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REPORT

on Early Years Learning in the European Union
(2010/2159(INI))

Committee on Culture and Education

Rapporteur: Mary Honeyball

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MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION

on Early Years Learning in the European Union (2010/2159(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,
- having regard to Article 14 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union,
- having regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular Articles 3, 18 and 29 thereof,
- having regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,
- having regard to Decision No 1720/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 November 2006 establishing an action programme in the field of lifelong learning¹,
- having regard to the Commission communication entitled ‘Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow’ (COM(2011)0066),
- having regard to the Commission communication to the Council and to Parliament entitled ‘Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems’ (COM(2006)0481),
- having regard to the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee of 20 January 2010 on early childhood care and education²,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 11 May 2010 on the social dimension of education and training³,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 26 November 2009 on the education of children with a migrant background⁴,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (‘ET 2020’)⁵,
- having regard to the ‘Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council of 21 November 2008 on preparing young people for the 21st century: an agenda for European cooperation on

¹ OJ L 327, 24.11.2006, p. 45.

² OJ C 339, 14.2.2010, p. 1.

³ OJ C 135, 26.5.2010 p. 2.

⁴ OJ C 301, 11.12.2009, p. 5.

⁵ OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, p. 2.

schools’⁶,

- having regard to the conclusions of the Barcelona European Council of 15 and 16 March 2002,
 - having regard to its resolution of 23 September 2008 on improving the quality of teacher education⁷,
 - having regard to its resolution of 24 March 2009 on ‘Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment’⁸,
 - having regard to Rule 48 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Culture and Education (A7-0099/2011),
- A. whereas children’s early learning lays the foundation for successful lifelong learning, which is central to the achievement of the Europe 2020 targets,
- B. whereas children in their earliest years are particularly curious, receptive and willing to learn, and whereas important skills such as the ability to speak and express oneself, as well as social skills, are formed at this age; whereas it is at this age that the foundations for the child’s future educational and occupational career are laid,
- C. whereas throughout the EU, early childhood education and care (ECEC) is provided in different ways, with various definitions of ‘quality’ which depend heavily on states’ and regions’ cultural values and their interpretation of ‘childhood’,
- D. whereas there is a clear link between a poor and disadvantaged background and low educational achievement, and whereas families from such backgrounds have been shown to benefit most from access to ECEC services; whereas these disadvantaged groups are less likely to seek access to ECEC services owing to issues of availability and affordability,
- E. whereas ECEC tends to receive less attention and lower investment than any other stage of education, despite clear evidence that investment in it brings great returns,
- F. whereas ECEC targets are often overly labour-market-driven, focusing too heavily on the need to increase the numbers of women in work and too loosely on the needs and best interests of the child,
- G. whereas many households have major difficulties in reconciling family obligations with the constraints of work linked to current changes in the labour market, such as the trend for employees to be required to work atypical and flexible hours and the rise of insecure jobs,
- H. whereas there is a direct link between the well-being of parents and children and the

⁶ OJ C 319, 13.12.2008, p. 20.

⁷ OJ C 8 E, 14.1.2010, p. 12.

⁸ OJ C 117 E, 6.5.2010, p. 59.

provision, in terms of both quantity and quality, of early years services,

- I. whereas childcare has traditionally been seen as the natural activity of women, which has led to a predominance of women working in the ECEC field,
- J. whereas staff qualifications vary markedly between Member States and between types of providers, and whereas in most Member States there is no obligation on pre-school providers to employ staff with specific qualifications,
- K. whereas there has been very little research undertaken at EU level on young children's education which can inform the development and implementation of EU-wide ECEC policies,

Child-centred approach

- 1. Welcomes the following targets set in the conclusions of the Barcelona European Council: 'to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age'; argues, however, that the Council and the Commission must revise and update these targets, putting the needs and best interests of the child at the centre of their ECEC policies;
- 2. Recognises that the Europe 2020 strategy, which seeks to create an inclusive society by raising employment, lowering school-drop out rates and reducing poverty, cannot be achieved unless all children are given an adequate start in life;
- 3. Notes that the early years of childhood are critical for cognitive, sensory and motor development, affective and personal development and language acquisition, and also lay the foundations for lifelong learning; recognises that ECEC supports children's healthy mental and physical development, enabling them to become more balanced human beings; recommends, therefore, that the Member States consider introducing a compulsory year of nursery schooling before the start of schooling proper;
- 4. Stresses that the early development of healthy lifestyle behaviours, such as good nutrition habits and appropriate and balanced exercise, can have a profound impact on physical and mental development and be a key determinant of health throughout life; warns against including children too early in certain intensive, results-oriented sports activities;
- 5. Recalls the importance of all early learning in the acquisition of knowledge, particularly of languages, multilingualism and linguistic diversity;
- 6. Encourages the introduction and retention of innovative pedagogical models for language teaching, particularly multilingual crèches and nursery schools which meet the objective set in Barcelona in 2002, which includes the learning of regional, minority and neighbouring languages;
- 7. Draws attention to the importance of developing and improving educational establishments (after-school facilities) which look after children following pre-school classes;

8. Highlights that, in addition to education and care, all children have the right to rest, leisure and play;

Universal provision of ECEC

9. Notes that, according to the Council conclusions of 12 May 2009, educational disadvantage should be addressed by providing high quality early childhood education and targeted support, and by promoting inclusive education;
10. Recognises that, while disadvantaged social groups may benefit from additional help, provision of ECEC should ideally be universal for all parents and children regardless of their background or financial status;
11. Emphasises that, where appropriate, children with disabilities should participate in mainstream ECEC services, and, where necessary, be offered additional specialist help;
12. Calls on the Member States to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities promptly;
13. Stresses that the Member States should allow pluralist approaches in the context of the pre-school curriculum and related practice;

Engagement with parents

14. Stresses that parents, both mothers and fathers, are equal partners in ECEC; recognises that ECEC services should be fully participative, involving all staff, parents and, where possible, children themselves;
15. Highlights that the provision of periods of maternity and paternity leave of sufficient length, the implementation of efficient and flexible labour market policies are essential components in effective ECEC policy;
16. Encourages the Member States to invest in parental education programmes and, where appropriate, to provide other forms of assistance, such as home visiting services, for parents who need additional help; maintains, furthermore, that parents should be provided with free, low-threshold, on-site access to advisory services in crèches;
17. Stresses that cultural activities are a source of enrichment for children, promote dialogue between different cultures and develop a spirit of openness and tolerance; recalls, in this connection, that it is important for teams of professionals working with and for children to carry out intercultural activities with children and their parents;
18. Notes that children of parents without legal residence status are still not given access to early years learning in all the Member States;
19. Calls on the Member States to grant the children of asylum seekers, refugees and persons with subsidiary protection status, or leave to remain on humanitarian grounds, access to early childhood education, so as not to restrict their life chances at the outset;

Better integration of services

20. Encourages the Member States to integrate ECEC services, providing support for their development and for related activities and ensuring better cooperation and coordination between the different institutions and ministries working on early childhood policies and programmes;
21. Encourages the Member States to allow ECEC services sufficient autonomy to retain their uniqueness and creativity in seeking solutions for the well-being of children;
22. Highlights the importance of innovative ECEC services which are local in character and bring together community members from the health, social, education, cultural and other sectors;
23. Calls on the Member States, in synergy with local authorities and non-profit organisations, to promote and finance measures and projects to provide ECEC services to children from disadvantaged social groups, and to monitor and assess them;
24. Recognises that account needs to be taken of the variety of families' differing life situations and the concomitant diversity of their needs, and looks to see a diverse, flexible and innovative range of early childhood education and care provision;
25. Calls for the development of a European framework for ECEC services that respects the Member States' cultural diversity and highlights shared goals and values;

Economic benefits

26. Stresses that in an unstable economic climate we must not neglect to invest substantially in ECEC services; emphasises that the Member States should devote appropriate resources to ECEC services;
27. Reaffirms that investment in ECEC has been proven to have subsequent economic and social benefits, such as increased tax contributions through a strengthened workforce, along with reduced future health costs, lower crime rates and fewer instances of antisocial behaviour; stresses that prevention is a more effective tool, and more cost-efficient, than intervention at a later stage;
28. Recognises that quality early years education can help reduce early school leaving, combat the educational disadvantages faced by children from disadvantaged social and cultural groups and reduce the resulting social inequalities, all of which affect society as a whole; notes that young people from vulnerable social groups are particularly at risk;
29. Emphasises that high-quality ECEC services are a complement to, rather than a substitute for, a strong welfare system incorporating a broad range of anti-poverty tools; calls on the Member States to address societal poverty;

Staff and quality services

30. Stresses that the pre-school period is the most important time in a child's emotional and social development, and that staff working with pre-school children must therefore have

appropriate qualifications; emphasises that the well-being and safety of the child is of the utmost importance when recruiting staff;

31. Notes that the positive effects of early intervention programmes can be sustained in the long term only if they are followed up with high-quality primary and secondary education;
32. Recognises that the most notable impact on the quality of ECEC services comes from having qualified and well-trained staff working with young children, and as such calls on the Member States to raise professional standards by introducing recognised qualifications for those working in the ECEC field; notes that other factors, including staff-to-child ratios, group sizes and curriculum content, can also affect quality;
33. Recognises the need for more connections and transfers of approach between ECEC educators and primary school teachers, focusing on the continuity of learning methods;
34. Calls on the Member States to develop mechanisms for evaluating ECEC provision and ensuring that quality standards are met, in order to improve ECEC services;
35. Calls, in the context of the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), for account to be taken of the quality of education and thus of learning outcomes; calls on the Member States to provide continuous training for those working in the ECEC field in order to increase and update their specific skills;
36. Encourages the Member States to ensure that all qualified ECEC staff are ideally paid a salary in line with that of primary school teachers;
37. Calls on the Member States to address the problem of the gendering of care work by implementing policies designed to increase the numbers of men on ECEC courses;

Research and exchange of best practices

38. Points out that, despite the existence of empirical data on young children from some Member States (compiled by, inter alia, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, UNICEF, the International Early Years Education Journal and the OECD), there is still a need for a better understanding of childhood development in early years education; calls for further investigation and research across the EU, and for an EU-wide exchange of results, taking into account the cultural diversity of the Member States;
39. Regrets that EU structural funding and schemes such as Comenius, which allow educators to participate in EU-wide exchanges, are not used enough; calls on the Member States to increase awareness of such schemes and funds among ECEC educators;
40. Welcomes the Commission's intention to promote the identification and exchange of good policies and practices through the open method of coordination, as mentioned in its communication on ECEC, and recommends that the Member States cooperate and exchange best practices in order to improve existing ECEC programmes;

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41. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission, and to the governments and parliaments of the Member States.

EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

Introduction

Europe is made up of a rich and diverse mix of educational traditions, with early education provided in a host of different ways across the continent. There is a clear variation between Member States in terms of the quality and supply of their provision, rates of enrolment, approach to services, governance of services, and so on. This report recognises that a ‘one size fits all’ approach to early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in the EU is not suitable, and would be difficult to realise. Instead, it is far better to develop a European framework comprised of shared goals and values, which includes shared entitlements and structures. While many EU Member States are undeniably world leaders in the provision of ECEC services, more needs to be done to bring about improvements across the board. For the purpose of this report, ‘early years’ will be used to refer to the period of childhood from 0 to 6.

In 2002 the Barcelona European Council called for EU members to provide childcare to at least 90% of children between the age of three years and mandatory school age by 2010, and to at least 33% children under three. These targets signalled a labour market approach to ECEC services, based on the need identified at the time of increasing the numbers of women in work. While it is vital to give due attention to the link between ECEC services and equality of opportunities for women, these targets are clearly problematic, and outmoded, since they fail to take into account many of the crucial qualitative aspects of a strong early education policy. ECEC centres are not simply a place to ‘park’ children so that women can work; they are of utmost importance in contributing to the well-being of children and improving their future life chances.

Child-centred approach

It is crucial that this report begins by ascertaining critical questions, problems and difficulties, rather than rushing to offer complex solutions. A useful place to start is to consider what exactly our image is of ‘the child’. If we believe that children are active and engaged citizens with rights, who are rich in potential creativity, and who are capable of forming and expressing their own views in matters affecting them, then we must agree that discussions on ECEC should start from the perspective of the child. The period from birth to three is critical for children’s brain development, physical and cognitive development, and language acquisition. These early years also lay the foundations for children’s lifelong learning, which is central to the achievement of the Lisbon objectives. In this report, therefore, the needs and best interests of the child are the primary consideration.

Universal vs. targeted provision

Poor families are less likely to use ECEC services, especially in privatised markets, than other groups. One of the most at-risk groups in the EU is the Roma, whose access to early years services is extremely low and falls well under the average across Europe. This is worrying, given that disadvantaged children are those that have been shown to benefit most from access to ECEC services. Several EU Member States have welcomed large numbers of immigrant and second-language children into their school population, which raises notable educational challenges, particularly when we see that children from ethnic minority families are also less likely than other

groups to use ECEC services.

The problem with Member States targeting poor families directly is that this can lead to stigmatisation, which may discourage them from making full use of the services on offer. While it is important to recognise that many poor families need extra encouragement when it comes to ECEC services, provision should be universal to all families and all children, regardless of their background or financial status.

Engagement with parents

Parents are the first educators of their children. They have, in most cases, a deep, unparalleled understanding of their child, and an intimate bond with them. It is widely acknowledged that the ideal setting for a child to thrive and develop in the first year after their birth is at home with a parent. The provision of long parental leave can also be a way of helping to reduce demand for childcare places. The problem is that very few Member States currently offer sufficiently long periods of remunerated leave. Where there is a gap between the end of paid parental leave and entitlement to a place in a good-quality childcare setting, difficulties can arise for parents. This report highlights that the provision of sufficiently long parental leave is an essential component in effective ECEC policy.

Parental engagement must also continue in the subsequent years. Poor and disadvantaged parents are less likely to be involved in strategies to address their child's education than other parents. Men, too, are more often than not sidelined when it comes to developing ECEC programmes and policies, and in participating in activities involving their child. This report stresses that parents should be central partners in all decision-making concerning their child, and that ECEC settings need to rethink how they interact with parents, especially fathers. Pre-school programmes such as Reggio Emilia in Italy, in which parents are rightful participants in the dual task of caring for and educating their child, demonstrate just how effective this type of practice can be.

Better integration of services

ECEC services have the potential to act as a strong support network for parents. This report argues that ECEC services across the EU have not been innovative enough. Early years centres and settings should not only be spaces in which children are educated and cared for; they can also open up possibilities for a whole host of different projects. To give just a few examples, early years centres may wish to combine formal or informal learning with child and maternal health, breastfeeding support, counselling services and family planning. Where the early years centre is viewed as a collective space, bringing together individuals from all sectors of the community, it is better placed to support families, strengthen social cohesion and community solidarity, and promote gender equality.

A similar approach should be taken by Member States in their handling and organisation of early years policy. In all but a few cases, countries have tended to adopt a two-tiered approach to ECEC, which separates welfare ('child care') and pre-primary education. This has resulted in a lack of focus on the cognitive development of children between the ages of 0 and 3, and too little attention on the health and psychosocial development of children aged 3 and above. It has also exacerbated inequalities, inconsistencies, and resulted in a lack of coherence for families.

Where cooperation between different sectors and agencies does take place, the absence of a common understanding or a common language can mean that much potential good work is stifled.

Just as early years centres need to be more innovative by addressing a range of issues pertinent to young children, so too must Member States bring together multiple agencies when developing early years policies and programmes. Examples include health, migration, gender equality, and employment. Integrated services, located primarily in education, will help to fulfil the education, health and other needs of children across the 0-6 age range. Existing services and sectors also need to develop a shared vision and a common set of vocabulary.

Economic benefits

The European Commission Network on Childcare advised in 1996 that European countries should invest at least 1% GDP in ECEC; yet according to an OECD survey made in 2004, only five countries out of the twenty reviewed had achieved this investment level⁹. This is surprising, given that research has shown that investing in ECEC brings greater returns than investment at any other stage.

In the context of an unstable economic climate and a period of aggressive austerity, early years education is easily neglected. Yet this report highlights that early years services are not a luxury which can be cut with impunity. Indeed the decision to not invest has costs which may not be recognisable straight away, such as lower potential future economic gains, and these can be an added burden on the financial stability of Member States. Investment in early years has been proven to reduce later costs, for instance by strengthening the future workforce governments avoid potential losses to taxes. It can also reduce future health costs, crime rates and rates of antisocial behaviour.

Staff and Quality of Services

To distinguish between good and poor practice across the EU, a universal definition of ‘quality’ is required. Yet no straightforward and widely-accepted definition exists. Ideas about what quality means vary from country to country. The reason for this is that they are bound up with individual Member States’ cultural values, as well as with their conceptions and definitions of ‘childhood’. This report seeks to provide a clearer understanding of what ‘quality’ should actually mean to EU members.

It argues that having qualified and well-trained staff working with young children has the most notable impact on quality. A poorly educated and badly paid early years workforce is simply not sustainable. Despite having already noted that the first three years of a child’s life are extremely important for brain development, and for establishing attitudes and patterns of thinking, we observe that across the EU, ECEC carers are frequently unaware of the critical importance of the first few years of a child’s life. Since early years carers in most Member States are not required to undertake professional training or gain specific qualifications in order to work with young children, many of them lack the interactive skills and overall proficiency necessary to ensure that the children in their care develop adequate cognitive skills.

Another problem identified by this report is that of the gendering of care work. Women, rather than men, tend to seek jobs in ECEC. This reinforces the idea that childcare is first and foremost women’s work, which in turn has implications for gender equality. Children need to have dual role models in

⁹ Starting Strong II, Early education and care, OECD 2006.

their lives, particularly in the case of single-parent families where the father rather than the mother is more likely to be absent. The problem is that very few EU countries have established targets for recruiting men into the profession, or sought to alter the perceived notion that, firstly, ECEC is ‘women’s work’ and, secondly, that there is something inherently ‘wrong’ with a man who wants to work with young children. Examples of good practice can be found in Denmark, where there is currently an enrolment rate for men of around 25% on early years training courses, and the UK, where for a number of years local education authorities have been running special programmes to attract men to work in childcare.

It is vital to develop policies to recruit and retain a varied and mixed-gendered workforce, and ensure that those who opt for a career in an early years setting find it fulfilling, well-respected and financially rewarding.

Research and exchange of best practices

At present there is no clear-cut empirical data on young children which can help to inform the development and implementation of EU-wide ECEC policies. Some research does exist. However, this is largely dominated by English-speaking countries, namely the USA, and as a result it is often very narrow in scope, and tends to be based on understandings of childhood which are not relevant to many non-English speaking countries.

Since there is such a broad range of ECEC services in existence across the EU, it can often be difficult to draw clear comparisons between them. Yet a cross-country comparative approach can be very useful in allowing Member States to learn from each other. It has been valuable, for example, in questioning the belief held by many parents and professionals in the English-speaking world that ‘proper’ learning must take place in a classroom environment, in contrast the Nordic model which recognises the importance of the outdoor world for children’s learning and development.

More extensive research would allow the EU to revise and update the targets on ECEC that have already been established.

RESULT OF FINAL VOTE IN COMMITTEE

Date adopted	17.3.2011
Result of final vote	+: 27 -: 0 0: 0
Members present for the final vote	Maria Badia i Cutchet, Zoltán Bagó, Malika Benarab-Attou, Lothar Bisky, Piotr Borys, Jean-Marie Cavada, Silvia Costa, Santiago Fisas Aixela, Mary Honeyball, Cătălin Sorin Ivan, Morten Løkkegaard, Emma McClarkin, Marek Henryk Migalski, Doris Pack, Marie-Thérèse Sanchez-Schmid, Marietje Schaake, Emil Stoyanov, Hannu Takkula, Helga Trüpel, Marie-Christine Vergiat, Sabine Verheyen, Milan Zver
Substitute(s) present for the final vote	Luigi Berlinguer, Nessa Childers, Oriol Junqueras Vies, Ramona Nicole Mănescu, Iosif Matula, Monika Smolková
Substitute(s) under Rule 187(2) present for the final vote	Miguel Angel Martínez Martínez