
19. **Improving ECEC provision requires political commitment.** Governments need to believe in ECEC- and to invest in it.