



Enhancing quality in Early Childhood  
Education and Care through Parent  
Participation



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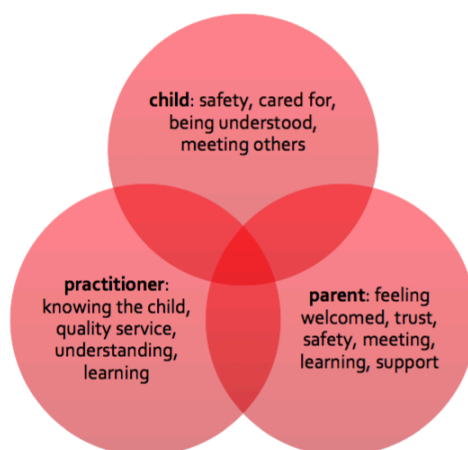
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# Part A- Identification of the practices and methods concerning participation in ECEC (Output 1)

## Belgium

### Parent Participation in ECEC - Flemish Community – Belgium



## 1. Introduction

In this paper, we shortly describe the current situation of parental involvement in ECEC in the Flemish Community<sup>1</sup>, both on the level of policy, research and practice. The overall concept is that participation is not just an ad hoc activity or action, but that participative work with parents is a process of building trust, dialogue, reciprocity and action, in many different shapes and forms and on many different levels. Up until now, involving parents has been much more developed in the childcare sector (0 – 2,5/3 y) than it has in preschools (2,5/3 – 6y)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Belgium is a federal state with 3 Communities (responsible for childcare and education), 3 Regions and one federal policy level. We will only cover the Flemish Community in this project.

<sup>2</sup> Please note we will only describe the childcare and pre-school sector. In the broader family policies, the Flemish community also developed a strong policy on overall parenting support with the concept of Houses of the Child, but we will not go into this in this report. For more information see the Belgian case study on parental support, commissioned by Eurofund and written by Ankie Vandekerckhove of VBJK:  
[http://www.vbjk.be/files/Eurofound%20\\_%20Parenting%20support%20in%20Europe.pdf](http://www.vbjk.be/files/Eurofound%20_%20Parenting%20support%20in%20Europe.pdf)

## 2. Theory and scholarly work

### 2.1 Policy: a split system

The Flemish system of ECEC is a historically grown split system with a clear division between education-oriented preschools and childcare or childminding provisions. The main differences are presented in this concise overview:

Childcare and out-of-school care	Preschool
Ministry of Welfare and Kind en Gezin (Child and Family) as public agency/administration <sup>3</sup>	Ministry of Education
Focus on 'care'	Focus on 'education'
0 – 2,5 to 3 y	2,5 – 6 y (6y: start of compulsory education)
Public and private centres Subsidies on different levels, depending on the efforts made for universal accessibility.	Mostly publicly subsidized schools (except for a small percentage of self-sufficient private schools)
Attendance fluctuates around 51% (not all full time)	Attendance: about 98% (most full time) <sup>4</sup>
Multiple qualification routes. Child practitioners mostly have vocational training (infant care) or in-service training. Family daycare personnel or staff in creches often have no qualification (will be required by 2024 for all)  Since 2014, pedagogical coaches on bachelor	The practitioners are teachers with a bachelor degree in preschool. The teachers who work with the youngest children are sometimes supported by a childcare worker as assistant (vocational training)

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<sup>3</sup> Kind en Gezin is responsible for regulations, allocation of places, funding, quality standards and quality management. The day-to-day running of childcare centres is the responsibility of the service providers (local authorities, non-profit organisations, and also private for-profit providers).

<sup>4</sup> There are three main providers of pre-primary education. Around two-thirds of the children enrolled (nearly 64 per cent) are in private subsidised education (mostly Catholic schools). Just under one quarter (22 per cent) are in local authority provision; the remaining 14 per cent attend a school of the Flemish Community (state schools). (Oberhuemer; 2010)

level are being employed in childcare	
Parents pay (most often fee is related to family income)	Attendance is free of charge
Pedagogical framework, not a binding but inspiring curriculum	Curriculum with set educational goals
No legal barriers but no equal access in practice (attendance by children from ethnic minorities, immigrants, refugees or families in poverty is below 25%)	Despite high attendance rate, unequal access: children living in poverty and children from ethnic cultural minorities are less subscribed and attend preschool less regularly, which is problematised by the Ministry of Education
Legal 'entitlement' , but depending on the budgetary context	Legal entitlement, right to education. Legally not obligatory under 6y, but recent coercive policies for parents have made this semi obligatory (toddler 'participation' policy)
Increasing attention for parent participation in the formal competences profile for practitioners working in childcare, Parent participation as a recurrent topic in CPD courses and coaching trajectories for childcare workers. Since 2011: a new bachelor training – Pedagogy of the Young Child – with working with parents as a fundamental part of the curriculum. As of 2014, the first graduates are employed on the field and this will influence the way parents are being involved in childcare and later on in pre- school.	Less attention to parent participation in initial pre-school training than in childcare. The professional competence profile of kindergarten teachers, recognised by the government, only mentions informing parents. The training institutions have the autonomy to develop their training competence profile themselves. Most of them are based on the government profile, , which hardly mentions parents.

## 2.2 Legal context

### 2.2.1 Children's rights

The Convention on the Rights of the child states that parents are the first educators and responsible for the upbringing of their children (art. 5) , keeping their best interest at heart

(art.3) . But the CRC also adds that states need to take up responsibility as well (art. 18)<sup>5</sup>: they have to support parents in their parental responsibilities. This convention clearly considers that raising children is a combined effort of parents and states, of the private home and public services. States have a certain freedom and discretion on how they meet this binding standard (e.g. social security including child support, (free) schooling, health services, social housing, parent support services etc.) ECEC is also a part of this support for families. Albeit that the CRC only mentions ‘working’ parents here (art.18.3), it must be clear that this convention sets the minimum norm and states can broaden this interpretation to all families, as it has been done in the Flemish Community as well.

In its General Comment nr 7 on Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood, par. 29b (2005), the Committee on the Rights of the Child points out that “In planning for early childhood, States parties should at all times aim to provide programmes that complement the parents’ role and are developed as far as possible in partnership with parents, including through active cooperation between parents, professionals and others in developing “the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential” (art. 29.1 (a)).” Par. 30 further states that “all young children receive education in the broadest sense (as outlined in paragraph 28 above), which acknowledges a key role for parents...”.

### 2.2.2 Childcare: decree for babies and toddlers

Parental engagement, involvement or participation in many ways has been on the agenda of the Flemish policymaker for the past few years. Starting from the idea that educating and caring for children is a shared responsibility of parents and the wider society both, the notion of parent participation has been more and more developed in practice and has now been structurally embedded in recent legislation and guidelines. (decree of 20/04/2012 into force as of

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<sup>5</sup> Article 5: States Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents or, where applicable, the members of the extended family or community as provided for by local custom, legal guardians or other persons legally responsible for the child, to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognized in the present Convention.

Article 18: 1. States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern.

2. For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children. 3. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible.

01/04/2014, art. 3 and 6).

All childcare provisions are required to get a license and in order to get one, childcare services have the legal obligation to involve families. The decree mentions elements of this family involvement (art. 6 §1, 3° d / art. 33 / art. 32 41), which serve as minimal obligations for service provider such as:

- Periodic evaluation of satisfaction
- Communication on the pedagogical approach
- Information on the license

In addition, providers need to have a written document on the internal rules, that also needs to contain some regulations regarding parents (art. 34, 3°), such as the right to a transition period, the right to access to all spaces where the child is being cared for, the right to (formally) lodge a complaint, the right to privacy and personal data protection.

### 2.2.3 Preschool: participation decree

In the participation decree for schools (April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2004), all schools have the obligation to create and promote a participative environment and support participation fora (art. 4). The idea is that participation rights strengthen the active commitment of all involved in reaching the educational goals of the schools (art. 5). In practice, these fora are most often rather traditional systems of councils. Every school has a school council, consisting of parents, staff and pupils. All members of a school council have a general right to be informed and the right to be heard upon request. While the school council should be heard in several relevant school matters, the schools themselves design their own pedagogical project. When parents enrol their child, this implies their agreement with this project. A specific parent's council is optional, but becomes obligatory when at least 10% of the parents requests this. The decree however does not clearly define what their function or mandate is. In 2009 the decree for pre-primary and primary school was adapted so that schools need to include an engagement declaration in their house rules. This declaration encompasses minimal reciprocal engagements between the school and parents. This is considered a tool to increase the parental participation in schools, including pre-schools (BaO/2009/02) A parent delegation is also part of the Flemish Education Council (VLOR), which is an overall advisory council for the Flemish government.

## 2.3 Curriculum

### 2.3.1 Childcare: pedagogical framework

Within the context of the decree and based on research and evolutions in the childcare practice, Child and Family, commissioned the design of a pedagogical framework, describing the different tasks of childcare towards children, towards families and towards society at large.



While this framework is rather 'open' and not legally binding, it is meant to serve as a common standard for ECEC practitioners.

In this pedagogical framework parents are considered as the partners by excellence for the ECEC professionals<sup>6</sup>. This way, the involvement of parents becomes a necessary part of delivering high quality services. Important to know is that involving parents starts with the professional; it should not depend on the parent's initiative.

Some of the basic principles regarding parents are:

- The belief in the family's competence and strength: parents all want the best for their children. ECEC practitioners need to recognize this, be sensitive and consider parents as the first educator.
- Reciprocal relationships: education at home differs from the one in childcare services. That is no problem if practitioners invest in a reciprocal relationship with parents on this education. This means engaging in an ongoing process of being attentive and having consideration for each other's feelings, experiences and meaning-making. Only when parents feel respected, safe and recognised as parent, only when open and honest communication is possible, childcare can be meaningful for all (child, practitioner, parent).
- Childcare as a meeting place: meeting parents of other children can be very valuable and supportive. Parents can exchange views, ideas and experiences on raising young children within an informal setting. This way they can offer each other information but also emotional and social support in parenting, outside the professional context of family support. The framework is built on the idea of jointly shaping the child's education. Childcare respects the child's education within his family and continues it in mutual consultation. This means that practitioners invest in a constant dialogue with families, involving both fathers and mothers. This gives them an insight into the social and cultural context in which children grow up and allows them to take the family's perspective into consideration in their pedagogical actions. The actions taken by practitioners cannot be separated from the parents' relevant views. Childcare facilities consult with parents about child-rearing ideas, questions and desires, so as to give shape to children's education together with the parents. This does not necessarily mean that childcare facilities automatically have to do what parents want. They enter into dialogue with

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<sup>6</sup> The vision states: "Childcare for babies and toddlers in Flanders helps to ensure that every child feels good about himself, is challenged and feels connected to the people and his surrounding environment. Childcare wants to shape children's education together with the parents. At the same time it aims to support parents in their child-rearing responsibilities. A childcare facility wants to be a place where every child, parent and practitioner feels at home. In this way it helps realise equal opportunities for children, as well as for adult men and women. Embedded in warm relationships with others, childcare wants all children to be able to grow up into adults who are confident in life and contribute to a learning, democratic society, where people treat each other and their environment in a respectful and sustainable manner."

the parents on each other's views and try to align them. The framework describes several ways to work with families and to connect with parents. E.g.: the importance of a transition period prior to attending childcare, regular contacts on how the child feels, reacts and develops, systemic dialogue on educational issues and considering what parents want and need for their children and respect for diversity and human dignity.

### 2.3.2 Preschool: developmental goals

In pre-school, some developmental goals are set for toddlers, but the curriculum does not mention parents as such. It is based on the child's individual development, with different family backgrounds, different attendance rates and different competencies. The teacher does regular assessments which can be discussed with the parents, but parental involvement is hardly to be compared to what it is in childcare.

## 2.4 European context

In this context reference could also be made to the recently developed European Quality Framework for ECEC and the many references made there to both research and practice within the EU. In this framework as well, one of the fundamental transversal issue is that parents are the most important partners and that their participation is essential<sup>8</sup>.

Children in Europe, a network of ECEC experts publishing the magazine with the same name, has also published a policy document in which participation is one of the 10 principles<sup>9</sup>.

## 2.5 Belgian scholarly work and research

While international research has noted several positive effects of parental involvement in ECEC (easier transition, better school results, stronger pre-literacy skills...), some criticism is also being formulated. More specifically on how parental involvement often only benefits the white middleclass because parents have to deal with unequal financial, social and cultural resources to comply with the staff request for parental involvement. Secondly these studies rarely consider how parents perceive quality themselves: the concept of quality is being too pre-defined by researchers and policy makers so parent's own knowledge is not recognised and valued in these studies.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.vbjk.be/files/CIE%20Policy%20Paper.pdf>. "Services should 'embody participation as an essential value, as an expression of democracy and as a means to combat social exclusion. Participation requires pedagogical work that supports the development and upbringing of each child. Participation means the active inclusion of the entire community: all young children and adults, including parents, professionals of all kinds working in services, and other citizens. Participation enables all of these groups to contribute to the construction of a common project and to every aspect of the life of the service including helping in many ways and active involvement in management, decisions and evaluation."

### 2.5.1 What do parents want for their children and themselves in ECEC?

By doing focus groups with a diversity of parents, Geens and Vandenbroeck (2013) demonstrate how places for parents of young children should encompass a space for encounter between a diversity of families, in which parents can reflect together about their parenting practices and what is good for their child at home and in childcare. Parents would like to remain the first owner of their parenting project and not be reduced to spectators of their own situation, weighed down by the dominant discourse about what good parenting is. In this sense, ECEC can offer parent support, not as informing parents about „the good ways of parenting”, but as a form of creating social support between the parents themselves and practitioners (Geens & Vandenbroeck, 2013).

A research, commissioned by the King Baudouin Foundation looked into the reasons why disadvantaged parents, mostly mothers, do or do not choose to have their children attend childcare (Crépin and Neuberg, 2013). It shows the different barriers they occur. When they do not send their children to childcare services it often seems to be related to a lack of trust and of communication (next to financial and other access barriers, like waiting lists). For some parents, the idea of leaving your child to be cared for by others, is rather unusual or going against ‘good parenting’, even increasing the lack of trust. When they do choose childcare, their reasons are mostly in terms of preparing the child for late school life and not at all in terms of their own integration or getting support. This shows that when parents do not even know what childcare could bring to their benefit, they will not easily use those services, let alone be actively involved.

A quantitative study on the perspective of parents on schools, commissioned by the Ministry of Education, shows how parents are more satisfied with the school, when the school opens up to parents and creates a welcoming climate. Parents tend to be more involved with the school, when they experience openness of the school (Verhoeven, Devos, Stassen, & Warmoes, 2003).

In a small qualitative study, 11 parents were interviewed on not enrolling their children in preschool, although preschool in Belgium is nearly free and available for every child and parents are stimulated with quite coercive policies to send their children to preschool. Specific for these parents was that, first, most of them experienced extreme poverty and second, many stated to while being interested in the education of their children at the same time they were doubting whether their children are ready for preschool. Their concerns were e.g. that toddlers need to be potty trained at 2,5 years, that classes are too big, that children don’t speak Dutch etc. These parents worried about how their children were to participate in school or if they would be excluded because of all these aspects that are problematised by the schools (Vandenbroeck et al., 2013).

These results are in line with a current PhD. study of Van Laere (2015) in which the perspective

of parents of ethnic cultural minorities and/or parents living in poverty is explored (in focus groups) on what they find important in the care and education of their child in preschool. Here too, the lack of or need of individual emotional attention of children is the common theme. Throughout all the educational and caring moments, the essential question is: do you see my child? Will you take care of my child? Will you ensure my child is not excluded from the group? It is remarkable how many parents would like to know and ask more how their child is doing but they perceive themselves as annoying and disturbing to the teacher by asking 'silly' and 'stupid' questions concerning issues of emotional (warmth, embrace), physical (health, sleeping, eating, toileting,...) and political care (discrimination and exclusion). Many parents ask to have more contact with the school – a daily 5 minute chat - and to be allowed in the classroom, which is often not the case in Flemish preschool. Because they know and understand the teacher does not have a lot of time, they try not to bother the teacher too much.

The lack of care on micro-, meso- and macrolevel can be a possible explanation why parents do not send their children to preschool regularly or distrust preschool. These results are in line with the above mentioned study in 2003. Parents do want to be more involved in school

life and they especially would like to get more opportunities to discuss issues of health, safety and hygiene of their children (Verhoeven et al., 2003).

Also, the presumed equality in the relations between professionals and parents seems to be somewhat overrated at times (Van Haute, Bradt, Vandenbroeck, Bouverne-De Bie, 2013). Even though parental involvement is valued, professionals still tend to shape the contacts with parents in a top-down manner and see the parents' input primarily as an instrument to reach the desired outcomes of their work.

It has to be noted, however, that many of these studies focus on the mother's perspective rather than the father's. Although researchers try to involve fathers in these studies, the practices of ECEC are a fairly female environment. While internationally, there is research on fathers' and their role in education, this role is often still not considered as a positive and inspiring example. Therefore, many scholars advise to rethink working with children and separate it from substitute mothering (Cameron, Moss, Owen, 1999; Peeters, 2007; Van Laere, Vandenbroeck, Roets & Peeters, 2014).

## 2.5.2 How to involve parents?

The Brussels government commissioned an action research ('PIO': partners in education<sup>10</sup>), done by VBJK, on how childcare can involve and support parents in the education of their

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<sup>10</sup> Eight childcare centres got involved and formed a learning community in a trajectory that was coached by the researchers. Also, six focus groups with parents were facilitated to get a view on their perspective.

children, resulting in practical guidelines for parent participation. What is vital to make parent participation FP successful and effective, is a clear vision, that can serve as a framework for all kinds of participatory actions and work. Why is participation important for the policy and the practice in childcare? What goals should be set? How and what will be evaluated and by whom? ... These are all important question to consider over and over again.

One of the main starting points is the 'triangle': child – parent – practitioner. Parents and childcare workers are allies in the child's life and education. In order to make this work, a relation of trust and respect is needed. This requires a welcoming attitude towards parents from the very first contact, not only those who already use childcare but also (and maybe even more so) those who do not. Different formal and informal barriers exist, especially for more vulnerable families. Childcare providers need to make themselves known, explain what their services really are and how it can be a support and a valuable extension of the home environment. In this sense, communicating and involving parents does start even before the actual use of ECEC.

To build on this relation of trust, investing in facilitating a smooth transition from the home environment to childcare is important. Getting to know and being genuinely interested in each other, getting familiar with the parent's views and culture, with the child's temperament and habits, does not only make families feel welcome but will add to the quality of the work, to a better response to the child's needs. The more you know about a child (especially the very young ones) and the family background and living context, the better you will be able to relate to the child. Building this relation of trust does not come naturally or automatically; it takes active investment of the professionals' work. In return, gaining this kind of knowledge about the child, will enable the practitioners do better in their work.

Parent participation comes in many different shapes and formats, but even more than the method or model, the underlying vision and the level of follow up will determine its success, authenticity and effectiveness. A given model in itself does not determine the level of real involvement or participation. E.g. a formal parents council is not, in itself, better than the short daily chat with parents in the morning. It is important to consider how and why participation processes are being installed and what the provision really means by it. Parents need to really feel that there is room for their input, questions and views. Tokenism should be avoided by any means and a certain level of representativeness needs to be met. The PIO research also showed that there should not be a hierarchy in the methods and practices (it all depends on the goal, on what you want to achieve and what the participation would serve)

Concerning parent participation in schools in general, a recent study of Van Avermaet and colleagues demonstrates that the formalized ways of parent participation (engagement declaration of schools, parental boards, parents need to sign the house rules,...) do not always serve the purpose of involving parents in school life. Informal ways of participation (daily

interaction between teachers and parents, ...) are at least as important or even more important as school formalities on parent participation (Van Avermaet, Vanderlinde, Mertens, & Ysenbaert, 2013).

### 3 Approaches & Methods

For the Flemish early years sector, Child and family, has developed a strong vision on participation, both of parents and children<sup>11</sup>. In this document, participative processes, in several early years services, are being valued as a fundamental principle both in developing policies and in daily practice. Participation can serve several goals: improve the service quality, increasing the support for and co-shaping policies to better answer to family's needs, creating co-ownership and increase social cohesion. Participation can mean 'taking part' or even more, influencing the decision making process. It can be formal or informal and it can happen on different levels: doing activities together, check the users satisfaction or actually shaping the policies with ECEC services. These forms all interrelate: when there is little or no one-on-one participative work in daily practice, parents will not feel as welcomed to join into participative projects or policy-involvement.

However, when we look at the Flemish practice of parent participation, we still notice many differences. The levels and methods of participation, within the legal framework that leaves room for discretion and interpretation, still strongly depend on the providers, resulting in a wide range of different initiatives of involvement and participation.

As an example we can mention the city policy of childcare in Ghent. Starting from projects and pedagogical innovations in the 80's and 90's a whole new vision and framework has been developed for community based childcare services in which participation is one of the key elements. In every goal, project or action, a consequent and continued reflection is being made towards all groups that are involved: the children, the parents, the staff and the community. Throughout the work, attention is given to families in more vulnerable living conditions (migration, poverty, low educational level, single parents...). The local system of enrolment and allocation of places has been structurally designed to obtain an equal, objective access as well as a social mix within the childcare centres. Priority rules have been installed, reserving 70% of places for children living in the area and 50% for children with a disadvantaged background. The community childcare works towards high-quality day care with respect for diversity, responding to needs and care demand of vulnerable low-income families with a limited social network, giving extra attention to barriers (admission procedure, language, composition of team, perception of day care) and high levels of involvement of children, parents, staff and neighbourhood actors. More specifically towards parents, attention is given to a.o.: tailored

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.kindengezin.be/img/visietekst-participatie.pdf>

communication (visual language, use of several languages, understandable Dutch, etc.), giving a lot of practical information so that parents feel welcome to take part in the activities, getting to know elements of their home life and situation, habits and care, have daily talks, organise festivities together etc. All in all, doing things together so that the knowledge and skills of each parent can be used (gardening, sewing, singing, reading, painting, training course) as well as thinking, discussing and deciding together so that each parent has a say.

The Ghent policy has proved that parent involvement is actually possible, even with parents who are often thought of as 'not interested' in getting involved. It also showed how practices in childcare can inspire pre-schools as well, e.g. using multilingual communication, circle time, inviting parents (often mothers) to activities with the children etc.

In Brussels we have Elmer<sup>12</sup>, a community-based childcare centre with 4 centres in different areas in the capital. Its work started in the nineties, answering to the need for low threshold but high quality services for children from families in vulnerable living conditions, as mainstream services did not fulfill this need. Elmer started as a childcare centre based on the principles of respect for diversity and believing in the positive growth of people. From day one, Elmer has elaborated a participatory approach of the work with children, with parents, with the neighborhood and with all the ECEC staff. This is the basic conviction, being translated in all of the daily life in the centres. Everybody should feel a sense of belonging and everybody adds to the meaning making process. Parents are part of the centre and get actively involved, not only in different activities but also in policy development of Elmer as such.

Getting parents involved needs to be part of the childcare provider's vision and daily practice, regardless of the family background, economic status or behaviour. Everybody has his/her own perspective and life history and welcoming and respecting other habits, values or views is not always easy. This will sometimes be a compromise, other times a clear choice. Continuous attention has to be given to the specificities of all kinds of different families. Especially to those who are vulnerable because of poverty, not mastering the majority language, having a migration background, belonging to a minority or other specific characteristics. (Continuous) professional development and pedagogical coaching of practitioners, both individually and in team, can be a huge support here (Urban et al, 2011). Dealing with this diversity is often a challenge. Views on how to raise children can vary quite a bit and an empathic attitude is required. Differences in views need to be made explicit, clarified, discussed and a solution needs to be negotiated. Through projects and CPD, more and more Flemish childcare services have also been inspired by the DECET principles<sup>13</sup> on diversity:

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<sup>12</sup> See also the input of Elmer in this EQUAP project.

<sup>13</sup> [www.decet.org](http://www.decet.org) and [http://www.vbjk.be/files/DECETeng\\_o.pdf](http://www.vbjk.be/files/DECETeng_o.pdf)

- Everybody feels that he/she belongs
- Everyone is empowered to develop the diverse aspects of her/his identity
- Everyone can learn from each other across cultural and other barriers
- Everyone can participate as active citizens
- Everyone actively addresses bias through an open communication and willingness to grow
- Everyone Works together to challenge institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination.

When talking about parents however, we see that in practice this will most often be mothers. In 2006, VBJK developed an instrument for ECEC services to measure the involvement of fathers in the activities that are organised for parents (Demuynck & Peeters, 2006). The use of this instrument showed that most of the activities organised for 'parents' were embedded in a 'female' culture and therefore mothers attended these 90% of the time. Within this European project it is important to give a lot of attention to the gendered bias of parental participation in ECEC.

#### 4 Relevant literature for project

- Hughes, P., McNaughton, G., Consensus, dissensus or community: the politics of parent involvement in ECE, Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, vol. 1, nr 3 2000
- Decet, Making Sense of Good Practice (see <http://www.vbjk.be/en/downloads/decet-making-sense-good-practice-pdf>)
- DECET, & ISSA. (2011). In search for capacities for working in a context of diversity and social inclusion. Brussels. (see <http://www.vbjk.be/files/Diversity%20and%20Social%20Inclusion%20Exploring%200%20Competences%20for%20Professional%20Competences%20in%20ECEC.pdf>)
- Children in Europe. (2008). Children in Europe Policy Paper. Retrieved 28/02/2011, from <http://www.vbjk.be/files/CIE%20Policy%20Paper.pdf>



# Italy

## Family participation within early childhood education and care in Italy. A first delimitation of the field

### 1. Introduction

In accordance with what was agreed during the first meeting of project coordination Equap held in Forlì on 19-20 November 2014, in this paper were collected useful information to outline an initial overview of the situation around the theme of the relationship between families and childhood services in Italy.

We have developed the following points: 1) synthesis of the current political-institutional framework for services for early childhood in Italy; 2) historical overview of the institutional and regulatory development of the participation of families in child care services; 3) reconstruction of the main areas of scientific debate, mainly pedagogical areas, on the issue of family participation; 4) review of the main practices through which the participation of families in early childhood services in Italy takes shape; 5) development of a first bibliography of reference useful both for the work of the project and for the writing of the final report.

### 2. The political-institutional services for early childhood

The political and institutional context of the system of early childhood in Italy is characterized, as in many other European countries, the presence of a "split" into two segments (split system): services for early childhood (aimed at children 0-3 years) and kindergarten (aimed at children aged 3-6 years). It is therefore a system still far from having translated operationally the notion of continuity throughout the educational development throughout life.

From the institutional point of view, the segment 0-3 is managed by municipalities, by private entities with the supervision of the local administration. The 3-6 segment is mainly steered by Ministry of Education, University and Research. Nevertheless, while there is a general distinction of between services 0-3 and 3-6 both educationally and institutionally, the presence of different cultures and consequently the pedagogical educational projects are often divergent and discontinuous. In some municipalities there are 0-6 years services in which there is a commitment to cultural and pedagogical consistency and continuity.

The segment 0-3 is one of the services at "individual request" while the 3-6 segment is a service of general interest. The latest report (2013-14) of the CRC Commission (Convention on the rights of the child) on the achievement of the Barcelona targets on the extent of care and education for children, indicates that Italy has exceeded the target of 90% for the older children. However it also shows that it has not yet reached the target set at 33% for children under three

years (CRC, 2014). "In 2011, our country ranks at 3rd place among European countries - along with France and after Belgium and Denmark - with 95% of children between 3 and 6 years in a kindergarten. It is instead on 12th place with 26% of children under three years in an educational service, while in Denmark are 74% in Sweden, 51% in France and 44% "(CRC, 2014, pg.111). In many municipalities, the Report noted with concern the high number, renunciation to the frequency of the nest by families no longer able to pay fees or excluded for the loss of employment of the mother (CRC, 2014). It indicated also

strong imbalance in the educational opportunities available to children in the various areas of the country (in all regions of the South and the Islands the availability of ECEC services is below national average). Furthermore, we note the controversial provision of vouchers as support for families in the care and education of children (especially when it turns into a mere provision of money to spend in an uncontrolled and uncoordinated market in a system of educational and territorial services) (CRC, 2014).

### 3. The educational curriculum in early childhood services

The presence of a curriculum 0-6 in Italy is affected by the presence of the split system that characterizes the Italian educational system.

As for the segment 0-3, in fact, one cannot speak of a real formal curriculum, though this term refers to any form of organization of learning goals and related means of achieving them. In fact, in the regional rules there are general purposes from which it is only possible to infer aspects of specific learning. In various regional contexts, it was the result of pedagogical research, and it was due to law provisions. Such research aimed to permit to reach the definition of areas of learning more specific and educational strategies to promote their development. In some cases (eg., In Emilia-Romagna), these research data were, in part, taken within regulatory measures.

By inference from the regulations it is possible to identify a frame of values within which specific formal curricula were developed. It is a process that has taken place mostly at the level of each individual managing body of the service (eg. In a single municipal or single social cooperative) where "educational projects" were drawn in order to guide the educational choices about space, materials, educational proposals and gaming, role and professionalism of the adult, and therefore also for the relationship with the families.

As for the segment 3-6, the situation differs substantially due to the presence of documents, translated also in legal terms, that formalize the aims and objectives of the kindergarten and also explicit educational methods to achieve them. In fact, the curriculum in kindergarten through time has found foundations in the "Guidelines of the educational State nursery schools" (Ministerial Decree of 3 June 1991), the Law n.53 / 2003, in the Legislative Decree n.59 / 2004 (Moratti Reform) which are attached the National Guidelines. At the center of the Guidelines for the curriculum of 2007 (Ministerial Decree of 31 July 2007) is set, however, the continuity of

the learning process from 3 to 14 years. In the National Guidelines currently in force (Ministry of Education, 2012), the development and implementation of a curriculum from three to fourteen emerge as a dynamic and open, and represent for the educational community an opportunity to participate and progressive learning and continuous.

#### 4. The birth and evolution of the participation in ECEC in the legislation<sup>1</sup>

In Italy the participation of families in ECEC services is a topic widely discussed and analyzed. It is a theme that can be inscribed in the broader debate on the culture and practice of political and social participation (Cagliari, 2014). Traditionally, it is linked to the very birth of many ECEC services in some regions of central Italy (primarily Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany<sup>2</sup>) as early as the second half of the twentieth century, when the alliance of teachers, parents and citizens, together with insights and commitment of former partisans groups, female associations, unions and cooperatives, have promoted care services and education for younger children (Spaggiari, 1997) after the totalizing, centralized and "paternalistic" experience of educational and social policies of the fascist dictatorship.

This theme is explored in some regulatory documents and national guidelines (art. 30 of the Constitution of the Italian Republic<sup>3</sup>, Law no. 1044/1971 establishing Italian nurseries; Enabling Act no. 477/1973; Ministerial Decree of June 3, 1991; Law 53/2003; D.Lgvo n.59 / 2004; Ministerial Decree no. 254/2012 [National Guidelines for the curriculum in kindergarten and the first cycle of education]; Drawings of Law no. 1260/2014 and n. 2294/2015).

In the field of education at large, participation has resulted in two main experiences (Spaggiari, 1997): social management in municipal pre-school services (nurseries and kindergartens); the organs of the state school of all levels. Below we try to outline the milestones distinct segment.

The nurseries (nidi d'infanzia 0-3 ). In 1971 the national law 1044 established the nurseries with "the aim of providing the temporary custody of the children, to ensure adequate assistance to the family and also to facilitate the access of women to work as part of a comprehensive system of social security "<sup>4</sup>. It is the first legal instrument designed to shift the care and protection of the child from the family to the community, through a program of social services

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1 It should be emphasized that the historical reconstruction of the evolution of the importance given to the participation of families and the factors that have influenced it is one of the areas of reflection and study of research in Italy.

2 Tuscany is a region located in the central Italian town with Florence; Emilia-Romagna is a region of north-eastern capital with the city of Bologna.

3 Article 30 of the Italian Constitution states: "It is the duty and right of parents to support, raise and educate their children, even if born out of wedlock. In cases of incapacity of the parents, the law provides for the fulfillment of their tasks. The law ensures to children born outside of marriage full legal and social protection, compatible with the rights of members of the legitimate family. The law lays down the rules and limitations for the determination of paternity. "

4 L. 1044/1971, Articolo 1

with a direct support of regional and local authorities. Article. 6, c. 2 of Law no. 1044/1971 stipulated that nurseries should "be managed with the participation of families and representatives of social groups organized in the territory." As Cagliari (2014) shows, although the law was the product of a historical period of great cultural and social development, it does not contain the word "parents" and cites only twice families, once in c. 2

and another in the immediately preceding paragraph, where the needs of families as a criterion for spatial planning are indicated.

Today in the normative documents of various Italian regions - particularly those that historically have been legislating more regularly in Italy on ECEC issues such as Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna, there is an explicit reference to the participation of families in the life of the services. In particular, it is noted that the Regional Law n. 6/2012 currently in force in the Emilia-Romagna in the area of services for early childhood, in art.4, c. 1, it is stated: "The nurseries and educational services (...), as territorial educational centers, constitute the educational system of services for early childhood, with the aim of ensuring a plurality of offers, promote comparison between the parents and the development of the culture of childhood, through the involvement of the families and the local community. "

The pre-school. As for pre-schools, family participation was introduced legally in 1973. In that year the Parliament delegation the government (Enabling Act no. 477/1973) to implement a series of decrees. In one of these (Decree of the President of the Republic n. 416/1974: "Establishment and organization of collegial bodies of nursery, primary, secondary and art") for the first time the pre-school is open to democratic participation of the families.

These bodies, inspired by the concept of representation, in time have shown scarce effectiveness, becoming in many situations structures with tasks more formal than substantive, whose work was more oriented to their own survival and self-legitimation rather than producing real dynamics of participation designed to effectively involve protagonists of education (Cagliari, 2014, p.200).

In the 90s we see a development and a legal systematization of this aspect. Some milestones of this development are represented by the following measures:

- Law no. 241/1990 on transparency, simplification and access to the records and government users;
- Ministerial Decree of 3 June 1991 "Guidelines of educational State nursery schools" in which Background and introductory part states that "The prevalent traditional nursery model as a place of life are taking over more explicit connotations of school still maintained in a total unitary vision of the child, his environment and relationships that qualify, which is accompanied by a tendency to define and implement projects in which education is an expression of the participation of families and the animation of the community [...] The coexistence of diverse and contrasting scenarios so deeply

committed then the school to play a role of active presence, in collaboration and in harmony with the family, to the full expression of the meaning and value of childhood according to the principles of equality, freedom and solidarity [ ...] The demand for education can be fulfilled when the family, schools and other educational reality constructively cooperate with each other in a relationship of integration and continuity. It is therefore useful to have present all the possible interactions between the various educational contexts, as a hypothesis that considered them in isolation would be partial and misleading";

- Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers on 7 June 1995 provides that every kindergarten, as a body of public administration, should draw up a charter of services and make it available to its users. It is a kind of training agreement that nursery schools conclude with families, even if it is a pact improper since families are asked to countersign the card services for acknowledgment without being able to contribute to its drafting.

As for the systematization, the participation of families becomes part of "Consolidated laws on education" (Legislative Decree no. 297/1994) to which art. 3, c. 1 states: "In order to achieve, in accordance with the laws of the State of the School and the skills and responsibilities of the inspection staff, directors and teacher participation in the management of the School giving it the character of a community that interacts with the wider social and civic community, are established at the level the school, district, provincial and national collegial bodies referred to in Title I '.

In particular, with regard to the participation of the families, the current "National Guidelines for the curriculum in kindergarten and the first cycle of education" (Ministerial Decree no. 254/2012) point out that "the presence of school communities, engaged in their own task, is a key aspect for democracy and civil life and makes every school a place open to families and to every member of the society while promoting reflection on the contents and ways of learning, the adult function and the educational challenges of our time, on the decisive place knowledge for economic development, strengthening the estate ethics and social cohesion of the country "(Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 15). In the guidelines it is also stated that

"families are the most influential in the development context affective and cognitive children. In the diversity of lifestyles, cultures, religious and ethical choices, they are carriers of resources that should be valued in the school, to help grow a strong network of communication exchanges and shared responsibilities. The entrance of children in kindergarten is a great opportunity to take a clearer awareness of parental responsibilities. Moms and dads (but also grandparents, uncles, brothers and sisters) are encouraged to participate in the life of the school, sharing purpose and content, educational strategies and practical ways to help the children to grow and learn, to become more "strong" for a future that is not easy to predict and to decipher. For

parents who come from other countries and who are engaged in life projects of various duration for their children in our country, the school is offered as a public space to build relationships of trust and new bonds of community. Cultural and educational models, different religious experiences, social and gender roles have an opportunity, to interact and to move towards the values of coexistence

in an open and democratic society. The families of children with disabilities are in school adequate support capable of promoting the resources of their children, through the recognition of differences and the construction of educational environments welcoming and inclusive, so that each child can find specific attention to their needs and share with others of their own learning "(Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 17).

Towards the integrated 0-6. The bill n. 1260/2014 tabled in Parliament ("Provisions on integrated education and education from birth to six years and the right of girls and boys equal learning opportunities") expresses the evolution of science and culture that characterized the preschool services in Italy from the second half of the twentieth century to the present. This bill in fact establishes the integrated system of education services (0-3 years) and kindergarten (3-6 years) (Art. 1, c. 2 and art. 2) and the educational continuity between the nursery and the pre-school (art. 5); and, precisely on the participation of the families, promotes the reconciliation between the times and the types of work and parental care of girls and boys, promotes measures to support the educational function of families and the involvement of families in the definition of educational goals and the verification of their achievement through the establishment of specific organisms representing assuring flexible ways of meeting and working with families and opening to the territory (art. 2)

In particular, for the field of children under three years, "the new legislation, which would replace the Law no. 1044/1971 establishing the municipal nursery service nationwide, should emphasize the educational nature of all kinds of contexts that welcome children under three years, countering the alarming re-emergence of forms of reception in non-qualified in terms of education, that reproduce such custodial services under new names, such as "reconciliation services" (CRC, 2014, p. 113).

It should however be emphasized that educational services were never at the core of specific policies nor of lasting structural and systematic financing plans. As a result of this, today, "also due to the economic and financial crisis," from an economic and cultural point of view their existence is put into question deeply undermining the overall identity of educational policies for early childhood. "This makes it necessary to reconstruct a grammar of educational services 0-6 to redefine their own identity from the participation of civil society and families to the educational, managerial, organizational, cultural and political center of the nest and the Kindergarten" (Cagliari, 2014, p.201).

March 27, 2015 was filed on Bill n.2994 "Reform of the national system of education and training and for the reorganization of the laws in force" in which merged in its fundamental

principles - art. 21, paragraph 2, letter i) - the Bill 1260/2014. This measure aims to regulate the autonomy of educational institutions, equipping schools with the necessary human, material and financial resources and the tools necessary to achieve their educational and organizational choices.

## 5. The participation of families in the development of cultural and scientific debate

After the birth of the Italian nursery schools, the evolution of research and educational practices regarding the timing, the needs, rights and potentials of children, the care of the relationships between children, between children and adults, and between adults, led gradually to read the experience of the nursery schools as a developmental opportunity, resource and relational space for growth and well-being thought outside the family context. Today the nursery schools - and in general preschool services in Italy - are recognized as places of education and learning for younger children, and not anymore as mere custody or care. Such services that are designed to promote the welfare, the harmonious development and learning of children (Bondioli, Mantovani, 1997; Galardini, 2003; Bove, 2003).

In particular, with respect to the issue of participation, one could say that the participation of families in the services 0/6 today relates both to the participated genesis of the services in some regions of central and northern Italy and to institutional bodies of representation of families in educational services for children (bodies, commissions and committees). Such bodies have historically given decision-making power to parents is to the practices of relationship with the families are now widespread in many Italian services.

In Italy, as elsewhere, the spread of the ecological approach of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) has favored increasing attention to the families, especially parents, who accompany their children in the experience of the educational community of the service. In this sense, An increasingly strong awareness of the need to welcome in the service, together with the child, also his family. "The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of progressive mutual adaptation between an active human being who is growing and the changing properties of the immediate environmental situations in which the individual lives in, even in the sense of defining how this process is determined by the relationships between the various environmental situations and the broader contexts of which the former are part "(Bronfenbrenner, 1986, p.55<sup>5</sup>).

This shows that the child is considered a dynamic entity that grows and moves progressively into the environment in which he lives and he/she restructures it. The child and the environment are thus in a relationship of reciprocity. The environment is considered relevant to the evolutionary processes of the child is not limited to an situation, but is expanded and

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<sup>5</sup> Original edition: 1979

extended to include the interconnections between multiple environmental situations as well as external influences arising from environmental conditions more in general. Some environmental situation, as the nursery or kindergarten or family, can therefore be valid in evolutionary terms if there are interconnections with other environmental situations where the child participates and depending on the nature of these interconnections.

If, therefore, the development of the child is recognized as a result of a system of relations and interactions between child and environment, where the latter is made up of different contexts and systems that influence each other (family, school, territory ...), the theme the participation of families in the Italian services has greatly evolved along with the service. In fact, "the choice of a service of care for their child made by the families now manifests the need for parents to find not only a response to the needs of socializing, playing and learning of children, but also a valuable opportunity for living in new ways their parental role in the context of services recognized as places of education, and not of mere custody or care. In a social context that has changed the needs and questions in approaching to educational services, these are now recognized as contexts able to act as a resource for both the child and his family "(Guerra, Luciano, 2009, p.16).

The nursery school, in particular, has been offering a good stance to capture the evolution of the child in a broader social context but also to valorize the more complex relational dimension of the education of children. Over time the emphasis on the relationship between adult and child left space to the centrality of the relationship between educators and parents in early childhood services, i.e. adults sharing the care of the child (Bonomi, 1998)

Today in the Italian scientific literature family participation in the child care services is unanimously recognized as a constituent element of the quality of the educational experience of the nests and preschools in Italy (eg., Bondioli, Mantovani , 1997; Milani, 2008; Guerra, Luciano, 2009; Bondioli, Savio, 2010; Zaninelli, 2014; Cagliari, 2014). Ethnographic research carried out between 1996 and 2001, conducted in collaboration with Reggio Emilia and parents and educators of educational services involved in the cities of Milan, Parma, Trento and San Miniato, has explored "the construction of socio-cultural concepts and practices relationship between families and services in the cities involved, "analyzing the meanings of local participation and educational practices related to them, connecting them to the cultural interpretations of each society ', bringing out clearly the link between' quality services, family participation and collaboration educators and parents "in different contexts (New, Bove, 2009).

In this light the ECEC services in Italy today assume the character of privileged spaces of encounter and discussion of educational issues for the parents. Spaces where to create a network of solidarity and socialization among adults (Bove, 2003; Catharsis, 2008; Sarsini, 2012), a place to promote training programs to support the thesis of parenting (Catharsis, 2006), where co-educate children and build partnerships to share the responsibility for their education (Milani, 2008) where co-build participation (Guerra, Luciano, 2014).



Not surprisingly, the essentiality of the recognition of an active role to the families understood as primary interlocutors of the educational project of the pre-school is one of the areas of convergence in the prevailing definition of the elements that contribute to the quality of an educational service for early childhood (CNEL , 2010).

However, today listening to parents highlights the perceived inadequacy of the existing forms of participation, which sometimes are not fully adherent to their needs that appear geared especially looking for interaction on issues regarding their parenting role. In parallel, the observation and analysis of participatory bodies shows fewer possibilities for families to take on responsibility in terms of decision-making (Guerra, Luciano, 2014; Zaninelli, 2014).

In Italy, the relationship educators-parents has had different features and positions both in relation to self-perception of the nurseries in terms of duties have been assuming over time and in relation to the professionalism of the operators. Based on this, Bonomi (1998) has identified three main ways that have characterized over the years the relationship educators- parents in Italian nursery schools (Bonomi, 1997):

- Social participation (Various Authors, 1983): refers to the expectation that the parent participate in the life of the nursery school as a collective subject supportive to the new experience of the service. A parent intended as advocate of the claims of the teachers to the government, a supporter of progressive+ choices against more traditional solutions of care in the family;
- Educational-didactic approach towards parents, who were asked to meet with the teachers to be able to observe and understand how useful and relevant educational interventions with their children were. This approach did not allow space exchange and discuss, except in relation to a possible self-criticism that families could do in relation to the distance from the educational model of the nursery attended by their children. It is natural that this would create frustration and a weaker participation by families, which were called to join a model rather than to express themselves and discuss. From this point of view as part the service was identified primarily as a place of stimulation and solicitation and learning more than a meeting place between different experiences and educational practices. From here the development of a more professional-oriented educational management of the adult-child relationship than that of a larger and more complex relationship child-parent-educator;
- Involvement of parents in terms of practical cooperation, which resulted in the call for contributions (materials, performance, skills ...) of single parent to the community of the nursery school. It is "proof of confidence" in which parents show their gratitude and recognition towards the commitment of teachers to their children, moments when the school is common thing to enrich and beautify together.

This reconstruction, albeit partial, of ways in which participation was themed by the educators,

shows an attempt at ideological commitment, that is, the effort to involve the parent in the various ideologies of the nursery: the educational one, the institutional one, the social and organizational one. The relational aspect of discussion and interaction among adults engaged in the experience of the child from different points of view (Bonomi, 1997) is excluded (due to its complexity).

However, over time the space to address the issues above has expanded, in parallel with the enrichment of the professionalism of educators in relation to skills pertaining not only the educational relationship with the children but also the relationship between adults (Bonomi, 1997).

Even in Milani (2008) there is an attempt to outline the evolution of the different models of intervention with families currently being tested in Italy. In an attempt to summarize the evolution of the various interventions of parent training and support to parenthood undergoing in Italy since the nineties, following the introduction law 285/1997 on "Provisions for the promotion of rights and opportunities for children and adolescence ", Milani identifies three main models:

- a. technical model: Anglo-Saxon in origin and imbued with a American pragmatist culture, a model of family education that offers small groups of parents led by a conductor who, pursuing specific objectives, addresses pre-defined issues proposing the evaluation at the end of training; the program is central and the main objective is to change the behavior of the parents;
- b. academic model: it is a model of awareness-raising on educational issue. It is based on information for parents who are invited to conferences on issues deemed important. It suggests the idea that the job of a parent can be taught by experts. Particularly prevalent in the 60's, it is now partially a marginal experience in Italy. It is very centered on content and it aims to transmit knowledge and learning on the education of children;
- c. experiential model: born in the early 30s in France with *ecoles de parents*, it spreaded in Italy with the welcoming in circle of parents and their educational experiences with the aim of generating discussion opens and comparison of experiences in the context of so-called "word groups ". It is a model oriented to focus on people and their experiences and it is mainly oriented at promoting personal reflection and knowledge of each thanks to the presence of a facilitator.

Following the presentation of these three models, Milani (2008) shows the current development in the Italian context of a fourth model that could be placed in between the three models presented above. This model does not give up the theoretical knowledge in favor of a relational superficial and vague approach. It offers content and information (but not pre-packaged solutions nor infallible recipes) in contexts of comparison, while being respectful of the singularity of the personal history of each. It acknowledges the "expertise" of the parent

from the educational point of view, thus leveraging its strengths and allowing him/her to use his/her educational skills in an ever more conscious and intentional way.

## 6. The main practical relationship between ECEC services and families in Italy

In Italy 'practices and formulas through which participation is organized and exercised are the most similar and different at the same time. They are those that emerge from the data of research and investigations and those that emerge from reading the municipal regulations or the Service Charters. Practices and formulas that define the sense of participation that expresses that community and that belongs to that municipality or territory "(Zaninelli, 2014, p. 101).

Today in Italy some specific practices are particularly widespread and recognized as capable, in their complexity and interdependence, to construct a good way to welcome parents in the service, not only by offering them support, but also through building opportunities for discussion, exchange and sharing with educators and teachers and between parents themselves (Guerra, Luciano, 2009). An approach to promote actions with families rather than for families, placing the school in perspective of educational alliance and partnership, which does not fail, however, to consider and also promote a key role for the children and the involvement of the whole community.(Guerra, Luciano, 2014).

Below we present a brief review of the main practices of relationship now spread into 0-6 Italian<sup>6</sup>:

Settling-in conversation. It is the moment of getting to know each other, time to listen to what the parent has to say about their own child, about the relation with a child, his emotions, expectations, convictions, but also the time to get acquainted with education service and its features. There is often a threat that such conversation is limited to a formal meeting during which only certain information regarding the child are gathered and the rules of the educational service are stated. Furthermore this information can be exchanged in paper form. It is useful to say that this moment represents an important occasion to start such relation of mutual confidence that is usually developed and consolidated in time, but has its basis in first meetings and contacts, where more importance is to be given to listening and observing, in general atmosphere of welcome favourable to building of positive relations, when there will be still time to talk and exchange of further information.

Settling in (Inserimento-Ambientamento) can be defined as a time and space of transition between the context of family and the context of educational service. It is a fundamental

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<sup>6</sup> The following resume of practices on participation is extracted from Guerra e Luciano (2009; 2010; 2013).

moment for meeting new children and for creating the relationship with their families. It has to do with different organizational aspects between the families and the educational services

during the first period of attending the services, but it also has to do with the experiences, ideas, imaginations and emotions of each of involved subjects. These two dimensions, pedagogical-organizational and psychological-emotional, appear inseparable; otherwise there would be a risk of not understanding how the period is a complex one. Settling in represents the first separation of a child from their family, as consequence of the decision of the family to share the care and the education of the child with an educational service. This is also the first educational experience within a new context in which the children can meet their first competences to relate and communicate in situation of different and multiple relations, building their own identity through relations with adults and other children. Due to fragility and multiplicity that are typical for settling in, this requires a specific approach regarding organization of groups, time, space, materials, proposals, moments of care and primarily educational and relational styles to adopt with both children and parents.

Welcoming and taking leave. These are moments of fundamental transitions that are not to be done in a hurry, but have to allow both children and adults the necessary time for greetings in the morning and for meeting again in the afternoon. Those, although short moments, allow to exchange basic information regarding the child's daily routine, but more importantly, they are the occasions when the parent can share a book or a game with the child within the educational service, contributing by these concrete, shared gestures, to create day after day the relation and trust among the educators and the family. Those moments of transition, which have to make meeting or separation easier (from couple adult – child, the child from the group or from educators, the parent from educator), bring about different experiences, rhythms and time of adaptation. Because of that it is recommendable for educators to accompany whoever enters and whoever leaves the educational service, in the morning as well as in the afternoon, with particular attention corresponding to the needs of every individual.

Individual conversation during the year. These interviews are particularly spread occasions in the educational services, because they enable to dedicate precious space and time for deeper and personalized knowing each other by the parents and the educators. These moments are precious to analyze together the situation of every single child, their growth and wellbeing, exchange proper ideas, but also to clarify a critical situation or to solve any problematic issues, always without judgements and evaluations, but looking for joint hypothesis and strategies. This is possible if communication is configured as a mutually oriented exchange, also by listening to each other and sharing not just information but also ideas, thoughts, words and emotions generated by this information.

Parents-educators get together (general meetings, meetings of classroom, thematic meetings, workshops, parties). These are occasions to enhance the participation of parents in educational services, sharing views and perspectives and helping dialogue. In that sense, rather than

educating and forming parents, with the risk of making them more insecure and dependent on experts, these moments should be an important opportunity to help families to explore, together with other parents and educators, the significance of growing and of educating, thus making educational services the places of shared culture regarding infancy, where everyone can find its place, be listened and get answers.

In addition to the practices of participation highlighted so far, it deserves careful study the pedagogical documentation as a strategy supporting the participation of families. "Through it (the pedagogical documentation), the educator certainly looms as an expert, but most of the strategies that enable and support the relationship its contents, for which however he and the adult family configure as a partner in dialogue. Children and families, for their part, can express their central role in several directions: as subjects of documents, which tell actions, thoughts and feelings as a snapshot in time through the watchful eyes of educators and teachers; as interlocutors, called to give their point of view, both in terms of feedback and new understanding. They can play also a role of co-authors, giving their own re-interpretation, a broader perspective of the story documented, introducing new elements and also new questions. In addition, children and adults can be invited to build or co-build documentation, in which they propose a different vision, primary and therefore particularly valuable, regarding their experience in the services" (Guerra, 2014, p.77).

The contribution of Milani (2012) - see chart below - is an attempt to build a set of practices and fundamental step in order fit them into a consistent theoretical-epistemological system. This should therefore prevent understanding them as a list of examples to copy and propose uncritically in different contexts. However, it is not a simple operation "since on the hand some practices spread transversally in most educational services, others are typical of a certain context. On the other hand, the practices are many, some are more formal (interviews, meetings etc) while other are informal (parties, trips). Furthermore, the same practice can be used in ways, goals and meanings that are very different. For example, an interview can be made to communicate, inform, listen, judge, etc., can last five minutes or an hour, can take place once a year or every three months and so on. This means that a set of practices that defines, clarifies and categorizes is important, but not sufficient, since it can help to create an idea describe what is done with the families, but does not say what and how you do not realize that the nature of these practices. Nevertheless, in the following table we propose a synthetic set of such practices with the aim of connecting at least the practice and the objectives pursued during their implementation. It is useful to clarify that parental participation is not a single event, but a gradual and complex process, which unfolds between opposing tensions, consists of several stages and objectives and it is centered on the work that parents and teachers can do both at home and at school, i.e. on their partnership. The partnership was defined as a sharing of information and knowledge, tasks and responsibilities in pursuit of a common purpose (Bouchard, 2002; Bouchard, Kalubi and Sorel 2011). The secondary purpose of the partnership

is the establishment of a trust relationship centered on sharing rather than on the affirmation of the power. The primary goal is to improve the ability of adults to meet the needs of the child and therefore the increased welfare of the child in general and at school, and then

The improvement in school performance. The main stages, ranging from a minimum to a maximum of interaction in the process which must be actively guided and supported, are summarized as follows: to inform; to listen; to allow and encourage participation; to engage; to support parenthood.

ACTION	OBJECTIVE	RELATED REPERTORIES OF PRACTICES
<b><i>Informate</i></b>	To Give account to the parents, documenting on a regular basis, the school performance of children (with a focus on the progress and successes), the class and school life in general. Help parents to know and understand the school and its dynamics.	2-3 year talks of a few minutes each; 1 or 2 meetings (school or class / section) per year of about an hour each.
<b><i>Listen</i></b>	To Know the child and the family, the social environment from which the child comes, the modus vivendi of the family, the mindset, habits, styles of education, the organization of everyday life, history etc.	Discussions of various kinds made in the year; joint meetings, section and class repeated several times a year and with a time diversified available, general meetings; written communications, telephone, email, SMS, online platforms etc.
<b><i>Facilitate the participation</i></b>	Allow parents to come to school to enable them to learn about the educational experience of the child and the entire school organization, to bring the classroom experience and the family experience, to give the word to parents, to welcome their contribution, to improve performance and promote the welfare of children in school and overall.	Parents participate and collaborate in the preparation of trips, open days, performances, parties (Christmas, until year etc.). We organize collaborative activities in the classroom, help to maintain the structure, dating to the pizzeria, auction of cakes, rounds of phone calls during the days when it snows or there is a strike, work shifts in the library etc. We realize laboratories of various activities, workshops and "groups do" to prepare teaching materials, toys, stories, small theater plays or music. It builds the newspaper of parents in special groups. It realizes the exhibition of works of children, photos, videos. It collaborates seeking funds for various purchases and special projects etc. It encourages the building of networks, both horizontal (between families) and vertical supporting mutual information, solidarity and daily life. Participation can also be of a managerial nature and therefore be in the appointed places of tips section, management committees etc.
<b><i>Include</i></b>	To Take the perspective of the coeducation in which parents and teachers will listen to one another, recognizing their respective roles and knowledge, to develop a common action plan where you define who does what and when in relation to the educational plan for each child, which has the effect of the adoption in 'pupil of better behavior in class, the feeling of well-being and a better quality of learning.	"Discussion groups", the groups do, laboratories, workshops, parents come into class with and without appointment; varied use of telephone, SMS etc., the documentation: posters, photos, blogs, slideshows, notices, newsletters, etc. Settling in practice for children newly enrolled; practices of hospitality morning and reunification daily, use of baby journal or notebook of parents and / or other type of documentation.
<b><i>Support</i></b>	Support parents in the exercise of their parental role, helping them to recognize,	Support may be explicit or implicit. Explicit: conferences, lectures, seminars, workshops parenting, word groups, free

	<p>respect, tune in and meet the needs of growing children through various actions of nature education / training (parenting support) developed from the analysis of the different learning needs of parents.</p>	<p>conversations, coffee-parents etc. Implicit: the parent is put in a position to make the learning in relation to itself as a parent, in some specific situations such as participation in games or reading with children or a laboratory. Through daily attendance one can offer discussion, observation points, different relational styles, examples of respect, attention, care, care for children who become, for the parent, opportunities for reflection on the child and awareness on the parental role, as well as opportunities of social reflexivity on educating in the daily dimension</p>
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Source: Milani, 2012, pp. 30-32.

# Greece

## 1. Theory and scholarly work

### 1.1. Family participation in Greece

Family participation in ECEC has not been examined thoroughly in Greece, because the value of parents' collaboration with preschool and kindergarten teachers was not established for a long time. Only in the last decade appeared official policy papers from the Greek Ministry of Education in order to enhance the collaboration between parents and teachers in kindergartens (see Dafermou, Koulouri, & Basagianni, 2006). This is one of the major reasons explaining recent findings which showed that day cares programmes provide low quality of communication and partnership between parents and early childhood caregivers (Rentzou, 2011a).

Family participation in ECEC is examined by the Greek research studies mainly under the perspective of parental involvement (e.g., Manolitsis 2004; Rekalidou & Penderi, 2010; Sakellariou, 2008a) and in some cases examined specific issues such as (a) the parent-teacher relationship quality (Petrogiannis & Penderi, 2014; Rentzou, 2011b) and (b) the effects of early home learning environment on academic skills (e.g., Manolitsis, Georgiou, & Parrila, 2011; Manolitsis, Georgiou, Tziraki, 2013). Parental involvement in these Greek studies has been conceptualized as an umbrella term that encapsulates all the possible facets of parent's involvement in child's life during the developmental period of early childhood (3-6 years old). Specifically, according to the Greek research studies the construct of involvement included a combination of communication types between teachers (or caregivers) with parents, joint activities of parents and teachers in the kindergarten or day care, the affective dimensions of parent-teacher interactions, parent's views towards the quality of ECEC provisions, and home learning activities. The most of the Greek studies (e.g., Manolitsis, 2004, Sakellariou, 2008a, Rentzou, 2011b) examined parental involvement under the theoretical perspective of Bronfenbrenner's (1995) ecological model.

A number of studies examined the types of parental involvement as the main facet of family participation in Greek ECEC. Manolitsis (2004) examined the frequency and structure of parental involvement in preschool education. 271 parents, who had children of 4 to 6 years old and attending a public kindergarten or day care at Crete (the largest island of Greece), participated in that study. It was assessed parental involvement using a 5-point Likert-type rating scale based on the Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs (2000) types of parental involvement in ECEC. The exploratory factor analysis showed four different types of parental involvement in Greek preschool education. The most reported types of parental involvement were involvement activities taking place outside the kindergarten or the day care, such as "control of child's behavior beyond school" and "psychoeducational involvement activities in home". The least



reported types were “the parent’s involvement into the ECEC classroom” and “the parent-teacher communication”. The most frequent communication issues were the conversation between parents and teachers about child’s relationship with peers and child’s behavior and academic abilities. Less often reported communication issues included classroom rules, learning activities taking place at home and meetings with the head of the kindergarten. It is noteworthy that discussion on the phone between parent and teacher was the least reported aspect of communication. In summary, communication between parents and teachers in kindergarten and day cares was not very frequent.

Another group of studies (e.g., Sakellariou, 2008a, Sakellariou & Rentzou, 2008b) examined the parents’ attitudes towards ECEC institutions and the types of communication between parents with teachers and caregivers. Sakellariou and Rentzou (2007 as cited in Sakellariou, 2008) showed that both parents and preschool teachers reported an informal type of communication and collaboration such as exchange information about child’s behavior during the time of child’s arrival and the time of child’s departure from the kindergarten or the day care. Also, this study’s results showed that teachers did not motivate parents for a closer collaboration. According to their results, the Greek types of parental involvement were not similar with the well-known models of parental involvement such as the six types of Epstein (1995). In a survey study Sakellariou (2008b) examined 673 preschoolers’ parents’ attitudes towards kindergarten and the quality of parent-teacher communication. This study’s findings showed that parents held positive attitudes towards kindergarten, but they reported few visits to their child’s kindergarten for communication with the teacher and even fewer visits in order to participate in briefing meetings for activities taking place into kindergarten. Similar findings by another survey study with 393 parents (Papandreou, Birbili, & Martidou, 2009) showed that parents communicate with teachers by their own initiative mainly for giving information about their child and to discuss issues of health, learning disabilities and behavior problems. Kindergarten teachers initiate communication with parents mainly to inform for the curriculum, the organized events and festivities, to suggest home-learning activities and to ask information about child’s development. It is notable that only the 16.5% of parents reported that they interested to participate into the kindergarten classroom activities.

In a qualitative study Sakellariou (2008a) interviewed 60 mothers of kindergarten children in order to examine their beliefs towards a broad range of issues regarding preschool education. According to the majority (above 80%) of mothers’ beliefs both parents and teachers need to provide educational support to children. However, less than 60% of mothers reported a daily contact with the kindergarten. Mothers believe that the parent-teacher collaboration could provide them information for a better understanding of their child. According to the mothers’ beliefs the most frequent type of collaboration was the conversation with the teachers. Most of the mothers reported a positive attitude for collaboration and active involvement in

kindergarten, and the 1/3 of them reported that both teachers and parents should decide that kindergarten's educational program jointly.

Rekalidou and Penderi (2010) in an action research study showed that both parents and kindergarten teachers complained that they were not collaborate and their communication was limited to short conversations when parents bringing or collecting their child to school. Parents' involvement limited only for the attendance at organized events and festivities. After an intervention phase of training teachers in organized sessions to implement the portfolio method of assessment and to enhance parent-teacher relationships. Teachers had to inform parents about the process and the benefits of portfolio. However, after the end of the intervention phase, few parents contributed to portfolio assessment actively. This action research study showed that communication of teachers with parents was difficult, given that parents and teachers held conflicting views in many cases, especially "when a problem arose with a child" (Rekalidou & Penderi, 2010, p. 31). However, in another action research study Papandreou (2010) implemented a focused intervention to enhance parents' involvement with a project designed according to the needs of the school and the participating parents. In this study parents trained in four sessions during the school year. Four different types of family participation activities implemented during the school year: individual meeting between parent and teacher, informational letters sent from teachers to parents, suggestions for home-learning activities were sent to parents by the teachers, and each parent invited to participate in kindergarten's program a single day. The post-intervention results showed that parents were very willing to participate and collaborate with the teachers. It seems that the continuing motivation of teachers towards parents to participate as well as the broad range of the implemented strategies by the teachers enhance parents' willingness to get involved more actively. Also teachers reported that they get valuable information from parents' records based on child's activities in home, in order to design their prospective educational objectives and activities.

Another of strand of research on family participation examined the types of the affective dimensions of parent-teacher interactions. Petrogiannis and Penderi (2014) in a survey study with 913 parents of preschool children and 233 kindergarten teachers examined the quality of their interaction with a 20-items scale. According to their results both parents and teachers beliefs about their interaction grouped in two broad dimensions: (a) the "trust/acceptance" dimension consisted of the affective component of parent-teacher interaction (affective blueprint, emotional tone and evaluation of the other part's contribution to the interaction"; (b) the "communication/responsiveness dimension consisted of the behavioral regularities that reflect the level of collaboration between parents and teachers. Also they showed that teachers held less positive beliefs for the parent-teacher interaction than parents did. In another similar study with day care caregivers Rentzou (2011a) examined the dyadic parent-caregiver relationship of 38 complete parent-caregivers dyads. Both parents and caregivers completed a

35-item scale designed in two separate forms for each group of participants. Both scale form included three dimensions of parent/caregiver relationship. The first two dimensions of “trust/confidence” and “collaboration” were similar for the parent and the caregiver form. The third dimension of the parent form included an “affiliation” subscale while the caregiver form included a “caring” subscale. According to Rentzou (2011a) results the caregivers rated higher the “care” dimension (parents’ skill and sensitivity for caring children) and lower the “trust/confidence” dimension. On the other hand, parents rated higher the “trust/confidence” dimension and lower the “affiliation” dimension (feel warmth and share friendly relationship with their child’s caregiver). Parents and caregivers have been found to cooperate superficially and early childhood caregivers held less positive beliefs towards the parents than parents’ beliefs towards caregivers. Particularly parents were more satisfied with the quality of parent-caregiver communication than caregivers were. To sum up, Rentzou’s results showed that caregivers were rather unwilling to collaborate with parents, whereas parents reported a willingness for collaboration with caregivers. Caregivers held positive attitudes only for a limited parental participation but they did not want any involvement in their pedagogical work.

The effects of home learning environment on child’s academic skills has been limited to home literacy activities and their contribution to literacy development. For example Manolitsis, Georgiou and Tziraki (2013) examined how the home literacy and numeracy environment in early childhood influences reading and math acquisition in grade 1. Their results indicated that parents’ teaching of literacy skills predicted reading fluency through the effects of letter knowledge and phonological awareness. Storybook exposure predicted reading fluency through the effects of vocabulary on phonological awareness. Finally, parents’ teaching of numeracy skills predicted math fluency through the effects of verbal counting. These findings suggest that both the home literacy and the home numeracy environments are important for early reading and math acquisition, but their effects are mediated by emergent literacy and numeracy skills. In Manolitsis, Georgiou and Parrila (2011) found that direct teaching of letters contribute significantly to kindergartners’ letter knowledge and storybook exposure contribute to children’s vocabulary.

## 1.2. Factors affecting family participation

A number of factors have been examined to associate with parental involvement in early childhood settings. Manolitsis’ (2004) results indicated that some of the aspects of parental involvement were influenced by variables such as the parent’s gender, preschool center, and mother’s educational level. Particularly, he found that parental participation into the classroom was more frequent for (a) parents in kindergartens than for parents who had their child in day care centers and (b) mothers than for fathers. Also his results showed that according to a general parental involvement index mothers were involved more than fathers in young children’s preschool education. Parents frequency of parental involvement was not associate with their child’s gender. Finally, in this study found that mothers of high SES differed from

mothers with low SES only on the frequency of psychoeducational involvement in home, but fathers SES did not associate with any facet of parental involvement. In Sakellariou's (2008b) study has been found that low SES parents held more positive attitudes towards the objectives of preschool education than high SES parents. Also Sakellariou (2008b) found that younger mothers and mothers of low SES communicate with teachers in order to be informed for safety and health issues, whereas high SES parents discuss with teachers mainly for their child's academic skills.

The quality of interaction between parents and teachers has been also found to associate with a number of factors. Teachers who have larger groups of children in the preschool classroom held more negative beliefs on "trust" dimension and lower general quality of interaction with parents than teachers who have smaller groups of children in the classrooms (Petrogiannis & Penderi, 2014; Rentzou, 2011a). Moreover, it has been found that mother's beliefs of the quality of teacher-parent interaction associated with the mother's parenting style; mothers with a positive relationship with their child reported better interactions with teachers than mothers with negative child-mother relationships (Petrogiannis & Penderi, 2014). Moreover, younger caregivers believe that they interact more positive with parents than older caregivers (Rentzou, 2011a). Finally Petrogiannis and Penderi (2014) showed that the teachers' job satisfaction and teaching efficacy beliefs correlated positively with the quality of parent-teacher interaction.

## 2. Methods and practices in the local and national level

In Greece, the policy related to family involvement in educational processes taking place in kindergarten school settings as well as to the forms of teachers' and parents' cooperation are described by three official documents published by the Ministry of Culture, Education and Religious Affairs.

Kindergarten teachers' Manual (Dafermou, Koulouri, & Basagiannh, 2006) constitutes an official document distributed to all public kindergarten schools aiming at providing to teachers clear guidelines regarding the implementation of an interdisciplinary curriculum for preschool education. In this document, parents are recognized as major contributors to their children's learning and development and are considered as those who can provide to teachers the most significant and accurate information regarding children's developmental profile. Systematic communication is considered as a prerequisite for developing effective cooperation between teachers and parents and can be achieved by several alternative practices such as: a) scheduled meetings with children's parents in whole class, b) a few-minute communication when parents come to school to take their children, c) scheduled meetings for resolving problems arising in the school environment, d) phone communication, e) communication diary carried by the child in his school bag, f) announcement board which is addressed to parents and is located in school and g) meetings with scientists aiming at informing parents about topics of special interest.

Scheduled meetings are necessary for providing to parents full information for several aspects of the school life and are conducted regularly through the school year. Specifically, at the beginning of the school year the teacher invites children's parents to the first scheduled meeting in order to guide them in the school environment, inform them about the educational program, ask for their cooperation and answer to any questions that the parents might have. Also, in the context of this first meeting, the teacher might ask for parents' contribution to procedures aiming at children's adjustment to the school environment. At the next scheduled meetings through the school year, the teacher informs the parents about the educational program development and about the activities developed by their children. Furthermore, the teacher informs the parents about their children's progress in several developmental domains, their special interests and the preferences they display regarding the activities that are taking place in kindergarten. For that reason, the teacher presents to parents work samples from children's portfolios and thus provides them the opportunity to observe and evaluate their children's capabilities, comment on them and ask for additional clarifications. During these meetings, the teacher has the opportunity to receive feedback from the parents about the way that the children perceive school environment and about the activities that are organized by him. In the pre-described procedures, it is important for the parents to be pre informed by the teacher about the purpose and the content of the meeting in order for them to be prepared appropriately. In the case of immigrant parents, the teacher arranges for the presence of a translator who can contribute and enable the communication processes.

Kindergarten teachers' Manual (Dafermou et al., 2006) also highlights the significance of parents involvement in the educational activities anticipated by the curriculum. The announcement board, which is located in the school can provide to parents alternative forms of involvement. For example, the teacher can announce regularly topics or activities for which he desires parents' contribution and cooperation. In this context, parents can organize the form of their involvement according to the needs of the recommended activities. For example, they might accompany their children in outside school activities, provide to teachers materials that can be used in the conducted educational activities, participate in indoor activities by presenting information related to special topics or participate in activities taking place in the kindergarten classroom, such as reading stories in the library area. Furthermore, the Kindergarten teachers' Manual (Dafermou et al., 2006) stresses the significance of expanding the recommended by the curriculum educational activities into children's family environment. Specifically, the Kindergarten teachers' Manual proposes to parents several kinds of activities that they can conduct alongside with their children in order to contribute effectively to their children's literacy, social, emotional and psychomotor development. The Kindergarten teachers' Manual with all the pre-described practices emphasizes the significance of teachers and parents mutual cooperation and communication for children's learning and development.

Parents' Manual (Vrinioti, Kiridis, Sivropoulou-Theododiadou, & Hrisafidis, n.d.) constitutes the second official document published by the Greek Ministry of Culture, Education and Religious Affairs and it also distributed in all public kindergartens. Its' aim is to inform parents about the purpose of preschool education and provide them with accurate answers to questions regarding several aspects of the all-day kindergarten function. The Parent's Manual provides clear guidelines, which establish the base of an effective communication between parents and teachers. The teachers are obligated to organize scheduled meetings with children's parents once in month or more frequently in order to discuss and resolve any problems that might arise in the school environment. These meetings are scheduled outside working hours and are recorded in teachers' book of proceedings. Furthermore, the Parent's Manual describes how parents can be involved in kindergarten school life. Initially, several procedures are described which can enable children's transition from the nursery school or the family environment to kindergarten. Specifically, parents are informed that it is extremely helpful to prepare their children for this transition by answering to their questions and making regular visits to children's new school environment. Besides children, parents should also prepare themselves for children's transition to kindergarten and allay any fears and worries they might have regarding children's attendance to it. Furthermore, parents should engage their children in procedures, which strengthen children's autonomy. Helping children to adopt healthy nutrition habits and to recognize and face dangers that arise in the school and social environment constitute two representative examples, which relate to parental involvement practices. In addition, play emerges as a core activity that can contribute to children's learning and development significantly. In this context, the Parent's Manual intends to correct many parents' wrong perception that children's engagement in playful activities constitutes an obstacle to kindergarteners' academic achievement. Thus, parents are advised to participate in their children's play through various ways. Indicatively, parents are motivated to create a special area in the home environment equipped with the necessary materials in order for children to play alone or with their siblings. Also, parents should grasp opportunities during the day in order to observe children's play in home and in kindergarten and thus acknowledge children's needs, skills and interests. Furthermore, parents are advised to participate actively in children's play as long as they do not block children's imagination and creativity and they do not transform it in a form of schoolwork that is characterized by features adapted to programme learning procedures.

According to guidelines of the Parents' Manual (Vrinioti, et al., n.d.), the cooperation between the parents and the teachers should be based on the following key-points.

Regular communication between the school and the family. Regular communication by both parties is often prevented by problems related to lack of time, lack of cooperation and lack of appropriate training. These problems are being overcome by designing and implementing parental training programs. For example, a training program can incorporate six to ten sessions

for groups consisted of twenty parents each. Parents are pre informed about the special topics that are to be discussed and thus they have the time they need to gather all the necessary information in order to participate in the procedures and activities of each session.

Guidelines and instructions provided by the school regarding the forms of parental participation in the learning procedures taking place in the family environment. Parents should not consider their children's learning and development as teachers' solely responsibility. They should also participate in children's learning by asking from teachers advises and guidelines for activities and practices that they can implement at home given that this effort does not reduce children's free time for play.

Invitations regarding parents' involvement in the activities conducted at school. Parents can participate in the educational activities carried out in school in regular and scheduled dates or they can be involved in procedures related with projects, visits or excursions organized by the children.

Joint decision making processes in topics related to children's learning. Nowadays, parents are more informed about topics related to their children education. Thus, they can appreciate any current teaching methods adopted by teacher, encourage and participate in innovative educational programs implemented in school.

Coordination of the learning activities conducted at home and at school. It is extremely significant for parents to enhance children's skills through age appropriate activities conducted at home. In this way, children can maintain all the recently acquired from the kindergarten benefits and continue to make progress in the targeted by the educational program skills. Furthermore, parents have the opportunity to follow their children's progress and provide to teachers feedback about the efficacy of the school activities.

Parental participation in decision-making processes about the school function in specific and allowed circumstances. Parents are motivated to participate in local and national committees, which relate with kindergarten schools function. Furthermore, their participation in the parents' school committee can contribute effectively in decision making and problem solving procedures.

Mutual respect between the parents and the teachers. All the pre-described goals can be accomplished and the practices can be implemented given that both parents and teachers recognize each other's role and contribution in children's learning and development.

Children's attendance to kindergarten, according to the Parents' Manual (Vrinioti, et al., n.d.), serves as preparatory stadium during which they are prepared for attending primary school. Under this notion, parents and teachers should cooperate in order to enable children's transition to primary school. Parents' and teachers' joint efforts should aim at helping children appreciate school, respond to school requirements creatively and develop a positive stance

toward learning. Specifically, parents can contribute to the aforementioned goals achievement by concentrating their efforts in helping their children to develop the necessary communication and social skills.

All-day Kindergarten Manual (Aleuriadou, Vrinioti, Kiridis, Sivropoulou-Theododiadou, & Hrisafidis, 2008) constitutes the third official document published by the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, which describes the necessity and the form of family involvement in the school processes. According to it, family is the first environment where children's education and edification takes place. Kindergarten serves a compensatory role with the aim to provide enhanced pedagogical help in the context of preschool education. Children's individual skills, interests and capabilities constitute the base on which parents' and teachers' cooperation is grounded. This cooperation is further supported by both parties having agreed on the basic school principles and methods and by having established a regular and systematic communication.

Furthermore, family cohesion and behavior, intra-family relationships, children's immigration background and family social and economical status are significant factors, which can form, enhance or prevent family-school communication and cooperation. Kindergarten teachers should be aware of the aforementioned factors and be flexible in order to accomplish feasible modes of communication with children's parents. In addition, the All-day kindergarten Manual (Aleuriadou et al., 2008) replicates forms of cooperation and communication, which are also reported in the Parents' Manual (Vrinioti, et al., n.d.) and Kindergarten teachers' Manual (Dafermou et al., 2006). A significant differentiation between the three documents is the emphasis that the All-day kindergarten Manual puts on teachers and parents group meetings. In order for a group meeting to operate effectively, teachers should bear in mind the following key features:

- Small groups (of twenty five members) operate more effectively than large groups.
- The topics of the group discussions should be selected according to parents' needs and should relate to usual developmental issues.
- Group cohesion should be accomplished as fast as possible.
- Parents should be informed about the basic theoretical principles related to parents-children-teachers relationships.
- Teachers act as facilitators in order to ensure that participants contribute equally to the group discussion.
- At the end of each meeting, group members should make a synopsis of the most significant conclusions in order for any wrong perceptions to be corrected.

All-day kindergarten Manual (Aleuriadou et al., n.d.) also stresses that is important for parents to participate in the school educational activities by offering voluntary work and to cooperate with teachers in order to regulate procedures related to all-day kindergarten special



procedures, such as children's lunch and rest time. Despite the fact that the Greek legislation anticipates (Law 1566/85, article 53) parents' participation in administrative and procedural issues of the school, there is no any official state program regarding the modes and methods of family-school communication and cooperation.

## Latvia

### Understanding Participation in Early Childhood Education: Latvian Experience

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The availability of quality education ensures economic growth in both the short and long term. Since education is considered as a factor that influences and reflects the values of society, it is of great importance to actualize vertical (in a formal way) and horizontal (in an informal way) development and recognize a set of common values that underpin the educational process.

European Commission has put forward the priorities that affirm the components of quality education, where access, participation and family involvement in education are defined as the main keywords (Lindeboom & Buiskool, 2013). Moreover, family involvement is considered to be as one of the democratic values and one of the main quality indicators for preschool education, and the emphasis put on family participation plays important, if not critical, role.

## Participation

Participation in general focuses on partnerships of educational institutions, families, and communities that attempt to improve preschool programs and climate, provide family services and support, thus increasing parents' skills and involvement, create a network within the community, and help pedagogues and teachers in their work (Pavitola, Grava, Mikelsone, & Pole, 2016 as cited in Everington, 2005; Uemura, 1999).

As there exist a variety of concepts that characterize participation - taking part, collaboration, acting together, involvement, inclusion, decision making together etc., it is important to clarify and understand the essence of the term participation. It is significant to realize that it does not mean only instructions that are often considered as participative activities by parents and pedagogue.

In preschools there exist several ways of involvement into participative activities, characterizing productive and effective participation practice among educational institutions, families, and communities that can be employed through all stages of participation:

- parenting – by helping families to establish supportive home environments;
- communicating – by designing effective forms of preschool-to-home and home-to-preschool communication that enable parents to learn about preschool activities and their children’s progress as well as enable teachers to learn about how children do at home;
- volunteering – by organizing parent help and support;
- earning at home – by providing information and ideas to families about how to help children at home with programme and curriculum-related activities;
- decision making – by including families in preschool decisions, and having parent representatives in preschool meetings;
- collaborating with the community – by identifying and integrating resources as well as services from the community in order to strengthen preschools, family practices, and children learning. (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997)

This is in accordance with the evaluation model of quality education outlined by German scientist W. Tietze (Tietze, 2014), setting apart several dimensions: 1) the quality of pedagogical staff competence, containing notions of pedagogues about meaningful professional activity, developmental opportunities of a child and necessary support for it; 2) the quality of the process, considering care about children, compliance of implemented educational approach with the child’s individuality, ensuring physical and emotional security, as well as supporting learning process and providing for educational environment and resources; and 3) the quality of structure, that determines functioning of educational institutions and refers to normative regulations of premises and material resources.

**Benefits for Children** Family participation cannot be implemented without involvement and positive outcomes for children, whose development and wellbeing should be in focus in all participative activities. However, parents and professionals do not always agree on what would be the best for the family and the child, and the concept of family participation can mean different things to different people. Although most preschool teachers value connections with families, many preschool education institutions do not have well- organized programmes of family and community involvement. (Pavittola, Grava, Mikelsone, & Pole, 2016) As R. Stauffer (2011) believes, participative activities are possible both formally and nonformally, where every child and his/her family have a possibility to co-participate: individually, as a member in a group and a preschool institution (see Table 1).

Table 1 Participative activities in preschools (Stauffer, 2011)

Kinds of participative activities	Nonformally (Project activities, single cases, participation in negotiations and decision	Formally (Regular and “strictly” regulated institution and processes)
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	making)	.
Institution of preschool education	Satisfaction with the climate in a preschool institution Organizing of common projects (day/week of sports, drama) Exchange with toys	Board of the preschool institution Children`s conferences Meetings  Committees of the preschool institution
Group in a preschool	Common planning of activities and play-activities, and common resolution of conflicts	Regular planning and choice of topic Reflection after play-activities  Regular children involvement into the creation of play- activity  Regular common resolution of conflicts
Individually	Self-evaluation Portfolio	Regular self-evaluation Workshops - activities Regular work with portfolio Management of group premises

The above mentioned ways of participation result in certain benefits connected with multisided components of health and citizenship education, positive institutional climate and development, as well as multisided collaboration and integration. These components reveal in:

- Personality development – children cognize and are aware of their independent activities, thus strengthening their self-determination skills, self-reliance and confidence;
- Competence development – social, communicative competences and those for democratic activities foster the implementation of pedagogical goals;
- Identification and belonging – child`s participation and belonging to a group create identification with own life space and responsibility;
- Quality of preschool institution – children`s participation has to be viewed as both quality characteristics and investment in it, thus promoting and ensuring the development of preschool institution (Amstutz & Marty, 2007) Policies concerning family participation and involvement in early childhood education Education Law of the Republic of Latvia (Izglītības likums, 1999) determines participation of family and

society in education, pointing to their obligation to take part in organizational processes of the child's education, promote the quality of education, and protect children and teachers interests and rights (article 21). The Law of Education also determines the responsibility of municipalities – to provide children with possibilities to obtain preschool education in the institution nearby their place of residence (article 17).

The Ministry of Education and Science develops state guidelines for preschool education (Noteikumi par valsts pirmsskolas izglītības vadlīnijām, 2012) and prepares patterns of preschool education programmes based on these guidelines. The content of these programmes is grounded on holistic approach to the child's development, ensuring continuity, based on the results that can be reached by the means of mutual interactions of children and pedagogues. The programme sample is elaborated with emphasis on play as leading activity in preschool. Applying it, children take over experience stored in society, develop attitudes, improve their experience by acting independently and cognizing themselves, nature and the world around. There are several samples of programmes elaborated: programme of preschool education till the age of 6, special education programme for preschools, programmes for minorities till the age of 6 with Russian and Polish learning language, integrated preschool education programme for 6-year olds, and integrated preschool education programme for minorities with Russian and Polish learning language

Since the regulations on state preschool education guidelines do not mention the concept participation, rather focus on collaborative activities among children,

pedagogues, and parents or their legal substitutes as one of the basic conditions for successful process in preschool education. However, the term participation is more common in the context of inclusive education in Latvia. Thus, it can be concluded that legislation, regulations and terms turn little attention to family involvement and participation in the processes of early childhood education, delivering responsibility to pedagogues, families and preschool institutions.

Latvia seems to be into the developmental process of participation practice with social partners, therefore exchange of positive experience is of utmost importance. Currently the collaboration between preschool education institutions and parents manifest itself mostly in parents' meetings, participation in activities and parents donations to preschool institution, though wholesome participation should occur on three levels – preschool institution, municipality and state (Skolu un pirmsskolu pašpārvalžu darbības izvērtējums un ieteikumi efektivitātes uzlabošanai, 2012).

Also the survey of studies published by Education, Audio Visual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) on early childhood education and care supports the belief in intensive, early and child-focused education in combination with family participation, parent education and support activities (Pirmsskolas izglītība un aprūpe Eiropā: sociālās un kulturālās nevienlīdzības

risināšana, 2009).

## Existing quality indicators and tools on family participation practices employed in Latvia

There are no active quality indicators that evaluate family participation. Latvia seems to be into the developmental process of participation practice with social partners, therefore exchange of positive experience is of utmost importance. Currently the collaboration between preschool education institutions and parents manifest itself mostly in parents meetings, participation in activities and parents donations to preschool institution, though wholesome participation should occur on three levels – preschool institution, municipality and state. (Skolu un pirmsskolu pašpārvalžu darbības izvērtējums un ieteikumi efektivitātes uzlabošanai, 2012) Also the survey of studies published by Education, Audio Visual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) on early childhood education and care supports the belief in intensive, early and child-focused education in combination with family participation, parent education and support activities. (Pirmsskolas izglītība un aprūpe Eiropā: sociālās un kulturālās nevienlīdzības risināšana, 2009)

Currently existing indicators and tools are available from Education Initiative Centre (non-governmental organization in Latvia), which has translated and adapted/elaborated materials based on International Association project Step by Step (ISSA), where majority of preschools in Latvia were involved. In the frame of the project a work group was made and Step by Step Program and Teacher Standards for Preschool and Primary Grades were developed in 1999. Step by Step is a comprehensive methodology for children at the age since birth to 10 years and for families of these children. The developed methodology and materials are foreseen for teachers, parents and university teachers. It is based on child- oriented approach and participation of parents and society in children`s education (Step by Step Programme and Teacher Standards for Preschool and Primary Grades, 2002).

Specialists on preschool methodology worked with these materials, when they were translated in Latvian (year 2013), and adapted the criteria for quality evaluation of teachers. These indicators were elaborated but still not implemented as a system – they might be employed in several preschools/municipalities in Latvia. In Liepāja there was an attempt to elaborate the indicators for quality evaluation of specialists in preschool

methodology (vice heads of preschools), but the idea failed as majority of these specialists were against the fact that somebody would evaluate them. Currently there are existing criteria for preschool teachers` self-evaluation that is used as a tool in Liepāja preschool institutions. It can have variables from institution to institution, and it is not used as a systemic tool (see table 1).

Criteria for self-evaluation Criterion Pedagogue`s work with the family
Quality indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Informs family about everyday activities and achievements of their children (letters, phone calls, individual meetings, notes etc.)</li> <li>- Gives opportunities for children and parents to develop educational materials. Informs about fees (no debts) on time. Organizes individual meetings with the family, in order to discuss the child`s achievements and difficulties, and obtain information about expectations of parents, their goals, concerns and needs.</li> <li>- Designs information board and creates its content (plans of activities, information about that, activities in groups etc.) Organizes different events and involves families in them.</li> <li>- Invites parents to take part in group activities (work shadowing).</li> <li>- Finds out the sphere of occupation of parents and the issues that parents can share with children as experts, thus being involved into the process of education (professions, hobbies etc.).</li> <li>- Pedagogues provide parents with a possibility to learn and share experience on children`s development and education (parent meetings, seminars, thematical afternoons etc.).</li> <li>- Collaboration with the institutions (orphan justice centre, social services etc.), in order to provide children with the care they need.</li> </ul>

## Best practices of family participation at national level

Good practice examples found in Latvia, show that parents also participate actively in the administration of the preschool and are a part of the network within the community. Summarizing the studies carried on in Latvia, it can be concluded that preschools offer different kinds of participative activities for parents. Their content, volume and frequency can differ from institution to institution, but as the most popular kinds of participation at preschool educational institutions are mentioned the following:

- Parent Board;
- Self-government;
- Activities organized for children and parents, for example, concerts, workshops, sports day, festivities and celebrations, excursions, joint work, involvement in everyday routine etc.;

- Individual meetings with pedagogues and administration.

## Examples of good practices

**“Parent Association of Latvia”** – founded in 2011. Its mission is to develop and strengthen potential of parents and their opportunities to collaborate in education promoting their involvement in improvement of environment of the educational institution. The Association implements the project on parent education and collaboration Parent-To-Parent (P2P), and takes part in organizing European Parent association (EPA) conferences.

**“Parent Forum of Latvia”** – on May, 12<sup>th</sup>, 2012 in Riga took place the first Parent Forum of Latvia on the issues concerning positive changes and strengthening of parent role in the system of education. There were present 130 parent organizations and representatives of school boards, as well as parents from all over Latvia. The goal of the Forum is to give voice to parents on necessity of changes in the education system, put forward proposals to the Ministry of Education and Science, The Saeima and Cabinet of Ministers about further activities on strengthening the role of parents and advocating changes in the sphere of education, as well as develop a model of collaboration and agree upon representation of interests in the education politics.

**“Open Parents”** – it is the organizations that unites three Baltic associations of parents: “Parent Association of Latvia”, “Parent Forum of Lithuania” and “Parent association of Estonia”. They have developed the project for educating parents “Open Parents”, which foresees to enhance collaboration with educational institutions for children and strengthen development of parent competence centres.

The following practices are connected with schools, as there are schools that provide preschool education as well, and we consider them as excellent opportunities for parents to continue their participation through school years. **“Friendly School”** – a movement initiated by children rights protection institution, whose mission is to improve psychosocial environment of educational institution, in order to ground relationships among children, parents, teachers and administration on mutual respect and honesty. The main goals of their mission are: 1) to improve mutual collaboration among children, parents, teachers and school administration, as well as collaboration with other institutions and municipality; and 2) to ensure regular preventive work on exclusion of violence in educational institutions.

**Programme for children development** – implemented in primary school in Zakumuiza, which motivates children develop themselves as successful, friendly persons needed for society. The programme has been developed together with parents and teachers, who agreed on 5 the most vital characteristics they would like to develop in their children. Every week children receive a sticker, if a progress is noticeable in the child’s behaviour.

## **Family participation practices at local level**

In order to study family participation practices at local level, a pilot study was performed with the goal to find out the understanding of the concept family participation, existing situation in practice, and its advantages and disadvantages. Participants were preschool teachers and specialists in preschool methodology, selected by purposeful random sampling strategy, and the data collection technique - a method of questionnaire was applied.

### Understanding of the concept

The results revealed the awareness of the respondents on the topic. The concept participation was characterized as a mutual interaction that actively involves everybody - a child, family, teachers - towards reaching a common goal. It is involvement in everyday life of the preschool group and institution as well. Among the keywords that characterize participation a dialog, discussion, common goals, involvement into the processes, ability to compromise, interest, opinion, appropriate and responsible decision making, information exchange, everyday challenges and their resolutions and teamwork were mentioned.

There was separated a term of pedagogical participation – that means mutual and creative activity of children, parents and pedagogues towards reaching common goals; one of them – development of the child's personality. Particular emphasis was put on the quality of communication that underlie successful collaboration. The more qualitative is the contact among the persons involved, the better support is given to the child.

Participation is necessary to promote the child's holistic development that is influenced by several factors: family, pedagogues, peers and society. All agents have to be interested in participative activities to ensure the quality of child care and education, thus assisting to develop child's individual abilities and skills within supportive environment.

The overall goal of participation is to educate children, develop their personalities and ensure readiness for school education.

Existing situation in local practice Participative activities that occur locally, can be characterized as periodical (a separate event) and regular collaboration (organized activities within long term period). And, although, the respondents expressed theoretical awareness of the term participation, the examples and practices they described were more tended towards collaboration. Preschool education institutions have local regular collaboration partners, for example, children libraries, Liepaja Doll theatre, swimming pool, Children and Youth centre, Liepaja department of the state police, shopping centres "Kurzeme", "Baata" etc., association „Dižvanagi", Liepaja University, Music school, Liepaja Board of Education, Liepaja Municipality, schools, social services and others. Most often collaboration partners are the ones, who initiate cooperation, although preschool institutions also are active in establishing contacts. Very

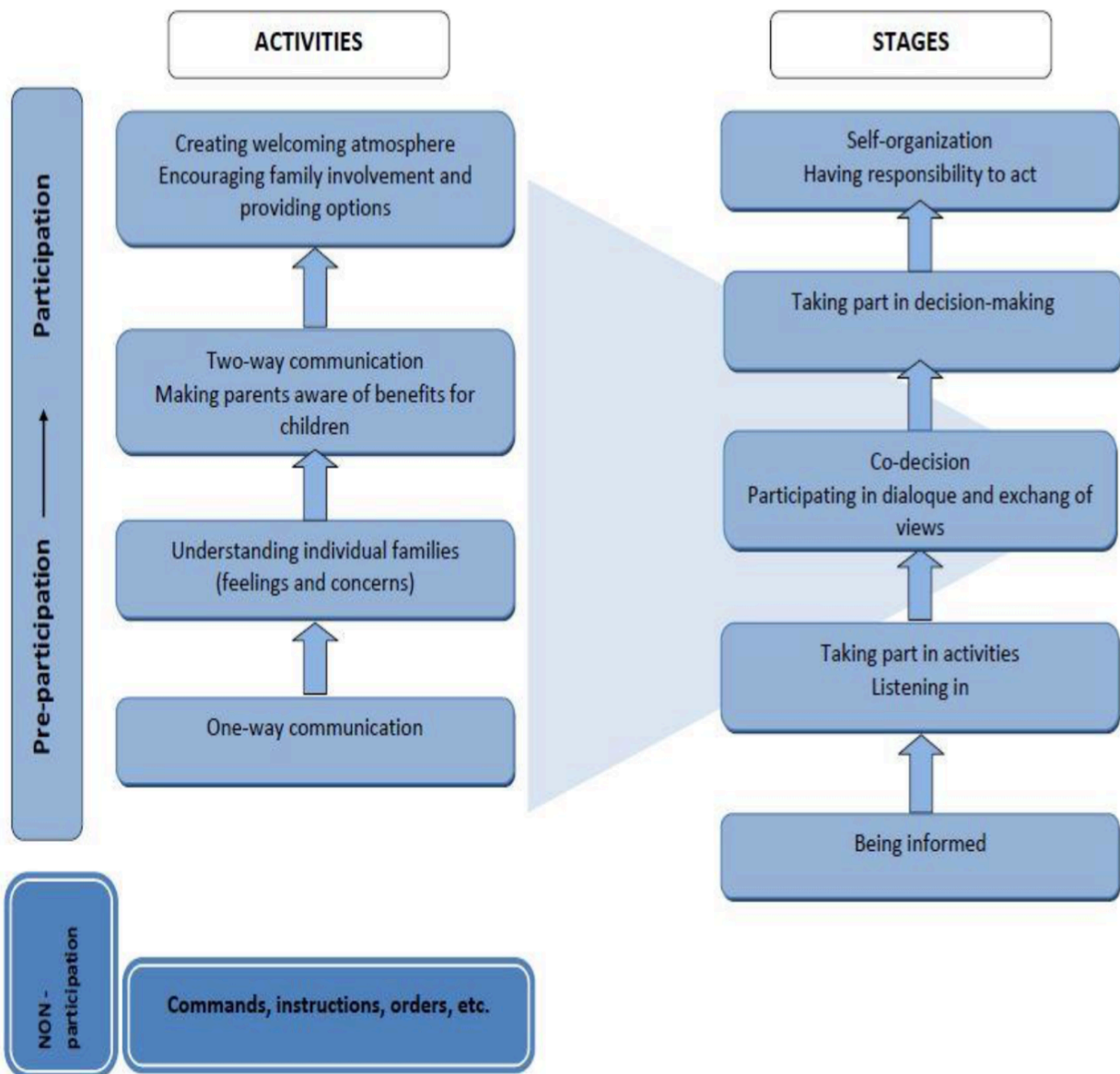


important is the initiative of parents, who in majority of cases are representatives of collaborating institutions. However, collaboration with parents almost always occur upon the initiative of preschool institutions and their invitation. Collaboration with parents exist in different ways – meetings of parents, general meetings for parents, whose children will begin to attend preschool, involving parents in different activities, board of education, e-mail of the group, information exchange folders, volunteering, parent participation in the period of adaptation, information days, shadowing activities.

**Challenges** There were noticed also the following challenges and problems – one of the most frequent is parents' occupation and being overloaded of at work that results in lack of free time that could be spent together with the child. Parents would like to have more information about cultural activities for children, more activities free of charge, and creative workshops, in order to develop their children's knowledge, skills and abilities. Preschool institutions and families have to think about the forms and possibilities of collaboration with community partners, as well as express more initiative in collaboration activities and match the time of activities with everyday routine at preschools. There are still many institutions, which refuse to take in children on a study tour. Also the municipality could be more responsive in terms of providing the transport for such study tours. There has to be improved parents understanding of the pedagogical process implemented at preschool institutions, and raised their awareness of being responsible for the child's development.

As the result of the study, a model has been developed that can be implemented in early childhood education in Latvia to extend family participation by the activities offered, thus promoting participation culture within preschool education institutions. The developed model is reflected in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Model for strengthening family participation in early childhood education (Pavitola, Grava, Mikelsons, & Pole, 2016)



## Conclusions

1. Theoretical studies give evidence that there exist a variety of terms that characterize participation, for example, taking part, collaboration, acting together, involvement, inclusion, decision making together etc., therefore it was sufficient to reveal the essence of the concept participation, that reflects positive relationships among educational institutions, families, and communities, and provides family services and support, thus increasing parents' awareness and involvement, as well as creates a network within the community.
2. Participation in ensuring education process is stated in several regulations in Latvia, however, it turns a little attention to family involvement and participation in the processes of early childhood education. Latvia seems to be into the developmental process of participation practice with social partners, therefore exchange of positive

experience is of utmost importance. Currently each preschool institution seeks for their own individual solutions, how to improve psychosocial environment and involve parents into the life of a preschool institution, thus undertaking mutual obligations and responsibility on the processes occurring at preschools.

3. As the result of the study, a model is developed that can be implemented in early childhood education in Latvia to extend family participation by the activities offered, thus promoting participation culture within preschool education institutions.

# Portugal

## Introduction

With this document, we aim to present a general perspective on the parental involvement in Early Childhood Education and Care in Portugal. We start from a conceptual/operative explicitation of what is understood by “school-families” relation (purposefully in the plural form...) as it is understood by researchers; so that in a second moment we may elaborate a dynamic portrait of the historical evolution and the legislative framework where this plural (“school-families”) relation is inserted. We will afterwards explicit the state-of-the-art or the formal bidimensional (0-3 years old and 3- 6 years old) educational system where Early Childhood Education and Care is inserted in Portugal.

Centered on this specific context and supposedly striving to provide an answer, we’ll present a reflection on the type of specific academic training and the profile of profile of the Early Childhood Education and Care professional in Portugal. Afterwards we’ll further explore some forms of parental involvement/participation in school, as well as some difficulties (hindrances/obstacles) that are mostly found in the Portuguese context.

Finally we’ll present research works in this thematic, as well as some projects that seem to us relevant for the partners in the EQuaP project. As a complement to this study we include a research on the main bibliographic references in Portuguese; a collection of best practices in the context of parental involvement that we’ve already gathered from our national partners; a list of the stakeholders that have worked with us; as well as a document that we’ve been using for the disclosure of the EQuaP project activities to the community of Portuguese language interested parties.

## 1. The school-families relation

“A educação é (...), competência de pais e educadores, que, de forma compartilhada, devem encontrar as coordenadas adequadas de atuação e de colaboração” (Arribas, 2004:393)

“Education is (...), competence of parents and educators, which, in a shared way, must find the adequate coordinates of action and collaboration” (Arribas, 2004:393)

Create bridges among cultures, among the different instances and social actors is one of the challenges of postmodern society. We live, according to Hargreaves (1998), a time of change and of turning the page in this decade of the XXI century. The postmodern family values autonomy and independence over the traditional family values, in which the union among the members was the main overtone. The cultural, social and ethical plurality has invaded all the societies, and people from all over the world. The globalization phenomenon and the new technologies narrow frontiers and limits, it is the end of definitive certainties. Stoer and Cortesão (1999) call attention to the fact that the school-family relation is a relation among cultures, that directs us to the importance of an education of inter-multicultural nature. School, family and community are the three major institutions in the children's world, which have shared responsibilities. If we strengthen the relations between these three pillars of the child's life, we are contributing for the personal and educational success of our children.

According with Sarmiento and Marques (2006:59), “The practices of the relation of families with schools have been approached in different dimensions: the parents expectations towards the schools, the practices of relation, the parents' associativism, the school mediators in the relation of the schools with the families, the legislative support for the parents participation in the school context.” These different approaches reiterate the definition of the different roles for each of the social actors involved in this relation (families/ guardians, school, children and community).

The schools-families relation transforms itself, in practice, in a vast multiplicity of school-family relations that vary, and will be different, according to the way of being, thinking, valuing and acting in each context, which directs us to an ecological and systemic approach of the inter-relations of the intervention contexts where these social actors move.

It is therefore why we prefer, and call attention to, the use of the complex concept of “schools-families relation”; as well as all the implications that this can bring in the theorization field and attempts to build “systematic and universal” solutions with the aim of favoring parental involvement: a school-family relation can only be understood in its context, however, this cannot be an impediment for the development and adaptation of a set of best practices applicable in diverse contexts (toolbox) - that characterizes one of the objectives of the EQuaP

project.

We note that in several studies carried out there's not much importance given to the children's participation in the social dynamics that arise in schools, with the result of being "rare or even non-existent, in Portugal, the references to the children's roles in that relation" (Sarmiento and Marques, 2006), which makes it decisive to center our particular attention on the role of the child in the school /family /community relations

According to Davies, parents' intervention in school can take two forms: participation and involvement. This author uses the expression "parents' participation" to refer to "modalities of parents' intervention that suppose some power or influence in fields such as planning, management and decision-making in school not as passive receivers of information or services" (Davies, 1994:387). For "parents' involvement" this researcher understands all the forms of parents' activity in the education of their children at home, in the community or in the school.

It underlies the practices of parental involvement the acceptance of the cooperation challenge. Cooperation promotes the individual self-esteem, foremost of the children, parents/guardians and early childhood teachers. To accept cooperation implies the sharing of power and decisions, respect towards the different social actors, where each one must feel respected, with an active voice and participative. When this doesn't occur we can find ourselves contributing to subvert the family-school relation, changing it, in the words of Pedro Silva (2003), into a "booby-trapped relationship". This is characterized by a reproduction of school and social inequalities, but also by provoking the "Pygmalion effect" that, according to Silva, leads educators to, in a more or less conscious manner, create more positive expectations towards the interested and active parents, and regard the silence of the other parents that don't question their children's path as a sign of not caring, which many times doesn't conform with reality

## 2. Historical retrospective and Portuguese legislative framework

The Portuguese education system clearly establishes the importance of a close child-school-families relation, there having been in the last years of the XX century a legislative reinforcement, that institutes through legal dispositions the establishment of partnerships and practices of parental involvement in Preschool Education. In parallel, it's worth remembering the historical path in Portugal relative to families' interaction in kindergarten.

The first contexts of attending to the child, non-private, start in the XVIII century, and had mainly a guarding function, without pedagogic preoccupations.

With the implantation of the 1st Republic, there is an importance attributed to children in preschool age, despite the achievements being sparse, due to little investment in the educators'

training and the existence of a restrict number of kindergartens (Sarmiento, 2005).

With the advent of the New State, 1926-1960, inspired by the Salazarist ideology, there was a regression in the social representation about children education, a non- valuing of the pedagogic value of kindergarten, that lead to the closure of kindergartens, delegating that responsibility to the families, in particular to the mothers. In 1934 comes the end of mandatory crèches; and childhood education is perceived as an evil, there is a defense of an authoritarian Pedagogy (Barroso, 2001). From 1948 to 1974, childhood education essentially assumes a compensatory function to overcome family shortcomings, in particular in children from less favoured socioeconomic backgrounds.

In the 1960s, with industrialization, in parallel with the massive movement of men for the colonial war; the migration of families from small villages to cities and the entrance of women in the labour market, we assist to an increase in the social search for children's guarding. In parallel the childhood, in this historic period, over the influence the ideas of Freinet and João dos Santos (Barroso, 2001), results from the studies produced in the meantime in the field of Psychology, Sociology.

Afterwards, with the Veiga Simão Reform in 1973, the conditions are ripe for the "creation of official preschool education (established only in 1978), being considered that, in accordance with specialists and for motives of pedagogic and familiar nature, it should remain optional" (Sarmiento and Marques, 2006, p.69). In 1974, with the 25th April Revolution, come strong social changes and new forms of participation, there is the appearance of workers commissions and parents commissions, existing a strong social intervention in all sectors of society.

In 1977 the creation of the official preschool education network is established, and in 1978 the first kindergartens of the public network are created. 1986 is characterized by a phase of social and political "normalization", and there's strong official investment in preschool education with the creation of an Interministerial Commission for Children's Education and Protection, which had the function of guaranteeing the national network of children's education and protection services (ibidem).

The presence of parents in the educational institutions, in a formal manner, starts to be allowed with the putting in place of the "democratic management" (Decree 769/A/76.) Law 7/77 of February 1 represents an important mark in the Portuguese education system, inasmuch as it is the first law on "Parents Association" but this law only applies to middle school and high school, and it takes almost 10 years for it to be extended to primary and preschool teaching (Decree 315/84 of September 28).

After the legalization of the parents associations it's created the SNAP (National Secretariat of Parents Associations) and later on is converted to the CONFAP (National Confederation of Parents Associations). Parents are now legal partners with full rights in school life, collaborating and being co-responsible in the establishment of a real and concrete partnership between the school, the family and the surrounding community.

The reformulation of the Associations of the Parents /Guardians Associations (APEE) happened with the publication of Decree no 372/90 enshrining the rights and duties of parents and guardians as members of the administration and management bodies of the preschool, basic and secondary public education establishments and respective structures of educational orientation.

However the APEE refer some difficulties in the prosecution of their objectives due to the fact that:

- There is no participation/ collaboration of parents/ guardians
- Shortage of information regarding the organization and functioning of the school
- Lack of parents who are specialists in school themes
- Parents having the idea of a lack of representativity in the Parents Association.

The model of democratic management of schools, in force in Portugal, appeals to the creation of partnerships so that the family and the school both be seen as two socializing institutions that must be conceptualized in an ecological perspective. The parents and guardians associations are an example of personal and organizational partnership.

The publication of Decree n.o 125/82, of April 2, promulgated the creation of the National Education Council (consulting body) with the participation of universities, teachers syndicates, research centres, youth associations and parents associations.

With the coming into force of the Education System Basic Law (Law n.o 46/86 of October 14) the democratic practices and participative processes in the definition of education policies at the national level are guaranteed: "The administration and management of the education system must assure the full respect for the democratic rules that aim for the prosecution of pedagogic and educational objectives, namely in the domain of social and civic training" (Law n.o 46/86) and establishes that "The education system must be equipped with structures at the national, autonomous regional, regional and local levels that assure their interconnectedness with the community through adequate participation levels of teachers, students, families, councils, entities representative of social, economic and cultural activities and also institutions of a scientific nature" (Law n.o 46/86, Article 43). This law comes to recognise the role of preschool education in the education system and clarifies that Preschool Education is, in its

formative aspect, “complementar and/or suppletive to the family education activity, with which it establishes a close collaboration” with a view to the promotion of the educational and personal success of children as citizens with full rights. The Education System Basic Law underlines that the intervenients of the educational process are prioritarily the students, the teachers and the families (line 1 of Article 3).

In the legislative framework, the Framework Law of Preschool Education, Law n.o 5/97, determines that “Preschool education is the first stage of basic education in the process of lifelong education, being complementary to the family educational action, with which must establish a close relation, favouring her full insertion in society as an autonomous, free and solidary being. “On its turn, we assist at this time, in Portugal, to an evolution in the terminology of “childhood education” (or establishments of childhood education) that can, in the case of the Private Institutions of Social Solidarity (IPSS), be more encompassing, and simultaneously guarantee the caring and education of children from 0 to 3 and from 3 to 6 years of age. This Law 5/97 reinforces the importance of the involvement of the families in the educational processes, highlighting as one of the priorities “...promote the participation of the families in the educational process and establish relations of effective collaboration with the community”. This law reinforces the commitment of the State in the promotion of the child’s education, in cooperation with the families.

The Ministry of Education, through its Preschool Education Nucleus, publishes the Curricular Orientations for Preschool Education (OCEPE, Act n.o 5220/97 of July 10) that as the name points out are not a formal curriculum, but orientations for all the establishments financed by the State, be they public or social solidarity, or that establish the principle of unique pedagogic tutelage on the part of the Ministry of Education.

With the publication of Decree n.o 75/2008 of April 22, Chapter III (Administration and management regime) in Article 10 underlines that “it must be safeguarded the participation of representatives of the academic and non-academic staff, of parents and guardians, of students, of the city council and of the local community”, and in point 2 of that article are identified the following bodies for the direction, administration and management of the schools groups and non-grouped schools: a) The general council; b) The director; c) The pedagogic council; d) The administrative council. Specifically in regard to the composition of the general council, strategic direction body, there are representatives of the academic and non-academic staff, of parents and guardians, (of students, in the case of grownups and secondary education), of city councils and of the local community, namely representatives of economic, social, cultural and scientific institutions, organizations and activities. This decree that regulates the schools’ autonomy, administration and management framework aims to ensure the participation of the families



and of the communities in the strategic direction of the teaching establishments and in the education process.

The Decree n.o 137/2012, of July 2, that republishes the Decree n.o75/2008, of April 22 approves the Regime of Autonomy, Administration and Management of Public Establishments of Preschool Education and of Basic and Secondary Education, underlines that the bodies of administration and management are maintained “... but there is a strengthening of the competences of the general council, attentive to its legitimacy, as a representation body for the teaching agents, the parents and guardians and the local community, namely institutions, organizations of economic, social, cultural and scientific nature”.

Afterwards comes Law n.o 85/2009, of August 27, that establishes the regime of compulsory education and consecrates the universality of preschool education for children from 5 years of age.

Subsequently to the principles established in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and in the context of the Action Plan for the Integration of the Persons with Disablement or Incapacity 2006-2009, it was created, under [Decree no 281/2009](#), published in the Diary of the Republic on October 6, the National System of Early Intervention in Childhood (SNIPI) in Portugal. The SNIPI operates through the coordinated action of the Ministry of Solidarity, Employment and Social Security, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health, together with the involvement of the families and of the community. The operationalization of the SNIPI presupposes the assurance of a system of interaction between the families and the institutions and, at the front line, those of health, so that all cases can be duly identified and signaled as rapidly as possible. Therefore, “shall be activated the necessary mechanisms for the definition of an individual plan (Individual Plan of Early Intervention - PIIP) attentive to the needs of the families, to be drafted by Local Intervention Teams (ELI), multidisciplinary, that represent all the services that are called upon to intervene.” ([Decree no 281/2009](#)). The early intervention professionals ground their action in several theoretical models important for the comprehension of the functioning of the family, based on a systemic approach to the family, we highlight Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Hobbs et al (1984) perspectives. These models stress the importance of knowing the child in her family and environmental context, as a support for the development of the work of the education professionals with the families. If parental involvement is an essential component in the healthy development of the child, that will be even more so in the situation of the child with a developmental deficit. In the perspective of inclusion we highlight some of the presupposes that structure the action of the early intervention professionals:

- “Regard the family as the unity for the rendering of services

- Recognize the strengths of the child and of the family.
- Provide an answer for the priorities identified by the family
- Individualize the rendering of services
- Give an answer to the priorities, in constant change, of the families.
- Support the values and the way of life of each family” (McWilliam, 2003:11).

According to Regulation n.o 293/2013 of September 26, the Early Intervention in Childhood (IPI) constitutes a program with a set of measures of integrated support centered on the child and on the family, including actions of preventive and rehabilitating nature, in the context of education, health and social action. This program is aimed at children between 0 and 6 years of age, with alterations in body functions or structures that limit their participation in the activities adequate for their respective age and social context or with a severe risk of developmental deficit. It is recognized “the important impact that the experiences and opportunities offered to children in the early years of life have in the development of the individual and, on its turn, of the preponderant role that the family characteristics, the patterns of family-child interaction and the resources and supports (formal and informal) of the family, have directly and indirectly in the child’s development, is that which provides the grounding for and characterizes the current perspective of IPI as an approach centered on the family” ([Decree no 281/2009](#)).

The evaluation of this program has demonstrated its positive effects, not only on the short and medium terms, but also on the long term, namely in the prevention of underperformance and school abandonment, in the resource to structures of special education. The Early Intervention in Childhood Program (PIIP) constitutes an organizing instrument for the families and the professionals involved (social service workers, psychologists and therapists) through an adequate diagnosis, taking into account not only the problems, but also the development potential of the child, together with the alterations to introduce in the environment in order for that potential can express itself. As such, the objectives of this program are: assuring children of the protection of their rights and the development of their capacities; detect and signal every child with early

intervention needs; intervene with children and families, according to the needs identified, so as to prevent or reduce the risks of developmental deficit; support the families in their access to services and resources of the social security, health and education systems; involve the community through the creation of articulated mechanisms of social support and integrate, as early as possible, in the essential determinants regarding the family, the health services, the crèches, the kindergarten and the school. ([Dec. Law no 281/2009](#)).

### 3. Organization of childhood education in Portugal

The educational responses for children between 0 and 3 years of age aren't a part of the educational system. Among the responses as complementary solutions for childcare outside the family space we have the crèches, constituted as private nonprofit establishments of social solidarity (Private Institutions of Social Solidarity - IPSS) with cooperation agreements with the Ministry of Solidarity, Employment and Social Security, or private for profit, with a license to operate approved by this Ministry.

In 2011 the National Education Council (CNE) approved by unanimity the Recommendation no 3/2011 on Education from Zero to Three years, this General Recommendation conceives education from 0 to 3 as a right of the children and of the families. It's the Ministry of Solidarity, Employment and Social Security that oversees and regulates this type of establishments and that recommends the elaboration of pedagogic guidance lines for work in crèche.

The crèches can operate as independent establishments or can be integrated in other educational establishments.

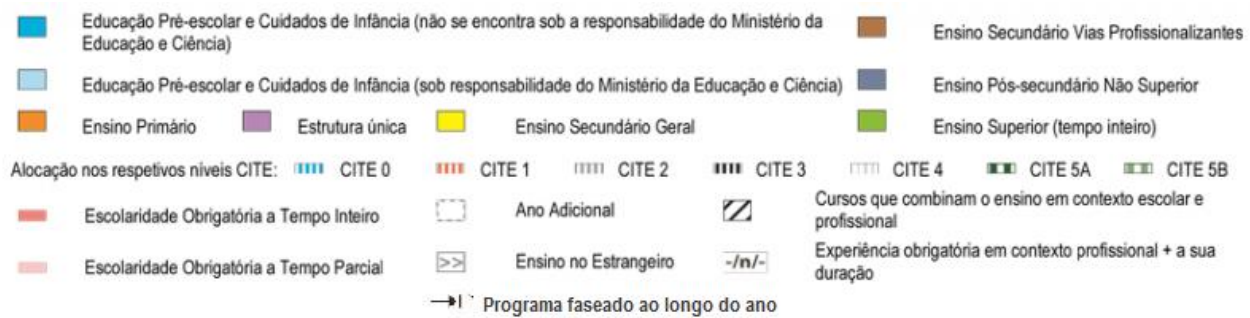
In Portugal, the education system is organized in different levels: preschool education, basic education, secondary education and higher education.

The preschool education covers children from 3 years of age until the age of entrance in compulsory education (Basic Education), with its attendance being optional and recognizing that the family has the primary role in the children's education.

Compulsory education starts at 6 years of age and has a duration of 12 years, encompassing Basic Education and Secondary Education.

School education contemplates Basic Education, that comprises three sequential cycles, with the 1st Cycle having 4 years, the 2nd Cycle two years and the 3rd Cycle three years. Secondary Education encompasses a three-year cycle (10th, 11th and 12th years of education) and is organized in a differentiated manner, according with different objectives, centered on the access to post-secondary studies or on preparation for active life. Higher Education covers universities and polytechnic higher education establishments.





Fonte: Euridyce

[https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Portugal\\_pt:Redirect](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Portugal_pt:Redirect)

The network of Portuguese institutions of preschool education is composed by establishments of public and private nature. Preschool education establishments of the Ministry of Education and Science and of the Ministry of Solidarity, Employment and Social Security are part of the public network. Part of the private network are the for-profit establishments, private and cooperative education institutions, and the nonprofit private institutions of social solidarity (IPSS).

It's incumbent on the Ministry of Education and Science to pedagogically oversee assuring the educational quality of the establishments of the national network of preschool education.

At this level the educational activity is of the responsibility of the early childhood teacher, which organizes the educational environment and develops activities with the purpose of promoting the development and the integral learning of the child in accordance with the Curricular Orientations for Preschool Education (OCEPE) which, not being a program, allow for a curriculum manager to develop it with the children.

It's worth adding that the children's groups, in preschool education, are composed by a maximum of 25 and, in the case of homogeneous groups of 3-year-old children, the number of children trusted to each teacher cannot be more than 15 (Order n.o 5048-B/2013, of April 12). When the groups have children with special educational needs of a permanent nature, and whose individual educational program thus defines it, cannot exceed 20 children, nor contain more than 2 children in those conditions.

#### 4. Teacher training and the Specificity of the Early Childhood Teacher Profile

Teacher training higher education institutions in Portugal have in the area of initial and lifelong

training of early childhood teachers revealed preoccupations of contemplating in their training offer the area of Parental Involvement, at the licenciatura, master and doctoral levels. With the ever-increasing appearance of structured practices of parental involvement in the context of preschool education, we find this thematic as an object of study in the training and research developed in the higher level institutions.

We consider that the training of childhood education professionals and their sensitization to this thematic, before starting their professional life, is in fact crucial for the exercise of their activity.

The training of Early Childhood Teachers, as agents of human development, in our perspective, cannot be limited to the mere acquisition of knowledge and development of dexterities and competences. We consider that this training must also have a direct influence in the human and personal development of the future early childhood teacher, otherwise its use and quality could be called into question (Neves, 2005). The professional singularity of the early childhood teacher arises, according to Oliveira-Formosinho (2002), from some characteristics of the small child that distinguish it from other age groups. The small child presents characteristics that cannot be sectorized, the child is an integrated whole, global, that is developing in the different development levels (affective, social, cognitive, psychomotor, ...) through the relations that she establishes with the different contexts of life. This globality of the child requires on the part of the teacher a great responsibility and intervention supported by a scientific training that spreads out across several domains. On the other hand, the physical, emotional, social vulnerability of the child requires on the part of the teachers a careful attention to the socio-emotional aspects (Oliveira-Formosinho, 2002).

The specificity of the activity of an early childhood teacher is therefore found in a continuous “caring” action and simultaneously in a pedagogic action with a view to the global education of the child. Silva (1991) considers that the specificity of childhood education is also found in the fact that it is “more centered on the one that is educated

- the pupil - than on the educational process or in the educator” (quoted in Oliveira-Formosinho, 2000:160). Another specificity of this professions relates to the extended network of interactions (with children, parents, teaching assistants, other professionals, local and community authorities) for which the teacher is responsible (Neves, 2005).

In the Decree n.o 241/2001, of August 30, Specific profile of the professional performance of the early childhood teacher constitutes a fundamental guidance framework, both for the organization of the courses that bestow professional accreditation for teaching, and enunciates the competences expected of early childhood teachers. These present themselves as referential,

ideals, that guide the performance of the teachers in an evolutive manner, that is, they must readjust, include new competences according to the needs and social demands.

In a succinct manner, this document highlights that a teacher must reveal competences in several domains:

- Organization of space and making available diversified and stimulating materials as pedagogic resources;
- Organization of time in a flexible and diversified manner;
- Mobilization of educational resources;
- Creation of safety and well-being conditions for the children;
- Observation of each child, the small groups and the big group, with a view to a planning taking into account the development of the teaching and learning process, the knowledge and the competences that children have;
- Planning activities in several curricular domains;
- Evaluation of the environment, and of the practice and processes of teaching learning;
- Favour the affective security, the autonomy, the involvement in activities, the cooperation among children;
- Involvement of families and communities;**<sup>1</sup>
- Promotion of the emotional, personal and social development, the curiosity, the disposition to learn, the problem-solving capacity in children;
- The teacher must also develop an integrated curriculum at the level of the different curricular areas. (Cfr. Decree n.o 241/2001)

## 5. Schools and families — partnerships for a successful learning

It is incumbent upon the school to promote and incentivize positive attitudes towards the successful learning of the student, for that the school must integrate the culture and the values of the community to which it belongs. Knowing that the school is a privileged place where cultural diversity is present, it's crucial the way in which teachers build "pedagogic differentiation mechanisms" (Stoer & Cortesão, 1999) that according with the principle of equality of opportunities for access and success, makes possible the concretization of a "policy

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<sup>1</sup> Bold is ours.

of difference”, policy which favours and is grounded on a multidimensionality where different variables interact, such as social class, genre, ethnic background, among other (ibidem). Therefore, it is incumbent upon the teacher the role of working with her students (training for multicultural education)

and for her students (training for multicultural education) creating pedagogic mechanisms that are adequate to the context and the students with which they work.

For the prosecution of this educational process conducive to the child’s success is of capital importance to build projects and partnerships between the school and the family. For that it is necessary the establishment of different types of partnerships, in a wider perspective, where initiatives developed by the different services and institutions in the context of municipalities, health, education and social security must be articulated.

The logic of the uniformization of responses, result from centralizing policies, was mostly substituted by the valuing of each context, understanding it as a unique reality, with needs and characteristics that demand differentiated answers and solutions. This preoccupation underlies the current autonomy and management model for educational establishments (Decree 115-A/98) that came to contemplate the constitution of socio-educational partnerships among all the intervenients of the educational process, however, in practice, not always these principles are fulfilled.

## 6. Advantages of parents’ participation in school

It’s incumbent on teachers to raise awareness about the advantages of parental involvement, to reflect on the more adequate involvement strategies to implement in the respective educational institutions, according to the intervention context. In fact, the educational success must necessarily contemplate the training of teachers and parents “... in the sense that they be made aware of the advantage of permanent mutual help, of the possible ways that that help can assume, and also of the development of a mutual responsabilization” (Villas-Boas, 1994:15)

Knowing that the parental involvement activities can be of several levels of collaboration according to Don Davies (quoted by Sarmiento, 1995), the ideal participation is at the level of decision-making, so as to be able to guarantee the change at the level of the relation practices, where the hierarchic and dependence relations between parents/guardians and teachers give way to collaboration relations of an horizontal disposition (Dias de Carvalho, Samagaio, Trevisan, Neves, & Brás, 2012). We find that the relation between the school, the families and the community changes according to the characteristics of the contexts where they interact and that there is no uniformity of solutions in the face of the heterogeneity of situations and

realities. Perrenoud (2002) points to the need of an equitable and negotiated division of the educational work between the parents and the school, considering that this represents, among others, one of the conditions to make the educational system more effective. We know that each family has its characteristics and specificities, possesses its own dynamic that it is necessary to know, respect and understand. Each family is constituted by individual and unique forces and interactions, that reveal themselves to be of great importance for the teachers that interact with the child and the family.

The more consistent and more benefic parental involvement practices continue to be the communication practices, and those almost always pass through the teacher (Ramiro Marques, 2001). In this sense, the more the family knows and trusts the education professional, the easier the communication, sharing of informations and collaboration will be.

The building of partnerships takes time and is hardly established without mediation specialists. The emphasis must be put on a basis of trust, collaboration and reciprocity. Valuing their know-how as parents and not focusing the attention on their shortcomings, that they might eventually manifest, leads us, according to Villas-Boas (2008), to speak of the necessity of substituting the paradigm -Rendering of services (involving a relation with clients - if we render services we have clients that "is potentially conflict-prone") for the paradigm - Partnership for learning, a successful learning.

This new paradigm implicates a new way of looking to the school-family relation, and to parents/guardians and teachers. Both are seen as responsible for the development of the children and as having the role to contribute to educate citizens integrated in society. According with this paradigm of partnership for learning, for a successful learning, it is necessary a true involvement of the several educational protagonists (Dias de Carvalho et al., 2012). This paradigm chance necessarily implicates an individual dimension and a collective dimension. It simultaneously involves the early childhood teachers, the educational institution and the context in which it inserts itself, it's about a learning process that involves all the actors in an active way. The teachers need to know how to learn with the parents so that they can have a positive influence over them on the basis of their own competences (Canário, 2008). Family and community are therefore seen, not as something foreign to the school, but as something that is inside the school, through the students. "Thus the most direct way of intervening on the change of the relation between the school and the community is in the way in which students are treated" (ibidem).

The construction of partnerships demands a permanent reflection and analysis and monitoring of the intervention contexts by the social actors that integrate them (early childhood teachers, parents/guardians, elements of the community where naturally children must have an "active



voice”), allowing for an evaluation and reformulation of intervention strategies with a view to the global and harmonious development of the child through a close relation between the school and the family. The parents/ guardians must be seen as co-builders, together with the teachers, in the children’s education, developing their parental competences that allow for a better and more adequate performance of the educational functions (Dias de Carvalho et al., 2012). To that end, it’s fundamental for teachers to know the resources of the community in which they are inserted, use them to enrich the curriculum and the experiences of their children and help the families to know them and use them.

The school must be perceived as a place where parents take themselves to be partners of the teachers in which “the hierarchic and dependence relations are substituted by relations of collaboration in a horizontal disposition.” (Ramiro Marques, 1987). The task of educating must therefore be shared by the school and the family, mutually responsible and solidary, implicating themselves in a process of permanent collaboration, brought about through the carrying out of several activities, executed both at home at in the school.

## 7. Hindrances/obstacles to parental involvement

There are however several factors that prevent parental involvement: as a general rule, they’re parents who are too anxious or too ambitious, that have created too unrealistic expectations about the future of their children; they are parents with a reluctance in accepting the limitations of their children; they are parents that aspire for their children something that is beyond their potentialities; they are parents too busy professionally, without time to be with their children, which leads them to turn the teachers into “scapegoats” of their own insufficiencies as parents; they are parents that carry a history of bad memories and resentments about their time in school (Ramiro Marques, 2001).

Luísa Homem (2002) also highlights several factors that can interfere in this involvement:

- Questions of power - related with the fact that the teachers are afraid that parents will challenge their power;
- Questions connected with political and cultural values - related, for instance, with the fact that some parents (mainly the ones from underprivileged social classes) are afraid to contact with authorities (teachers), considered by them as having power;
- Professional questions — related with the fact that teachers are afraid that parents will interfere in their professional knowledge;
- Questions related with past experiences — negative past experiences of participation by the parents or the school can influence present attempts;
- Questions connected with the bureaucratization of the structures — it’s related with

school massification and the solidifying of traditional behaviours in an attempt to keep the traditional schooling.

- Questions related with the absence of formal or formalized participation structures — it entails the existence of formal structures which provide an incentive to participation (meetings, debates, etc.). Structures that develop the individual parental involvement are important. However, it's important to take into account the difference between the individual parental involvement and the collective parental involvement. The first attempts to involve all parents, while the second only involves some as representatives. If the first leads to the building of partnerships, the second can lead to situations of an authentic struggle for power and heighten social inequalities.

## 8. Parental involvement strategies

We find through the publication of studies that the practices of partnership with the families in preschool education have been increasing and becoming ever more consistent. There are various strategies that the teachers can make use of to promote parental involvement. It's considered to be fundamental to involve from an early stage the parents/ guardians in the process of developing and educating their children, having as basis the creation of stable affective links, fundamental in the construction of the foundations for future success in school and throughout life. In this sense, strategies as the following can be put into practice:

- Establishing a positive approach to draw near families, using a language accessible to parents looking for information about the needs, competences and potentialities of the children.
- Resource to the use of the phone/ internet as one more communicational strategy.
- Provide formative meetings on thematics, addressed by invited specialists that will answer the needs of parents/ guardians.
- Creation of "Parents Club" as networks for mutual support in the education of their children, functioning as spaces for reflection and sharing of problems, doubts, disquietnesses.
- Implementation of pedagogic mechanisms (individual/ group), in accordance with the ludic experiences and/or learning situations that are happening in the kindergarten, with the children's group and that make the bridge School-Family.
- Creation of informal gathering moments, with parents/ guardians in the kindergarten.
- Carrying out of joint activities, between the families and the kindergarten in significant places in the community.

- Promotion of social events organized by the institution of preschool education.
- Participation in their children's portfolios of learning/evaluation, contributing with records (photos of situations, works and commentaries) on significant moments in the development and learning of their children, also allowing for an interactive communication through moments of dialogue with the parents sustained in concrete evidences/ documentation about the child.

## 9. Mediation in the promotion of the school-family relation

Parental involvement represents one of the dimensions of the educational system that implies the negotiation and sharing of power, facts that, on their own, demand a rapprochement between teachers and parents/ guardians, entailing compromises and sharing of knowledge. One could say that it is necessary to implement a constructivist pedagogy between the family and the school. The early childhood teachers cannot by themselves overcome the obstacles to parental involvement, but can contribute through changes of attitude, believing in the benefits, creating spaces to receive parents and asking for the collaboration of other education professionals (psychologist, social worker...) (Ramiro Marques, 2001). It's also worth noting, in the construction of the school-family partnership, the importance of mediators, from sociologists, anthropologists, animators, social educators, cultural mediators and other social agents that can even come from the local community itself (be they parents or not, even if they don't have any academic diplomas, but which, for several reasons, possess an adequate profile for the desired functions) for the intervention in a given educational context (Dias de Carvalho et al., 2012).

We are aware that the building of partnerships takes time, and that it's hardly established without mediation specialists. To be successful, the relation must be build on the basis of trust, collaboration and reciprocity between all the intervenients. As we see, the history of the school-family interaction has yet a very recent path, and, in present-day society, the co-existence of multiple types of families, with very diversified dynamics, cannot be ignored, which leads us to question if this reality is present in the referentials and paradigms on which the studies and researches produced are based, as well as if the emphasis has been in promoting educational continuity between the families and the school over the valuing of the differences and specificities that characterize them. Besides these variables, one cannot forget the explicitation of the social and participative role of the children in all this process.

Agreeing with Sarmiento and Marques, it becomes necessary "the assumption of children as effective subjects with rights and as social actors which, despite heavily conditioned in their action by the adult-centered functioning of the world (...) reinvent methodological procedures

through which it may be possible to give voice to the children so that they can not only testify their vision of the relation between the school and the families, the meanings that they attribute to it and the strategies that they use in their experience of two different educational contexts, but also create conditions for them to assume a propositional discourse that will morph into a process of emancipatory development.” (Sarmiento and Marques, 2006:83).

## 10. Scientific works, projects and intervention practices

With the “legality” of the family involvement in the preschool education contexts established, it’s interesting to understand how the scientific works and intervention projects in this context in Portugal have been characterized.

One can see that this theme is considered for research in master and doctoral degrees in different higher education institutions, namely in the University of Coimbra, in the University of Minho, in the Open University, in the Infante D. Henrique Portucalense University, in the Paula Frassinetti School of Higher Education, etc. However, the master’s dissertations and doctoral theses, carried out in the Portuguese context, that focus the importance and the type of family involvement, specifically in childhood education, are somewhat scarce.

Some postgraduate and doctoral researches carried out in Portugal are mainly grounded in psychological approaches (Pimenta, 2012), others focus on the participation representations (Mesquita, 2001; Carvalho, 2008; Pereira, 2009; Silva, 2011), but also some “new” participation practices (Brito, 2013).

Mauro Pimenta (2012) has developed a doctoral thesis that focus on the possibility of different patterns of parental involvement in which he analyses the possible associations of a greater involvement of the parents and the psychosocial adaptation of the children to the school context and aims to understand the stress factors and/or benefits felt by the parents in the management of the work and family and their relation with the parental involvement, having participated, in different stages of the study, between 208 and 532 bi-parental families with children enrolled in kindergarten. He has concluded that the parental involvement tends to correlate in a positive way with the children’s psychosocial adaptation to the school context, namely with the child’s social competence, and with higher cognitive competence indices.

In the research carried out by Margarida Mesquita (2001), the representations, expectations and practices (of 200 mothers and 158 fathers) relative to parenthood were analysed, characterizing it in two main dimensions - parental involvement and co- parentality - taking into consideration two challenges like the conciliation of professional life with the parental function and finding socio-educational and caring solutions for the children in the periods of

time during which the progenitors dedicate themselves to work. This study allowed the author to conclude that parentality in contemporary nuclear families besides complex is diverse, since it associates different types and levels of problems and is also diversified, existing different profiles of progenitors.

Sandra Carvalho (2008) has developed a case study wanting to know the parents' opinion regarding their participation in their children's kindergarten, identify the advantages of an effective participation and propose alternatives of parental involvement, concluding that the two first participation typologies of Joyce Epstein (1984) (basic duties in kindergarten and of the family) are the most frequent. She has verified that parents believe that their participation is valued by their children and that it improves communication, which goes on to impact the development and learning of the children and concludes that there is a strong level of significance between the parents' participation and the level of satisfaction with the kindergarten, the age of the parents, the various types of participation, the valuing that their children make, the improvement in communication and initiative.

Relatively to the work carried out by Maria Isabel Gomes Pereira (2009), a case study was developed, with the objective of understanding, based on the participation typology defined by Joyce Epstein (1987), what is the frequency of parental participation in kindergarten. She has verified that, like Carvalho (2008), the types of participation that occur most frequently are the ones referring to duties, either family duties or kindergarten duties. She highlights that legislatively the work of family involvement is

assured, but that it is for the institutions to articulate facilitating factors (schedules that allow families to participate; allow for the delivery of children in the classroom; carry out activities that directly involve the parents; offer a type of participation that is adequate to the capacities and motivations of the families, etc.) so that parental participation becomes more widespread and effective and mobilize the elements of the educational community to open up to the exterior and promote partnership and collaboration.

Susana Isabel Rego de Brito (2013) has opted for a qualitative methodology in the context of the research-action, with a view to describing the whole process of reflections and change of practices at the level of the interactions established between the parents and the crèche. She has found that through parental involvement in educational context children have enjoyed countless educational opportunities from the basis of exploration and experimentation, therefore fulfilling their right to participation in the building of their own learning and development, and parents have revealed themselves to be active participants and solidary with the new promoted educational experience.

José Alexandre da Rocha Ventura Silva, in the context of his master's dissertation, has carried out two purposefully differentiated studies: study 1 had as its objective to understand the representations that teachers, in the private network, have of the educational role of the family and characterize their practices of parental involvement using instruments as the Real/Ideal Scale of Parents/Kindergarten Cooperation - ERI (Gaspar, 1996), integrally filled out by the teachers of the two private network institutions that composed the sample of the study; study 2 had the pretension of evaluating, at the initial training level, through an inquiry, the competences of the childhood education students (73 students) relative to the problematic of parental involvement. The results have confirmed the existence of a positive relation between its valuing and family participation, which is reflected in the context of the teachers' educational practices and in the competences level of the children.

There were also varied the internship reports found, in the context of professionalizing masters in the teacher training area, that incide on the parental involvement problematic. The internship reports reviewed mainly use a study case and research-action investigative approach, centered on specific childhood education contexts. Several focus on objectives such as understanding and knowing the relations that are established between the family and the childhood education context and the influence that their parents' involvement exerts on the children.

Sarmiento (2005) refers that one aspect that has not been addressed in Portuguese research is the participation of the children in the schools-families interactions. This researcher has analysed some researches carried out, between 2000 - 2003, by professionals that work with children and their families, highlighting the following conclusions:

- Over the past few years the number of parents associations has increased;
- When we talk about the dynamism of a parents association, we are essentially referring to the work carried out by the small group that composes its social bodies;
- In most cases, the parents that compose the associative directions are the ones that share the same language as the teachers;
- Even when they're not grouped in associations, parents mobilize when they consider that their children are facing a common issue;
- Parents' expectations differ according to the children's age; 31
- Parents of smaller children (those in crèche) are essentially worried about basic caring (feeding and health);
- Parents' expectations are reconstructed from the interaction that they establish with education professionals (Sarmiento, 2005).

Academic research has mainly presented a theoretical foundation in different international authors (Joyce Epstein, 1984, 1987, 1992, 1995, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2006; Montandon and

Perrenoud, 2001; Perrenoud, 1987) and in national researchers (Canário et al., 1997; Correia and Serrano, 2000; D'Espiney and Canário, 1994; Don Davies, 1989, 1993, 1994, 1997; Diogo, 1998, 2002, 2006; Estaço, 2001; Homem, 2000, 2002; Gaspar, 1996, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004; Lima, 1992, Lima and Sá, 2002; Stoer, 1986; Stoer and Silva, 2005; Marques, 1988, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2009; Palos (2002); Silva Pedro, 2001, 2002, 2003; Silva (1994, 1996, 1999, 2003); Villas-Boas, 2001, 2009; Sarmento, 2005, 2006; Sarmento and Marques, 2002) of reference in the area of parental involvement.

We understand, through the bibliographic review of scientific works, that there has been, at the national level, over the past few years, an investment in the study of the relation school-family, namely the relation between the childhood education institutions and the family and that the results point to a positive effect of the family involvement in the development, learning and psychosocial adaptation of children in educational context.

In addition to the academic research in the context of parental involvement, at the national level there has been the carrying out of intervention projects:

✓ **Project A Par** - Learning in Partnership Association (A PAR) — since 2006

The Learning in Partnership Association (A PAR) is a non-profit association, whose status as an IPSS (Private Institution of Social Solidarity) and recognition as collective person of public utility has entered into force in May 2007. This association has as its ends: create development and learning opportunities for children aged 0 to 6, always through a work of close partnership with parents and carers; support parents and carers in their role as the first and foremost educators recognising that they are the ones that can facilitate a beginning of life and of schooling with greater success for their children; contribute for the health, well-being, creativity and integral development of the communities.

The association offers a program, created in 2006, — A Par — Learning in Partnership — co-financed and technically supported by the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), a private agency directed towards the support of disadvantaged communities. It has the pretension of contributing for an educational betterment of the community involving, from a very early stage, parents and carers in the education of their babies and children up to five years old. Concerned with the statistical data of school underperformance and abandonment, violence, teenage pregnancy, existing in Portuguese social housing projects, the founder of the association, Maria Emília Nabuco, after becoming aware of the positive results that the PEEP Project (Peers Early Education Partnership) had with residents in priority intervention areas in the city of Oxford, in England, wanted to adapt this project to Portuguese culture.  
(<http://www.portaldacrianca.com.pt/artigos.php?id=65>)

### ✓ **Project School-Parents** (IEC and Educational Communities Institute)

The School Parents project, created in 1995, comes out of a partnership between the Child Studies Institute of the University of Minho and the Educational Communities Institute. Inscribed in the METAFORMA Research Centre, it is carried out with a group of professionals that integrates teachers of the 1st Cycle of Basic Teaching and early childhood teachers (Sarmiento & Marques, 2006).

This project has the goal of promoting and investigating collaboration practices between educational centres (schools, kindergartens and others) and the families fulfilling the following objectives:

- Collaborate in an adequate and reflexive way with the enlarged educational community;
- Take advantage of the partnership relation with the family;
- Promote the continuity of the school with the communities so that significant learnings are achieved;
- Create a body of norms and own and specific values for the profession;
- Establish networks of collaboration between professionals and school projects.

The project has gradually integrated the reference “families” (besides “parents”) since the team involved came to realise that in the environments in which the project is carried out there are still networks of family support, mostly based on the grandparents, and because the more encompassing conception of family allows for the widening of the project to other elements of the local communities with whom partnerships come to be established.

### ✓ **Parents XXI Project**

The Parents XXI Project is a network project, carried out in the municipality of Santa Maria da Feira, that presents a model of work with the parents at the intervention level, that aimed to be a space of sharing and parental education, through the “Parents Club” and, at a more global level, through the local radio program “Parents XXI Space”. The Parents Club was initially formed under the guidance of a psychologist, with four groups (of 15 to 18 persons), with 80 hours of training being scheduled, but, afterwards, one of the groups ended up giving continuity to the project, meeting systematically.

<http://www.educare.pt/noticias/noticia/ver/?id=13123&langid=1>

The Paula Frassinetti School of Higher Education, a higher education institution directly connected with the EQuaP project, has developed several research/ intervention projects related with the school-family relation; of those we highlight the following:



## **✓ School-family: ways of building relations. The Case of the Junqueira Grouping, Vila do Conde**

The School-family research project: ways of building relations, that was carried out between 2010 and 2012, was developed between the team of the Social Development Local Contract (CLDS) of Vila do Conde (Porto - Portugal) and the Paula Frassinetti Research Centre (CIPAF)/Department of Training in Social Education in the context of school/families/community relations. This project was carried out in a Research-Action (IA) logic and took the Schools Grouping as a case to study in depth and in an intensive and interpretative perspective, trying to find effective answers to concrete problems: the building of a training program for the Grouping responding to the needs of the group of teachers and to the acquisition of work competences with families and community; the design of family activities with families in the school, starting from the revitalization of the Parents Association and its direct involvement in the promotion of students' success; the training of members of institutions that work directly with families.

The protagonists of this Social Intervention Project are, on one hand, the families absent from school, that seemed to be the more problematic cases, with the objective of finding a set of intervention answers that would promote their plural success working the competences of the aggregate in different levels/areas and, on the other hand, the teachers of the grouping, with whom there was a deepening of the capacity of a dynamic with actions that would qualify the School-Family relation.

## **✓ The Family's Port of Support (Porto)**

The Family's Port of Support (PAF), that began in 2013, is an intervention/research project of the Paula Frassinetti School of Higher Education, consisting in the monitoring and overseeing of the Dynamization and Family Support Activities (AAAF) in all the kindergartens of the public network of the Porto municipality, in partnership with the Municipal Division of Education of Porto City Council. The Dynamization and Family Support Activities aim to ensure the children's oversight beyond the daily period of educational activities and during the periods of interruption of these activities looking to contribute for the integral development of all the children between 3 and 6 years of age, that are enrolled in preschool education establishments.

This project has as its main objectives:

- Involve the families in the quality of the AAAF;

- Offer technical support and adequate training to the needs of the AAAF team;
- Implicate the whole education team in the dynamization of the AAAF;
- Implicar toda a equipa educativa na dinamização da AAAF; It's grounded on the acknowledgement that it is urgent to value the importance of the family and of non-school time in the life and development of the child.

## Final Reflections

After having presented a general panoramic of Early Childhood Education and Care in Portugal, we might say, in a conclusive way and making some final comments, that parental involvement requires a fundamental reinforcement. Understood either on the part of the educational professionals as on the part of the very families that need to feel their role and their involvement with the school as something decisive in the education of their children. Therefore, however much legality has been introduced in Portugal, the ECEC continues to lack an effective participation/involvement from the families. The legislation, in most cases, refers only to thematics related with “parents and guardians associations” and about “school management”; there lacks a overarching work tending to the building of effective parental involvement strategies. Laws are necessary but are not sufficient for parental participation/involvement to be effective!

There continues to be a certain generalized corporatism at the professional level as well as building of barriers around the deep involvement of families in Portuguese schools. Despite the fact, which is undeniable, that we've assisted to an increase in the levels of participation of the families in the past three decades. The Curricular Orientations for Preschool Education (OCEPE), Act n.o 5220/97 of July 10 is the basic document where are clearly established the margins through where Early Childhood Education and Care in Portugal must “flow” which doesn't invalidate the existence of the different curricular models existent in the Portuguese pedagogic tradition. Inside these margins, the parental involvement is established; yet, its situation is of a pure legality and anchored in local and particular strategies at the level of each education establishment, thus not existing a line of practical intervention(s) established at the national level and that sets clear paths suggesting concrete/practical indications...

There is actually, as we've acknowledged (see, further down, our chapter dedicated to best practices in Portugal), a wide set of best practices at the education level that, apparently, obtain good results in regard to parental involvement in schools. Many of these interventions carried out in a particular and intermittent way by the education professionals are grounded in studies and in scientific research that has been conducted in Portugal. There's yet the need to build or draft a set of practical ideas of which the professionals can make use and, in a certain way, safely

implement and supporting themselves on a network of partner institutions at the international level with the same practices already validated, discussed and adapted.

What is now demanded is, precisely, a systematic (scientific) work of building/developing and evaluating best practices based in quality criteria/indicators that can be disseminated and applied in various European contexts - this will be the Toolbox to be build by the EQuaP Project. These best practices, this Toolbox selected by the EQuaP Project already incorporates the legal measures as well as all its ideological/political grounding: we can perceive the Toolbox as a distillation of a whole theoretical-practical evolution of the European policies concerning ECEC over the past few decades. Since this Toolbox is one of the fundamental aspects of the EQuaP Project, we must understand that the whole project aims to anchor the extension of its scientific activities in job shadowing activities (observation in professional contexts) that will potentiate, adapt and validate the aforementioned Toolbox.

# Slovenia

## 1. Theory and scholarly work

### I. Participation of families in the educational process in the Republic of Slovenia

Preschool Curriculum (Bahovec et al., 1999), national document in the field of early childhood education, outlines several objectives of preschool education. One of them is *improvement of information and co-operation with parents*. Preschool Curriculum (ibid.) identifies also principles for realization of the objectives; one of them is *principle of cooperation with parents*, referring to various aspects of cooperation with parents: providing parents with written and oral information about the programs in preschool, the right of parents to exchange information about their child, the right of parents to in-depth meetings with educators and counselors, the right of parents to gradual introduction of a child in a variety of preschool programs, and the right of parents to participate in planning of life and work of a preschool (ibid.; Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2010). In doing so, educators must obey the law of protection of personal data, parents' right to privacy, and provide parents with continuous and systematic information about their rights and responsibilities (Bahovec et al., 1999).

Cooperation among parents and preschools is an important aspect of quality early childhood education. Pre-School Institutions Act (Official gazette of Republic Slovenia, 100/2005) explicitly requires cooperation with families. Preschools have to list forms and programs of cooperation with families in their yearly work plan. Parents have the right to participate in planning of life and work in a preschool and in children's classes in agreement with educators. They have also the right to participate in educational work, while respecting the professional autonomy of a preschool.

Taking into account systemic and conceptual solutions in Slovenian preschools, based on research findings on individual quality indicators and on the basis of already designed models and approaches for determining quality in other countries, Slovenian authors have developed three basic levels of quality in preschools, and within each level additional domains and indicators of quality in preschools (Marjanovič Umek et al., 2002). To structural/contextual and process level, they added so called *indirect level*, which is by most other researchers (Barnas in Cummings 1994; Howes in Olenick 1986; Dahlberg, Moss in Pence 2000, in: ibid.) recognized partly as in the context, and partly as in the process. According to Slovenian authors (Marjanovič Umek et al., 2002), *indirect level refers to subjective conditions and opportunities, in which preschool education is running/taking place* (eg. The involvement of employees in education, employees' satisfaction, collaboration with parents). Indicators at this level include relationships, in which a child is not directly involved, but have significant effects on the work

in a preschool as well as on a child itself. Cooperation between preschool and families therefore falls in the scope of indirect level of preschool's quality, where quality indicators are the following:

1. formal forms of cooperation (eg. individual meetings with parents, parental meetings, written materials for parents, bulletin boards, parents' council, lectures for parents, events for parents);
2. informal forms of cooperation (eg. communication with parents at the arrivals/departures of children, unplanned discussions, picnics, trips/excursions, workshops for parents or for parents and children, intergenerational meetings, participation of other family in the activities of a preschool);
3. active involvement of parents in the educational process (eg. participation of parents in planning, execution and evaluation of curriculum, problem solving) (ibid).

In 2010, Slovenian author Lepičnik Vodopivec (2010) conducted a research with the following research questions:

- identify presence of formal forms of cooperation between educators and parents in preschool,
- identify presence of informal forms of cooperation between educators and parents in preschool.

Research findings were the following: parental meetings and individual meetings with parents are quite common (2-, 3-, 4 times a year, or more frequently), reflecting the provision of formal opportunities for collaboration with parents. Quite often, educators inform parents also through bulletin board (at least once a week), and they regularly communicate also on a daily basis. Educators enable parents to take part in other activities, too (eg. events, trips, picnics, workshops), which are important for parents to get to know their child in different situations. Data show that in most preschools such activities are implemented 2- or more times a year (84.5% of all surveyed parents responded that this is the case in their preschools) (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2010).

Current ways of cooperation between preschool and family is a solid basis for the development of partnership relations between them, with a prerequisites: willing to share information equally, and that each side (preschool/family) will take its own obligations and responsibilities associated with raising children, while being aware of their rights and duties (ibid).

A wide range of issues, related to both the formal and informal forms of cooperation with parents, still remain open. One of them is certainly the issue of organization of formal forms of

cooperation, which includes issues of planning, implementation and evaluation of parental meetings and/or individual meetings with parents (time, invitations, spatial planning, selection of staff, use of ICT, writing reports). Finally, this is also a question of management of parental meetings or individual meetings with parents, the mode of communication (verbal and non-verbal aspect) between educators and parents, etc.

Brusnjak (2009), in her Master thesis, identifies formal forms of collaboration among families and preschools (eg. parental meetings, individual meetings with parents) as still the most frequent ones. But additionally, every day communication at arrival/departure of a child is becoming more and more widespread; many parents use this form of exchange of information daily, the majority uses it once a week. Brusnjak (ibid) found out that more and more informal, enrichment, active forms of mutual cooperation, such as picnics, trips, events, etc. are present in preschools. Parents least take advantage of the possibility of taking part in planning and evaluating the work in the preschool, but they want more relaxed forms of interaction and exchange of information using modern technologies, such as email and website. Parents want more additional and enrichment activities that could be implemented, according to their opinion, by professional staff in preschool or by external experts.

According to the above mentioned research findings, the following questions have arose:

- Is a preschool ready to take the family as a partner in the educational process?
- Does a preschool know views and opinions of parents, their expectations, hopes, possibilities etc. enough (in details)?
- How to satisfy wishes of parents, children and educators?

## II. Participation of parents of migrant children in the educational system in the Republic of Slovenia

Each year, children of immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers and persons enjoying temporary protection are included in Slovenian education system (Strategija vključevanja otrok, učencev in dijakov migrantov..., 2007). It has been identified, that migrant children, while integrating in the Slovenian education system, have difficulties to follow the life and work in preschool, have difficulties with inclusion in the broader social environment, which is partly result of a lack of adequate professional knowledge and skills of professionals for quality collaboration with migrant parents:

- no relevant recommendations, guidelines for working with migrant parents;
- no adequate training and materials with examples for working with migrant parents;
- modest knowledge of the key elements of the language and culture of migrants, what

could help to avoid potential misunderstandings or to facilitate contacts with parents and encourage them to participate;

- modest knowledge and skills of teachers to promote intercultural dialog between Slovenian and migrant parents;
- no adequate financial support to assist in communicating with migrant parents (lack of funding for translators to prepare bilingual invitations, instructions, messages, ...) (ibid).

In 2007, a national document *A Strategy for inclusion of immigrant children, pupils and students in education system in the Republic of Slovenia* was adopted. In the Strategy (Strategija vključevanja otrok, učencev in dijakov migrantov..., 2007), among key principles defined, there is also a principle of cooperation with parents, as one of the most important forms of work. This principle has to be developed by educational institutions and their professional staff (Strategija vključevanja otrok, učencev in dijakov migrantov..., 2007). The Strategy (ibid) emphasizes that parental involvement can not be left to educator alone - development of strategies and forms of work with migrant families must be part of a school's program of work. Developing forms of cooperation with parents is also a special task of counseling services (school counsellors). As far as possible, schools should involve parents in activities that are carried out by the school. School must develop a wide range of different forms of cooperation with parents, which will bring together parents of both cultures (ibid).

*The guidelines for inclusion of immigrant children in preschools and schools* (Smernice za vključevanje otrok priseljencev v vrtce in šole, 2012) identify measures in the field of education for inclusion of immigrants and the realization of the *Strategy for inclusion of immigrant children, pupils and students in education system in the Republic of Slovenia* as part of a national strategy for the inclusion of immigrant children. Within guidelines and ideas for the implementation of the principles, relating to cooperation with parents, *The guidelines* (ibid) states that when in contact with parents of immigrant children, their privacy, culture, language, worldview and values need to be respected, and when communicating with parents, a special attention has to be paid to constantly verify if a person did understand the message, and to request the expected feedback.

Among the instructions for preschools is also stated that it is necessary to establish a contact with immigrant parents prior to enrolment of a child in the preschool, and agree to the gradual enrollment into the preschool and ways of acquiring knowledge of Slovene language. It is also necessary to ensure that parents are involved in the life and work in a preschool; when they enroll their child in preschool, they have to be informed what are their rights and responsibilities and about the characteristics of the Slovenian education system. It is also necessary (in accordance with the possibilities) to use interpreters and parents and their relatives include in a work program of a preschool, so to be invited to the presentation of the culture and language to other parents and children (ibid). *The Strategy* (Strategija vključevanja

otrok, učencev in dijakov migrantov..., 2007) proposes »themed days« in preschools, when parents can present themselves with their cultural or linguistic uniqueness, and workshops for children and parents could be organized for showing specific manual and other skills specific to a particular cultural environment.

In all of this, principle of autonomy is exposed and should be respected, so each educational institution itself must prepare an implementation plan activities that include and take into account the characteristics and uniquenesses of a child / pupil / student and in accordance with applicable regulations and *Guidelines* (2012) seek the most appropriate solutions to concrete challenges, while a school can rely on experience of other educational institutions in similar cases (ibid).

In the framework of diploma thesis (Fatić, 2013), a survey on a sample of preschool teachers, who have migrant children enrolled in their classrooms. The purpose of the research was to identify key challenges which teachers face when integrating immigrant children in the group. The survey results showed that preschool teachers have most problems with understanding of language. 30% of teachers indicated that parents due to a lack of language understanding do not collaborate with them and they do not participate in a variety of additional activities; they also do not participate at individual meetings or parental meetings. Similar results were identified also in a research in 2011 (Jagodić, 2011) on the topic of knowledge of Slovenian language as a prerequisite for the successful inclusion of children of foreigners in Slovenian preschools. A considerable amount of teachers (39,58%) stated that, when working with foreign children, they had the greatest difficulties in cooperation with their parents.

### III. Participation of parents of children with special needs in the educational system in the Republic of Slovenia

It could be said that there is almost no group of children in preschool, in which would not have been at least one child with special needs who require additional help with education.

Cooperation with parents when in a group of children a child with with special needs is enrolled, takes place at various levels: cooperation with parents of a child with special needs; cooperation with parents of other children in the classroom; and cooperation with other parents in a preschool. Such kind of cooperations are foreseen in *Instructions to the curriculum for preschool programs with adapted implementation and additional professional assistance for children with special needs* (Navodila h kurikulu za vrtce..., 2003). Additionally, *Instructions* (Navodila h kurikulu za vrtce..., 2003) says that parents of all children should be fairly and professionally acquainted with the value and importance of joint education of children with special needs. Preschools can do so through preschool's publication in which they present the entire program of work and life in a preschool. In addition, it makes sense that professionals



providing direct assistance to children with special needs, present themselves at parent-teacher meetings. In this way, parents learn that also children with special needs may be enrolled in classroom/preschool (children who need special care and attention not only from teachers and teachers' assistants, but also from other professionals), and on the other hand, they became aware that some day maybe also they will need a help from different experts (ibid).

Different professionals cooperate with parents of a child with special needs: preschool teachers, preschool teachers' assistants, special pedagogues and other professionals. It is important that all professionals have correct and professional attitude towards them (parents). Each of them takes note of a child's progress, each of them from their point of profession. Common talks/meetings are intended for comprehensive analyzes. Practitioners/professionals listen to parents, respect their experiences with a child in the treatment, education and in everyday life (ibid).

A special padagog who treats children, involves parents actively in designing an individualized program, in monitoring child's progress, and give advises on how to work with a child at home. Special pedagog, together with parents, discovers a child's strong areas, potential challenges and obstacles, and thus affect the realistic expectations towards a child and professionals. In addition to this, various forms of training and counseling are offered to parents. Well-informed parents will carry out its primary and irreplaceable role of parenting easier, and they will trust the professional work to experts (ibid).

Nevertheless, as the Jurišić (2008) points out, parents of children with special needs are often not treated in a way which is described above. Reality is for many parents a different experience. Joint cooperation, as Jurišić (ibid) notes, is in practice most often limited to a meeting at which parents come or not; there is someone who present a child's individual plan (IP), which was drawn up by a teacher himself or expert group. Parents tell if they agree with the content of the IP (in most cases they do), and sometimes they propose something. In many cases, before this meeting, parents do not even know what IP is and what teachers expect of them, and often after that they do not know anything more.

#### IV. Participation of Romani parents and other marginalized groups of parents in the education system in the Republic of Slovenia

In the Slovenian education system, also Romani children are included. *Appendix to the Preschool Curriculum for work with Romani children* (Dodatek h Kurikulu za vrtce..., 2002) stresses that cooperation with Romani parents, when enrollment of Romani children in a preschool is taking place, is of special importance. It should be noted that cooperation with parents is a key already in the process of informing Romani parents about preschool programs and decision-making

about the enrollment of their children in these programs (ibid), since the enrollment rate of Romani children in preschool programs is extremely low (Vonta and Jager, 2013). Cooperation with Romani parents is also crucial for a child's development and educational success later in school. In *National evaluation study on school success of Romani pupils in Slovenian elementary schools* (ibid), factors at the school level, associated with school performance of Romani pupils, have been identified. Among the prognostic factors for the pupil's school success, two important factors directly related to early childhood education were identified, namely:

- enrollment of Romani children in preschool programs before entering elementary school;
- cooperation with parents.

*Appendix to the Preschool Curriculum for work with Romani children* (Dodatek h Kurikulu za vrtce..., 2002) stresses, that preschools have to build trust towards Romani families, and explain to them that they are not trying to change or »steal« their children. Preschools should also demonstrate the important role of education in later life for children, the benefits of bilingualism and multiculturalism, and the importance of maintaining their own cultural identity while integrating into mainstream culture. As practice shows, visits of preschool teachers at a child's home are wellcomed already before the enrollment in a preschool, as well as visits of parents with children in a preschool. To acquaint parents with a preschool's program, to which they have a legal right, it is not enough just to give them a publication of a preschool, but due to poor literacy of most parents, preschool staff needs to present and explain the program orally and in person. The same applies to any other information with which parents are informed in a preschool (ibid).

Resman (2008) states that good cooperation between preschool and parents is not easy to achieve, and it is particularly difficult to achieve it with marginalized groups of parents. The reasons for this may include (ibid): stereotypes towards certain groups of parents; too paternalistic attitude; lack of knowledge; lack of understanding of parents; family, social environment and economic conditions of their lives.

There are still very strong stereotypes present among providers of educational programs, such as: Romani parents and other marginalized groups of parents are indifferent in relation to their children; they do not care what is happening with their children; they are unprepared to participate, etc. (Resman 2008; Vonta, 2013). *National Evaluation Study on School success of Romani pupils in Slovenian elementary schools* (Vonta et al., 2011) revealed the same results.

In relation to forms of cooperation between preschools and Romani parents, more or less traditional forms of cooperation are in place (Komac et al., 2010; Vonta et al., 2011; Vonta and Jager, 2013), while some even point out that in the case of cooperation with Romani parents they do not make any difference in how they cooperate with them. This may indicate that they

are implementing antidiscrimination policy and principle of equality, but in reality, positive discrimination should be in place. While they »treat all of them the same way«, they generate even greater differences among Romani (and/or other marginalized) parents and other parents. Marginalized parents can feel lack of motivation or lack of interest to cooperate with teachers/preschool because preschools do not adapt their strategies of cooperation to parents' needs, interests and abilities.

In the scope of a European project, *European dimension in parent education* (Vonta, 2009), which was implemented in four EU countries (Estonia, Greece, Latvia, Slovenia) from 2007 to 2009, and was focused on the integration, motivation and empowerment of socially, economically or otherwise disadvantaged parents (parents of children with disabilities, migrant families, minority families, Romani families, etc.), a study on needs, aspirations and interests of parents regarding the content they (parents) want to strengthen in their parental practice, was carried out. Parents would like preschools to organize meetings and different materials to support them in their parental role - that undoubtedly represents a fundamental prerequisite for a successful cooperation between parents and preschool professionals, and also shows parents' wish for participation. To realize their wish and also their right to participate, we should respond to their needs, aspirations and interests adequately.

## 2. Methods and practices in the local and national level (Specific practices at local and national level)

As it was presented in the first part of this document, three forms of cooperation with parents are present in Slovenian preschools:

1. formal forms of cooperation,
2. informal forms of cooperation,
3. active involvement of parents in the educational process (Marjanovič Umek et al., 2002).

Those forms of cooperation with parents are, according to Marjanovič Umek et al. (2002), »quality indicators of indirect level of preschool quality«. All three forms will be presented below and highlighted with examples from practice.

To get insight what kind of methods and practices in the field of collaboration with parents are in place in Slovenian preschools, we have invited 35 preschools from whole Slovenia, all members of National Network of Step by Step Preschools and Primary schools<sup>1</sup>, to present their best practices. We received 70 examples of good practices from 17 preschools. In all 70 analyzed examples of good practices, informal forms of cooperation with parents and active

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<sup>1</sup> Operating within Educational Research Institute, Developmental Research Center for Pedagogical Initiatives Step by Step.

involvement of parents in the educational process were presented; not a single example of formal forms of cooperation was presented as an example of good practice. We cannot know for sure, but, as we will see below, formal forms of cooperation are something what is obliged to implement, so maybe this is the reason the teachers do not see such forms of cooperation as examples of good practice.

## I. Formal forms of cooperation

Formal forms of cooperation are:

- Individual meetings with parents (»talking hours«)

They are the most common forms of cooperation between educators and parents and are part of preschool teacher's work obligation. They are implemented in a form of individual interviews with parents about a child's development. In addition to that, parents expect to exchange information about raising their child, and possibly also professional advice on how to deal with educational issues and various specific situations at home. They are usually implemented once a month and a parent can decide voluntarily whether to come or no. In special occasions, teacher can also invite parents to the individual meeting, specially when teacher deems it is necessary (developmental delays etc.) (Intihar and Kepec 2002).

- Parental meetings

Parental meeting is a form of cooperation with parents, which is intended to address common issues of the whole group and is normally used for transmission of information to parents. Teachers present parents necessary information about life and work in a preschool, they present an annual work plan, they agree on forms of cooperation, they harmonize their wishes and requirements with the wishes and expectations of parents, etc. Parental meetings are usually carried out two times per year, or more if necessary (Čadež, 2005).

- Written materials/messages for parents, bulletin boards

Written messages are useful especially when they are intended to inform parents, but certainly they cannot and should not replace personal contact between educators and parents. With written messages, teachers inform and invite parents to other forms of cooperation. By notices on bulletin boards, they inform about the activities in and outside the preschool (ibid).

- Parents' council

Parents' council is composed of one representative of parents from each group of children; representative is elected at parental meetings. The Parents' council may propose above-standard programs; gives its approval to the headmaster's proposal of above-standard programs; is involved in the development of the proposal of preschool's program development; gives an opinion on the annual work plan; gives an opinion about candidates

for the headmaster; discusses headmaster's reports about educational issues; deals with complaints from parents concerning the education process; elects representatives to the Preschool's council; may adopt its own work program of cooperation with the preschool, particularly in terms of integration into the local environment; may establish or set up working groups on specific areas of educational work and projects alone or in collaboration with preschool staff; designs and gives an opinion in the appointment process of headmaster and perform other tasks in accordance with the law and regulations (Organization and Financing of Education Act, 1996, Article 66; Law on Amendments and Supplements to Organization and Financing of Education Act, 2008, Article 22).

- Working meetings of representatives of Preschool's council

Preschool's council represents the highest body of a preschool. It is composed of five representatives of staff, three representatives of preschool's founder and of three representatives of parents. At their first meeting, they present planned activities and parents can give their proposals, which are implemented in the scope of preschool's financial possibilities and professional reflection. (Okrožnica - Sveti vrtcev in šol..., 2009).

## II. Informal forms of cooperation

Informal forms of cooperation include both, the communication with parents at the arrivals and departures of children, as well as unplanned interviews (Marjanovic Umek et al., 2002). Moreover, as indicated by Marjanovič Umek et al. (2002), and as shown by the results of the analysis of best practices, implemented at the national level, various other forms of informal forms of cooperation with parents are present, such as:

- creative workshops for children and parents (eg. making toys, etc.).
- workshops for parents (eg. tea party on a specific topic about child development)
- picnics (eg. the autumn picnic, etc.).
- sport events (eg. a night walk to the nearby surrounding hill, etc.).
- trips (eg. a visit of farm, etc.).
- various final meetings (eg. on topics of completed projects, in the form of charity bazaars, etc.).

Based on the received examples of good practice, we can identify some common characteristics (underlined in the text below) of the above mentioned forms of cooperation.

The analyzed examples of good practices address 5 target groups:

- children
- parents

- grand parents
- other relatives, eg. sisters, brothers, aunts, etc.
- representatives of local community.

The majority of meetings are intended for children and their parents, but occasionally also grandparents and other family members attend (eg. Earth Day – participants have cleaned playground and surroundings of a preschool), as well as representatives of local community (eg. meeting, devoted to celebrate the arrival of spring). At the same time it should be pointed out that some meetings are held only for parents, eg. a workshop in the form of tea party on a specific topic about child development).

Parents, to whom such meetings, in addition to children, are intended, can participate in two roles:

- as active participants
- as facilitators or co-facilitators of meetings.

We identified that parents are not included just as active participants, but also as facilitators/implementers of specific activities, eg. puppet show, implemented by parents for their children. Parents were involved in planning, implementation and evaluation of the whole process.

Those meetings are based on initiatives and needs of:

- parents
- educators.

When planning activities with parents/families, teachers often follow on the level of preschool/group of children agreed priorities of educational work, or they link them to current projects taking place in the group/preschool, eg. meeting at the end of the project on traffic safety. Teachers plan their activities with parents/families also on the basis of needs as they identify them at their work with children and their parents, eg. different activities (in the group of children, with all parents, other teachers) for successful inclusion of a child of deaf parents. Occasionally, teachers plan their activities/meetings with parents also on a basis of »urgent« issues (eg. stubbornness in child development).

In terms of time determinant, informal meetings are conducted in forms of:

- one-day activities (eg. art workshops, etc.);
- two-days activities (eg. camping: families slept in tents at a preschool's yard, and preschool teachers prepared a number of activities for children and their parents); or

- longer-term activities (eg. parents are involved in project on a specific topics, for example »Space flight« - parents are involved in preparing necessary requisites, they set the scene, film the activity etc.).

In terms of location, meetings are taking place:

- in preschool (inside and outside of a preschool) and
- outside the premisses of a preschool (firehouse, cultural center, medical center, farm, etc.).

Irrespective of diversity of contents and forms of informal meetings, mostly all meetings are planned in terms of the following objectives, which can be classified into three categories according to each group involved in the meeting/activity:

*A) from the perspective of preschool staff:*

- building trust with parents
- better knowledge about parents and a child's family
- better understanding of a child (child's behavior in the presence of parents may be different)
- greater connectedness with children and parents
- improved communication and collaboration with parents
- greater involvement of parents in the educational process
- strengthening professional competences in the field of planning and implementation of activities to promote different areas of child development and activities for cooperation with parents

*B) from the perspective of parents:*

- building trust with teachers
- better knowledge of teachers and work in a preschool
- better understanding of a child (child's behavior in a preschool environment, in a presence of a teacher may be different)
- better mutual understanding of families
- greater connectedness between educators and parents,
- greater connectedness of parents with children,
- greater connectedness between families
- improved communication and collaboration with teachers
- greater involvement of parents in the educational process
- strengthening of parents' parental competencies

*c) from the perspective of children:*

- building trust in preschool teachers
- greater connectedness between children and teachers
- greater connectedness between children and parents
- greater connectedness between children
- improved communication and collaboration with parents and teachers
- promotion of different areas of child development

Examples of good practice, addressing migrant families, families with a minority background, socio- economically (SE) disadvantaged families etc. in its objectives, content, or diversities of modes of implementation of activities, are not very common, but they could be detected among examples, that we have received. In most cases, preschool teaches have pointed out that they do not have children from families with a migrant/minority background or from a SE disadvantaged family in their group of children. Those teachers who have those children/families included in their group, and recognize the need to adapt forms of cooperation according to families' needs, first try to achieve that these families attend events that are planned and (at first, as passive participants). When they achieve this, preschool teachers provide all necessary material for a certain activity (in order not to make family's financial burden even greater) or choose such an activity in which families can use waste/natural material. When organizing different events, teachers offer different ways for parent/family participation: investment of their time (preparation/cleaning) rather than providing financial, material resources. Or, for example, arrange meetings/events, which primary purpose is to help families in need (donations, rent or exchange).

### III. Active involvement of parents in the educational process

In this form of cooperation, parents and families are involved in the educational process itself. In most cases, parents or grand parents spend a day with their children in a preschool, based on advanced joint planning between teachers and parents, for example: presentation of parent's profession, creating with clay, presentation of games from the past, etc. Or, teacher involve parents in planning of activities for the whole school year in advance, and in evaluation of implemented activities at the end of school year. Migrant families, families with a minority background, socio-economically disadvantaged families are mainly invited (only) to present their language, culture, and from which they come from.



# Sweden

In Sweden ECEC begins at the first year of a child's age and lasts until the 7<sup>th</sup> year. The Swedish Parliament and the Government set out the goals and guidelines for ECEC and primary school through the Education Act and the Curricula. ECEC is regulated in [the Education Act](#) but have two different curricula. ECEC has had its own curriculum since 1998 (revised in 2016), and the preprimary class is incorporated in the school system. The compulsory school and the preprimary class, as well as the leisure-time centers share a common curriculum (National Board of Education, 2016). The preprimary class is a voluntary type of school within the public school system. Most Swedish children attend preschool (more than 83% of all children between 1-5 years old) and the leisure time centers (more than 90% of all children between 6-9 years old) (The National Board of Education, 2014). The preschool as an educational institution has a long tradition in the Swedish society. In 1998 the preschool got their own curriculum and also become a part of the national educational system. In the curriculum involvement of the children's guardians is clearly stated with a standpoint from a democratic perspective.

In the Swedish educational system both children/ pupils and guardians right to have influence over the education is an important value and clearly stated in the Educational Act (2010:800). A central goal in the preschools daily work is also to establish a co-operation between the home and the preschool. In the curriculum it's stated in the following way: "The guardian is responsible for their child's upbringing and development. The preschool should supplement the home by creating the best possible preconditions for ensuring that each child's development is rich and varied". This quote shows the importance of that both the guardian and the preschool has responsibility for the child's upbringing and it is of import to have a mutual understanding of each other. As a starting point for this understanding is to create a knowledge of the family and the child but also that the preschool is clear about its goals and what its works involves.

To create the mutual understanding between the family and the preschool the work is done both in a formal and informal way. The informal ways includes for examples the daily meetings when a child arrives and departures from preschool. The formal ways is for example teacher parents' conference, parents- meeting and different kinds of documentation to make learning outcomes visible in different forms.

Further on the involvement should take part in different areas in the preschool. One specific are which is regulated in the curriculum is the period of transition, when the child starts at preschool. In Sweden the transition to preschool is a period when the guardians, the child and the preschool teachers met. Often the introduction to the preschool extends for a period of one to two weeks. During that period of time the preschool teachers and the parents got a possibility to meet and to create relations. During the transition period information about the child is also of important and of important to gaining knowledge of each and every child's unique needs. To ensure that the child

and parents ensure a good introduction in the preschools that is clearly formulated in the curriculum as a specific goal.

In the Swedish preschool the guardians also have a formal right to have influence and in every preschool the head of the preschool is obliged to ensure that there is a forum where parents are able to get information and to discuss the preschool. In the curriculum it is written: *“for ensuring that parents receive opportunities to participate and exercise influence over how goals can be made concrete in pedagogical planning»*. This quotation means that the parent should be able to have influence over the every-day activities in the preschool from different aspect and not just have a say at special occasions.

Research about family involvement in Swedish preschool is limited. Studies has been focused upon specific areas like parents teachers conferences where research conducted by Markström & Simonsson (2013) shows that the conference as a form is an important arena for interaction and collaboration but can also be understood in terms of normalizing practice not only for the child, the parents and the preschool as an institution, but also for the preschool teachers themselves in their role as professionals.

## Part B- Research guidelines

# Enhancing quality in Early Childhood Education and Care through Parent Participation: a state of play in seven European countries

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this document is to present a general picture on parent participation in research and in international policy documents. Throughout this text, different approaches of parent participation are described, ranging from a rather outcome-related, instrumental view on the issue to a more intrinsic and fundamental democratic approach of developing quality in partnership with parents. This document is based on literature reviews of the University of Crete, the Ghent University (Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy), VBJK, (Centre for Innovations in the Early Years) and the University of Parma, and on additional input by all partners and on findings throughout the project. Besides findings on the value of parent participation<sup>1</sup>, common challenges in developing and maintaining parent participation and possible ways of overcoming barriers are presented. In addition, an overview is given on the existing ECEC systems, good practices and quality indicators for parent participation in the partner countries of the EQuaP project. Finally, conclusions and further considerations about the important role of parent participation are put forward.

## 2. Getting parent participation on the agenda and why<sup>2</sup>

Since the Council Recommendation on Childcare in 1992, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has gained an increasingly prominent position on European policy agendas. Initially, the main rationale for investing in ECEC was driven by socio-economic concerns about employment, competitiveness and gender equality (Council of the European Communities, 1992). However, over the years **the quality of ECEC provision has emerged as a crucial**

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<sup>1</sup> See also the EQuaP project proposal and the country reports.

**factor for promoting children's cognitive and social development, and, in turn, for enhancing their educational chances in the long term.** The deepening of the discussion on the characteristics of ECEC provision that are associated with good quality emerges as particularly important for the improvement of the educational offer at local level and for a strengthening of the skills and competence of ECEC staff (see e.g. the EQF, 2014). At the same time, the successful pedagogical approaches and educational experiences developed in many European countries tell us that **ECEC quality is also the result of a participatory process** that involve on-going negotiations with all stakeholders – children, parents, practitioners and local communities– rather than a measurable outcome that could be predetermined by scientific evidence (Dahlberg et al., 2007; European Commission 2014; European Commission Network on Childcare , 1996; OECD, 2006; UNESCO, 2008)

Although there is a growing consensus on the importance of parent participation in ECEC, **different discourses and underlying assumptions** can be identified (Hughes, & Mac Naughton, 2000). The underlying assumptions and perspectives, as they will be described, also give way to a variety of concepts and terms, such as collaborate, cooperate, involve, include, make decisions together, act together etc. Several terms are often being used interchangeably, which does not always lead to more clarity in the debate: 'parent participation', 'parental engagement or involvement', 'family involvement'.

As described below, research and policies often stress the importance of parent participation or parental involvement in relation to educational attainment of underprivileged children. While this is not problematic as such, it does bring the essence of parent participation to a mere instrumental level. In doing so, according to many other scholars, several of these studies and policies represent a 'democratic deficit' and leave little room for parents to also get involved in defining goals and modalities of their own participation (Brougère, 2010; Canella, 1997, Doucet, 2011; Garnier, 2010; Vandenbroeck, Hughes, & Mac Naughton, 2000; Vandenbroeck, De Stercke., & Gobeyn, 2013; Van Laere, 2017).

Recognizing **parents as the first educator** -in line with the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - leads the way to an increased attention that is noticed on the importance of a **reciprocal relationship** between parents and ECEC professionals as 'a fundamental element to build a co-constructive educational project between children, educators and their adult relatives' (Guerra and Luciano, 2014; Rayna, S., Rubio, M. N., & Scheu, H., 2010 ). Being involved in caring for and educating young children, is, or should be, therefore quite inconceivable without involving parents in a process of shared responsibility or co-education.

The **CRC** committee, in its General Comment nr.7 on children's rights in early childhood (par. 29b) clearly recognizes, over and over again, that parents are the first educators and states that

‘In planning for early childhood, state parties should at all times aim to provide programmes that complement the parents’ role and are developed as far as possible in partnership with parents including through active cooperation between parents, professionals and others in developing “the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential” (art. 29.1 a)’

Both this specific interest in, and this complexity of parent participation were the reasons for developing the EQuaP project (Enhancing Quality in early childhood education and care through Participation), aiming at developing quality approaches of ECEC in which parents are considered and approached as important stakeholders and participants in children’s’ education.

Partners from seven European countries (Belgium-Flemish community, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Slovenia, and Sweden) participated in the EQuaP project and have demonstrated the context, good practices and quality indicators of parent participation in their countries. They have also participated in activities (including job shadowing) and project meetings in order to exchange ideas and promote and improve parent participation practices in their country. During discussions in this project, a consensus grew on the idea that parent participation is a matter of principle, a way of working and not only a method to reach certain goals. Parent participation should be promoted and supported in ECEC, and can be meaningful in terms of quality even without proven results in terms of educational attainment of the children.

For the purposes of this document, we clarify some key terms that regularly will be used:

- **ECEC**

There has been some debate on how to label the provisions for children under compulsory school age and their families. In this report, we use the term ‘Early Childhood Education and Care’ (ECEC), since it is the term most commonly used in international and European policy documents, as well as in OECD reports. Some countries are characterised by a split system in which childcare centres and preschool education is organised for different ages, under the auspices of different governmental departments. Other countries have more integrated ECEC systems in which early childhood centres exist for children from the age 0 until 6. (Bennett, 2003; European Commission, 2011; Kaga, Bennett, & Moss, P., 2010). To add to the complexity, the divide between age groups and institutions (childcare / preschool) is often not the only divide in the early childhood system. In ‘split’ systems in particular, services tend to be fragmented, with different types of services (e.g. public, private, private-for-profit) existing in parallel (Urban et al, 2011). Parent participation as well, shows different features throughout this divide.

- **Practitioner**

As the SEEPRO and the CoRe project (Oberhuemer et al., 2010; Van Laere et al., 2011) made perfectly clear, there are many different professionals working in the field of ECEC, bearing different names according to the country and the type of services they work in, the qualifications they have, or the functions they fulfil. Their names may vary from teachers, teacher' assistants, childcare workers, pedagogues, ... When we talk about the people working in ECEC, we use the term *practitioner* throughout the document.

#### - **Parent**

Without denying the role of other family members in the education of children, the term 'parent' is used in this project. The word *parent* is used to refer to those adults within a family who have the legal responsibility for the children and who actually raise them. This can be the legal parents, guardians, adoptive parents, foster parents and so forth.

# Importance of a participatory quality approach of the relationship between parents and ECEC

## 1.1 The European Union

On a policy level, the importance of parent participation is promoted in several **EU** documents. The European Commission has put forward the priorities that affirm the components of quality in education, where access, participation and parental involvement in education are defined as the main keywords (European Commission, 2014; Lindeboom & Buiskool, 2013). Parent participation is among the recommendations of European cooperation in quality evaluation in school education formulated by the European Parliament and the Council to the Member States (2001/166/EC). A European report of quality in parent participation (2001), has also identified parent participation as an important quality indicator in education. Moreover and specifically for ECEC, the European Quality Framework for ECEC (2014) is very clear on the matter of parent participation, considering it as one of the fundamental issues for the development and maintenance of high quality ECEC (p. 8): “parents are the most important partners and their participation is essential. The family is the first and most important place for children to grow and develop, and parents (and guardians) are responsible for each child’s well-being, health and development. Families are characterised by great social, socio-economic, cultural and religious diversity – and this diversity should be respected as a fundamental element of European societies. Within a context that is set by the national, regional or local regulations, the family should be fully involved in all aspects of education and care for their child. To make this involvement a reality, ECEC services should be designed in partnership with families and be based on trust and mutual respect. These partnerships can support families by developing services that respond to the needs of parents and allow for a balance between time for family and work. ECEC services can complement the family and offer support as well as additional opportunities to parents and children.” However, while the involvement of school leaders and practitioners is ensured to some degree almost everywhere, the practice of providing children, parents, and representatives of the local community with the possibility of expressing their voice, and taking their opinion into account, is still less systematic.

The policy commitment to ECEC at European level is characterised by the recognition that ECEC provision has to be of high quality (European Commission 2011, 2014). Definitions of quality in ECEC vary considerably across countries. Despite these varieties, there is a consensus amongst scholars and international networks that quality in ECEC should be contextualised and include a continuous revision of understandings and practices for the improvement of ECEC services in ever-changing societal conditions (Penn, 2009; Urban et al., 2011; Dahlberg et al.,

1999; DECET 2007; Children in Europe, 2008 and 2016; ISSA, 2010). Consequently, **quality is an on-going process** rather than as something that is either achieved or not.

## 1.2 International research: ambivalent notions on parental involvement

In terms of how parent participation relates to ECEC quality, research and international documents seem to cover the whole range of different perspectives and underlying assumptions, ranging from the ‘instrumentalist’ to the ‘essentially democratic’ approach. In some documents series we also notice changes throughout the years.

The **Starting Strong reports** (OECD, 2001, 2006, 2013) place the question of quality in the context of democratic ECEC governance. Beyond the minimum standard ensured by the basic regulations, defining and assuring quality should be a participatory and democratic process, involving different groups including children, parents, families and practitioners who work with young children (OECD, 2001, 2006).

*“At centre level, touchstones of a democratic approach will be to extend the agency of the child and to support the basic right of parents to be involved in the education of their children. In this approach, the early childhood centre becomes a space where the intrinsic value of each person is recognised, where democratic participation is promoted, as well as respect for our shared environment. Learning to be, learning to do, learning to learn and learning to live together should be considered as critical elements in the journey of each child toward human and social development.” (OECD 2006, 18)*

These first two Starting Strong reports clearly underlined that parental involvement is not about teaching parents how to be involved or hold parents solely responsible for the difficulties a child may have. The relationship between ECEC staff and parents was understood as ‘*a two-way process of knowledge and information flowing freely both ways*’ in order to foster continuity in children’s learning and experiences between ECEC and the home (OECD 2001, 117). Accordingly, professional development should be more oriented on how professionals can learn to listen to parents and learn from the knowledge that parents from diverse backgrounds contribute, while at the same time being aware of the power dynamics that are at stake between parents and ECEC centers (OECD 2006, 2001).

Although research on the impact of early learning has existed for over 40 years, it is especially in the last decade that international policy debates (e.g. OECD, European Commission, UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank) massively adopted an early learning perspective. Many studies emphasized the importance of quality early learning of preschool children as a foundation for reaching high educational attainment and employment in later life (Unicef Innocenti Research Centre 2008, Matthews and Jang 2007, Melhuish et al. 2015, Leseman and Slot 2014, Shonkoff



and Phillips 2000, Barnett and Masse 2007, Heckman 2006). The last Starting Strong report stressed that, influenced by academic studies especially in the field of neuroscience, ECEC serves as a crucial foundation for children by fostering the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills that would matter for success later in life (OECD 2013, 2015).

We could then see how the former emphasis on the democratic approach of ECEC disappeared in the most recent Starting Strong reports and consequently the nature of the relationship between the ECEC professionals and parents changed as well: parents and communities needed to collaborate with ECEC staff to foster skill development and stimulate the healthy development of their children. Especially since there was recurrent available research evidence that correlated parental involvement in early learning of children with better learning outcomes and later academic success (Arnold et al. 2008, Carter 2002, McWayne et al. 2004, Sylva et al. 2004, Fantuzzo, Perry, and Childs 2006, Halgunseth 2009, Marcon 1999, Miedel and Reynolds 2000, Eldridge 2001, Castro et al. 2004, Galindo and Sheldon 2012)<sup>3</sup>.

In studies on the early childhood programs, **significant positive results** of parental involvement were found in helping children transition to kindergarten and succeed during the primary grades and even high school (Barnard, 2004; Carter, 2002). This was especially the case among children in a societal disadvantaged position and those at risk of school failure (Carter, 2002). Children are more motivated to learn and develop key emergent skills that are necessary for success in later life (McWayne et al., 2004). Greater parent involvement in preschool was also associated with stronger pre-literacy skills of children (Arnold, Zeljo, Doctoroff, & Ortiz, 2008). Some assume that when parents and practitioners cooperate, children will be affected as much as possible (Smith, et al, 2013; Westmoreland, Bouffard, O'Carroll, & Rosenberg, 2009). "When families of all backgrounds are engaged in their children's learning, their children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and pursue higher education" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; p. 73).

It is also observed that if parents are involved early, at the preschool level, they are more likely to continue being involved at the next educational levels (Barbour, 1996; Lindeboom & Buiskool, 2013). Furthermore, when parents and practitioners work together, they can deliver clear and consistent messages to children, encouraging the development of positive behaviors concerning the emotional and social development of their children (Smith, et al. 2013). Other programs aiming at the improvement of emotional health and the management of behavioral and emotional problems have also been implemented with positive results. (Evangelou, Brooks, & Smith, 2007; Evangelou, Coxon, Sylva, Smith, & Chan, 2011; Goff, Evangelou, & Sylva, 2012; Sylva, Scott, Totsika, Ereky-Stevens, & Crook, 2008). The kind of parent involvement by means of informing parents about issues of health, healthy eating, exercise and promoting physical

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<sup>3</sup> Although the first studies on parental involvement were predominantly situated in compulsory education, the notion of parental involvement also has gained ground in the academic field of ECEC (Jinnah and Walters 2008, Hughes and Mac Naughton 2000).

activity are also very common in all stages of education. (Herman, Nelson, Teutsch & Chung, 2012; McCurdy, McPhil, Winterbottom, Mehta & Roberts, 2010; Tomporowski, Lambouine & Okumura, 2011). Sylva et al (2002) argued that parent participation programs contributed not only to the academic and cognitive development of children, but also positively affected the parents' and practitioners' behavior. Involving parents, in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is acknowledged as a key component not only for their children's education, but also for the improvement of children's development in general. This has been reported in several studies (Berthelsen & Walker 2008; Epstein, 1995; Epstein, 2011; Smith, Robbins, Stagman, & Mathur, 2013).

Besides the beneficial outcomes for children, parent participation is also considered as an essential part, and even a **prerequisite for ECEC quality**. In the comprehensive CARE research (2016), the document on European Framework for Quality and Well-being Indicators formulates the parent participation as an indicator for quality (p. 20-21): "The centre communicates and engages in dialogue with important stakeholders, foremost the parents of the children, on a regular basis via accessible media, taking parents' language and media literacy skills into account. The centre actively involves parents, and builds collaborative partnerships with them, in developmental and educational goal setting, in curriculum and pedagogy development, in implementation and evaluation of curriculum and pedagogy, and in the periodic review of the pedagogical plan." And furthermore adds that: "The centre is sensitive to differences in views, values and priorities between centre and parents. Hence, where possible, alternative views, values and priorities are recognizably incorporated in pedagogical plans and practices. Where this is not possible, differences in views, values and priorities are respectfully discussed in constructive dialogues, in which professional knowledge is brought to bear on the issues. Consensus is sought through on reconstructed or reconsidered views, values and priorities."

### 1.3 Bridging the educational gap by more parent participation?

Adding the fact that the educational gap between children with high SES and low SES is very persistent (OECD, 2013, 2016), increased **parental involvement has been advocated as a means to close this gap** by several international organisations (European Commission, 2015, OECD, 2006, 2012). Already since the 60'ies the relationship between parental involvement and children's educational attainment has been of considerable interest to educational and sociological scholars and policy makers (Lareau and Munoz 2012, Brooker 2015). It is widely assumed that parental involvement in children's education in school and at home could prevent school failure and allegedly may contribute to 'bridge the gap' between children with lower and higher educational attainment (Barnard 2004, Carter 2002, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1995). That is why in contrast to the earlier OECD reports that were oriented on parents in

general, parental involvement in the latest OECD reports was considered especially important *'in low income, minority communities where differences in socio-economic background and cultural values about child rearing and education are likely to negatively affect child development* (OECD 2012, 222)'. Consequently, parents in a societal disadvantaged position are more targeted from a deficit perspective to work actively on the development and learning of their children to achieve later academic success and school completion.

Several of the studies that show the positive impact of parental involvement on children's outcomes base themselves upon the Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and the Overlapping Spheres of Influence model of Epstein (1995, 1987, 2004). These theoretical models emphasize that schools, families and communities have shared responsibilities in educating and socializing children (Fischer, Dowrick, and Maynard 2007). In Epstein's model several types of parental involvement are put forward in terms of what parents can do at home and in the school environment to help their children perform well at school and in later life (Epstein 1995, Epstein et al. 1987, Epstein and Salinas 2004).

At the same time, scholars in the field of sociology of education like Lareau (1987, 1996, 1999) have criticized this line of thought for several reasons. A first problem is that Epstein promotes a model of consensus by using terms as for example partnership and common goals. By assuming a consensus, this theoretical model fails to acknowledge **patterns of unequal power** between diverse parents and schools (Lareau and Shumar 1996, Todd and Higgins 1998). Secondly, when this theoretical model of Epstein is translated into educational policies, the focus is on increasing individual parent's participation in education starting from the premise that all parents are equal. According to Lareau (1987, 1999, 1996) and other sociologists who base themselves on the Bourdieusian concept of cultural capital, the **equity of parents is a problematic assumption** since parents have to deal with unequal financial, social and cultural resources and parents have different skills to activate their cultural and social capital in order to create an educational advantage for their child within the school system. By overlooking these differences, it is argued that it is hard for parents from working or lower class to comply with the staff requests for parental involvement which are permeated by social and cultural experiences of intellectual and economic elites (Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003, Lareau 1987, Lareau and Shumar 1996, Lareau and Horvat 1999). Consequently, several scholars alert that schools' efforts to involve parents can paradoxically create greater inequities in children's learning, creating disadvantages for children in low-income positions (Gillanders, McKinney, and Ritchie 2012, Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003, Lee and Bowen 2006). By decontextualising the encounters between parents and schools and responsabilising parents individually to involve themselves, parental involvement risks to be a means to confirm and increase social inequality rather than challenging it (Clarke 2006).

An overview of similar critique can be found in the work of Janssen (2017 and references there, forthcoming) where he recognises that the discourse on the socio-economic benefits of ECEC

mainly focuses on reducing inequalities among young children at school entry, preventing early school leaving and closing the educational gap. What is then problematic, is how proposed solutions (educational interventions with a focus on children's outcomes) are set in a 'seemingly self-evident, objective, and incontestable way' and by doing so neglect the democratic politics of education policies and reducing it to a technical practice. Which brings us again to the critique on instrumentalising parental involvement. In addition, it goes against the advocacy for a social constructivist approach in dealing with the reality of diversity and complexity in ECEC (Urban et al, 2011, Peeters, 2008, Peeters and Vandenbroeck, 2011).

## 1.4 Questioning the instrumentalisation of parents

Several scholars contested the instrumentalisation of parents within the debates on parental involvement. In the last OECD reports for example, the two-way dialogical process of knowledge exchange between parents and staff was left out (OECD, 2012). By predefining the purpose and modalities of parental involvement, the government and ECEC staff manages to think *for* parents, yet not *with* parents (Rayna and Rubio 2010). Parents can help their children to achieve the learning outcomes that the school or government has set. Hence, they are less involved in discussions on the kind of preschool education or society they want for their child and themselves (Garnier 2010b, Vandenbroeck, De Stercke, and Gobeyn 2013, Brougère 2010, Doucet 2011a, Hughes and Mac Naughton 2000, Lawson 2003). Based on a.o. Foucault, Dahlstedt (2009) introduced the concept of 'parental governmentality' in which parents are indirectly recruited into the teacher's project to foster pupils learning in line with the convention of the schools (Dahlstedt, 2009). In this instrumentalisation discourse, participation has an inherent preventive value in terms of avoiding school failure. Parents need to be activated to adopt a more present role in the learning of their children.

One of the side effects of this discourse is that non-participation of parents is considered a problem. (Bouverne-De Bie et al. 2013; Bouverne-De Bie et al., 2012; Brougère 2010).

In one of the last OECD reports (2012) for example OECD countries repeatedly reported that especially poor and migrant parents do not engage themselves enough in preschools because of a lack of interest and care which according to other scholars is considered a pervasive myth (Crozier and Davies 2007, Tobin, Arzubiaga, and Adair 2013, Lawson 2003, Doucet 2011a, OECD 2012). On the contrary, few qualitative studies demonstrated that parents are absolutely interested in their child's education but face many problems like unclear expectations on behalf of the preschool, experience of institutional racism, feelings of intimidation by the staff, and the daily struggle to survive (Tobin, Arzubiaga, and Adair 2013, Garnier 2010a, Crozier 2005, Jeunejean et al. 2014, Doucet 2011b, Vandenbroeck, De Stercke, and Gobeyn 2013). Another essential feature of this instrumentalisation discourse is that parents who do not 'participate' need to learn to participate. Doucet (2011a) and Dahlstedt (2009) problematised that ways to

increase parental involvement are actually codes or implicit strategies to socialize parents to the mainstream white middleclass norms but still within a inequitable educational project (Doucet 2011a, Dahlstedt 2009).

Bouverne-De Bie (2013, 2012) and Brougère (2010) contested the popular discourse on the instrumentalisation of parents by underlining that participation is an ontological fact: people live in a participatory world and real participation concerns creating societal possibilities and spaces for dialogue and negotiation, not necessarily in a consensus way but also with space for dissensus as society consists out of multiple, often contradictory interests, values and definitions of wellbeing (Bouverne-De Bie et al. 2013, Bouverne-De Bie et al. 2012, Brougère 2010, Doucet 2011a). Some scholars accentuated that more dialogue will not improve the relationship unless the politics of knowledge from the parents and the staff, underpinning the communication, are thoroughly analysed: In what ways can the parental knowledge of children equally be as acknowledged as the practitioner's knowledge of children? (Hughes and Mac Naughton 2000, Brougère 2010, Cardona, Jain, and Canfield-Davis 2012). One of the main issues according to Lightfoot (2004) en Hughes and Mac Naughton (2000) for example is that many preschool programs start from the assumption that only one normative path for child development and learning exists, which ought to be mastered by preschool staff. Consequently the knowledge of parents is considered subordinate to the 'expertise' knowledge of preschool staff even in cases where preschools genuinely want to respect parents' wishes and home cultures (Lightfoot 2004, Hughes and Mac Naughton 2000). The scholarly work of Freire (1996) on the 'culture of silence' clarified how in these dominant school systems parents experience an internalized oppression which often translates itself into a conformity with the dominant norms of the preschool (Freire 1996).

In line with this instrumentalisation critique, children as well tend to be made passive in practices on parental involvement.

The challenge is how ECEC centres value the actual participation and interest of parents and develop positive democratic approaches of creating quality together. A similar approach is found in literature focusing on working 'with' families instead of 'on behalf' of them (see Guarra and Luciano and references there, 2014; Rayna, Rubio, & Scheu, H. 2010), which creates way more opportunities for exchange and powerful reciprocity and thus avoiding the risk of power imbalance.

## Parent participation in ECEC practice: why and how?

## 2.1 The need for reciprocity

Although Bronfenbrenner is often used in research to instrumentalise parents, Bronfenbrenner's original readings weren't meant in an instrumental way! Taking a step back and looking at the issue in a broader perspective, we can see how Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological approach, highlights the many interactions between humans and the (actors within) their surrounding environment. Environment has a great influence on human's developmental process. In education, practitioners, parents and children are all considered as part of the school system, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach has favored increased attention for the position and role of parents. According to that approach, participation is a reciprocal process where practitioners, parents and children act together and influence each other in order to build true cooperative relationships. The child also, is considered as a dynamic entity that develops within the environment he/she lives in, with both family and school being the two major contributors.

## 2.2 Parents as assets

Henderson and Mapp have stressed that "programs that successfully connect with families and community invite involvement, are welcoming and address specific parent and community needs." They explain that "relationships matter." How parents and community members are viewed and treated by school staff—as assets to the process of raising achievement rather than as liabilities" and the "level of social trust can predict the quality of the school." One of the best ways to see parents as assets is to involve them in shared decision making around children's learning, development, and social life in the classroom and school. Henderson et al. (2007) identify four core beliefs that should serve as the foundation for the work of educators/schools/early years' programs in engaging families:

- 1) Educators must believe that all parents have dreams for their children and want the best for them.
- 2) Educators must believe that all parents have the capacity to support their children's learning.
- 3) Parents and school staff should be equal partners.
- 4) The primary responsibility for building partnerships between school and home rests primarily with the school staff.

Practitioners are also positively affected from their co-operation with parents, and through that co-operation they can positively affect their work with the children. It is important for practitioners to be aware of children's needs and background in order to provide the appropriate support for each child. Parents are the experts on their children and can therefore

be the most valuable advisors for practitioners, and when a relationship of trust is developed between them, the benefits for children will be even more, affecting their whole personality (Smith, et al, 2013). In a case study of a northern Italian ECEC service, Guerra and Luciano (2014) describe how improving the cooperation and deepening the relation between staff and parents helped the professionals to work towards more satisfying responses to certain, very concrete, critical issues regarding parents and their (lack of) involvement in the service.

## 2.3 Not serving just one predefined goal

Luciano & Guerra (2013) consider parent participation as a mutual process between adults and children, serving multiple goals:

- Parent participation is a responsibility of community services, which shall embody participation not only as a democratic value, but also as a means to avoid social exclusion. Every parent should feel welcomed and free to express his opinion.
- Parent participation is a responsibility of educational institutions, which need to be organized with care and pedagogical work. Practitioners and communities must be very well informed about the factors affecting parent participation.
- Parent participation is a responsibility of the entire community, which is part of the process. Children, parents, practitioners, professionals, people working in services and other citizens are part of the participation process.
- These people have common goals and share the opportunity to contribute to the improvement of the educational institutions in many ways, such as by helping the development of a common project, or involving in management decisions

Note that the CARE research as well defines constructive dialogue as a quality indicator but also points out that there may not always be agreement on e.g. goals and values (p. 21). In fact it adds that different views can come up on issues like quality and wellbeing, in beliefs and preferences regarding child rearing and socialization in general. These differences may have to do with differences in social and cultural background (or not?). Even then, according to the CARE researches, the mutual trust and ongoing dialogue between parents and practitioners remains vital. This process of searching for agreement and possibly adapting ECEC practice to parents' views, beliefs and preferences, does contribute to the cultural accessibility and inclusiveness of ECEC. At the same time, this does not mean that certain elements of quality of ECEC, as developed by professional knowledge and scientific evidence should be deleted. A professional system is characterized by striving for consensus in views, beliefs and preferences through dialogue, and informed by professional standards based on experience and scientific evidence.

Based on the concept of educational co-responsibility, partnership and educational alliance, Guerra and Luciano (2014) state that this element of mutual accountability of parents and professionals to be involved and committed towards the children first and foremost, does shift the focus and makes parent participation go beyond merely informing parents, or educating parents in 'how to be good and competent parents' towards creating close relationships, cooperation and co-education.

## 2.4 A right based approach of equity and respect for diversity

The ethical framework of the **DECET**<sup>4</sup> principles may also serve as an inspiration for the development of an alternative ways of thinking and speaking about parent participation in preschool education (DECET, 2007). This framework is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and is applied to preschool education, as outlined below:

"All children and adults have the right to evolve and to develop in a context where there is equity and respect for diversity. Children, parents and educators have the right to good quality in early childhood education services, free from any form of - overt and covert, individual and structural - discrimination due to their race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status" (in reference to Article 2, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). DECET consistently advocates that all children, parents, practitioners and local communities:

- feel that they belong
- are empowered to develop the diverse aspects of their identity
- can learn from each other across cultural and other boundaries
- can participate as active citizens in ECEC
- actively address bias through open communication and a willingness to grow
- work together to challenge institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination.

ECEC should indeed be a place where children, parents, staff, and local communities can participate in democratic educational practices (Jésu, 2010; Rayna & Rubio, 2010; Doucet, Lawson). This is not an easy mission due to the fact that ECEC are still often strictly predefined and organised in a fairly hierarchical way. Considering the existing diversity and societal power differences amongst families, practitioners and local communities, democratic practice is a constant search for a way to create conditions where everyone has the right to be heard and

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<sup>4</sup>DECET (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training) brings together different European organisations and projects with common goals about the value of diversity in early childhood education and training. DECET aims at promoting and studying democratic ECEC, and acknowledging the multiple (cultural and other) identities of children and families. See all on [www.decet.org](http://www.decet.org)



experience respect, recognition, solidarity, care and a sense of belonging. Quality in this approach is the inventing and reinventing of ways in which ECEC can function for all children and families by negotiating meanings among all stakeholders.

## 2.5 Suggestions

Both, the OECD report (2012) and the European Quality framework for ECEC (2014) give some suggestions on how to install and sustain parent participation in ECEC both on policy or institutional level, inspired by examples from countries all over the world. Some examples:

- Parent participation should be embedded in ECEC policy. This way, it is an obligation for ECEC to work on that and a right for parents to engage (or not). Every ECEC service should find appropriate ways for families to participate<sup>5</sup>.
- Financial resources, preferably public funds, should be provided to parent's associations. This can improve the quality level of the services and can strengthen the role of parent associations in the community.
- Parents should be engaged in a management body of the ECEC services<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, however, the European Included study and a study of Van Avermaet et al (2013) have demonstrated that e.g. formal ways of parent participation such as school boards are not always as effective at involving all parents in school life.
- Parents could be also engaged in setting the curriculum<sup>7</sup>.
- Practitioners and other staff should be trained to involve parents. The CoRe study demonstrated clearly that involving parents is an inherent part of ECEC professionalism. The curricula of many European countries do not sufficiently prepare ECEC practitioners for this (Urban et al., 2011; Van Laere, 2012)
- Parents should be provided with support materials. Example activities, websites, toys, written information, counseling etc. could be provided to parents.
- Organized meetings and activities with parents or 'contact books' between practitioners and parents should be provided.
- Free services for vulnerable families should also be provided. (At the same time, offering free services for some groups can also increase the barrier of feeling stigmatized.)
- Parents should participate in evaluating the ECEC provisions. In many countries, parents have the right to evaluate provisions or curricular activities mainly by visits and observations in ECEC units.

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<sup>5</sup> E.g. Have parents in the school board (Manitoba, Canada).

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Norway has established a national advisory board of parents for ECEC. The board makes parents' voices to be heard in ECEC policies and also provides the Ministry with advice on the cooperation between schools and families. Each ECEC is required to have a parent council.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. In Korea, Japan, Spain and other countries parents are members of the curriculum review committee. In Norway, parents are actively involved by establishing the annual plan for pedagogical activities in ECEC units. Every unit draws up its annual plan and includes parents as its members.

- Parent participation should be evaluated in order to proceed in any necessary changes.

These examples show that many different ways of participation can be meaningful if ECEC provision can create the appropriate environment for parents to feel welcomed and free to express themselves.

The EQF (p. 25) further adds that: “in order to be responsive, educational practices need to be co-constructed with children and their families. Parental involvement needs to be based on an equal partnership with ECEC providers and include: democratic decision-making structures (e.g. parental committee) for the management of ECEC services; staff with an open-minded disposition towards challenging traditional practices. Parents may have differing needs to taken into account - ECEC services should be committed to negotiating their practice and values in a context where contrasting values and beliefs emerge.”

## Rome wasn't built in a day....

Parent participation is an ongoing process, which is continuing, gradual, complex and has several stages. Practitioners need to keep in mind that building true relationships and cooperate with parents is a process that takes time. Relationships with parents are about sharing and mutual exchange, not about the dispute of power. Parents should participate in education in order to meet the needs of their children, increase the wellbeing of their children and then to improve their school performance. This partnership shall aim at the establishment of a true relationship, with practitioners and parents learning with and from each other (Bouchard, 2002; Bouchard, Kalubi & Sorel, 2011; Wright, Block, & Unger, 2008). Again, it is important to acknowledge the power-balance in this relationship. While it shouldn't be a power play, it sometimes is because of the different types of knowledge at stake. Practices on informing, instructing and motivating parents are rather top-down practices (see Jansen, forthcoming) and these inequalities in knowledge-power can be a barrier for participation.

To build relations of trust, it is important to invest facilitating the transition from the home environment to childcare. Practitioners have to know and be truly interested in parent's view and culture. Parents will be the ones to give important information about child's temperament and habits. All this information exchange will enhance the quality of the educational process, and will help practitioners to create true relationships with children. The construction of this relationship does not come naturally or automatically, it needs active investment of the professionals' work. In return, gaining this kind of knowledge about the child, will enable the practitioners to improve their work. It is also important for practitioners to realize that parents would like to remain the first owners of their parenting project and do not need someone to give them advice about what good parenting is. Parents need support, in a form of creating

social support between the parents themselves and the practitioners (Geens & Vandenbroeck, 2013).

### 3.1 The many variations in participation

Different models and levels of parent participation are described in literature. Although participation needs to be developed in the given context, with the given partners, some ideas or models can serve as inspiration.

Wright, et al (2008), notices four developmental stages in the process of parent participation:

- a. Non-participation: Practitioners give commands and instructions.
- b. Pre-participation: Practitioners inform and listen to parents.
- c. Participation: Practitioners and parents decide together.
- d. Meta-participation: Practitioners and parents work together as a system.

Quite often, practitioners believe that participation means simply informing parents about issues that come up, but in fact that is only the pre-participation stage. Every single stage is built on one another and is one of the preconditions to ensure effective participation and build positive relationships between practitioners and parents (Duncan, et al, 2010).

According to Milani (2012) there are five developmental stages in the process of parent participation and several practices following these stages. The stages are summarized as follows:

- a. Inform: talks & meetings,
- b. Listen: several kinds of communication in order to get to the child and the family better,
- c. Facilitate the participation: open class, excursions, joint activities,
- d. Include: workshops, discussion groups, use of child's journal,
- e. Support: support the role of parents, meetings with experts, seminars.

According to Duncan, One, Royce, TePunga-Jurgens, Shaw, Eaton, & Thomas (2010), the relationship between parents and practitioners should be characterized by:

- Authenticity, where partners respect each other and make efforts in building trusting relationships.
- Sustainability, when parents focus on enriching their knowledge about children and make relationships with other families.
- Intentionality, when practitioners support parents with specific, caring activities.
- Embedding, that means being exemplar and affect the life of the wider community.

In order to ensure effective participation, there are some principles that have to be taken into account such as:

- Parents and practitioners work together to support children;
- Participation creates a two-way collaboration and communication. Children parents and practitioners are equal. Parents and practitioners aren't authoritarian or strict and children are not restricted in their feelings, senses, and attitude;
- All decisions must lead to results which are acceptable by both sides;
- Participation is a goal related to real life (Andrist, 2007; Duncan, et al., 2010).

The most important factors affecting parent participation are on one hand that parents realize they can contribute to their children's development, and on the other hand that practitioners make parents feel welcomed at school (Smith et al., 2013). The primary motivation for parents to become involved appears to be a belief that their actions will improve their children's learning and wellbeing. In addition parents are involved more if they perceive that school staff and students both want and expect their involvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In order to build a strong relationship and not just any relationship with parents, practitioners should have a clear plan about it, and assign roles to adults and children (Guerra & Luciano, 2009). Practitioners should also make positive connections with parents and provide a variety of activities and opportunities to fully engage parents. Schools must also sustain parent engagement by keeping parents engaged (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

## 3.2 Roundup considerations

All in all, it is apparent that authentic, meaningful and respectful parent participation does not shape itself. It requires continued attention and it appeals strongly upon professionals who need to invest in this. It requires work, pedagogical support and instruments (like documentation), initial and on-the-job training, competence development and supportive policies (Guerra and Luciano, 2014).

Conclusively, with all its different goals, models and underlying values and meanings, it should be clear that there is no real and valid definition to be found for 'parent participation'. What we do know is that it is about as a reciprocal process where practitioners, parents, children and the community work together, engage in respectful dialogue and defining certain goals in common. These commonly agreed goals may refer to several different issues at stake and may be less or more ambitious, e.g. getting to know and understand each other better, improving exchange of information both ways, guaranteeing and improving children's well-being, improving quality in ECEC, etc. The essential point of democratic and meaningful participation, remaining that all parties can freely contribute into how this process will take shape and how, if any, the goals will be defined.

# Parent participation in ECEC in Europe

In the field practice, there is a significant variety among the parent participation activities implemented in different territories or countries, based on different approaches and differences in culture, curricula or laws. The EQUAP project aims at demonstrating parent participation practices across Europe. The seven European country-partners of the EQUAP project have provided basic information about parent participation in their countries, as it stands now in policy and practice<sup>8</sup>. A short review of these policies and practices is given here.

## 4.1 Greece

It was already reported that the Greek ECEC is a split system with a clear distinction between nurseries (0-2.5 years) or preschools (2.5-5 years) and kindergartens (4-6 years). Kindergartens are considered as integral part of Greek Primary Education (up to 12 years). ECEC in Greece is offered: a) in public & private kindergartens under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, b) In public and private nurseries and preschools under the supervision of municipalities. Children may attend kindergartens at the age of four, attendance however, is compulsory only for children at the age of five years. An all-day preschool program operates in parallel to the ordinary kindergarten program with a broadened daily schedule. According to the Law 2525/199, the aim of all-day kindergarten is to support working parents and reinforce the role of state care in order to eliminate any educational or social discrimination (Eurydice, 1/3/16).

Parent participation in Greece ECEC was not established for a long time. Only in 2006, the Greek Ministry of Education published official policy papers regarding the value of parent participation. The policies related to parent participation along with the forms of teacher-parent cooperation are described in three official documents: The Kindergarten Teacher's Guide (Dafermou, Koulouri, & Basagianni, 2006), the Parent's Guide (Vrinioti, Kiridis, Sivropoulou-Theodoriadou, & Hrisafidis, 2008) and the All-day Kindergarten Guide (Aleuriadou, Vrinioti, Kiridis, Sivropoulou-Theodoriadou, & Hrisafidis, 2008). These three documents apart of providing instructions about the implementation of the curriculum, they also provide to practitioners generic guidelines about engaging parents in their children's education. All three documents acknowledge parents as major contributors to their children's development and progress.

Based on the above three official documents practitioners should make sure that they follow some of the recommended practices in order to involve parents. Recommendations for enhancing parent participation are based on practices such as: a) scheduled group meetings with parents of an entire class, b) scheduled individual meetings with parents in order to discuss specific problems, c) seminars by experts in order to inform parents about several

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<sup>8</sup> See also the equap website

scientific topics regarding their children's development, d) parents' groups (workshops) discussing educational issues e) a few-minute communication when parents during arrival and departure times, f) use of noticeboards located at the school entrance with written advices and notes concerning child development, guidelines for practices that can be implemented at home, or even information about practices taking place in school, g) phone communication, h) communication diary carried in students' school bag, i) participation in procedures related with school projects, innovative programs, visits, excursions, j) parents' council, in order to contribute to the school function, k) voluntary parental work in schools or for school. Although, there are many ways that parents can participate in their children's education, there is no official state program regarding the modes and methods of family-school communication and participation.

Research findings show that parent participation in Greek ECEC is not very well established and provide low quality of communication (Manolitsis, 2004; Papandreou, 2009; Papandreou, Birbili, & Martidou, 2009; Rekalidou & Penderi, 2010; Rentzou, 2011). Manolitsis (2004) examined the frequency and structure of parent participation in Greece and concluded that the most common types of parent participation were activities taking place outside schools, for example at home. Communication between parents and practitioners did not appear to be very frequent. Studies showed that the most frequent way of communication between practitioners and parents occurs during arrival and departure times (Sakellariou & Rentzou, 2007; Rekalidou & Penderi, 2010). Sakellariou and Rentzou (2007) argued that practitioners did not usually motivate parents for a closer collaboration. Though parents are unlikely to be involved in their children's education, studies revealed that when practitioners motivate them they are eager to get involved actively (Papandreou, 2009; Sakellariou, 2008). Practitioners seem to initiate communication with parents mainly to inform them about the curriculum or scheduled events, or when learning disabilities and behavioral problems are detected. Usually they are reluctant to collaborate with parents, probably because they think that parents may involve in their pedagogical work in an appropriate manner (Papandreou, Birbili, & Martidou, 2009; Rentzou, 2011).

The quality indicators of parent participation in Greece were extracted by limited research findings and based mainly on some official reports. They can be categorized at a three-level frame. At the lower level, parents are able to participate mainly by being informed. Practitioners provide notes, encourage parents to be involved in the program of preschool or attend a class, while the program is running, communicate informally when the child arrives or leaves preschool. At the good level, parents are more actively involved. They are very well informed about the educational procedures, they are usually invited to participate in school activities, and have the opportunity to observe the group in which their child will be enrolled. Practitioners also make sure that there is a specific space for parents in school, and prepare scheduled individual meetings with parents throughout the academic year. At the excellent level, parents are part of the school system. They participate in the evaluation of the school

program (interviews, questionnaire for parents etc.) or/and they can be members of the school board. They are also informed by written notes about their children's academic achievements, have access in their portfolios, and participate in workshops offered by experts or the practitioners in the school.

## 4.2 Portugal

The Framework Law of Pre-school education (Law no. 5/97, 10<sup>th</sup> February), defines ECEC as the first step in the educational system. It also recognizes it as a complement of parents' role in their children's education. Preschool education is an optional cycle for children from 3-5 year-olds, but from the school year of 2016/17 on, the universality of preschool education is recognized for children from 4-6 year olds (Law no. 65/2015, 3<sup>rd</sup> July). There is a public and a private network of early childhood education institutions, which are complementary. The Public network is composed of education institutions under the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labor, Solidarity and Social Security. The private network is composed of for-profit and non-profit education institutions. Those are private and cooperative education institutions, in the first case, and private institutions for social solidarity (IPSS), in the second case. All these organizations providing educational services in Portuguese ECEC from 3-5 years old remain under the tutelage of the Ministry of Education; Educational "services" to children under 3 years old is due by the Ministry of Labor, Solidarity and Social Security.

In Portugal, parent participation was legalized in 1986, almost a decade after the end of the dictatorship period. The most common way of (collective) participation was 'parents' associations,' which were incorporated in school management. It has been seen over the past decades

the emergence and growth of various forms of participation of families in preschool education. The individual or collective partnership with families, have shown the importance for educators to meet the different social and cultural backgrounds of the children and their contexts, when planning their educational action.

Until now parent participation in Portugal could be characterized as legalized, but lacking of a clear national implementation strategy and official guidelines. In 2016 the 'pre-school curriculum orientations' (Ministry of Education, 2016)—REFERENCE: Dispatch n<sup>o</sup> 9180/2016 of 19 July might be considered as the legal regulations for parent participation in Portugal ECEC. These norms and regulations for the intervention of early childhood educators emphasize the importance of professionals to potentiate the family involvement in ECEC, also present some considerations on how to do so. Focus the importance of the relationship that the educator establishes with each family, considering that both are co-educators of the same child; the communication is vital and it has to take place through informal exchanges (oral or written) or at planned times (meetings with each family).



These “Preschool curriculum orientations” present some strategies that potentiate all parents/families participation in educational dynamics (for example, inviting parents to take part in preschool activities or informing them about the achievements of their children) and in collective organizational relationship of the educational establishment (for example, the creation of parents associations and their participation in the educational project).

The relevance of the partnership, individual and collective, with families, is also given in the sense of facilitating the transition of children from family environment to crèche, to start preschool education, for other educational contexts and also for primary education.

Recently, scientific research along with ‘good practices’ and parent participation projects has contributed in establishing effective strategies towards an active parent participation. Several research practices and studies developed in Portugal have addressed quite successfully different dimensions of the parent participation in school life. New research topics have emerged around the relation between family and school; some of them focusing in the importance of putting the child's point of view as the central perspective in an effective participation of the child and not reducing participation to the action of childhood educators and families.

### 4.3 Belgium - Flemish community

The Flemish system of ECEC is a split system with a clear distinction between childcare<sup>9</sup> (0-2.5/3 y) and kindergarten or pre-school (2.5/3y - 6y). There are many differences between these two sectors<sup>10</sup>, but worth mentioning here is that in the childcare sector, parent participation has begun to be a more important part of the work than in the pre-school sector.

#### **Child care**

Parent participation is considered to be quite important in Flemish Community childcare provision. It is most often viewed as ‘a process of building trust, dialogue, reciprocity and action’. Parent participation has been developed in practice and has been legally embedded since 2014 (decree of 20/04/2012 into force as of 01/04/2014, art. 3 and 6). In order to get their license all childcare provisions are legally obligated to involve parents. The decree gives some minimal conditions that childcare services need to implement towards parents: An obligation to evaluate the satisfaction and the work in the childcare, regular concertation and communication on the pedagogical approach, the work with the child and in case of problems with the child, any decision of the licensing authority and access for parents to all the places where the child is being cared for. Parents also have the right to complain, ask and learn about the pedagogical process.

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<sup>9</sup> Childcare is provided in group settings (crèches) or with accredited childminders at home.

<sup>10</sup> Different ministries, different qualifications, different working conditions, different adult/child ratio, different safety, hygiene and other regulations, different image....

In Flemish childcare, there is also a pedagogical framework, according to which parents are considered as 'partners by excellence'. Parent participation is considered a high-quality indicator here, and practitioners invest on building strong relationships with parents. The idea is to meet regularly with parents exchanging information about the children, discussing pedagogical issues, and ideas in order to collaborate and shape their children's care and education together. Childcare is not replacing or compensating the education at home, it is adding another educational context to it.

The basic principles are:

- The belief in the family's competence and strength: parents all want the best for their children. ECEC practitioners need to recognize this, be sensitive and consider parents as the first educator.
- Reciprocal relationships: education at home differs from the one in ECEC. That is no problem if practitioners invest in a reciprocal relationship with parents on this education. This means engaging in an ongoing process of being attentive and having consideration for each other's feelings, experiences and meaning-making. Only when parents feel respected, safe and recognised as parent, only when open and honest communication is possible, childcare can be meaningful for all (child, practitioner, parent).
- Childcare is a meeting place: meeting parents of other children can be very valuable and supportive. Parents can exchange views, ideas and experiences on raising young children within an informal setting. This way they can offer each other information but also emotional and social support in parenting, outside the professional context of family support.

Professionals do not only work with and for the children, but the framework also appeals to their responsibilities towards parents:

- Shape children's education together: ECEC respects the education at home and continues this in within a continuous dialogue with the parents, both mothers and fathers. In this way they can learn and understand the social, economic, cultural and pedagogical context of the home environment of the children and use this in the childcare work. Childcare professionals need to relate to them with consideration and respect for their values and beliefs. The parent's feelings and ideas on education can be 'translated' in childcare, but this does not mean that every parent's ideas should be followed blindly. The ECEC providers also have a vision on how to relate to children and the issue is to keep communicating about that.
- Broaden the educational scope of home/family: in ECEC settings children can expand their horizon and meet the outside world, other adults and peers, living in

a larger group, experiencing other ways of play, other languages...This way the learn about the other, and so do their parents.

- Facilitate participation in society: thanks to ECEC, parents can engage in other things as well, such as work, training, higher education and they can better combine their family life and their work or other activities they want to engage in. ECEC should be flexible enough to support this participation in society.
- Recognize and support connectedness: parents do not only meet professionals in ECEC, they also meet other parents and families. These contacts can offer information, support and a sense of being connected. ECEC can facilitate this meeting aspect, by which they also foster integration, exchange of ideas on education and mutual recognition.

However, we should also mention that these policy documents are rather recent (decree and pedagogical framework both 2014), and is not yet completely or regularly implemented in all childcare centers. Additional efforts, such as pedagogical coaching and support and self-evaluation instruments, are in place to improve the practice on the field.

### **Pre-school**

In Kindergarten practice (pre-primary education, ages 2,5-6y) less attention is paid to the many different forms of parent participation. However, since 2004, all schools have the obligation to involve parents and create a participatory environment. The most common way of participation is through school boards. Every school has to have a council consisting of parents and staff. The members of the council have the right to be informed about issues related to school and the right to be heard as well. A specific parents' council is optional and is being created only when at least 10% of the parents request it. There is also a parent delegation in the Flemish Education Council (VLOR), which is an overall advisory council for the Flemish government.

In many pre-schools, parental involvement is not a mainstream practice yet. A recent study by Van Laere (Van Laere et al., 2017, forthcoming) describes e.g. what parents had to say in focus groups on how they experience pre-school and what pre-school education means to them. Some of the results show that they are quite interested in what happens in pre-school classes but that they have little knowledge of that. There is also quite some uncertainty about how their children are being cared for and supported in their education (and the differences with the home environment), about the lack of information and communication, about attitudes of the practitioners etc. All in all, they seem to be in a rather subordinate position in their relation to both staff and the school as an institution, which makes it hard for them to really be partners in their children's education.

### **Inspiring practices**

In the document on the Flemish Community two ‘good practice examples’ were introduced. The first concerns the city policy of childcare in Ghent, where parent participation is present throughout the educational process. According to that policy, four groups are for the main actors in developing a high-quality childcare setting: children, parents, staff and community. Every parent is welcomed and treated with respect for diversity. There is special attention for families living in more vulnerable conditions (poverty, migration, single parents, low educational level etc.). Practically, parents take part in the activities, join scheduled meetings, volunteer at school, organize festivities together etc. Practice has shown that, when efforts are made by the childcare centers, all parents can be involved, including those who are considered ‘not to be interested’.

The second example concerns an EQuaP partner, Elmer, a community-based childcare with four centers in different areas of the capital. As in Ghent, also Elmer’s childcare policy acknowledges the four key players for a successful educational process: children, parents, staff and community. Elmer’s childcare is based on principles of respect for diversity and the belief that everyone should feel a sense of belonging. Every family is welcomed, included vulnerable families, and all are treated with care and respect. Parent participation is evident in daily practice and parents get actively involved, not only in different activities but also in policy development of Elmer. Elmer’s childcare approach for parent participation is considered to have also inspired other Flemish childcare services.

As it regards quality indicators in ECEC for parent participation in the Flemish community in Belgium, the document offers some general points of attention and questions to ask rather than a list of criteria to be checked. Indicatively, at the beginning of the school year or at the start of attending childcare, practitioners need to make all parents feeling welcomed, and create a climate of trust. During the school year or childcare years, parent participation shall go beyond a set of participation activities. Conditions shall be created allowing everyone to take part in their own way. Through ongoing dialogue, professionals and parents need to find their role in the pedagogical process and discover what ways work for them. Not all parents are willing or able to participate in the same way. Thus, in order all parents to be able to join in, a variety of activities shall be provided. Pedagogical documentation is mentioned in childcare as a positive tool for parent participation, to get the dialogue going, and by which parents and practitioners can discuss childcare issues as equals and actually parents give very important information to practitioners, so that practitioners can get to know and understand the children better.

## 4.4 Latvia

In Latvia, ECEC lasts one-year more compared to other European countries as children first attend primary education at the age of seven. The attendance is compulsory for children 5-7 years and can also be provided by families (homeschooling). Families educating their children at home may receive support at consultative centers. ECEC for children with special needs is

implemented in special early childhood educational establishments and groups. Due to the small number of places in public ECEC institutions, play centers can be either private, or public, and function as alternatives to pre-school education institutions. The main purpose of these centers is to provide child services for working parents, but they are obliged also to provide education activities for children.

In Latvia, the Education Law (Izglītībaslikums, 1999) recognizes that in order to promote quality in education, parents and society shall be parts of the educational process. The Ministry of Education and Science is in charge of developing state guidelines for ECEC and also patterns of appropriate educational programs based on play as a leading activity (Noteikumi par valstspirmsskolasizglītības vadlīnijām, 2012). Programs are developed based on a holistic approach, where children, staff, parents and community are considered as parts of a successful educational process. There are several programs elaborated in the Republic of Latvia, such as the program of preschool education till the age of 6, the special education program for preschools, the programs for minorities till the age of 6, where the Russian and Polish language are taught, the integrated preschool program for 6-year olds, and the integrated preschool program for minorities.

Parent participation in Latvia is defined as the collaboration between practitioners and parents for example through meetings, participation in activities, or donations to ECEC units. Although Latvia could be considered at an early stage of parent participation practices there are 'good practices' examples, which demonstrate that parents can actively participate in ECEC, some of these practices are following:

- "Parent Association of Latvia" was founded in 2011 and its mission is to provide parents opportunities to involve for the improvement of the ECEC environment. The association implements a project on parent education and helps organizing the European Parent Association (EPA) conference.
- "Parent Forum of Latvia" took place in Riga on May 2012 with representatives from 130 parent organizations, school board members and parents from all over Latvia. The main goal of the Forum was to give voice to parents, exchange ideas, and put forward proposals to several Ministries about strengthening the role of parents and develop a model of collaboration.
- "Open parents" is an organization that unites three Baltic parent associations (Parent association of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania) in order to educate parents and enhance their collaboration with educational institutes.
- "Friendly school" is a movement initiated by children's rights protection institution in order to build honest and mutual relationships among parents, practitioners, children and school administrators. Another goal is to find ways to prevent violence in ECEC units.

- “Program for children development” is a program implemented in the primary school of Zakumuizaa inspiring to help children becoming useful member of the society. Parents and practitioners work together having agreed on five vital characteristics that their children shall develop.

In general, the most frequent parent participation activities in Latvia ECEC are parents’ boards, meetings with practitioners & administrators, and participation in joint activities for children & parents such as workshops, excursions, celebrations etc. Parent participation in Latvia is at a developmental level and for this reason quality indicators cannot be presented. Though, based on the criteria for practitioners’ evaluation, preschool practitioners are considered that cooperate effectively with parents when she/he:

- Inform parents about the everyday achievements of their children.
- Inform parents about fees on time.
- Inform parents about the activities that take place in school.
- Provide opportunities to children and parents to develop educational materials.
- Organize individual meetings with parents in order to discuss issues that come up with their children.
- Invite parents to take part in preschool activities.
- Organize events and involve families in them.
- Allow parents to join the educational process and share valuable information with children.
- Organize workshops and share their experience with parents.

## 4.5 Slovenia

In Slovenia, ECEC is the same for all children from the age of one to six, and is an integral part of the education system. Since 1993, it has been under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, which ensures continuity from pre-school to basic school education. The state is responsible for the national policy, the legislative framework and the general program of ECEC. Municipalities establish kindergartens and are responsible for the implementation of the ECEC programs. They must provide places for all children or make call for a concession. ECEC education is provided separately for two age groups, 1-3 years and 3-6 years. Also, in response to parents’ and children’s needs and upon agreement with the local municipality, ECEC units can offer different programs, such as full-day, half-day or even shorter ones.

In Slovenia parent participation was in place in the ECEC program but is officially mentioned in 1999 (Bahovec et al., 1999) in Preschool Curriculum, a document that refers to several objectives of ECEC. One of them is: the cooperation with parents, and the improvement of information for parents. Cooperation is defined as the obligation of the ECEC units to follow several practices such as: provide parents with written and oral information, prepare individual meetings between practitioners and parents, prepare meetings with other scientists, give parents the right to participate in planning the function of a preschool (Lepičnik &

Vodopivec, 2010). Cooperation is considered as an important aspect of the provided quality in Slovenian ECEC. According to Preschool Institutions Act (Zakon o vrtcih, uradnoprečiščeno besedilo (ZVrt-UPB2), Ur. l. RS, št. 100/2005), ECEC units have to list forms and programs of cooperation with families, when they make their year plan. It is also worth pointing out that parents have the right to participate in the planning of the ECEC units' operation, or of the actual educational work while respecting preschool practitioners' and preschool's autonomy.

In Slovenia there are three levels of quality in ECEC. Taking into account systemic and conceptual solutions in Slovenian preschools, based on research findings on individual quality indicators and on the basis of already designed models and approaches for determining quality in other countries, Slovenian authors have developed three basic levels of quality in preschools, and within each level additional domains and indicators of quality in preschools (Marjanovič Umek et al., 2002). The first level is the structural/contextual level, the second is the process level and the third is the indirect level. Indirect level refers to all those informal opportunities and relationships in which ECEC education takes place. In this case a child is not directly involved, but is indirectly affected. Cooperation between parents and practitioners is such a relationship. There are three quality indicators on cooperation with parents: formal forms of cooperation (meetings with parents, lectures for parents, written information for parents, participation in several events, parents' council), informal forms of cooperation (unplanned conversation between parents and practitioners when the child arrives or leaves school, excursions, workshops) and active involvement of parents (parent participation in the school operation, problem solving) (Marjanovič, et al., 2002).

In order to get an insight of some examples for the three above forms, 35 schools from Slovenia were invited to present their 'good practices' about parent participation. The following forms of practices were presented:

- I. Formal forms of cooperation: a) individual meetings with parents about their children development, b) parental meetings where parents are informed about the program, c) written materials and messages for parents about several issues, d) parents' council and e) working meetings of representatives of preschool's council
- II. Informal forms of cooperation: a) creative activities with children and parents, b) workshops for parents in order to discuss several issues, c) picnics, d) sport events with children and parents, e) trips and excursions, f) various final meetings-presentations from children to their parents
- III. Active involvement: a) parents spend a day with their children in preschool in order to present their profession, present games from the past, cook etc., b) parents cooperate with practitioners in order to plan activities for the whole year or evaluate activities at the end of the year.

Examples of good practice, addressing migrant families, families with a minority background, socio-economically (SE) disadvantaged families etc. in its objectives, content, or diversities of modes of implementation of activities are not very common, but they could be detected among examples, that we have received. In most cases, preschool practitioners have pointed out that they do not have children from families with a migrant/minority background or from a SE disadvantaged family in their group of children. Those practitioners who have those children/families included in their group, and recognize the need to adapt forms of cooperation according to families' needs, first try to achieve that these families attend events that are planned and (at first, as passive participants). When they achieve this, preschool practitioners provide all necessary material for a certain activity (in order not to make family's financial burden even greater) or choose such an activity in which families can use waste/natural material. When organizing different events, practitioners offer different ways for parent/parent participation: investment of their time (preparation/cleaning) rather than providing financial, material resources. Or, for example, arrange meetings/events, which primary purpose is to help families in need (donations, rent or exchange).

Quality indicators of parent participation in Slovenia were presented in an extended article and it is beyond the purposes of the present review to present all of them. Quality indicators are presented according to ISSA (International Step by Step Association), which serves as learning community and a champion for quality and equity for all children and their families, and of which Slovenian partner is a member. Quality indicators about parent participation, as developed by ISSA, and endorsed and implemented by Slovenian partner in (pre-) schools with which the partners cooperate, are the following:

- Knowledge and appreciation of families and communities strengthen relationships with and among them.
- Sensitive, respectful and reciprocal communication with families supports children's development and learning.
- Services are best provided in partnerships with families.
- Inclusion provides equal opportunities for every child and family to participate.
- Inclusion is promoted through partnerships with families.

(Source: <http://issa.nl/content/quality-framework-birth-three-services>)

- The educator invites and welcomes family members into the classroom and finds ways for all families to participate in the educational process and life of the learning community.
- The educator involves family members in shared decision-making about their children's learning, development, and social life in the classroom.
- The educator involves family members in decision-making concerning children's learning environments.



- The educator regularly communicates with families about their children, their learning and development, curriculum requirements, and the events in the classroom.
- The educator regularly communicates with families to learn about a child's background in order to gain insights on the child's strengths, interests, and needs.
- The educator promotes opportunities for families to learn from one another and to support each other.
- The educator uses knowledge of children's communities and families as an integral part of the curriculum and their learning experiences.
- The educator offers information and ideas for parents and family members on how to create a stimulating home learning environment and helps to strengthen parent competences.
- The educator treats every family with respect, dignity, and consideration and finds ways to involve them in their child's education.
- The educator and family members share information regarding children's progress and interests and together create short-term and long-term individual goals.

(Source: <http://www.issa.nl/sites/default/files/Quality-Principles-final-WEB.pdf>)

## 4.6 Italy

In Italy the existing system of ECEC is characterized as a "split" system providing services for preschool (0-3 years) and kindergarten (3-6 years). It is worth mentioning that in the recent years the continuity of the learning process from 3 to 14 years is widely discussed.

Municipalities or private initiatives supervise the services provided for children between 0-3 years. According to the latest report of the European Commission, Italy has a low percentage of children's attendance in preschool services (26%). It is also remarkable that in fact, there is not a formal curriculum, but only some general guidelines and targets. Parent participation was initially mentioned in the National Law in 1971, where nurseries were officially established with the aim of providing a temporary safekeeping of children and assist families. Nurseries are the first institutions that care and protect children after the family. According to the above Law, families, representatives of social groups and practitioners operate the nurseries together. Nowadays, nursery schools are recognized as places of education and learning for young children. There is an explicit reference to the participation of families, where nurseries shall provide many opportunities to parents to engage in their schedule.

On the other hand, children attending kindergartens (3-6 years) have reached the percentage of 95%. Kindergartens are supervised by the Ministry of Education, University and Research. In some municipalities of Italy, there are 0-6 years services, characterized by a pedagogical consistency and continuity. A formal curriculum is provided for the segment 3-6 that formalizes the aims of ECEC. Moreover, and suggests specific educational methods. Parent participation has been legally introduced in 1973, but had been limited at the concept of representation,

failing to provide sufficient results. Since the 90s new laws have been implemented and parent participation is encouraged in many ways and is also considered necessary for the educational process.

In 2014, the bill n. 1260/2014 mentioned that there is a need for educational continuity between nursery and preschool and also there is a need for parents to actively participate. On March 2015, the above law was reorganized in order to regulate the autonomy of educational institutions and provide schools the necessary resources and tools to achieve their educational and organizational choices.

The evolution of research in Italy regarding ECEC led gradually to consider preschool institutions as very important places of education and welfare and not as places providing only care. In Italy, the ecological approach of Bronfenbrenner (1979) has deeply influenced the way of seeing parent participation in education. The child is considered as an entity that is influenced by the interconnections between multiple environmental situations. ECEC and family are two very important environments for the child and they have to cooperate to help child development. The emphasis of the relation between practitioners and children has been transferred to practitioners and parents, so adults share the care for the child (Bonomi, 1998; Guerra, Luciano, 2009). Today, in the Italian scientific literature, parent participation is considered as an indicator of quality in education (Bondioli, Mantovani, 1997; Cagliari, 2014; CNEL, 2010; Milani, 2008; New & Bove, 2009). Milani (2008) showed that in Italy, there is a model of parent participation that offers information, content, and respect to each individual. Parents are given the opportunity to educate themselves and use these skills thoughtfully.

Nowadays, in Italy there are some ECEC practices, which are considered as successful in giving opportunities to parents to collaborate, discuss and share with practitioners. Such practices are:

- a) A conversation between parents and practitioners mostly at the beginning of the year, where very important information are exchanged from parents to practitioners
- b) Settling in. It is the time and space of transition from family to the educational institution. This is a fragile period for both parents and children and has to be handled with care. Settling in, includes all that time, moments, space, piece of advice given from practitioners to parents, to help their children adjust as good as possible,
- c) Arrival & Departure. All those moments and short discussions taking place during the arrival and departure time between parents and practitioners. Although short conversations, they are very important in exchanging information about children's daily routines. Practitioners accompany whoever comes and leaves the school with particular attention.
- d) Individual conversations throughout the academic year. Conversations between parents and teacher about several issues concerning the child. Parents and practitioners exchange information in order to solve problems and follow together a common strategy.

e) Parents-educators get together. Meetings with experts, classroom meetings, parties, excursions, workshops etc. enhance parent participation in ECEC and help parents feel welcomed and part of educational process. One should also add the “pedagogical documentation” as a strategy supporting parent participation. Practitioners have the authority and families cooperate with them as partners in a dialogue. Children and families can express their opinion, propose ideas and solutions, ask questions and provide feedback.

## 4.7 Sweden

In Sweden ECEC begins at the first year of a child’s age and lasts until the 7<sup>th</sup> year. The Swedish Parliament and the Government set out the goals and guidelines for ECEC and primary school through the Education Act and the Curricula. ECEC is regulated in [the Education Act](#) but have two different curricula. ECEC has had its own curriculum since 1998 (revised in 2010), and the preprimary class is incorporated in the school system. The compulsory school and the preprimary class, as well as the leisure-time centers share a common curriculum (Läroplanförgrundskolan, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet, 2011). The preprimary class is a voluntary type of school within the public school system. The activities in preprimary classes should be considered as teaching in the same sense as in other types of school. Leisure time centers are educational group facilities, operating during the times of the day when schools are closed for enrolled children, for children whose parents are working or studying or for children who have their own needs of the facilities. Generally leisure time centers are integrated within schools. Leisure-time centers are aimed at children up to 12 years old who attend school.

## Conclusions of the EQUAP partner review

After the above presented research findings, guidelines given by national and official organizations and good practices provided by the 7 European country-members of the EQUAP project, some valuable conclusions could be drawn. These conclusions may offer a fertile ground for further discussion and development of new strategies towards increasing parent participation in ECEC at a European level.

- Most important, parent participation is officially recognized as a quality indicator in ECEC both by the Equap partners and in relevant documents (Epstein, 1995; European Commission-Directorate-General for education and culture, May, 2001; European Parliament and the council to member states, 2001/166/EC; OECD, 2012; Sayed, 2015). Education programs that include parents are the most effective ones, and research findings indicate that parent participation even at a minimum level can positively influence children’s academic achievements (Smith, et al, 2012; Westemoreland et al, 2009). Parent participation also shapes the ways in which professionals and parents together establish co-educating partnerships; an alliance that benefits all involved parties. Educational laws and curriculums in all 7 countries participating in the EQUAP project identify parent participation as a significant factor that practitioners and the community have to take into account.

- Most of the 7 countries participating in the EQUAP project (Greece, Portugal, Flemish community of Belgium, Italy, and Sweden) have a split ECEC system with a clear division between the ages of 1y-3/4 y and 3/4-6 y. Latvia and Slovenia have an integrated ECEC-systems for all children ages 1 to 6. In the countries with split ECEC, different parent participation practices are implemented for these two groups. In Greece, Portugal, and Italy there is an increasing interest for parent participation mostly in kindergartens, concerning the ages 3/4-6. On the contrary, in the Flemish community of Belgium there is more attention paid in parent participation in the childcare sectors (ages 0 – 2,5/3y), while parents are far less involved in pre-school practice (2,5/3 - 6y). In Latvia and Slovenia parent participation practices are implemented for all ages from 0 to 6. The forms of inviting parents to participate are general, but implementation depends on each teacher and the group of parents.
- Although curricula and educational laws in all 7 countries promote parent participation in ECEC, it seems that in practice most of the countries admit that parent participation is not equally well established throughout the whole ECEC sector. The Flemish community of Belgium, Latvia and Slovenia seem to be more confident about their parent participation practices. Even though formal and informal ways of participation are implemented in all seven countries, further attempts are needed in order to enhance and deepen actions and strategies parent participation. Also, the debate on the importance and meaning of parent participation needs to be upgraded.
- The most frequent formal way of participation is the participation of family members in school boards or councils, where parents can take part in decisions concerning school management or can give their advice. It seems that all seven countries give parents this opportunity. Latvia also demonstrated many organizations for Latvian parents, so that parents are not only informed about several pedagogical issues, but also have the right to make decisions. Italy also mentioned a way of parent participation, albeit not all that formal. Practitioners and parents discuss several issues, parents express their opinion, they have a voice and they decide together with practitioners. They discuss managerial or pedagogical issues at an equal level. Latvia and Italy usually follow parent participation practices that are consistent with national organizations' guidelines for parent participation.
- Overall, it does seem that the more informal ways of participation are most frequently implemented in ECEC. Greece, the Flemish community, Latvia, Slovenia and Italy demonstrated activities with parents such as: scheduled or circumstantial meetings with parents, communication with parents during arrival and departure time, meetings with professionals about several issues, voluntary work of parents, parent's participation in several activities taking place in preschool, excursions, parties etc. All these informal ways are very important in order to make parents feel comfortable and welcomed at school (Van Avermaet et al, 2013). Especially the Flemish community of Belgium has demonstrated two "good practice" examples of parent participation in ECEC in the city of Ghent and Elmer.

According to their educational policies, parents are involved in many informal ways and become part of the educational process. These practices described by the Flemish community of Belgium are consistent with either current legislation or the pedagogical framework for childcare on parent participation.

- Having said this, it is not the formal or informal character of participation models that will define its meaningfulness or democratic value. This distinction may not be so relevant as formal participation models can still be quite powerless or not involving all groups of parents, while informal models can really influence and change the practice in an ECEC setting.
- Greece and Slovenia have demonstrated quality indicators for parent participation and both concluded that they are organized at 3 levels. Slovenia, as mentioned before, has presented quality indicators according to ISSA (International Step by Step Association), and Greece provided quality indicators based partially on the limited research findings and mainly on international scientific findings and/or policies. A general conclusion of this distinction could be that: At a minimum/informal level, parents are being informed about the school program, join informal conversations etc. At a good/formal level, parents take part in school activities, attend school meetings and workshops etc., and in an excellent/active involvement level, parents are members of the school boards, they have a voice and decide together with practitioners about managerial issues.

## Implications and further debate

According to the research findings presented in this review and the data provided by the seven country-members of the EQuaP project, meaningful parent participation in ECEC should be promoted and further developed. Not only because of the long-term effects that it has for children's academic, social and emotional development (Barbour et al., 2012; Lindeboom & Buiskool, 2013) but also because it shapes the educational partnerships between professionals and parents, the latter being the first educators. Processes of reciprocal and respectful dialogue and working on co-educating together can come in many different shapes and forms. The challenge lies in the continuous search for the most appropriate ways, for every child's parents to be able and willing to participate in their children's education in a meaningful way. It is also important to give opportunities for participation to all families, according to their needs and regardless their different backgrounds or needs. As societies and families are changing and becoming more and more diverse, because of social, economic and political changes around the world, ECEC practitioners have to be ready, by training and sufficient support throughout, to meet all these challenges and continue to provide equal opportunities for children and their families (OECD, 2012). Different participative actions and strategies need to be designed in a dialogue setting, in which parents are considered to be partners of ECEC practitioners.



# Towards a typology of practices of participation between families and early childhood educational services

Elena Luciano and Massimo Marcuccio

## 1. Why a type of participation practices?

The construction of the quality of educational services for young children is an ongoing process that requires the contribution of several subjects on multiple dimensions. Families and service are two of the key players in this process.

Reflection on how to conceive the family contribution to the process of building the quality of educational services is a first step in this direction. Many are already experiences, even with established forms of relationship, involvement and participation of families. Our aim, in this paper, is to build a theoretical framework that can serve as a flexible map to navigate the experiences and, at the same time, by instrument "generator" of other possible forms of cooperation / participation between families and services. Not only that, it also aims to help identify possible paths for the "promotion" of participation.

This work requires a course of abstract type / theorist who goes through two phases: first, the development of a definition of participation; secondly, the construction of a typology of forms of participation of the families to the service. The latter must be designed with a dual function: a) descriptive, namely that attempts to describe what already exists; b) generative / heuristic, which aims to promote the identification of new forms of participation.

It has to clarify that the proposal advanced here - like all such proposals - born theoretical choices and methodological details and that, therefore, the type to be developed should be interpreted as "temporary" and is liable to future adjustments in the short, It is of fundamental shifts that may even lead to an overcoming it.

## 2. For a definition of participation

We assumed that the elaboration of a definition of participation can only refer to the concept of "relationship between families and child care services." This report exists and has value in the light of the fact that accommodate a small child in educational services and care for children today means to accommodate his parents and, in general, those who primarily takes care of him; This has a value today unanimously recognized, thanks to the studies in the ecology of

human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These studies have highlighted the reciprocal interaction between individual and environment and the influence that the ecological environment has on evolutionary processes, not only limited to a single environmental situation but extending to encompass both relations between different environmental situations both external influences that result from environmental conditions of a more general character (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Within the ECEC system, build a relationship with the families - not a report but any good relationship - the service requires a clear and conscious design of the report, which is the deliberate choice about the idea of relationship with families We want to develop, to the roles that you want to assign (to the child, the parent, educator) and the objectives you want to achieve through this report (War, Luciano, 2009).

We consider that the relationship with families in educational services for children may therefore orientate and brand themselves in different ways based on the perspectives through which we observe and analyze (Luciano Guerra, 2013).

If, on the one hand, the relationship between workers and families is based on processes to inform, listen, learn, communicate, on the other hand it seems that it could go further, to the participation, that is, to successfully carrying out the transition from 'act "to" families being, doing and decide "with" them, opening up possibilities for exchange and discussion, but especially powerful reciprocity. In this sense, the "notice", on the one hand, and "participation", on the other hand, could therefore be two different orientations - specific and deliberate - of the relationship between educational services and families, or two its special connotations, prospects, guidelines, any service can choose whether or not to develop through practical course consistent with that choice. As if to say that not all relationships with the families are always participatory, but can be, under certain conditions that will emerge in the type we go below to submit.

We take as a starting point to provide a definition of the term / concept "participation" some considerations taken from some vocabularies of the Italian language. In the first instance we try to give a definition of the concept in general and then to proceed with its bounding the specific field of interest. This type of procedure will allow us to delve more clearly in the phenomenon we are studying without "interference" early due to the specificity and complexity of the subject.

Another important prerequisite is to do. When we speak to propose a definition of what we want to talk in the language of the ancient logic was called the "essence" - nominal and insubstantial - participation, that the element of "specific" that distinguishes and differentiates the concept in question from other concepts. We believe that a term / concept can not exist a single definition: and then we talk about definition as an expression of "nominal essence" of the concept. However, our position differs from that which considers "definition" of a concept



any kind of answer to the question "what" ?. Consider that in the logic of Boethius, in line with this assumption, it is identified as many as 15 types of definition. To understand the peculiarities of our position, we take for example the definition of "participation" which is offered by Children in Europe and that we have here in four parts to carry out a more comprehensive analysis:

- '1. Services should embody participation as an essential value, as an expression of democracy and as a means to combat social exclusion.
2. Participation requires pedagogical Work That supports the development and upbringing of each child.
3. Participation means the active inclusion of the entire community: all young children and adults, including parents, professionals of all kinds working in services, and other citizens.
4. Participation enables all of these groups to contribute to the construction of a common project and to every aspect of the life of the service including helping in many ways and active involvement in management decisions and evaluation. "

Let's look at each of the four points of the definition.

1. First, it states that participation is a "core value". Also it is said that "participation" is "an expression of democracy": stands in such a way that participation is a "marker" of another concept which is to "democracy". At the same time it is said that "participation" is a "means" to combat social exclusion: in this way is made explicit its function. It answers the question: What is the participation? But in all this we can say that they have identified the "essence" even nominal participation? We can find an answer to the question: what is the specific element that distinguishes the concept of participation from other concepts? We think not. Why say that participation is a "core value" does not help us understand what is the "specific" participation because many other concepts can be called "essential values" such as, for example, the concept of care. Many other concepts can be defined as "an expression of democracy", and many other concepts can be considered as 'means' to combat social exclusion. So even if many other concepts - different from that of participation - can be told what has been said about the participation of what is "specific", that is "just" and "unique" that distinguishes the "concept of participation" from other concepts? In relation to this first point of the definition proposed by Children in Europe, it remains an open question of interpretation as players "should promote" participation are two: the services, on the one hand, and families on the other. If this statement answers the question, "Who participates? ", What is the answer to the question: "What you participate? ". In addition we are talking about "promotion" that is a different concept from that of "participation".

2. Affirming that participation "requires" a 'involvement in education, "there seems to move in terms of the response to the question: what are the conditions for participation will be? What are the factors that make possible participation? But again, do not answer the question: what is the "specific", l "'unique" in the concept of participation. Even if the word "requires" is interpreted as a synonym of the verb "to be", always we fall back on generic and not specifically the concept of participation. In fact, state that participation "is" a "involvement in education" - which aims to "support the development and education of each child" - does not tell us anything yet of "unique" than the concept of participation. It is certain elements that help define the scope of the semantic concept but fail to realize that the "heart" essential ".

3. Even with the phrase "Participation means the active inclusion of the entire community," we find ourselves in the same situation just described above. In fact, in this case, the focus shifts to the question: what are those involved in participation. But it does not answer the question: what is the element "unique" participation.

4. The first part of the last period of the "definition" of children in Europe answers the question: what is an effect, a result of participation? And in this case the answer is: "to contribute to building a common project and to every aspect of the life of the service." The moment you use the word "through" it is recognized that this objective is achieved through two activities: the "support" - in its various forms - and the "active involvement" in the processes of management, evaluation and decision of its own service. In this case two elements that seem to be emerging - in our opinion - go in the direction to answer the question: what is the unique example of the investment? In this case we can say that children in Europe to respond in this way: the participation is "two things": it is a "support" is an "active involvement".

Since the definition of children still leaves open certain aspects of the concept of participation, then we try to explain in an even more precise in what we intend to propose a definition of participation.

As we said above, the starting point is to assume that the common language of which we consider best expression formalized what we find in dictionaries. In this case we have assumed as a reference the maximum scientific contribution in respect with regard to the Italian language.

The definition of participation that we take as a reference is this: "Direct action of a person together with others to achieve a certain end" (p. 660). It is a definition that we believe - for the purpose of this contribution - captures the "core" of the specific concept. The component elements of this definition are the following:

- 1) the " direct action '(A): When you talk about "participation", therefore, we are talking about an action carried out "first hand", ie in a direct and unmediated by other elements;
- 2) the "person" (X) that performs direct action;

3) "other" (Y) that perform direct action. The concept of others indicates one or more other entities X;

4) the concept of "together": the action is carried out jointly (together) between "person" and "the others". In this sense, then, each person (X and Y) becomes a "part", became "part" active in the construction business;

5) the end (F) to be obtained by the action.

According to this definition the correct expression to use in connection with the participation should be as follows:

X together with Y perform A to reach F.

This is in a nutshell of "un'agire together between individuals to an end." So the expression "participation of families in the service" is not strictly correct because it should say "participation of families and service actions / activities" or "participation between families and service action / activity" meaning by this expression families (X), together with the service (Y), carry out a task / action (AD) to an end (F). But in this case the "families" are a special case of X and services are a particular case of Y.

The formal aspect of this definition should not scare us because thanks to it, in fact, we can find a way to contribute to the construction of a typology of forms of participation.

In this way it seems to us that the definition proposed by us will be able to locate one "specific" concept of participation that serves as a guide to our thinking. In the definition of Children in Europe, however, we find aspects and elements that help define / adequately define the individual elements of the definition as it is done in detail below.

### 3. Some conceptual boundaries:

When detailed situational participation in services for young children, is a need for a definition and / or delimitation of the conceptual elements that become part.

The idea of participation that characterizes our definition and our (proposed) type forms of participation is characterized by the following aspects:

- all those involved in various capacities in the services or entering into relationship with them can - in relation to our definition - take on the role of X or Y. Our definition of participation in early childhood services it is specific to different actors (children, figures / family members, workers, citizens all). Therefore;

- take into account the specific characteristics of the different actors / individuals (X and Y) and their shared responsibility for action. In particular, in relation to the fact that it is "natural persons individual" or "organizational subjects". Due to the characteristics of "organizational stakeholders", it sets out a participation in multiple dimensions and at different levels (political-institutional, pedagogical, educational, organizational, management), as is clear from the literature internationally (eg., CIE, 2008 ; OECD, 2001, 2006, 2012). The service is seen as an organization that is a health and education through an educational project and the educational choices that are placed inside a political horizon and management;
- refers to an "order" that can not be attributed only to the promotion of learning of the child that lives and grows in single family nor to the operations of the service attended by the child, but it is an idea of participation that moves in a horizon of meaning theoretical intentional wider, ie aimed at the development of the project of education and development of every child and all children;
- methodologically independent from recognizing the "value" and the "responsibility" of the different parties even if such an appearance, along with the strictly assembly of "legitimacy" are aspects that. In this case, the family is recognized as the main responsible of the child and his education but claims the right and the responsibility to shape the child;
- refers to the idea of family is not limited neither to the mother nor to a type of nuclear family, but rather extends to all members, regardless of the forms, manners and by the types of family, make up the specific family which every child belongs and in which lives and grows;
- the action that is carried along by X and Y is essentially any activity intentionally directed to the achievement of a fine (F), which is the educational development of the child;
- the concept of a set implies the existence of a dimension of communication between different actors (X and Y) that perform the action;
- the concept of action is understood here as "essentially" interconnected to a person (individual or collective, natural or legal): talk of action always involves talking to a person performing that action. In this sense, however, it should be noted that the action is here understood as a "something" that began in the subject, but that does not end "inside" the subject himself. In addition, the action is always intentional, that is directed toward a purpose / end, as stated in the definition of participation. For example, the thinking, the will, the feel and imagine, can be considered all actions that a person does but that does not necessarily have an event in the external world of the subject and that, moreover, do not necessarily imply a consequent movement body perceived by an outside observer. As the action of a person, the action can be articulated in different sizes and / or aspects which constitute it: a) the mental representation of the action within the subject; b) the attribution of value to the action (consent); c) the decision to implement the action; d) the implementation of the action, that is the

implementation of behavior (body movements) - consistent with the mental representation - that can achieve the desired objective;

- similarly, we must speak of "organizational action". In this case, we assume that an action organizational organization

The choice to focus only on the participation between families and services to the education of children is only methodological. This means that in order to offer a wider and more comprehensive range of forms of participation would be necessary to consider other actors and other family services and in the form of participation with more than two players involved or even with different actors. Despite these limitations, we believe that the debate took place here would be a significant conceptual basis for further development.

# The Focus Areas

The articulation of the concept of participation in four Focus Areas has been identified, circumscribed, negotiated and shared by the project partners who have co-constructed the Toolbox.

## Focus area 1: Learning about the family – Knowing and appreciating families and communities

The family is the key partner of all educational services with which educators are called to collaborate and act in synergy. This viewpoint refers to “The ecology of Human Development” by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), is a widespread perspective that focuses on the relationship between human development and the context in which it occurs. This theory emphasises that the process of interaction between two elements occurs during a long period of time and includes immediate surroundings, cultural patterns and bodies of knowledge.

Each growing individual is located at the centre of a **multitude of relationships**, which influence him/her and in turn are influenced by him/her. What becomes relevant in this theory, in terms of impact on development, are not only the individual situations experienced by the child in its various environments of life, from those closest to those more distant from its direct presence, but also the interconnections between these environments. The more the family and services are interconnected, the more the child’s experiences will be consistent and positive in terms of development outcomes.

A close **interaction between services and families**, as well as ensuring continuity of the child’s experiences, stimulates joint growth in terms of **awareness and educational intentionality**. The first fundamental step for building this essential interconnection between is mutual knowledge, in other words the ability to welcome, accept, and appreciate **diversity as a resource** for all. Educational and care services therefore plan different forms of relationships and meetings with families, aimed at fostering the exchange of information, dialogue, comparison, sharing of ideas, sharing of the educational project and involvement in the life of the services through reciprocity and inclusion of all the differences. It is important that the services adopt a plurality of languages and are careful to calibrate, as much as possible, the type of **approach according to the specific traits of each family**.

**Welcoming families, recognizing them in their different identities**, enabling them to collaborate on projects and initiatives, giving them the possibility to contribute in the planning and implementation of activities and events, and being really **open to include them**, allows those who work in the services to discover different aspects of the parents. This in turn **promotes parenting skills**, active citizenship and **builds new, unexpected and richer results**. At the same time it allows families to feel valued, active and co-protagonists in the

educational path taken by their children. Not just the parents group but the **entire community** in which the service is placed is to be understood as an element with which **close ties** and **interconnections** are being woven. This is a valuable resource for the design and development of **educational planning** and for the **growing together of children, parents and teachers**. For this reason, the service providers need to show parents the educational opportunities and services available. For this purpose, what is needed is professional competence that is aware of its own limits and knows where to turn with different types of problems.

To promote the development of parenting skills, services should increase the opportunities for discussions on educational practices in various areas, between parents and professionals, between parents and external experts and among parents. Educational and care services should promote the dissemination of information related to services for families in the area, and in general take action to overcome social and psychological isolation that many families experience in the context of contemporary social history. Families play an important role in educating and supporting their children. The quality of parenting is the most important factor in preparing children for a safe, healthy and productive future. Educational and care services, should however, directly plan cultural and / or aggregation initiatives and promote those organized by other institutions in the area, collaborating in networks that have dual objectives. These are: **to support and develop families' skills and resources; and to encourage** the construction of informal **mutual support networks**. The above leads to **positive relationships between educational institutions, families, and communities** and provides families with services and support, which **increases parents' awareness and involvement** while **creating a tight network within the community**.

## Focus area 2 – Communicating with families – Sensitive, respectful and reciprocal communication with families

The family's need to be fully involved in all aspects of their child's education and care is undeniable, as stated in the European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2016). In order to achieve this goal, it is crucial to create the conditions for a friendly environment, marked by trust and openness between the family and the child's educators and in this way guarantee effective partnership and communication. "Parenting the teachers" and "teaching the parents" (Silva, 2003) is the result obtained through cooperation and close communication between families and educators. Parents and families are the child's first educators. They know their child best. By establishing and nurturing genuine communication with the families, we can all gain advantages. The main factor for successful communication is without doubt mutual trust. When working side-by-side with families, educators should engage in a **thorough communication with them so as to share information about their children's experiences, health and needs, contributing to joint interventions that support the children's overall development, while respecting their uniqueness**. Educators face many challenges in their daily relationship with families. In these relationships different cultures coexist as do different types of family structures. The communication that the services have to establish with the parents/families also requires time and affective availability on behalf of all educators: they have to be able to **listen to the concerns, desires and expectations of each parent and each family**.

Time is a very important factor in the communication with parents. The time when children arrive to the nursery school/pre-school in the morning and leave in the afternoon is intended solely for the exchange of basic information about the child. The educator must know how to listen and also understand the parents' desire for a more comprehensive discussion and recognise when to dedicate more time to them. A parent should then have the opportunity to talk to the educator who will be able to attend to their wishes, doubts, problems....

This communication method, at the basis of the school-family relationship, highlights the importance of the intellectual, technical, relational and moral dimension in the profile of a childhood educator. The intellectual and technical dimensions refer to the fact that the educator needs to be a connoisseur and specialist in knowledge issues, the relational dimension is linked to the educator as agent for human development (Formosinho, 2001) and the moral dimension is related to interactions with others, namely, families: how we treat them, how we listen to them and the respect and attention we give them (Neves, 2015). So, briefly, it is the educator's responsibility to attentively and actively listen to parents and families. The educator has of course to **refrain from value judgments or criticism in order to establish an interaction in which both parties are understood as educational partners**.



For an effective communication that is open to cultural diversity, family resources and availability, the **possibility of using a variety of ways to communicate can be very useful**. The communication channels adopted and made available by professionals of the early childhood services can be digital, written notes or formal or informal face-to-face meetings. The different channels can be used jointly and should be chosen according to the families' preferences and the content of the information to be communicated.

The communication strategies adopted should ensure that all of the information is received by all families especially those who, for example, have a different first language. It is therefore important that early childhood educators promote regular communication about the progress, interests, needs and daily experiences of children by selecting means which enable the interaction with families to be carried out easily and in a timely and effective manner. The educators have to understand that this interaction should be a dialogic and bilateral process in which educators and families together share and discuss information concerning the children (cf. Fevorini & Lomônaco II, 2009). Engaging families in educational contexts implies the use of means that allow both parties to understand each other, since communication is the tool that enables the school-family relationship (Bhering & Siraj-Blatchford, 1999; Bhering & De Nez, 2002). **Maintaining confidentiality on all information about the child and its family is extremely important for the quality of the relationship between the families and the professionals**. At the basis of this principle we find ethical reasons, respect for individual privacy and reasons linked to the importance of fostering a relationship of trust that facilitates and promotes the exchange of information, which is relevant for the achievement of the aims of the activities carried out with the children.

The educator must constantly keep in mind that he or she works with very vulnerable people. On the one hand we have the children and on the other hand their families. The educator is often seen as a person they can trust and open up to, because they know that the information shared will not be misused and the educator will try to help them. According to the educator's competences, he or she will attempt to direct parents to the appropriate services, which will help solve possible problems.

The sharing of information on children and families, which is sometimes useful among education professionals, must have received the consent of the family and should always aim to bring benefits to the children. A communication culture, based on the establishment of an effective trust partnership between families and education professionals, facilitates transitions and educational continuity between contexts and thus generates benefits for the children (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2016).

The diversity of opinions and perspectives between the families, the school and the professionals connected to the education of the child (psychologists, nutritionists...) must be regarded as the great potential that allows the construction of a safe and shared educational

space within the community. The exchange, discussion, and often comparison of opinions are an integral part of building an educational community that feels really alive. On the other hand, imposing a strong opinion, for example that of a professional, on other opinions (of families...), is a practice that is still very common in the school environment but that gradually but steadily should be eradicated.

**Educators are often mediators between parents who have different views and aspirations in the education of their children.** While communicating, it is important that people respect each other and that each participant has the opportunity to freely express his or her opinions. Furthermore, the educator should set a good example through his or her conduct and actions.

The role of the school (and the educator) should therefore consist in welcoming all opinions and allowing them to be discussed in order to **“adapt” the school system to the needs of the children.** In other words, the educational community must rebuild itself and adapt to the diversities it consists of. The school/educator should act as an open platform, capable of receiving opinions, perspectives and experiences from different parties and in different forms, and thereafter including them in the work in a way that leads to changes and benefits for the children. Thus, the children, that are the essence of the educational process, benefit from the new management of the school and its development into a safe and inclusive educational system which is constructed in a free, democratic and shared way, through transparent and open communication.

### Focus area 3: Deciding and acting together with families – Partnership and sharing decision making responsibilities

Talking about parents participating (more) in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), means talking about a whole range of events, **activities and decision-making processes in which parents are involved**, in one way or another.

It's not always a one-off activity with a clear beginning and/or end but rather a process, designed and shaped together by ECEC services and parents. The process aims at building and strengthening the partnerships necessary for the education of young children while sharing the decision making power.

The main interest and responsibility of both parents and educators is **the children's wellbeing**, their opportunity to develop, learn and engage in meaningful relationships and be taken care of.

To achieve this common goal it is essential that parents and professionals work together. (By

“parents” we mean mothers and fathers, legal guardians and of course other family members that can play an important role in a child’s life. Where young children are concerned, it is equally important to involve fathers as well as mothers.

Working together with parents and considering them partners in the decision-making process can be a win-win situation.

- Getting parents involved in different ways helps to build bonds between the child’s home life setting and the ECEC services. This can contribute to the child’s wellbeing, improve its sense of belonging and make him or her feel safe.
- Parents can get familiar with the ECEC setting and express their opinion on how their children are being cared for or supported while growing up. They can also feel they receive support from the professionals.
- Professionals can learn a lot about the children they work with every day from the parents. They can learn what the children’s home life is like and what the parents consider important in raising their children.

The more we cooperate the more mutual trust and growing commitment we will achieve which can only influence the ECEC work in a positive way.

Acting together and sharing the decision-making responsibility are interlinked. ‘Acting together’ is about how the ECEC service can be better aligned with the children’s life at home by working and communicating with the parents. This kind of improved continuity is important for children. To feel safe and comfortable, they shouldn’t experience big gaps between their life at home, in childcare or in pre-school. **The roles of parents and professionals are important in the process of sharing expertise, feelings and convictions about raising children.**

Some of the “acting together” initiatives are formal, others informal. Some deal with children individually, others with the more structural way of working. Some are direct, others indirect. The work carried out is a pedagogical partnership not a struggle about who has the power.

The challenge is to design and implement participation models and methods, and to keep questioning these together: do they match the expectations of the involved parties? Do they work and change things for the better? Do parents and professionals feel comfortable with these models and methods? Do different talents and competences get addressed and used?

There are no perfect models, and different types of activities and events can be meaningful in different ways. For example, organising a party to which parents and family members are invited can be a very nice way to spend time and have fun together, even when parents were not involved in the decision-making process.

There are, however, more formal settings in which parents are officially involved in the decision-making, as in parent councils or if parents are members of the Board of directors of the organisation. Both examples can lead to positive results and increase parents' involvement, but they can also be set up in a more symbolic way and have no good results whatsoever. The positive outcome of an activity depends on the development, the design, the perception of parents as educators, the attitude and the actual will to see parent's involvement as something positive.

Some issues are relevant and have to be taken into account when acting together and sharing the decision-making responsibilities:

- Being authentic and respectful. For example, don't ask for parents' opinions if you won't take them into account or if you don't explain to them why some of their suggestions or ideas are impossible.
- Invite parents to get engaged in issues that they are interested in or activities to which they can offer added value to. E.g. some parents like to work on practical things, like refurbishing a building, others will be more likely to engage in council meetings. Different levels of involvement and different methods should be used in different contexts.

This way, all parents can get involved in one way or another and no one will feel excluded.

- Be willing to really engage in dialogue, look for ways to solve possible conflicts in a positive way, work towards solutions that are agreed upon by all parties involved.
- Be open and transparent about how your institution is being managed, what the pedagogical project is, why certain choices have been made.
- Make parents feel welcome and show them that you care about their feelings, routines, culture, etc. If they do not really feel that, there is very little chance that they will get involved.
- Parent participation is not an ad hoc activity. It must be embedded in an open and participatory climate within the institution and among the professionals.

During the Equap project, partners have learned from each other thanks to the exchange of experiences and very concrete initiatives focusing on parents' involvement. They have exchanged practices on different 'joint actions' and introduced some of these practices in their own work contexts.

## Focus area 4: Cooperating and collaborating with the community – Sharing educational responsibilities with the community

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is an important and vital part of the whole education system but can also be recognized as a key element in the process of life-long learning (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2006). Strengthening the ECEC role in the community with the help of different cooperative and collaborative partnerships can be seen as something **positive, both for children and parents but also for the society as a whole**. According to Bronfenbrenner's theory of "The ecology of human development", the process of development is shaped by the **interaction** between the individual and the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

For families the ECEC services often plays a central role in their daily life. The activities that are described in the toolbox aim to connect the family, the ECEC and different services in society. One example of this connection is inviting a variety of different professions into the preschool-services.

Getting involved and gaining knowledge about the ECEC services is important both for the ECEC as an educational practice and for strengthening the social structure of a local community. Several of the examples in the toolbox highlight the opportunities of meetings between young and old.

They can also create a **feeling of belonging** that is shared by people from the same local community. Furthermore, children and their parents can create connections with the world outside the nursery school and preschool services.

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are seen as full citizens with civil rights, which means that they should be able to make themselves heard on all issues that affect them (UNICEF, 2016).

In order to be able to exercise influence it is important that young children get familiar with the society that surrounds them. To enable this, children and their families need to learn about the community and how to have access to different resources. They also need to learn that children are recognized by the community as important citizens. The community also has to **encourage children to be a part of the initiatives and decision-making activities in their area**, for examples, in connection to the creation of outdoor playgrounds.

# Part C – Indicators and tools addressing more effectively participation as process contributing to quality in ECEC (Output 3)

## The case of Slovenia

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The system of identifying and ensuring the quality of education in the Republic of Slovenia is based on self-evaluation/internal quality assessment of preschools/primary schools. Director of the preschool/primary school is generally responsible for quality in the institution, but all participants (teachers, children, parents) are involved in process of supervising the quality of work.

There are no quality indicators determined at the national level. Preschools and primary schools use documents/indicators to help assess quality of their work/quality of the institution, in accordance with their needs and context.

Most indicators used in practice focus on the structural aspects of quality. In the document we are introducing two examples of such - *Strengthening Families* and *7 Steps Towards ECO-School*. These indicators focus on a certain segment of the work of the preschool/primary schools or are subject oriented. Umbrella institutions responsible for implementing those indicators/documents, support preschools/primary schools in implementation.

Less instruments/ documents focus on the process aspect of the quality. In the document we present two examples of such - *A Quality Framework for Early Childhood Practices in Services for Children Under Three Years of Age* and *Competent Teachers of the 21st Century. ISSA'S definition of Quality Pedagogy*. Both documents are used in environments implementing child centered approaches. Educational Research Institute provides professional support to the preschools/primary schools in implementation of the documents.

## QUALITY INDICATORS USED IN SERVICES WITH CHILDREN FROM BIRTH TO THREE

A Quality Framework for Early Childhood Practices in Services for Children Under Three Years of Age (ISSA – International Step by Step Association, 2015 – draft for peer review)

## 1. Theoretical background of quality indicators

The Quality Framework builds on ISSA's<sup>11</sup> vision of a society in which families, communities and professionals work together to empower each child to reach their full potential (ISSA, 2015, p. 7).<sup>12</sup> By producing this document, ISSA is acknowledging the importance of putting the very young child and their family at the centre of all early childhood interventions and programs provided through a very diverse range of services (ISSA, 2015, p. 4).

The Framework is underpinned by the most current research conducted into how children under three learn through quality experiences and relationships. What is more, it is aligned with other important international frameworks and position papers, such as the *European Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* (2014),<sup>13</sup> *Starting Strong III* (2012),<sup>14</sup> and documents from UNESCO and UNICEF; as well as presenting new ways of looking at care and learning (ISSA, 2015, p. 8). The Quality Framework (ISSA, 2015) is based also on *The Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC)* (1989)<sup>15</sup> and on its *General Comment No 7* (2005),<sup>16</sup> since the CRC (art. 18.2) and *A Guide to General Comment 7* (2006, p. 47, art. 29.1 (a))<sup>17</sup> outline parental and public responsibilities for early childhood education.

## 2. Methods of use of quality indicators

As the Quality Framework addresses multiple audiences (aiming at developing intersectoral cooperation and programs for very young<sup>18</sup> children and their families), it can be used across different sectors creating a more unified and powerful voice to ensure that very young children's rights and needs are met, with family and community partnerships involved (ISSA, 2015, p. 21). In our case, following the project's aims and focus (family participation, family involvement, (building) partnerships with families), we identified quality indicators, which can be used by *those who work in centre-based early childhood education and care (ECEC) or child care centres including administrators, psychologists and therapists*. The Quality

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<sup>11</sup>ISSA (International Step by Step Association) - An innovative network of early childhood development professionals and organizations primarily in Europe and Central Asia, working to make quality early childhood education and care accessible to all children.

<sup>12</sup> ISSA (2015). *Quality Framework for Early Childhood Practices in Services for Children Under Three Years of Age*. Draft for peer review.

<sup>13</sup> *Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care. Report of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission* (2014). [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf) (24. 3. 2015).

<sup>14</sup> OECD (2012). *Starting strong III: A quality toolbox for early childhood education and care: Executive summary*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/49325825.pdf> (24. 3. 2015).

<sup>15</sup> *The Convention of the Rights of the Child* (1989). <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx> (24. 3. 2015)

<sup>16</sup> General Comment No 7 (2005). *Implementing child rights in early childhood*. Geneva: Committee of the Rights of the Child. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/GeneralComment7Rev1.pdf> (24. 3. 2015)

<sup>17</sup> *A Guide to General Comment 7: Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood* (2006). The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation. [http://www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/files/Guide\\_to\\_GC7.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/files/Guide_to_GC7.pdf) (24. 3. 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Children from birth to three years old.

Framework (ISSA, 2015) with its *Principles* and *Indicators of quality practice* invites reflection on and dialogue about—with self and group assessment of—practices (ISSA, 2015, p. 22).

### 3. Quality indicators and evidences/examples, showing the implementation of quality indicators

#### *Focus Area: 1. Relationships*

***Principle: 1.5 Relationships support/facilitate the child under three's routine and non-routine transitions***

*Quality indicator:*

- Communicates with parents/families regularly about the routines they are following to provide consistency.

*Evidence(s):* in the process of identification in the scope of another project, will be added accordingly

#### *Focus Area: 2. Family and Community*

***Principle: 2.1 Knowledge and appreciation of families and communities strengthen relationships with and among them.***

*Quality indicators:*

- Learns about each family's values, beliefs, assumptions and practices and incorporates them whenever possible.
- Individualizes relationships and services for families in ways that best support their needs.
- Builds on family and community strengths and, where possible, acknowledges and incorporates the 'funds of knowledge' that are a part of every family and community.
- Promotes opportunities for families to learn from and support one another.

***Principle: 2.2 Sensitive, respectful and reciprocal communication with families supports children's development and learning.***

*Quality indicators:*

- Engages in on-going, responsive communication with parents/families to share information about the child's experiences, health and needs.
- Takes time to listen carefully, being non-judgementally with families.



- Uses various ways to communicate with families that incorporate their language and communication preferences.
- Maintains confidentiality of all information about the child and their family.

***Principle: 2.3 Services are best provided in partnerships with families.***

*Quality indicators:*

- Ensures each family's rights and responsibilities to be involved in decision-making, with them making the final decision about their child's development, learning, well-being and services.
- Incorporates and respects families' specific goals, needs and cultural practices; upon mutual agreement, modifies routines appropriately to enhance continuity between the home and other settings.
- Strengthens and reinforces parenting practices while offering evidence-based parenting education and support for improving these when necessary.
- Promotes the involvement and engagement of fathers and other family members in the child's care and learning.

***Focus Area: 3. Inclusion, Diversity and Values of Democracy***

***Principle: 3.1 Inclusion provides equal opportunities for every child and family to participate regardless of gender, race, ethnic origin, culture, native language, religion, family structure, social status, age or special need***

*Quality indicators:*

- Makes adaptations to the environment, learning experiences and interactions such that those with different physical and mental capabilities, or who speak different languages, can also fully participate.
- Addresses gender and other stereotypes (including poverty stereotypes) in the materials and learning experiences provided to children and/or their families.

***Principle: 3.2 Understanding and appreciation of the diversity that exists among children, families and communities builds children's identities.***

*Quality indicator:*

- Supports families' child rearing practices, in addition to cultural and linguistic styles where possible. Where this is not possible, appropriate support and guidance is offered.

**Principle: 3.4 Inclusion is promoted through partnerships with families.**

*Quality indicators:*

- Dialogues with families about how services can be improved to show respect for and the value of diversity.
- Dialogues with families about how services can be more inclusive, including advocacy and support for families of children with special needs.
- Works with families and specialists to create a plan for inclusion; discusses in this plan the successes and challenges, observations and reflections related to working with individual children.

*Focus Area: 6. Observation, Documentation, Reflection and Planning*

**Principle: 6.2 Observations are most useful when documented, reflected upon and shared with parents/families and others who are involved in the child's care and well-being.**

*Quality indicator:*

- Shares observations with families and other professionals (when parental permission is granted) who work with the child with a view of providing seamless care for the child and to engage them in any interventions and involvement of other services.

*Focus Area: 7. Enabling Environments*

**Principle: 7.3 The environment is welcoming, accessible and comfortable.**

*Quality indicators:*

- Arranges the space so that family members feel comfortable and welcomed during any visits.

## Quality indicators used in services with children from 3-10 years old

Competent Teachers of the 21st Century. ISSA'S definition of Quality Pedagogy (ISSA – International Step by Step Association, 2010) <http://www.issa.nl/sites/default/files/Quality-Principles-final-WEB.pdf>

### 1. Theoretical background of quality indicators

According to ISSA members, the following *focus areas* are crucial to ensure high quality support to children's development and learning: *Interactions, Family and Community, Inclusion, Diversity and Values of Democracy, Assessment and Planning, Teaching Strategies, Learning Environment,*

*Professional Development.* The seven focus areas promote practices that are guided by humanistic and socio-constructivist principles, emphasizing developmentally appropriate practices, individualized approach, and the idea that learning occurs in interaction, and is a dialogue between children and adults, as well as between children, which is marked by respecting each other, stimulating and giving autonomy to the learner, and assuming that children are competent and full citizens even while they need support from adults. *ISSA's definition of Quality Pedagogy* recognizes and promotes the important role of the professional as a knowledgeable, sensitive individual who guides and scaffolds children in their journey of exploration and learning and works in close partnership with families as the first teachers of their children and communities as a natural resource for learning and inquiry (ISSA, 2010, p. 15).<sup>19</sup>

## 2. Methods of use of quality indicators

ISSA's *Principles and Indicators of Quality* are offered to everybody to use them as a starting point of the discussion on what we want our societies to be in the future and what we can do to help our children create and live in such societies. They are offered as a framework for innovation, self-assessment, and improvement, and urge the user to explore new territories with children. They guide but do not restrict (ISSA, 2010, p. 18). ISSA's intention is that this document (ISSA, 2010) will serve as a framework for building and strengthening partnerships with a wide range of audiences (families included), as each of us in one or another way influences children's early years experiences (ISSA, 2010, p. 17).

*Indicators of Quality* are intended to begin reflection and dialogue about educator's own practice in order to better meet the needs of their own contexts and environments; they can also be used to identify educator's own strengths and areas for improvement (Tankersley, Brajkovic, Handzar, 2011, p. 6-7).<sup>20</sup>

## 3. Quality indicators and evidences/examples, showing the implementation of quality indicators

### *Focus Area: 2. Family and Community*

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<sup>19</sup> ISSA (2010). *Competent Teachers of the 21st Century. ISSA'S definition of Quality Pedagogy*. Budapest, Amsterdam: International Step by Step Association. <http://www.issa.nl/sites/default/files/Quality-Principles-final-WEB.pdf> (24. 3. 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Tankersley, D., Brajkovic, S., Handzar, S. (2011). *Professional Development Tool for Improving Quality of Practices in Kindergarten*. Budapest, Amsterdam: International Step by Step Association.

**Principle: 2.1 The educator promotes partnerships with families and provides a variety of opportunities for families and community members to be involved in children's learning and development.**

*Quality indicators:*

- 2.1.1 The educator invites and welcomes family members into the classroom and finds ways for all families to participate in the educational process and life of the learning community.

*Evidences:*<sup>21</sup>

- Offers a variety of activities for parents/family members to choose from and get involved with their children in the program.
  - Develops and displays monthly plans of classroom activities, including thematic projects with specific opportunities for involvement of family members.
  - Posts welcoming signs and thank-you letters to acknowledge the contributions of family members.
  - Uses parent/family surveys to find out how families would like to be involved, and uses that information to involve them.
  - Looks for ways to involve all families, even if they cannot spend time in the room, by sending home things that they can do with their children at home that support what is going on in the program.
  - Facilitates family participation based on their interests, abilities, and cultures.
  - Identifies barriers to greater participation by families (especially families from disadvantaged groups) in building homeschool partnerships and seeks alternative ways to involve them or bring them into the school.
- 2.1.2 The educator involves family members in shared decision-making about their children's learning, development, and social life in the classroom.

*Evidences:*

- Has a system for getting parents' goals for their children (such as through conferences, written communication, regular phone calls, etc.) and incorporating those goals into classroom activities.
- Involves parents/family members in creating Individual Education Plans for their child (if necessary).
- Provides tools such as children's portfolios and written reports to help families review and assess their child's development.
- Provides parents/family members with the opportunity to become familiar with the program prior to the start of the child's participation.

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<sup>21</sup> All evidences in this section are taken from this document: Tankersley, D., Brajkovic, S., Handzar, S. (2011). *Professional Development Tool for Improving Quality of Practices in Kindergarten*. Budapest, Amsterdam: International Step by Step Association.

- Involves parents/family members in creating plans for the social life of the classroom.
- Integrates parents' knowledge in the assessment process of children's learning.
- Empowers families and is an ally to help them advocate for inclusion of their voices on issues concerning their children's learning and development.
- 2.1.3 The educator involves family members in decision-making concerning children's learning environments.

*Evidences:*

- Involves families in planning and creating the learning environment, classroom, and school so that their values, goals, and concerns are addressed.
- Involves families in discussions around classroom/school rules, bus schedules, program goals, extracurricular activities, and aspects of community involvement.
- Encourages families to become active as members of the classroom or school governance team or voice their needs and expectations to those who are governing.
- Involves families in writing the program's philosophy, goals, operating procedures, etc.
- Shares power with families and community members to implement national school reform initiatives at the school/center and community level.

***Principle: 2.2 The educator uses formal and informal opportunities for communication and information sharing with families.***

*Quality indicators:*

- 2.2.1 The educator regularly communicates with families about their children, their learning and development, curriculum requirements, and the events in the classroom.

*Evidences:*

- Regularly provides parents/families with written information on their children, emphasizing child's strengths, (such as children's portfolios, child assessment instruments, narratives on the children, etc.) and asks for parents/families feedback.
- Regularly updates written information on curriculum requirements and events in the classroom on a families' information board in the classroom.
- Individualizes communication with families to accommodate their schedules, languages spoken at home, and other special circumstances including emails, telephone conferences, written progress reports, etc.
- Provides information on how families can communicate with the educator and lets families know what they can expect will be communicated to them.
- Organizes parent education sessions based on the latest research and scientific arguments.
- Makes parents aware of information relevant to their key role.

- Empowers families and is an ally to help them to express their views on school reform and curriculum requirements.
- 2.2.2 The educator regularly communicates with families to learn about a child's background in order to gain insights on the child's strengths, interests, and needs.

*Evidences:*

- Communicates regularly (both formally and informally) to find out about a child's interests, special needs, new skills observed at home, routines, special people in his/her life, upcoming events, and other activities that impact the child's life.
- Adapts plans and routines in response to information learned from families.
- Asks parents about beliefs and actions they find important in supporting their child's development at home.
- Uses information provided by parents to meet their child's learning needs in the classroom.
- Empowers families and acts as an ally to get school systems to listen to families—their values, needs, strengths, goals, dreams, and important perspectives on their children—in order to provide programs that best serve them.
- 2.2.3 The educator promotes opportunities for families to learn from one another and to support each other.

*Evidences:*

- Plans activities in which members of various families form positive relationships with each other and helps them share their knowledge, concerns, and interests regarding child-rearing, including informal family gatherings such as picnics, excursions, family nights.
- Provides space in the classroom and time during events for information exchange by families.
- Assists families in engaging peers and networks for information and support.
- Creates a family-friendly environment in the school/classroom, including space and time to meet, library resources, and announcing opportunities for parents to meet, share/learn from one another, and form support groups on specific topics.
- Helps families exchange ideas and network with one another, such as sending suggestions home, creating a group network on the web, etc.
- Empowers families to form, lead, and moderate meetings, activities, and associations around issues that concern them in the community.

**Principle: 2.3 The educator uses community resources and family culture to enrich children's development and learning experiences.**

*Quality indicators:*

- 2.3.3 The educator uses knowledge of children's communities and families as an integral part of the curriculum and their learning experiences.

*Evidence(s):*

- Aligns resources that families and community member offer with national curriculum goals and children's interests.
  - Plans activities that integrate family and/or community knowledge, including folklore, oral history, personal experiences of community members, music, crafts, rituals, and games.
  - Uses events that happen in families and community to develop learning activities and projects.
- 2.3.4 The educator offers information and ideas for parents and family members on how to create a stimulating home learning environment and helps to strengthen parent competences.

*Evidence(s):*

- Provides/offers information, learning materials, and workshops to families on child development and demonstrates activities that families can use to foster learning at home.
- Invites other specialists to offer workshops for families on creating stimulating home learning environments.
- Invites parents/family members into the classroom to observe the children's activities.
- Helps families recognize the strategies they are already using that contribute to their child's development and learning.
- Provides parents with simple strategies they can use during everyday interactions with their children.
- Empowers families to be able to assess the success of different strategies they use at home and to make adjustments so that they build on the child's unique strengths and needs.

Focus Area: 3. Inclusion, Diversity, and the Values of Democracy

**Principle: 3.1 The educator provides equal opportunities for every child and family to learn and participate regardless of gender, race, ethnic origin, culture, native language, religion, family structure, social status, economic status, age, or special need.**

*Quality indicators:*

- 3.1.3 The educator treats every family with respect, dignity, and consideration and finds ways to involve them in their child's education.

*Evidence(s):*

- Is sensitive to parents' individual circumstances, finds multiple ways in which they can be involved.
- Makes nonjudgmental statements about individual children's families.
- Looks for ways to provide learning experiences for children WITH family members and builds on what families already do with their children.
- Recognizes that learning occurs continuously outside of school and builds learning at school on those experiences.
- Supports families to help children bring together the various aspects of their multiple identities.
- Works with families to help them preserve their identities and cultures.

Focus Area: 4. Assessment and Planning

**Principle: 4.1 The educator regularly and systematically monitors each child's progress, learning processes, and achievements.**

*Quality indicators:*

- 4.1.1 The educator uses systematic observation and other diverse and developmentally appropriate formative assessment tools that reflect on the process and outcomes of learning and development.

*Evidence(s):*

- Uses observation results to track individual children's progress on meeting national goals for learning as well as their own and their families' goals for them.

**Principle: 4.2 The educator plans for teaching and learning based on information about children and national requirements.**

*Quality indicators:*

- 4.2.1 The educator plans activities that are based on the developmental levels and interests of the children to enable them to acquire relevant competences.

*Evidence(s):*

- Has individual plans for each child developed in conjunction with the child and his/her family.

**Principle: 4.3 The educator includes children, families, and relevant professionals in the assessment and planning process.**

*Quality indicators:*



- 4.3.3 The educator and family members share information regarding children's progress and interests and together create short-term and long-term individual goals.

*Evidence(s):*

- Shares recorded observation and assessment instruments with family members.
- Asks family members how they contribute to the child's progress in learning.
- The family, child, and educator together write learning goals and discuss strategies for achieving those goals.
- The family, child, and educator together assess how well learning goals were achieved.
- Solicits information from parents about their expectations for their child and strategies they use at home to help the child, and incorporates this information into instruction.
- Uses special interests of families in planning to provide more varied learning experiences for children.
- Asks family members to share ideas for units of study the children could do in the classroom.
- Reflects on and acts in ways that encourage even greater input from children and families on writing learning goals for children.
- Understands that certain procedures in schools might create barriers to family input and works to change them.

Quality indicators used in preschools

Strengthening Families Slovenia: ISA Institute (Institute for psychological-counseling developmental projects) USA: Center for the Study of Social Policy

#### 1. Theoretical background of quality indicators

*Strengthening Families* is a research-informed approach to increase family strengths, enhance child development and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. At its heart, *Strengthening Families* is about how families are supported to build key *protective factors* that enable children to thrive. It is based on engaging families, programs and communities in building five protective factors:

- *Parental resilience*: Managing stress and functioning well even when faced with challenges, adversity and trauma.
- *Social connections*: Positive relationships that provide emotional, informational, instrumental and spiritual support.

- *Knowledge of parenting and child development:* Understanding child development and parenting strategies that support physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional development.
- *Concrete support in times of need:* Access to concrete support and services that address a family's needs and helps minimize stress caused by challenges.
- *Social and emotional competence of children:* Family and child interactions that help children develop the ability to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate their emotions, and establish and maintain relationships.<sup>22</sup>

The approach was introduced to Slovenian preschools and educators in 2010-2012, as a first country implementing this approach outside USA, where it was developed and initiated. More than 1000 educators across the country were involved in training for implementation of this approach.

## 2. Methods of use of quality indicators

Four of these five protective factors—*increasing parental resilience, building social connections, increasing knowledge of parenting and child development, and providing concrete support in times of need*—are primarily directed towards parents. The remaining factor—*supporting the social and emotional competence of children*—complements these parent-directed services by focusing on the developmental needs of children and the quality of their primary relationships (Center for the Study of Social Policy, p. 7).<sup>23</sup>

*Strengthening Families* is being used to reshape how early care and education (ECE) programs engage parents in their children's development and to help them build strong relationships between family members and staff.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike many other service providers, ECE programs provide an opportunity for highly stressed parents to obtain needed services in a non-stigmatizing and easily accessible environment. The fact that ECE staff interacts with children and parents on an almost daily basis provides a context in which strong, supportive relationships may develop. This, in turn, allows staff to develop the working knowledge of children and families needed to tailor prevention services to meet individual needs. At the same time, this close connection between families and staff

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengtheningfamilies/about>; <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/2014/SFoverview.pdf> (23. 3. 2015)

<sup>23</sup> Center for the Study of Social Policy. *Protective factors literature review: early care and education programs and the prevention of child abuse and neglect*. <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/resources/body/LiteratureReview.pdf> (25. 3. 2015).

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/2014/SFoverview.pdf>, 23. 3. 2015

should enable programs to detect cases in which the risk of child maltreatment is high, and immediately attempt appropriate interventions (Center for the Study of Social Policy, p. 7).<sup>25</sup>

### 3. Quality indicators and evidences/examples, showing the implementation of quality indicators

*Quality indicators:*

- **Parental resilience**

*Evidences:*<sup>26</sup>

- Be a source of assistance for each family that suffered a fire, death or other tragedy; when preschool may help with collecting clothes, food, toys, or otherwise.
- Create a flyer and send it through a child to his/her family, asking parents to sit down together as a family and answer a few simple questions, for example: *What are the greatest strengths of your family? Name three things that your family do or was doing to become even stronger.* Use the given answers to highlight what families do, that they are strong.

- **Social connections**

*Evidences:*

- Organize activities to support families in cooperation with other families (eg. picnics, fairs, movie nights, field trips etc.).
- Organize regular monthly meetings with parents about life in a preschool – what works well, what can be improved; different topics about which parents would like to talk/discuss.
- Make a bulletin board for parents, where they can communicate among themselves; for example for sharing skills, exchange of services (babysitting) etc.

- **Knowledge of parenting and child development**

*Evidences:*

- In a preschool, create a “space for learning” with books, journals, leaflets etc. about child development, parenting.
- Invite experts, who present topics, important for parents, and are available for a talk (eg. doctors, different therapists etc.).
- Make a “box for questions”; parents can write questions (anonymously) about parenting, child raising, and other questions. Questions can then be used for organization of parental meetings on specific topic, equipping “space for learning” with actual materials etc.

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<sup>25</sup> Center for the Study of Social Policy. *Protective factors literature review: early care and education programs and the prevention of child abuse and neglect.* <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/resources/body/LiteratureReview.pdf> (25. 3. 2015).

<sup>26</sup> All evidences in this section are taken from this document: ISA institut. *Krepimo družine skozi predšolsko vzgojo in varstvo. Priročnik.* [Eng. *Strengthening families through early childhood education and care. Manual.*]

- **Concrete support in times of need**

*Evidences:*

- Organize fair where different organizations present their materials and products, so parents can see what is available in their neighborhood, especially services that are easily accessible and free or available at minimal cost.
- Distribute among families a list of locations where they can go for help in case of different problems they face with. The information should be easily accessible throughout the year.

- **Social and emotional competence of children**

*Evidences:*

- Use either meeting or messages to family, asking what a preschool and family can do together to ensure a healthy social and emotional development of a child. Use the African proverb *"It takes a village to raise a child"*, saying the essence.

Quality indicators used in preschools and primary schools

7 Steps Towards ECO-School

<http://ekosola.si/sedem-korakov/>; <http://www.eco-schools.org/menu/process/seven-steps>

1. Theoretical background of quality indicators

An international programme of the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), Eco-Schools to empower students to be the change our sustainable world needs by engaging them in fun, action-orientated learning. Each school follows a seven step change process and empowers their young people to lead processes and actions wherever they can. Over time and through commitment to the Eco-Schools seven step process, improvements will be seen in both the learning outcomes, attitude and behavior of students and the local community and ultimately the local environment. The Eco-Schools programme provides an integrated system for environmental management of schools based on an [ISO 14001/EMAS](#) approach.<sup>27</sup>

2. Methods of use of quality indicators

**Seven Steps**

The Eco-Schools methodology encompasses Seven Steps that any school can adopt. The process involves a wide range of stakeholders (*also family participation is desired*), but pupils play the central role. After a period of participation, an evaluation of the success of these initiatives and the methodology is undertaken, and the whole Eco-Schools programme for each school is assessed.

**Green Flag**

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<sup>27</sup> What is Eco-Schools: <http://www.eco-schools.org/menu/about/eco-schools-2> (23. 3. 2015)

Successful Eco-Schools are awarded the Green Flag, an internationally acknowledged symbol for environmental excellence. In some countries, this recognition happens through a three level system, where schools are awarded either bronze and silver awards before getting the green flag, or one and two stars. There is flexibility to the ceremony and awarding process but the criteria for assessing schools for the award must follow the guidelines of FEE's International Eco-Schools Programme.<sup>28</sup>

### 3. Quality indicators and evidences/examples, showing the implementation of quality indicators

#### *Quality indicator*

#### **Step 6: Informing and Involving**

One key aim of the Eco-Schools programme is to raise general awareness of your environmental activities - throughout the school and the wider community - and to make sure that as many people as possible get a chance to take part. Actions should not just be confined to the school: for example, pupils should take home ideas to put into practice. Involving the wider community brings a wide range of benefits. Parents, neighbors, local businesses and the local authority can be sources of advice, information, practical help and financial assistance. This is also an ideal opportunity to raise the school's profile within the community through the production of newsletters to parents, press releases to the local paper, Open Days, etc.<sup>29</sup>

#### *Evidences:*

#### **Involving the community (families included)**<sup>30</sup>

- produce a newsletter that regularly keeps parents updated about the Eco-Schools process. Copies of the newsletter can also be sent to other members of the community (e.g. local council, parishes, local businesses)
- send letters to local businesses seeking support for initiatives
- ask resource people from the community to come to the school to give talks or offer help in particular tasks
- hold press releases publicising Eco-Schools activities, research results and achievements
- hold community-wide surveys to gather information about the environmental issues that are mostly relevant
- disseminate the school's Eco-Code within the community
- invite people from the community to attend the Eco-Schools celebration event (<http://www.eco-schools.org/menu/process/seven-steps>, 23. 3. 2015).

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<sup>28</sup> How does Eco-Schools work: <http://www.eco-schools.org/menu/about/programme> (24. 3. 2015)

<sup>29</sup> What are the Seven Steps: <http://www.eco-schools.org/menu/process/seven-steps> (24. 3. 2015)

<sup>30</sup> What are the Seven Steps; Step 6: Informing and Involving: <http://www.eco-schools.org/menu/process/seven-steps> (24. 3. 2015)

# Quality Indicators of ECEC services

## Quality Indicators - Focus area 1

LEARNING ABOUT THE FAMILY - Knowing and appreciating families and communities

The working group:

- Learns about each family's values, beliefs, the prerequisites of practices and incorporates them when- ever possible.
- Individualizes relationships and services for families in ways that best support their needs.
- Learns about the communities where children live and uses that knowledge to meet children's needs in order to create more adequate approaches for learning.
- Builds on family and community strengths and, where possible, acknowledges and incorporates the "funds of knowledge" that are a part of every family and community.
- Promotes opportunities for families to learn and support each other.

## Quality Indicators - Focus area 2

LEARNING ABOUT THE FAMILY - Knowing and appreciating families and communities

The working group:

- Learns about each family's values, beliefs, the prerequisites of practices and incorporates them whenever possible.
- Individualizes relationships and services for families in ways that best support their needs.
- Learns about the communities where children live and uses that knowledge to meet children's needs in order to create more adequate approaches for learning.
- Builds on family and community strengths and, where possible, acknowledges and incorporates the "funds of knowledge" that are a part of every family and community.
- Promotes opportunities for families to learn and support each other.

## Quality Indicators - Focus area 3

DECIDING AND ACTING TOGETHER WITH THE FAMILY - Partnership and sharing decision-making responsibilities

The working group:

- Promotes activities in the services that families are invited to participate in.
- Ensures each family's rights and responsibilities to be involved in the decision-making process.
- Takes the final decision about the child's development, learning, wellbeing and services offered together with the family.
- Incorporates and respects families' specific goals, needs and cultural practices. Upon mutual agreement it modifies routines in order to enhance continuity between the home and other settings.
- Strengthens and reinforces parenting practices while offering evidence-based parenting education and support when necessary.
- Promotes the involvement and engagement of parents and other family members in the child's care and learning.

## Quality Indicators - Focus area 4

COOPERATING AND COLLABORATING WITH THE COMMUNITY - Sharing educational responsibility with the community

The working group:

- Ensures seamless transitions when cooperating with different services to support families.
- Actively engages local communities to promote children's and families' rights through community outreach and advocacy activities.
- Creates opportunities for community members to be involved and participate in early childhood services' activities.
- Recognises that young children are part of the communities that play a vital role in their early childhood experiences.

# Part D – Jobshadowing and the monitoring process of the testing innovative practices

## Jobshadowing method: implementation, added value, facilitating conditions

Within the Equap project, which focuses on parent participation, practitioners in ECEC had the opportunity to engage in a jobshadowing activity. This is a method of shared learning, in which practitioners join their colleagues on the work floor in a different country and get actively involved in the work there. This learning method has proven to be very valuable and much appreciated by all participants. They all witnessed that they had an eye-opening and rich learning experience.

While this jobshadowing was organised to work on different methods of involving parents in ECEC, we are convinced that this learning method can be used on many other themes as well.

In this document, we share the main points of interest, as well as some caveats for implementation.

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*"Job shadowing is a very enriching and inspiring way to learn. It opens up your mind, as a professional and as a person."(Narimane Sidali)*

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### 1. Before

#### Announcement and initial information

- Clear announcement and explanation on what the JS will entail, to everyone who could possibly get involved
- Use of different information channels to make sure everyone is informed
- Provide as many details as possible: on what JS is, where to go, languages, document requirements (visa etc), period, what service...
- Be aware of possible barriers and consider how these can be dealt with (not used to travel for work, language issue, home situation....)
- Make it clear that JS is not just another study visit, but a time to work and learn and really get engaged in a quite unknown setting.

#### Who can go?

- Collect info on who is interested



- Not too many criteria need to be put forward, but some are worth considering: basic knowledge of languages used, commitment, eagerness to learn, ability to report and give some feedback
- Added value of sending duo's (or more) people from the same centre, with different functions within their centre: supporting each other, being able to reflect together during the JS period, combine different perspectives on the job (both at home and abroad), better opportunities to share within the whole team across different levels afterwards...

## How to prepare?

- The preparation is very important to make the JS experience as rich and meaningful as possible.
- Preparation is needed on two levels: the content (What will we be doing? What is the meaning of the jobshadowing? Why get engaged? ...) and the more practical arrangements (travel documents, reservations, timing, materials: notebooks, the focus areas...). It is wise to appoint a 'JS coordinator' in this phase to take charge of this preparation and all the details.
- Arrange for meetings before the JS to take a closer look into the issue at hand, go through relevant background literature/documents, get acquainted with some basic information on the place that will be visited. Again, be clear and detailed on both content and practicalities.
- Make it clear what the focus issue will be, what perspective will be taken, how the reporting will be done, what instrument could be used as some kind of 'compass'.
- It is advisable to have team discussions on the content at hand, collect ideas and underlying convictions and views on the topic to know how you stand within your own service.
- The different JS partner organisations should inform one another (e.g. by some kind of Identikits: who are we? What do we do? Staff? Experiences? What is our approach on...?) This exchange of information not only helps people decide where they want to go and why, but drafting this can also make people even more aware of their own work and why they work the way they do. (Writing an identikit of your own centre, can be a reflection exercise on your own work: why do you want to tell what to the visitors? Why do you stress this and not that? What do you seem to take for granted?...)
- Keep the rest of the team, who do not go JS, informed throughout this process as well.

## 2. During

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***"Instead of looking for what can NOT be done, open your eyes to see what CAN be done."(Bouchra Chfira)***

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## Being welcomed

- Receiving colleagues in a warm and welcoming way. Be aware that some people are not used to travel for professional reasons at all and that the visiting colleagues do not know much about your work
- Try to take nothing of your work for granted. Be ready to explain whatever is being asked.
- Get the JS colleagues really involved in your daily work (unnecessary to set up major events especially for them, but do what you usually do)

- Organising a nice dinner or reception to have everyone introduced to each other
- Inform everyone at the work places where JS will be done and explain what this entails, so that receiving centres can be prepared as well.
- Be sure that you can offer activities or working methods that relate to the issue at hand.

### *Where to go?*

- Depending on the issue or what they want to witness and engage in, different places can be involved (centres, community meetings, workfloor...)
- Make it clear in the JS program whether people will stay in the same service or centre or will move around to different work places (both have advantages and disadvantages. Staying in one setting for a couple of days can deepen the learning and make people really part of a team. Moving around on the other hand offers more opportunities to see different ways of working.)

### *Reporting and regular briefings*

- A daily debriefing or reflection moment makes sense. There are so many impressions that it is good to look back on that on a daily basis (not to forget too much). This also helps to stay focused on the issue at hand.
- Take a moment a day to write down some notes on what you experienced and felt during the day (little culture shocks, surprising practices, new approaches, things that made you feel good...) make it into some kind of 'JS-diary'.
- These reflection moments can also be the start of looking into ways how you could 'import' or 'translate' a certain practice in your own work setting.
- The diary can also serve as a first basis for the JS reporting to the team at home

### *Professional and personal relationships*

- When visiting and receiving colleagues succeed in getting to know each other well, it adds to the JS experience. The closer the working relationships, the deeper the learning.
- Engaging in another workplace, opens opportunities to think about your own work and also appreciate that more.
- Jobshadowers need to keep a learning attitude and an open mind. Be curious about the work of others; JS is not about teaching the hosting colleagues how to do their jobs.
- Send regular updates and news to the team at home

## **3. After**

- JS serves a purpose: the learning abroad needs to be brought 'home'.
- Be sure to inform your colleagues about the JS experiences, the things you learned. This way they can also get involved in the search on how new practices could be implemented
- Be aware that a mere cut/paste of practices, methods or activities will NOT work. Need to adapt things to your own organisation, setting, target groups and context
- Keep a focus on the issue at hand
- Discuss in team what could be 'imported' and what goal that would serve (the WHY? Question)
- Getting out of the comfort zone and of your own routine also gives new perspectives and ideas, but remain realistic. Enthusiasm is good but the regular work needs to be continued as well.

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*“Listening to their stories, inspired me to make some changes in our work, even when I did not go jobshadowing.” (Frieda)*

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## Receiving jobshadowers from partner countries

- On the receiving end side as well, preparation is vital. Think and discuss well about what and how you want to involve people on the workforce, what to show and explain about your work. and.
- Get everyone well informed about what is going to happen, who is coming and what the purpose of the JS is. Have everyone (mentally) prepared to have jobshadowers around for a week
- Arrange for a warm welcome and offer some activities in the free time as well. Consider that people are away from home and their usual work surrounding and that things, that seem ordinary to you, may be very new or strange to them.
- Focus not only on the strong points in your work but also have the courage to show what you're less sure about, things that do not go perfectly; in short, the real life in the job. (perfection doesn't exist anywhere)

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*“We did not only visit Elmer, we smelled and felt Elmer.”  
(visitor from Slovenia)*

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## Reflection and comments

The overall reactions on the jobshadowing range from positive to extremely positive. The word 'boost' is a recurring theme in the interviews..

- Possibility to arrange job shadowing for a shorter time or closer to home so more people could join
- Job shadowing is 'contaminating': more people want to go and the ones who stayed home also got inspired by the jobshadowing colleagues. The ones who did leave, want to do it again.
- Strong bonds were created, beyond the work level. People are keeping in touch.
- Job shadowing also positively affects the interaction among colleagues; going away together changes and deepens the connection with the people you work with.
- The choice to combine different functions to participate together in the jobshadowing has actually enriched the experience, the follow-up and the outcome, as practices are being implemented on all levels.
- Jobshadowing can be an extremely important learning opportunity for ECEC-practitioners and it can be a powerful professional boost and an eye opener.
- The Elmer jobshadowers travelled with colleagues that were not always working in the same location. This has advantages (getting to know each other, information from different locations) and disadvantages (not taking the same experiences and ideas back to the same work place, not bringing back a shared experience). Some would prefer to do it with their own colleagues, others enjoyed getting to know colleagues from other Elmer locations.
- Working with the focus areas was not always easy. The wording was not always so clear and the different areas sometimes overlap. Then again, it provided a common language, a good

start and could lead to what the focus needed to be. It gave directions at what to look for. Again, investing in a good preparation, also on the focus areas, proved essential.

- Jobshadowing is positively exhausting. If it would have been easier or less demanding, it wouldn't have stuck so well.
- The regular feedback and reflection during the jobshadowing is really vital. Sharing the things you see, comparing the little things ('did you find it strange too that...?'), discussing what could be taken home.
- Having an analytical view, an open mind, being curious and having a reflective attitude does make the jobshadowing a lot richer.
- Jobshadowing makes you appreciate your own work as well, become more aware on how you work and teaches you to enjoy your own successes more.
- In some places there was hardly any actual parent activity to witness or take part in, which was a pity.

## Some conclusions on the conditions for successful jobshadowing:

- A thorough preparation is necessary for deep learning, on both content and logistics and on both ends: the travelling and the receiving team (on activities, on the focus areas, on visiting ECEC provision and sites, on what you want to show and do together...).
- Discuss expectations and keep these realistic
- Make sure that possible jobshadowers fully understand what it is all about (e.g. explain, translate documents, clear program...)
- Be aware of possible confrontations or cultural shocks and try to prepare for that (professionally but also personally).
- Be aware of anxieties or feelings of possibly being judged
- Combined functions in one jobshadowing team create an added value.
- Be sure to also take care of the people who stay in the home base
- Regular debriefing during the jobshadowing is needed and valuable
- A warm welcome and feeling of 'fitting into the team' adds a lot to the learning experience
- During job shadowing it is vital to get ample opportunity to really see the ECEC practice in a different setting; avoid too many presentations and formal meetings, but really dive into the work.
- Structural changes: to get child free hours, add staff or rearrange time schedules
- Questioning routines, breaking down what seems so evident, changing the ways 'as we've always done it'
- Job shadowing can add to professional growth and in this way to overall ECEC quality
- Be ambitious but at the same time realistic: the enthusiasm after returning is surely contagious but you can't do it all.
- Keep the focus on the issue at stake, in this case parent participation. There is so much to see and look into, on so many other issues that staying focussed can be quite a challenge.
- Continue to ask questions during the jobshadowing on how, what, who and especially WHY?
- Receiving teams need to know clearly what they want to show to jobshadowers

# Testing Equap parent participation practices in Brussels

## Context

For Belgium, only the childcare sector in the Flemish Community was considered for this project. While VBJK was the research partner, Elmer, with 4 childcare centres in Brussels, was the partner on the field. Elmer provides day-care (0-3,5 y) in Brussels in 4 different locations, all in quite vulnerable areas. Respect for diversity and parent involvement are some of the key elements in the vision and the daily work in all the Elmer locations. (More info: [Elmer](#))

The overall view of Elmer and VBJK is that participation is not just an ad hoc activity or action, but that participative work with parents is a process of building trust, dialogue, reciprocity and action, in many different shapes and forms and on many different levels. It is, in other words a commitment of effort, not a commitment of result.<sup>31</sup>

Starting from the idea that educating and caring for children is a shared responsibility of parents and the wider society both, the notion of parent participation has been more and more developed in practice and has now been structurally embedded in recent legislation and guidelines. (decree of 20/04/2012 into force as of 01/04/2014, art. 3 and 6). Working for and with parents and families is also a major part in the 2014 pedagogical framework for childcare for babies and toddlers. In this framework, which serves as an inspiring guideline for practice, parents are considered as the partners by excellence for the ECEC professionals. This way, the involvement of parents becomes a necessary part of delivering high quality services. Important to keep in mind, is that involving parents starts with the professional; it should not depend on the parent's initiative.

The vision states:

"Childcare for babies and toddlers in Flanders helps to ensure that every child feels good about himself, is challenged and feels connected to the people and his surrounding environment. Childcare wants to shape children's education together with the parents. At the same time it aims to support parents in their child-rearing responsibilities. A childcare facility wants to be a place where every child, parent and practitioner feels at home. In this way it helps realise equal opportunities for children, as well as for adult men and women. Embedded in warm relationships with others, childcare wants all children to be able to grow up into adults who are confident in life and contribute to a learning, democratic society, where people treat each other and their environment in a respectful and sustainable manner."

## Planning of the testing – methodology

During the Equap project, several practitioners from Elmer got engaged in jobshadowing activities. Elmer sent out 15 team members from all 4 settings and received colleagues from Slovenia, Italy and Sweden. Within Elmer this was thoroughly prepared: focus areas were discussed, clarified, partner countries were discussed and chosen, and the practitioners knew what the jobshadowing would be about, what they needed to pay attention to and how they were expected to report their experiences.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Also see the Equap website for the background text on parent participation in Flanders and the qualitative indicators.

<sup>32</sup> See also the text on the methodology of jobshadowing

As an overall impression, we can state that the jobshadowing has been a great success. All jobshadowers mention how it has given them a boost, both professionally and personally, how it made them appreciate their work in ECEC more and how a change of perspective helps them in reflecting on their own practice.

There was no agreement among all research partners on the actual method by which the testing would be monitored<sup>33</sup>. VBJK chose for the **method of 'critical friend'**, interviewing and reflecting with the coordinators and practitioners on what they learned during the jobshadowing, what practices inspired them, which practices they would test in their own child centres and how this unfolded. VBJK also did some focus groups with parents, who have children in the Elmer centres<sup>34</sup>. This way, VBJK could follow Elmer staff in their work from a distance, while having in-depth conversations with them on the issue of parent participation and how to shape this and encouraging them in the testing phase.

Shortly after the return of the Elmer jobshadowers, a meeting was organised (March 4<sup>th</sup> 2016) with everyone working at all Elmer locations (63 people): coordinators, coaches, child practitioners, administrative and logistical staff.

In the morning, after an introduction of the Equap project and situating the job shadowing, the jobshadowers all showcased their lively presentations on what they had seen in the partner countries. In the afternoon, the different ideas and actions were discussed within the whole group of employees of every Elmer location, looking into what they found interesting or inspiring. During this brainstorm, possible actions were considered: what could be 'imported', what could be set up, what seemed interesting to try out with the parents and families of Elmer?

Some actions were planned in all 4 locations, others only in one specific location, but all locations have been adding specific modalities of the participation actions and ideas. Common actions that were selected were: communication and group talks with parents about their feelings and emotions at the start of the day-care, involving parents in the pedagogical themes and the gathering of recycled materials. In each Elmer setting other initiatives were developed, in which parents participate such as: the new building project, the garden project, the library project and intergenerational exchange with a home for the elderly in the neighbourhood.

As this was decided by Elmer teams, it may seem that parents had no say in this at the start. However, not all the chosen topics and actions fell from the sky. On some issues, parents had already made comments or formulated suggestions. E.g. in one location, a questionnaire for the parents (Nov. 2015) had already revealed some discontent on the uninspired outer space and on some elements of communication. Also, some comments of parents, lead to certain choices of activities. A remarkable example was given in one of the locations, where a parent commented on the difference between the Elmer policy and reality, stating that she 'didn't really feel after all that she, as a parent, was the first educator', although this is one of the guiding principles of Elmer. (Note that it already shows how parents do have the space and feel comfortable enough to give a comment like this and that they are in fact informed on the main drivers in the work of Elmer! This also shows how parents do have the feeling that anything can be discussed in Elmer, that this is the style in which they work.) This shows how there can be a link between parent's input and the choice of activities by the Elmer teams.

Other activities were not induced by parents (such as the library) but were deemed important within Elmer's approach to start working on and trying to involve parents anyway.

Throughout the tested activities, it will be described how they were actually designed (with or without parents) and how the action will take place (most of them had not started on the time of the first interviews).

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<sup>33</sup> Liepaja meeting, Feb 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Interviews on May 18th and 27th 2016 (coordinators) , august 25th 2016 (practitioners). Focus groups with parents on Sept. 13<sup>th</sup> , 14<sup>th</sup> , 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> 2016.

But, in whatever initiative, in whatever phase, the issue is also whether a participative climate is created or not. It is only in such a climate, that parents will be interested, confident and trustful enough to actually engage. E.g. offering a warm and welcoming start with a through policy and practice on familiarisation, may not seem to be a parent participation action, but it does create the needed climate for parents to get involved in the ECEC centre and can influence the way childcare takes care of their child. After hearing about the different actions and initiatives, we also think that it is not always necessary to have parents participate in all four phases to get meaningful and authentic parent participation. E.g. at first sight, buying the new building seems to be a decision of the board of Elmer. But looking at this more closely we see parent's input in several ways. First of all parents are part of the board as such. Also, parents had been complaining about the difficult physical accessibility for strollers at the current entrance. Other parents had been disappointed because the centre was full and there was no place for their child. Those are all reasons that also lead to the decision to buy another building for Elmer. Once this decision was taken, parents (and staff) are involved in every other step of the way. All in all, meaningful participation remains possible throughout all the phases in this process, even when parents were not fully involved from the very start. They can change things along the way, they can decide not to get involved (meaning that the team may have to reconsider their choices) or they can start new initiatives on their own, based on other experiences and activities.

## Job shadowing and lessons learned

Child practitioners and coordinators of Elmer went jobshadowing in the partner countries and implemented some practices in their own centres.

In a project like involving parents in the recycle project, it became clear that this is a very low threshold practice. All parents can join in. it is a quite simple but strong initiative and with a little bit of creativity you can actually do a lot. The experience was also that, the more recycled materials were being used (for play, for decoration...), the more the parents felt inclined to bring materials from home. Other projects, like the garden project, will be running for a longer time and can be more demanding to join (eg. Meetings in the weekend, doing the actual gardening) so it is not surprising that a smaller number of parents will commit themselves to it. But some of them really do and they are a great asset.

## Facilitating conditions are vital

The jobshadowing had people look at the working conditions and context in the partner countries as well and also made them think about possible supporting factors. On this level as well, changes in their own workplace were considered or actually implemented.

- Within Elmer an investment was made in the workforce, by employing a new team member, who will be moving among the locations to step in where needed (a 'butterfly') in order to allow others to get some child free hours to work on e.g. documentation, child reports, preparing the satisfaction talks with parents....
- Being even more aware of keeping a climate in which all questions are allowed. This depends a lot on the daily contacts with parents.
- View parents as critical friend: comments may not always be easy to receive...but they can be a real gift. Get Elmer to review certain habits and ways of work. Learning how to consider critical comments as a surplus.
- Embedding specific actions into more general policies within Elmer will add to the sustainability of the changes. E.g. the group talks with parents fit into the larger policy on communication and will be continued.
- Get the correct professional in charge, in control (e.g. video's: the child carers choose what to film).

- Decent evaluation is needed in order to really learn.
- Keep the discussion with the practitioners going, allow them to negotiate, to make counter suggestions.
- No parent participation without team participation.
- Communication is essential and must always be done in different ways: daily chats when they bring and pick up their children, newsletters, posters, mail, regular reminders, one-on-one conversations. Sometimes the effects are different when a child practitioner informs or invites parents (they see each other every day) or when this is done by the coordinator (sometimes it can seem more important if she/he takes the time to talk about an initiative to parents). Every type of initiative needs its own set of communication. A poster can serve as a reminder or a first step. Child practitioners can speak to parents about an initiative on a regular basis after it has been introduced by the responsible ...More and more the child practitioners are becoming the main communication channel towards parents, supported by the responsible. But while the communication between parents and the practitioners will most often focus on their child, the talks with the responsible can sometimes cover the broader picture. The responsible can also add more flexibility (e.g. in working hours)
- Certain projects (e.g. the garden project, the new building) are long lasting projects with many implications on different levels: it will require quite some time and energy to keep the motivation going, to install the feeling of co-ownership and finding some pride in getting the project done.
- Certain interventions or facilities can help parents to get convinced of certain actions or to take away their reservations or concerns. E.g. the garden will change the use of outer space and the children will be able to go outside more. To counter some concerns of parents, Elmer West and North bought extra jackets, rubber boots etc. for the children to facilitate and stimulate outside play as much as possible. Or, they will show how fun playing in the sand can be, countering the idea that sand is dirt.
- Keep an eye on variation and diversity of activities and initiatives, so that all types of parents can join. Also be aware of the parent's possibilities (e.g. don't ask them to bring expensive materials, but ask for used toilet rolls – linked to recycling project).
- It is also important to show parents results on a regular basis. If they bring in recycled material, show them what has been done with it. (E.g. showing some artwork will make both the parents and the child very proud.)
- The jobshadowing has raised considerations on the importance of 'child free hours' and of sufficient resources to invest in projects. While this is true, it was also noticed that you can do a lot with a little as well, when there is enough motivation and support. Instead of looking for reasons not to engage in a project, the jobshadowing also gave the opportunity to turn this around and to go and look what can be done in your own working context.

## Some observations

- Goals and ambitions: Being over-ambitious can cause a feeling of drowning, being overwhelmed with all that has to be done. Many seemingly 'little' things always get bigger in the end or lead to other actions and projects. Beware to take care of yourself, beware of the dangers in doing 'too much', and stay attentive for colleagues during the process of adding new ideas and actions. Enjoy enthusiastic reactions but keep both feet on the floor: when introducing a new project (big or small) all the other daily work remains mostly the same and also needs to be done. Try to limit things to what is feasible, not expand to what is 'dreamable'. Ensure that the core business is still being done as it should be.
- Communication is key: Keep the internal communication flow open, listen to comments and whispers (and also to what is NOT being said). Team members in Elmer are used to



speaking their mind but give them more support where needed, explain why certain new approaches or actions are being introduced. Point explicitly to what the Equap project can bring for the team members, for the children, for the parents.

- Agreements and follow-up on plans: regularly remind colleagues on what was decided (make the video fragments, look what is in the recycling boxes...)
- Participation for all: when working on parent participation, you shouldn't forget about the participation of all the people in the team either. Just as parents need to be welcomed and be able to feel 'at home' in Elmer, team members need that too. They do need to get opportunities to participate. This is a responsibility of the location responsible. One does not simply get 'lucky' with parents who want to engage: it is also the professionals who facilitate and support such engagement, who have a welcoming and respectful attitude, which makes parents confident enough and happy to join in. It is also the team that will look out for the less 'engaging' parents, the ones who are not that verbally strong, the ones who live in more vulnerable situations... And, remember that participation remains a free choice; don't add pressure or a sense of obligation, but provide a climate in which parents can join and participate, if they want to and in ways they feel comfortable in. Not all parents need to feel that they have to participate in everything. Some are more interested to join the board, others will redesign the garden and others again, will not feel interested to join at all. That is not a problem as such, but they need to get the opportunity and support to participate if they wish to do so.
- Importing actions and ideas: avoid copy-pasting projects you have seen, always 'translate' it to your own context to keep it viable and long lasting. E.g. the group talk with parents (Forli) is more difficult in Belgian ECEC as there is no collective date of entry. Some parents will indeed be very new to the centre, while others may have had their babies there for a couple of months. This can have advantages (more opportunity to share experiences) and disadvantages (different situations among parents). Some types of parent participation were mentioned during the jobshadowing but not really seen or experienced (e.g. camping trip with fathers) which makes it hard to try out in your own centre.
- Domino effect: the different focus areas can be covered within one project. It is sometimes great to see how just suggesting an activity or mentioning an issue, can get parents to react actively or to see how one activity links to another or results in more new actions.
- Professional support and development: Child practitioners are getting more and more used to and appreciative of the presence of parents on the work floor. When they are well supported, when they know what they are doing and why, the presence of parents is no longer a threat or considered as being peeping toms. It remains important to frame this correctly (e.g. a clear invitation for parents to join the singing moment or to come and tell stories does not mean they should tag along the whole day). Good and clear agreements avoid frustration or uncomfortable feelings, both with the child practitioners as with the parents ('Would it be OK for me to leave now?'). Child practitioners are more and more supported in asking questions and not being judgemental. When parents arrive, it is useful to have them do the tour and really show parents everything (not only the play area, but also the kitchen, the bathroom...). Let parents ask whatever they want and have the child practitioners explain how their work is done. Working with parent's questions, concerns, uncertainties has a continuous influence on the daily work and it often works out for the best.

## Testing the practices

As decided on the team day, several practices were chosen to be tested, some in all 4 Elmer locations, some in one location. All designed with a clear plan, a set timing, an implantation phase and evaluation afterwards.

Elmer city	Elmer South	Elmer West	Elmer North
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Parent cafe: talking about feelings at the start of childcare (parents of babies).</li> <li>- Involving parents in pedagogical themes</li> <li>- Involving parents in gathering recycled materials</li> <li>- Looking for connections with the community.</li> </ul>			
Intergenerational activity with a home for the elderly	Participative Library project.	Participative garden project	Participation in designing the new building.

FOCUS AREA	Activity
1. Learning about the family	Parent talk on feelings at the start of ECEC (Forli)
2. Communication	Parent talk on feelings at the start of ECEC (Forli)
3. Doing together – decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recycling material (Porto, Forli)</li> <li>- Getting parents involved on specific issues (Porto)</li> <li>- Library (Forli)</li> <li>- Planning the new building (Porto, Slovenska Bistrica)</li> <li>- Garden (Porto, Slovenska Bistrica)</li> </ul>
4. Cooperative and collaborative partnerships with the community	Links to and exchanges in the community (Slovenska Bistrica)

## What do parents say?

During focus groups, parents could elaborate on their views and feelings about parent participation in the Elmer centres<sup>35</sup>. In total, during the different sessions in all 4 Elmer locations, around 20 parents joined the focus groups. Some of them took part in the testing activities, others didn't.

Overall, all parents expressed how Elmer makes them feel welcome and respected and how they have the feeling that they can always ask anything. The general comment is that they feel secure that their children are in good hands and that the staff take their questions, worries, suggestions into account. Some clearly feel comfortable enough to also comment quite frankly on certain decisions, which they don't agree with.

They all mention how much is invested in communication, on a daily basis and in many different ways (e.g. Photos, leaflets, family wall, daily talk....). Strong communication is the basis for trust.

There seems to be a lot of mutual trust and one mother said that 'Elmer is like a second home to us'.

On participating in activities parents notice that it is more than just having fun. It brings them more insights in how Elmer functions but also it gives them an opportunity to connect with other parents, see and exchange about different styles of raising children, different habits etc. Given the fact that Elmer has

<sup>35</sup> Focus groups with parents on Sept. 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> 2016.

families from many different socio-economical and cultural backgrounds, parents also like it to meet other families who e.g speak the same language, or come from the same country as they do. At the same time, others mentioned that they sometimes regret that this also leads to certain 'clicks' during the activities. This example, again, makes it very clear how hard it is sometimes to meet all parents' expectations.

Not all parents participate in all activities but that is not a problem. Some are too busy with work and take part in activities outside working hours, some join almost all activities, but they all appreciate that the activities are organised. One parent says it is good that there are several activities on different times, so that you can at least join some of them or you get a choice.

Most parents are very happy with the way Elmer takes care of their children. They say they can tell as their child is happy and comfortable at Elmer. Some also mention that showing their involvement in Elmer also reflects on their child: they feel better when they can see and feel that their parents trust Elmer, even if the parents aren't present all day. Some parents also had issues (e.g. letting a baby cry too long) or felt uncomfortable about things at first, but even then they say that they can always discuss about their worries with the staff. They mention that there is definitely the willingness to take their concerns into consideration and to adapt their work accordingly, if possible. This open mindedness and willingness to negotiate seems very appreciated.

Parents also accept that things at Elmer can work differently than they do at home. Some parents even say that they like that, so that their children learn from that. That they learn to behave differently in different contexts (e.g. crawling up on the table is OK at home, not in the childcare centre.) or learn to share and get along with other children.

E.g. the parent café, talking about emotions at the start of the childcare, was a successful event. Parent who participated just loved the video footage of their child, giving them a chance to be 'a fly on the wall'. They appreciate how the Elmer staff do understand how hard it can be to leave your young child in the care of others and that it takes time to build a bond of trust.

## Evaluation

- Some practices went so well that they will be continued (e.g. parent cafe)
- Involving parents more can be felt as threatening or controlling but it can also feel very rewarding for the practitioners (see interviews)
- Practices that may not seem to be very 'participative' for parents (e.g. working with recycled materials), do get parents more involved as they can see what their children have been doing with the materials they had brought into the centre. Or, some parents stayed for a while to make something together with their child. Given the fact that this material is 'for free', all parent could bring this (no financial barrier).
- The more staff communicates with parents, the more parents feel at ease and will communicate more as well. It adds to the level of trust.
- Talking about children, can give practitioners more relevant information on how to work with them (how to comfort a child, better understanding of what he/she likes to do, how they like to be put to bed...) In this way, getting parent's input is a support for the practitioner rather than a burden.
- More involvement of parents also brings more explicit appreciation for the practitioners and their work (for some a surprise)

Effect on quality:

- Parents' appreciation feels good and strengthens the practitioner. It also creates more openness towards each other
- More specific attention for each child, thanks to more specific info of parents
- Information on the child gets exchanged and can be used
- Input of parents on more structural issues of the work can improve the quality of the centre in general

## Valorisation process

After testing some practices, 10 practices were selected by all Equap partners<sup>36</sup> to use on a valorisation process with other ECEC organisations. It took some time to edit the practices in a given format and to get them translated and ready to use for the valorisation partners.

Eight organisations joined this process, representing about 30 child care centres in the Flemish community.

At a first meeting (Feb. 8<sup>th</sup> 2017) the Equap project was presented and information was shared on the job shadowing and the tested practices. The content of the draft toolbox was presented and the goal of the process was explained. Partners got to understand what we would expect from them: use the practice sheets and the focus area information, see if the material can be easily used and implemented, give suggestions for improvement and so forth.

On May 22<sup>nd</sup> we gathered again to exchange their experiences. Most partners had either tried some of the practices or started discussing on how they could best proceed with this. For some, parent participation is almost part of their DNA, for others it is still quite new to get parents more involved in their work. Here, the practices did inspire them and some initiatives were started.

Summarised, these were the main comments and suggestions given by the valorisation partners:

- Need for a clearer focus on who the toolkit is for
- Add an overall page on recurring steps (instead of repeating them): plans-preparation-action-reflection-evaluation-continuation
- Most practices do not involve the parents from the very start (e.g. Defining the goal)
- Too much text - Need for more photo's (even film?) or quotes. Text can become too rigid, a 'recipe'.
- Focus area texts are too difficult, 'translation' needed by coordinator
- Reflection and evaluation are vital
- Working with parents is not an 'additional' thing to do, should be part of the daily work and routine
- Sometimes irrelevant details
- Overall risk that the result becomes more important than the process
- The essence of parent participation should be presented more clearly and explicitly

The main conclusions of the valorisation process were:

- The content of the toolbox can surely be inspiring

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<sup>36</sup> Brussels meeting, Jan. 2017

- Offering parent participation practices in some kind of 'recipe' approach will not work. Practices need to be presented in a way that an ECEC provision can translate and adapt it to the own context, the families they serve, the way they usually work
- It is important to have a vision on parent participation, why you invest in involving parents in ECEC? The focus areas may support this.

## Multiplier event<sup>37</sup>

After the testing and valorisation, dissemination of Equap materials and content will be done June 29th to a group of practitioners in the Flemish ECEC field (childcare centres, pedagogical coaches etc.).

The programme contains:

- An introduction of the Equap projects and the outputs, linked to Flemish policy, practice, the Flemish pedagogical framework and the pedagogical quality instruments
- An illustration of the job shadowing and some tested and valorised practices
- A discussion and reflection round.

Around 30 people will attend the event and the Equap toolbox will be sent as soon it is published. (The final materials, translated and in the Equap layout, will not be ready on the date of the multiplier event).

In the 2 discussion groups, led by VBJK and Elmer, participants will be invited to exchange about their own experiences and activities on working with parents. They will also consider how inspirational the Equap materials could be in their current work. In these discussions, it will be very helpful to have the Elmer practitioners present who actually took part in the jobshadowing and testing, as well as some of the valorisation partners.

## Main conclusions and challenges

- The impact of the jobshadowing has been quite bigger than we may had expected. The practitioners all witnessed that it was such a boost and that it made them grow as professionals. This method is now also being used among provisions in Flanders. It does seem like the jobshadowing had been the real revelation in this project.
- It is also very clear that 'importing' practices is not a cut-and-paste work. Practices from other settings need to be adapted to the context of the ECEC provision, with all its own particularities.
- Parent participation is more than simply organising an activity with parents every now and then. It is basically a democratic process, which requires constantly investing in an overall participative climate throughout the service. If not, activities as such will not really lead to meaningful and authentic participation.
- The Equap project has increased the explicit attention for the added value of parent participation. It is an invitation to make the shift from the overall principle of parents being the first educator to everyday reality in ECEC (and seeing that this is not always as easy as it seems)
- It is important to take into consideration the diversity among parents. This diversity can be seen on many different levels: socio-economical situation, level of education of the parent, cultural background, views on education and family life, expectations of childcare, religion....

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<sup>37</sup> Given to time restraints, we needed to finish this tekst before the multiplier event.

## Additional material

### Liepaja document as inspiration for the monitoring of the testing phase

#### **Some takeaways from the Liepaja meeting for all Equap research partners:**

- It has become clear how rich and valuable the Job Shadowing (JS) method is and how practitioners did in fact learn from each other on more than only the EQUAP issue of Parent Participation (PP). VBJK and several of the jobshadowers feel that we should not let this go to waste and add this method to the toolbox as such.
- Importance of time, process, reflection...
- For the choice of what initiative or action of PP that could/should be tested, the input from both the jobshadowers and the parents is needed. Bring in the parent's point of view by next meeting.
- The testing of practices will be happening in cooperation with the researchers who will monitor the testing process
- The researchers will also develop the research-based guidelines to add to the toolkit (adding info from Porto and Slovenia papers, analysis of the JS and results of the testing)

#### **What was discussed to get in the research?**

- Conclusions of the JS and the testing
- Link it to existing text of Massimo (Ideation, design, decision, action)
- Individual interviews? Focus groups?...
- Focus on the PP (for now?)
- Need for input from practitioners as well as from parents

What did we see? How did practices get transferred and implemented? How can we move towards 'definitions' of 'good' practice (use the term inspiring practice?)? Discussion going back and forth on what research methods to use, on feasibility...ending with a minimal agreement on what to do next:

- 1 semi-structured interview with 3 practitioners. See draft questions below, also to be used during the monitoring process and the evaluation at the end.
- Participating countries decide on how they will question and involve parents and add this in a report per country (Most will use focus groups, some will use questionnaire). VBJK adds some questions here that could be used either way.
- We finally did NOT decide anything on how we will monitor the testing process as it moves along. Veerle suggested the 'critical friend' method: the researchers meeting with the ECEC practitioners on a regular basis to see how it goes, to give support, to add critical questions...this requires about 3 meetings minimum.

#### **Draft questions for semi-structured interviews:**

It is important to frame this interview at the start: explain why you do the interview, why it is important to document the JS experience and the transferability of the tested practise and initiatives.

We talked about possible structures (e.g. the Italian scheme of ideation-design-decision-action or the focus areas as they were used in the JS) but didn't really decide on a specific one. To be able to use all the information in a comparable way, it may be most practical to use the focus areas as the jobshadowers are probably more familiar with it.

Throughout the interview, questions relate to what they have seen on the JS, but also on how they work in their own centre and how this can be influenced, changed – or not at all – by what they have seen and experienced. What was really inspiring and what wasn't? What has been meaningful to take with them to their own context? Where they experienced differences, or had some kind of 'cultural shock'?

→ Doing together, decision making, partnership, co-ownership

Here we give some suggestions for questions. Everyone could look what suits him/her best to use. Possibly, one may prefer more general, reflective questions in relation to their role as ECEC professionals in encouraging parents to engage and participate.

More concrete questions could be:

- Have you seen or do you know of any practices/methods/initiatives on how parents and practitioners can be connected and meet with each other? If so, what is or could be the added value of these initiatives?
- Do you know or did you learn more about ways to get all parents interested in such initiatives? Do all parents take part? If no, why do you think some parents do not participate? Are both mothers and fathers always invited and if so, how?
- Have you seen or experienced if and how such initiatives are viewed by the parents? What do they think about that? How does that make them feel?
- Have you seen or experienced if and how such initiatives can be fun, important and/or supportive for parents? How do you know?

The same questions could be asked about parents meeting or getting together among themselves. Do you know about practices or initiatives that are set up with this goal? Which ones? Can you tell what parents partake in these activities and what parents don't? Do you think you can explain this? How do parents experience these opportunities to meet other parents? Do they find that nice, reassuring, supportive, and important?

- Have you seen or experienced if and how parents can be more involved in the policy of the centre/school? How they can discuss about the pedagogical vision, maybe add to it or comment on it? Could it be possible that they make suggestions to change elements of this vision?
- How can you know whether parents really understand the pedagogical vision? How can you inform all parents?
- Have you seen examples of certain topics that have been discussed by parents? How can ECEC services get parents involved on certain pedagogical issues? How can these discussions take place (formal/informal, at set times or not, in specific working groups or not...) How do parents know if their opinions or views are taken into account? Do they get any feedback?

→ Communication: sensitive, respectful, reciprocal

- What have you seen or experienced in the different ways of communication with parents? (These can be formal as well as informal) Can you explain about what types or manners of communicating would be sensitive, respectful and reciprocal? Do you know about good examples of this?

What types of communication and information that have you seen would be important for parents? How can you tell?

- How have you experienced that communication is, or can be, in fact reciprocal?
- When parents are invited for an activity, a talk, an event, how is this done? Have you seen or do you use different methods and if so, which ones?

*(For an interview, you could continue on the example that is given or go over several types of communication. If e.g. satisfaction interviews are not used, more can be said about the informal daily talk)*

- Have you witnessed how the daily contacts with parents take place? What happens during these moments? How can you use the information, or the questions you receive from parents? Do you know what parents think about these moments?
- Have you seen methods on getting to know parents are satisfied or not? Who is in charge of that (evaluation talks, satisfaction talks, follow-up talks...) Do you know or have you learnt how parent's views can be important or how they can be a starting point for change?
- Do you know or have you seen inspiring practices on how parents and the ECEC services keep each other informed on the child's behaviour, wellbeing, acting in the group...?

→ Involvement of families, learning about the families, knowledge and appreciation
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- Have you seen or learnt anything new or inspiring on how to make parents feel welcome? And on how you can really check this? Are specific actions needed to reach all parents?
- When welcoming new families into the services, how can you make them familiar with the way you work? Do they feel this is supportive? Do you use the starting days to get an idea on what the parents expect, and if so, how? What can the parents teach you here? How can you be supportive in this transition period?
- Do you know or have you witnessed practices on how relevant information on the children's family life can be brought into the ECEC service? Have you seen whether or not this is important for parents?

→ Cooperative and collaborative partnerships within the community
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- Have you seen or experienced how links are made between the ECEC services and other organisations in the community? Which ones? Have parents been involved in making these links and if so, how? Do you think this can be important for the servicing of parents? Why?
- Do you know or have you seen concrete activities with other organisations? If so, did parents consider this useful, fun, important, supportive?

→ *General question at the end:* looking at your own practice, and on practices that you have witnessed during the JS, do you have an idea if or how the involvement of parents can influence the quality of ECEC? Can you explain or give examples?

### **Suggestions of questions for parents:**

*(To be adapted according to the way parents are questioned (questionnaire, focus group...))*

Here as well, more general reflective questions could be used as well on how parents felt when professionals contacted them to participate, or where they would expect to see any improvement or change of practice in parent engagement.



More concrete questions could be:

- Do you feel welcome? How come? What can be done to make you feel more welcome? Do you feel at ease? Why? Why not?
- How is the atmosphere among parents and staff, among parents in general?
- At the start, how were you and your child received in the centre? How did the first days go? Did you have time with your child in the centre? Did you feel comfortable to talk about what you wanted, about your worries, about specific things on your child? Could you share your anxiety, expectations or worries? How were the reactions?
- Can you talk to practitioners regularly, daily? Is there enough time for this? Are there several ways to do this (personal contact, daily notes...) Can you talk about what is on your mind? Are there things you felt you cannot talk about? Why? What do you experience as supportive, relevant, and interesting?
- Are there any activities for parents? At the start? At certain given moments (e.g. Christmas)? On a regular basis? Do you feel invited to partake? Do you feel uncomfortable? What could be done to make parents feel at ease or interested to participate? What do these kind of activities mean to you? Are they supportive, do they make you feel more involved?
- Do you feel like your opinion or input matters? How do you feel this? Do you mostly get involved in activities (celebrations, logistical support, excursions...) or also on the level of pedagogical policy? How do you experience that the parent's input could make a difference?
- Are there possibilities to get involved on your own initiative? Or to give suggestions or raise questions?
- Have you felt supported by the service as a parent? Have you felt supported by meeting other parents?
- Does the service have any links with other services in the area? Are they visible, as an ECEC service? If so, how? What are your views on that? Have you learnt about other services you may use in the community? Did you find this supportive?

More detailed questions can be added depending on the activity (eg frequency, feeling that it matters (or not), feeling of really being involved and listened to...)

→ *General questions at the end:* do you feel that you have a place in the ECEC service as a parent? Do you feel involved, in the daily practice or in the policy of the service? If so, how come? If not, would you like to get more involved and what should be done to support you better in this area? Do you think that, as a parent, you can build on improving the quality of the service, with the staff, the team, the manager? (Examples?)

## Job shadowing from and to Brussels, Elmer

From	Jobshadowing in
Sonja Cassiman, pedagogical coordinator Elmer Latifa Bouhoute, location responsible N	Linköping (Jan. 18–22 2016)
Bouchra Chfira,, location responsible W Meral Demiral, child practitioner W Astrid Hinderyckx, child practitioner S Olowatoyin Olufowora, child practitioner N	Slovenska Bistrica (Feb. 1-5 2016)
Gerd Lannoo, location responsible S Saida Bouhoute, pedagogical coach S Emily Mwaluma, child practitioner S	Forli (Nov 30 – Dec 4 2015)

Faith Uwubamwun, child practitioner W	
Narimane Sidali, location responsible C Carolina Jose Bamba, child practitioner S	Porto (Jan 25-29 2016)

Kelly Vercammen, head practitioner S Zinep Boutaib, child practitioner W Haleh Mandegar, child practitioner N	Liepaja (Nov 16-20 2015)
Eva Kohne, Mojca Lorencic, Mojca Rankl, Suzana Mlakar from Slovenska Bistrica Helena Fantini, Patrizia Morena from Forli	Brussels (Feb 8-12 2016)
Asa Jonsson from Linköping	Brussels (Feb 29 –March 4 2016)

## Questionnaire for the coordinator interviews, as used by VBJK

Main issue is how to work with and for parents, aiming at quality improvement, with what we learned from the JS?

- Ideation: who brought which ideas and practices? How was this considered and who discussed these?
- Design: who was involved in designing the activities and how did this go?
- Decision: how, when and by whom was the decision taken on what practices would be tested where? What were the reasons for this choice and what was defined as the goal(s)?
- Action: how will you actually get to work? What is already in place? What is planned, with whom and how? What team members are involved? Are the parents involved? If so, how?
- Did you notice any change on the work with parents or the vision on parent involvement after the JS?
- How did the work with parents change, strengthened?
- What is or could be the added value of the JS, short and long term?
- How did the choice of testing practices align with the already existing practices in Elmer?
- Have you noticed that more, or other groups of parents have gotten involved now?
- How did you get parents willing to join?
- Do you think that little, rather ad hoc activities (e.g. coffee in the morning, gardening...) can help improve parent's involvement and participation? Do you consider this at the very start of the activity? How?
- Do you check for added value of the activity? Among the team? With the parents? How?

## Questionnaire for the practitioners interviews, as used by VBJK

- You went JS. How was that? What did you learn? Did you get enough support?
- What were your experiences like? What touched you? What did you bring home, in your mind, in your practice?
- Did you learn new things about working with parents or the added value of parent participation? Did your view change on this subject? Do you think that involving parents (more) can add to the quality of your work? How?
- Did the focus areas help you in any way?
- What has been supportive in the JS? How?
- What were the reactions of colleagues who stayed at home? How did you respond to that?
- What practices were chosen to test and how was this decision made? How is it planned and how did it unfold?

- Do you work differently with parents now? What do you think they feel about the practices? How do they convey their views and ideas to you?
- Why would you do these efforts towards parents? Why is this important for you? Does it affect your work with children and if so, how?
- What are the effects of the tested practices?
- Do you think you may connect more to the wider community now? Why and how?

## Questionnaire for the focus groups with parents, as used by VBJK

Explain the goal of the conversation, and the confidentiality. Conversation topics relating to the focus areas. Some possible questions:

- Questions on whether or not they felt welcome in Elmer from the start. What made that happen (or not)? Do you feel at ease? Do you trust the people in the center?
- Is there enough communication? Do you feel that you know how Elmer works?
- Do you feel that your values and ideas on educating your child are respected? Can you share your worries? Do you feel that practitioners can adapt their routine to what you find important (e.g on food, sleeping habits, language...).
- Do you get information on your child? Throughout and/or on specific occasions?
- Do you feel involved in how Elmer works? Can you give suggestions, comments, and ideas? How do complaints, conflicts or discussions get discussed and solved?
- Are their parent activities and how do you get invited? Do you partake in these activities? How do you feel about those? Do you think that is important?
- Do you get in touch with other parents? Do you value that and if so, why?
- Did Elmer introduce you to other services in the area? Is that helpful?

## Valorisation partners

- Kleine Berg, childcare centre, established, organised and managed by parents
- Minimabo, Ukelele and Nieuw Kinderland, child care centres in Brussels, investing in accessibility for vulnerable groups
- Elief, childcare centre with specific offer for occasional and crisis care
- Mezenneestje, childcare centre in Aalst, investing in accessibility for vulnerable groups
- City of Ghent, pedagogical guidance centre, coaching over 20 childcare centres of the city
- Effect, 3 childcare centres in Kortrijk

# The testing of the practices and their results - Slovenia

**Prepared by:** Jerneja Jager, Educational Research Institute

## Context

Cooperation among parents and ECEC centres is an important aspect of quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). *Zakon o vrtcih* (Official gazette of Republic Slovenia, 100/2005) explicitly requires cooperation with families. ECEC centres have to list forms and programs of cooperation with families in their yearly work plan. Parents have the right to participate in planning of life and work in an ECEC centre and in children's classes in agreement with ECEC staff. They have also the right to participate in educational work, while respecting the professional autonomy of an ECEC centre.

In Slovenia, ECEC centres' yearly work plans, also concerning parent involvement and participation, are developed in September (at the beginning of a school year). Since testing phase started in April (in the middle of the school year), the timing of testing was not the most appropriate time for introducing new approaches/activities to parents. Additionally, 2 ECEC teachers worked with a group that left to elementary school, so they already had many activities planned for the last months of the school year (April, May and June). Taking all this into consideration, the process of testing and implementation of practices was adapted according to the existing plans ECEC teachers already had.

## Planing of the testing

In March 2016, when all teachers came back from jobshadowing, ERI organised a meeting with ECEC staff from Vrtec Otona Župančiča Slovenska Bistrica. We have jointly decided that they go back to their groups and organise a meeting with parents in order to present them the aims of the EQUAP project, experiences and examples from jobshadowing, and goals of the testing phase. The goal of the meeting with parents was also to get an insight, in which focuses areas parents would like to deepen their involvement, and through which activities. Those activities were then implemented in April, May and June 2016.

In the new school year (2016/2017), they again organised a meeting with parents asking them about their ideas, initiatives and needs, in order to incorporate them in yearly plan (at the very beginning of the school year). This was even more important for ECEC teachers that started to work with a new group of children and parents.

It was also agreed that the teacher will transfer their knowledge from jobshadowing and testing phase to other colleagues who were not actively involved in the project by organising a professional group on the topic of parent participation, and by sharing their experiences by peer-to-peer observations with reflective discussion after.

Documentation of practices and reflecting about transferred activities were stressed as a core of this process.

## Involvement of parents

Every ECEC teacher organised a meeting with a group of parents in order to introduce them the EQUAP project more in depth, experiences and examples from jobshadowing, what were the goals of the testing phase and where and how parents' role is foreseen. The goal of the meeting was also to get an insight, in which focus areas among 4 parents wanted to deepen their participation, and through which activities among those, which ECEC teachers had presented to them. ECEC teachers had developed also a survey, that was sent out to parents, asking parents about their current satisfaction with the work of teachers in the area of parent participation, and what could be improved.

After the testing period, a focus group with parents was organised in July 2016, aiming at evaluation of the testing phase and tested practices.

## Monitoring and evaluation - methodology

ECEC teachers developed a questionnaire with examples (practices) from jobshadowing they wanted to test. Parents decided in which of them they would like to participate in / deepen their involvement in. Teachers adopted the chosen practices to their context and tested them together with parents and children.

An evaluation was made with parents that were involved in testing. Focus group discussion was implemented with 5 parents. Focus group discussion was divided in 3 parts:

- *'Introductory' questions:*
  - How do you feel as a parent in your ECEC centre?
  - What is the general climate among ECEC staff and parents in your ECEC setting?
  - Are you allowed to openly communicate about your wishes, fears, expectations etc. for your child/yourself as a parent?
- *Questions about 4 focus areas:*
  - Do you find particular focus area important? Why?
  - Do you think that identified focus areas are implemented in the group of children, in which your child is involved in? Give examples.
  - What would you like more in particular focus area?
- *Final questions:*
  - Which focus area did you find most important?
  - Do any of the described focus areas seem more important than others? Which and why?
  - In the frame of which focus area would you like more activities to be implemented?
  - Do you think that you as a parent can contribute to higher quality of ECEC centre? How?

An evaluation of testing was carried out by ERI in September 2016. ERI has developed in-depth questionnaire (with open questions) for ECEC staff. The questionnaire was divided in three parts:

- *introduction:*
  - how they have plan testing of chosen practices,
  - how parents were involved,
  - why certain way of involving parents were chosen,

- details about the group of children they were working with;
- *questions about particular focus area:*
  - which practices did they test and why particularly those,
  - how the testing of a particular practice had changed their knowledge, practice and values,
  - how change in understanding of certain focus area has influenced their further planning of activities in certain focus area;
- *final questions (for testing and jobshadowing phase):*
  - What in the testing/JS phase has the biggest value for you?
  - How did you, as a professional, grow because of the experience with testing/JS?
  - What can ECEC centre gain with your experiences in testing/JS?
  - Which challenges did you encounter in the phase of testing/JS? How did you overcome them?
  - What is still your challenge in the field of parent participation? Why?

In December 2016, ERI has organized a reflection meeting with the ECEC staff who were involved in JS and testing. Questions were mainly focused on changes that occurred to ECEC staff as professionals during JS and testing, for example:

- *How JS and testing had changed you as a professional?*
- *What would you change if you would be involved in the JS and testing once more? Why?*
- *Was there any impact on other colleagues? What kind of impact?*
- *How did you understand family involvement and parent participation before JS and testing, and how do you understand them now?*
- *How would you evaluate your practice on parent participation after JS and testing experience? What are your strong areas?*
- *Plans for further development on parent participation issue.*

The data from the focus group interview with ECEC teachers were analysed by ERI, the main conclusions are presented below ('Reflection about jobshadowing and testing phase').

## Testing phase

The testing itself was the most intensive during April, May and June 2016. ECEC staff have tested the following practices:

FOCUS AREA	Activity
5. Learning about the family	Parent café to share emotions about the first year in ECEC (BE)
6. Communication	Parent café to share emotions about the first year in ECEC (BE) + all the workshops
7. Doing together – decision making	Workshops (Mini graduation, gardening, "Mlinček" run.)
8. Cooperative and collaborative partnerships with the community	Intergenerational exchange in the neighbourhood

# Evaluation of tested practices

## Evaluation with parents

Evaluation with parents took place in July 2016. ERI conducted a focus group interview with 5 parents that were involved in testing (data were analysed by ERI using qualitative content analysis (Vogrinc, 2008)). Parents came from different units of Preschool Oton Župančič Slovenska Bistrica, so they represented a good reference for practices that were tested, however it was hard for them to evaluate only practices that ECEC staff brought from jobshadowing – they were looking at parent participation from broader perspective (based on their experiences with the ECEC centre in general). They looked at *parent participation as an approach*, and not as a project their group is involved in.

In general, parents feel very well accepted in the ECEC centre. They regularly communicate with ECEC staff, they are asked to propose their suggestions. They find ECEC staff very open, accessible, however they agree it depends from teacher to teacher. Climate in ECEC centre is respectful, relationships among parents and ECEC staff are professional and pleasant.

Parents found all 4 focus areas important, and expressed that all four are intertwined, however the basis for all is 'Communicating with the family'. They exposed that communication is crucial, especially in situations of e.g. shared custody, illness, but also in terms of supporting child's development:

*"At the beginning, there is a shock (if information from ECEC staff is not very positive; author's note), but then you realise that this is OK, because you can step together and jointly find a solution, if you work together."*

'Learning about the family' was perceived as important, because ECEC staff needs to know in what situation a child lives, what interests him/her and his/her family in order to incorporate those information in (daily/monthly/yearly) plans. It is also important that ECEC centre organises activities/events at which families can get to know each other, exchange experiences and support each other.

'Deciding and acting together with the family' was also found as important,

*"but we are employed, it is not so simple to come to ECEC centre in the morning".*

However, parents' initiatives are taken on board, and if events are organised in the afternoons, parents can be engaged more intensively.

'Cooperating and collaborating with the community' is also important. Parents find it useful for the children that they are exposed to different information already from the early years on.

Parents think that all four focus areas are adequately 'covered' with activities and events, organised by their ECEC centre, and they would not propose any additions. However, in the anonymous questionnaire that ECEC staff had developed at the beginning of the testing phase, they expressed some points that can be further developed.

Last question was about their contribution to higher quality of ECEC centre:

*"Quality is the most reflected in the children. Communication among parents, educators, and children is important. If this is well developed, then this is it. This reflects quality, and not whether the family participates at the meetings or not."*

### Evaluation with ECEC staff

Evaluation with ECEC staff, who were actively involved in testing, took place in September 2016. ERI developed in-depth questionnaires with open questions, which were filled in by all ECEC staff, involved in testing. Data were analysed by ERI using qualitative content analysis (Vogrinč, 2008), and here are the main conclusions from this part of monitoring and evaluation phase.

After jobshadowing experience and testing of selected practices, ECEC staff feel more confident in their work, since they are more aware about the importance of involving parents in the selection of activities as well as in identifying their strong areas – all together brings more confidence to them as they are more 'equipped' with information what would interest parents and address their needs.

Also, involving parents already in selection of activities and planning was recognized as important factor for greater parent participation - this makes parents being more motivated to participate, and also brings more commitment to all involved parties.

From questionnaires, it is also noticeable that ECEC staff is now more aware that parents are a child's first educators and that ECEC staff can learn from parents the most (since parents know their child the best). Further on, instead of seeing obstacles for cooperation with parents, ECEC staff see the necessity for developing partnership with parents and to encourage parent participation from the very first day when families enter ECEC centre.

ECEC staff becomes also more aware of any kind of situations parents might be facing with, and are more aware of the needs of individual family; they also know families better due to deeper and more frequent involvement in ECEC processes. This implies also greater awareness of diversity of families and developing approaches to address and include all of them in the existing plans, approaches, relationships, decision-making processes etc. However, ECEC staff is still researching how to involve and include *all* parents, especially those who never or very rarely attend activities/events, that are offered by ECEC centre. This families are usually migrant families or families with low socio-economic status.

In terms of organizational matters of the testing period, ECEC staff is realistic that

*"...you cannot expect parent participation will be deeper and stronger after only 3 months of testing – I worked with the same group of children and their families for 5 years, and only after 5 years I can say our partnership is strong."*

It was also stressed that only 'copy-pasting' of activities that were seen in other countries during jobshadowing is not the way of transferring inspiring practices:

*"I think it is not necessary to replicate the whole activity – it is enough already if you take only one inspiring idea, which you then transfer and adapt to your context of children and families."*

Testing as a professional experience brought different impacts on ECEC staff: one became more confident in her work, other raised her competences in inclusion of families from different cultural background. Another raised the following:

*"Everyone is important – parents, children, and us, ECEC staff. Positive self-esteem of all, with who we are in everyday contact, strengthens also with our help. Activities that we are*



*developing for families and offering to families are not intended for us, but for families together with us. Because of them we are here where we are."*

## Reflection with ECEC staff about jobshadowing (JS) and testing

In December 2016, ERI organised a reflection meeting with ECEC staff, who were actively involved in testing. ERI conducted focus group interview. Data were analysed by ERI using qualitative content analysis (Vogrinc, 2008).

JS and testing gave many positive experiences to ECEC professionals, among others they have identified being more open towards families from different backgrounds, deepening understanding about parent as a first child's educator, as well as broadening means of communications in order to achieve all parents.

They have expressed the importance of being personally involved in JS and testing, the importance of personal experience going abroad and learning from colleagues in different countries. It was also pointed out that practices cannot be only replicated ('copy-pasted'), but you should find 'the essence' of the practice and transfer that essence to the context you are working it. And, if you involve parents in planning and give them opportunity to express their ideas and wishes already from the very beginning, this raise the successfulness of the activity you are planning to implement.

In terms of conditions that need to be in place for successful testing, ECEC professionals identified the importance of being ready for changes, analysis and reflection of the practice you have seen in other country, as well as analysis and reflection of your own work. Support from the management was also expressed as a very important factor, good collaboration with a colleague you are working with, and well-informed parents about the changes that you are planning to implement.

If they would be involved in testing once more, they would pay more attention to documentation, they would record activities in which they were involved in order to capture all the important details. However, they again stressed the importance of finding 'the essence' of the practice and transfer that essence to the context you are working in.

Understanding of family involvement and family participation was deepen by all ECEC teachers that were actively involved in JS and testing, and they were also successful in encouraging parents:

*"If you are excited about this topic and about the 'new' way of working with parents and encouraging them to be actively involved in the learning processes of their child, then this way of thinking and working can be easily transferred to parents, and they respond positively. But in the first place you are the one who should start this 'journey'".*

ECEC teachers had also deepen their understanding in involving all parents/families – they are not anymore satisfied with the fact, if the majority of parents came to the event, but they started to think who are the parents who did not come and why they did not come. Because, those parents are usually the ones who are representatives of different cultures, lower socio-economic status etc.:

*"Throughout the year, it is very important to organise activities and events that attract different parents/families, in order they get involved as many times as possible."*

As well as:

*“constantly checking if a parent has understood you, if he/she has received the message you wanted to pass to him/her”.*

Also, they have deepened the importance of

*“mutual communication, respectful relationship, and mutual cooperation between ECEC staff and families”.*

ECEC teachers are now

*“more aware that families are ‘individual wholes’ – you cannot say ‘this is our group of parents’, but you should be aware that every family is unique and something special, and every family needs something special. You, as an ECEC teacher, should always search for those individual approaches towards different families you are working with, in order to get them ‘on board’, engaged and follow the goal of supporting a child’s development together.”*

Furthermore,

*“if you accept and listen to a parent, you get a lot of information about a child’s development that you can include in your work in order to support a child’s development”.*

## Main conclusions and challenges

ECEC staff reported many positive changes in terms of their understanding of parent participation:

*“My opinion was that collaboration with parents can sometimes be very exhausting; today I think that this is an opportunity for exchange and sharing information, views, opinions, ideas. /.../ I see parent participation and partnership with them as many opportunities for collaboration – before, I sometimes saw many obstacles. /.../ After testing, I understand partnership with parents as an opportunity for getting to know children better. I also see my personal progress in adapting to the values and norms that are necessary for daily work.”*

Involving parents and families in ECEC daily work is also a step out of comfort zone. ECEC teacher must work with different families’ values, they should be inclusive towards all different cultures and nationalities that they are working with, every family also have their own needs and views on child development and education etc. An ECEC teacher should take into account all of those facts when encouraging and strengthening parent participation. It seems that experiences from jobshadowing and testing gave them support in being confident when stepping out of their comfort zone:

*“I am more aware now that the parent is a child’s first educator and that this is the person from whom we can learn the most, because he/she knows his/her child best. I became even more emphatic, I try to listen to parents, to hear them and to understand their potential distress.”*

In this respect, building trust among ECEC staff and families is very important, and it is recognised that trust can be established and strengthen also through encouraging parent participation:

*"By encouraging parents in different forms of participation, ECEC teacher builds trust with them and develops a positive climate. /.../ For many parents and ECEC teachers such forms of cooperation are very important, because through activities, in which parents and teachers feel comfortable, they can build mutual trust."*

There is also a recognisable impact on children that were involved in jobshadowing experience (when their teacher was hosting a colleague from another country):

*"Teachers and children, we were both enthusiastic about hosting a colleague from another country. We enjoyed in activities, and we have developed new skills and knowledge. Children have acquired more complex social skills, and establishing contact with different nationalities and cultures gave them an opportunity to experience differences among people and developing respectfulness to diversity."*

Although there are considerable changes observed in ECEC staff's understanding of parent participation, there still is some room for improvement. It seems that there is a recognisable progress in listening to families' needs, involving parents as partners in learning processes of their child, involving parents already in the planning of activities/events etc. However, no one has reported about the importance of evaluation of those processes *together with* parents. In order to encourage and develop successful partnership and involve parents as equal partners, they should be involved in all steps: planning, implementation, and evaluation and reflection.

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# Analysis and report on the enhancement and dissemination of the EQUAP Project Toolbox practices in Portugal

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This document was produced by a group of researchers involved in the EQuaP Project - Miguel Prata Gomes, Brigite Silva and Ivone Neves, from Escola Superior de Educação de Paula Frassinetti (ESEPF) of Porto, Portugal. It aims to give an account of the evaluation and enhancement work conducted by the Portuguese stakeholders in relation to the parental involvement practices presented. Practice enhancement events were held with an added objective of disseminating the project and its final products, contributing to the sustainability of the participants' (institutions/schools/teachers) parental involvement practices.

Project dissemination was based on a Training Programme, directed at early childhood education professionals, on the theme of parental involvement. Work on the Toolbox practices was undertaken at these and other events.

The evaluation and enhancement work was based on two distinct methodologies and on a diversity of data collection tools aimed at two sets of stakeholders who had different roles throughout the project: a group of privileged stakeholders with whom we worked closely; and a wider group of stakeholders also actively involved in the EQuaP Project.

The first methodology consisted of a closer and deeper collaboration with a group of privileged stakeholders selected due to their expertise and close working relationship with the research institution (ESEPF). Five institutions (twenty teachers/stakeholders) were selected and a presentation of the EQuaP project was carried out. This led to a detailed discussion/evaluation of the practices, all of which had previously been sent to each of the five institutions alongside a short open questionnaire where the stakeholders could feed in their comments

The written documents (questionnaires and notes on the stakeholder's own practices) which resulted from the evaluation carried out by these institutions, were collected, coded, and analysed qualitatively considering the following indicators: 1. clarity of speech; 2. description detail and usefulness of the contents for implementing the practice in different contexts; 3. need for images or multimedia resources to enable the visualisation of practice

implementation; 4. practice relevance to the promotion of parental involvement; 5. potential adaptability of practice to context; 6. specific improvement suggestions. The evaluation and practice enhancement work carried out focused on the indicators above, without disregarding other suggestions/ideas presented in the discussions.

It is worth noting that the comments, written by the stakeholders on the Toolbox practices' work sheets, were also the object of analysis, having produced very specific and relevant data. The collection of information from all direct discussions and exchanges was systematised into field notes and fed into this Report, providing invaluable data to inform the Toolbox's final design.

Further to the work conducted with the privileged stakeholders, in order to reach as many peers as possible, an extra methodology was added to the Toolbox's evaluation/enhancement and dissemination exercise: four Training Sessions on parental involvement were conducted, each including work on all the Toolbox practices at some stage. These sessions were attended by 121 stakeholders (teachers and other early childhood education professionals).

Two distinct tools were employed to collect the data resulting from the work carried out in the training sessions: a questionnaire about the practices, which was given out to the working groups set up during the actual training sessions; plus, direct observation and collection of data from the final discussions, which were carried out in stages, between the event's participants. All the documentation was collected, coded and analysed qualitatively. The entire set of data, which has been fed into this Report, was presented at the EQuaP Project meeting of May 2017, in Linköping, Sweden.

In the final phase of the EQuaP Project, the Toolbox and its contents were analysed and evaluated by different stakeholders who were identified at local and national level, as either privileged collaborators or other professionals in the field of early childhood education, by each of the project partners. Each partner, in the different countries, devised a strategy for the enhancement and dissemination of both the Toolbox practices and the overall project. The common goal was to gather feedback on the Toolbox and its relevance to the early childhood education professionals of each country.

The practices presented were not intended to be understood as a restricted model, but as innovative and interesting examples, adaptable to specific educational contexts.

For that purpose, once all privileged stakeholders and other early childhood education professionals were identified, ESEPF proceeded with meetings aimed to provide information on the project and sound out the attendees' interest in collaborating. This resulted in a series of plenary and training sessions which included opportunities for reflection and discussion among small groups of early childhood education professionals.

Further to these reflection and dissemination meetings, a number of privileged stakeholders from the Porto region, in Portugal, were selected and sent the Toolbox practices for analysis. These were: Colégio Novo da Maia, OSMOPE; Externato das Escravas do Sagrado Coração de Jesus; Colégio da Paz; Casa Madalena de Canossa – all of which have links to the early childhood education sector and recognized experience and know-how in the field of parental involvement. These stakeholders' contribution proved extremely meaningful and relevant to the dissemination of the project and its final products, and stimulated the exercise of reflection on parental involvement practices within the institutions' educational teams.

Regarding the methodology used in the work developed with the wider group of stakeholders, ESEPF opted for a parental involvement training programme in which the presentation, evaluation and discussion of the Toolbox practices was carried out in addition to the work conducted on the specific theme.

ESEPF led a series of events on the following dates and venues:

- 20th March 2017 (Colégio do Sardão - Vila Nova de Gaia)
- 5th April 2017 (ESEPF - Porto)
- 6th April 2017 (ESEPF - Porto)
- 16th May 2017 (ESEPF - Porto)

These meetings took the form of short (3-hour) training sessions titled, *Parental Involvement in Early Childhood Education: foundations and practices*. These were provided in the context of lifelong learning, according to the Teaching Profession Statute (Decree Law N.22/2014 11th February). The sessions were attended by 121 participants from 31 early childhood education institutions, including: private and public institutions from the south Porto metropolitan area (Vila Nova de Gaia Municipality); private and public institutions from the north and central Porto metropolitan area and education-related institutions (Porto Municipality – Municipal Department for Education / Ministry of Work, Solidarity and Social Welfare, Ministry of Education); private and public institutions which cooperate directly in the practical training of ESEPF students, future early childhood education teachers and local and national decision-makers with links to education, from the following institutions:

- Casa Madalena de Canossa
- Colégio de Nossa Senhora da Paz
- Colégio do Sardão
- Colégio Novo da Maia
- Externato das Escravas do Sagrado Coração de Jesus
- OSMOPE
- Agrupamento de Escolas do Cerco
- Agrupamento de Escolas Alexandre Herculano

- Agrupamento de Escolas António Sérgio
- Agrupamento de Escolas de Campo - Valongo
- Agrupamento de Escolas do Viso
- Agrupamento de Escolas Fontes Pereira de Melo
- Agrupamento Escolas Padrão da Légua
- Jardim de infância - Alegria de Aprender
- Associação de Creches de S. Vicente de Paulo - JI "O SOL"
- Associação Pro-infância de Pedroso
- Centro de Bem Estar Social Nossa Senhora do Socorro
- Centro Juvenil de Campanhã
- Centro Social de Sandim
- Centro Social e Paroquial da Igreja do Senhor da Vera Cruz do Candal
- Centro Social e Paroquial de Sta. Marinha
- Centro Social Paroquial de Oliveira do Douro
- Colégio de Nossa Senhora da Bonança
- Cruzada do Bem - Patronato Amor de Deus
- De Mãos Dadas, Associação de Solidariedade Social
- Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian
- Fundação Couto
- Fundação Padre Luís
- Instituto S José
- Jardim de Infância Zebra
- Lar Santa Isabel
- O Caminhar, Jardim de Infância

The training sessions' programme included the following:

- Introduction to the EQuaP Project (general assumptions; objectives; activities; partners);
- Parental involvement in early childhood education (short conceptual framework; parental involvement advantages and obstacles; parental involvement strategies);
- Introduction to the Toolbox developed in the scope of the EQuaP Project (objectives; organization; contents);
- Introduction to the focus areas identified within the EQuaP Project framework (partnership and sharing of decision-making responsibilities; communication – sensitive, respectful and reciprocal communication with the families; learning about the families – knowing and appreciating families and communities; cooperating and communicating with the community);
- Presentation of the practices selected for the Toolbox (10 parental involvement practices);

- Discussion and sharing of reflections on the Toolbox practices among working groups;
- Presentation of working groups' suggestions on the Toolbox practices.

Further to introducing the EQuap Project, these meetings had the underlying objective of providing the education professionals with an opportunity for reflection and training conceptually framed by the theme of parental involvement, followed by a sharing and extended discussion around the Toolbox practices. It was decided that the activity should not restrict itself to the dissemination of the Toolbox and project, but simultaneously provide the participant professionals with a moment of educational enrichment.

These enrichment moments took place as planned, generating continuous interest and participation throughout the sessions.

To meet the objective of collecting suggestions and comments on the Toolbox, the practices' work sheets had to be translated into Portuguese and a questionnaire to guide analysis and discussion had to be made available. The questionnaire produced included questions on: clarity of speech; description detail and usefulness of the contents for implementing the practice in different contexts; need for images or multimedia resources to enable the visualisation of practice implementation; practice relevance to the promotion of parental involvement; potential adaptability of practice to context; and improvement suggestions.

After filling out the questionnaire, there was an opportunity for public presentation of the analysis drawn up by each working group, followed by a general discussion.

The data collected and presented indicates that, overall, participants' feedback was very detailed, relevant and concrete, including some suggestions specific to the to the Portuguese context.

Practice analysis considered the following dimensions: focus areas included; objectives; description of the activity; remarks; role of the teacher; role of the family; added value for the child and for the family; materials to be used; questions to reflect on the general improvement of the service; questions to reflect on the improvement of the practice.

The following list summarises all the practices analysed:

"Breakfast with parents" (source: Elmer, Belgium; tested in Forli, Italy): the activity consists of inviting the families of different groups of children for a breakfast in the educational institution, enabling wider socialisation between the families and the institution's staff.

"Parents share their emotions about the first weeks in the baby-group" (source: Forli, Italy; tested in Elmer, Belgium): parents are invited for a coffee/tea at the end of the day



and, as a group, are encouraged to share emotions about their child's first weeks in the nursery. During the activity, short films (previously recorded by the teachers) are shown so that the parents can see their children's daily life in the nursery.

"Our little blanket for all" (source: Elmer, Belgium; tested in VRTEC, Slovenia): the activity aims to create a small blanket made by the families of all the children in the nursery group. Meetings take place to make decisions about how to make the blanket and a workshop is carried out to produce it. The blanket is taken home by each of the children (taking turns).

"School market" (source: VRTEC, Slovenia; tested in College do Sardão, Portugal): the activity consists of a market organized by the children's families alongside the teachers and other school professionals. The products to be sold (for example, vegetables from the school's vegetable garden, food, etc.) are prepared together by the children, their families and teachers.

"Bank hours" (source: Forlì, Italy; tested in College do Sardão, Portugal): in this activity, the parents are invited to run a short session (for example, teaching a song, telling a story, playing a game or other activity) with the children who attend the after-school club. Parents talk to the teachers to arrange a day and time for the activity.

"Creative Workshop" (source: VRTEC, Slovenia; tested in Linköping Kommun, Sweden): the children's families are invited to participate in evening workshops, organised and run by the kindergarten's teachers and children. During the activity, families and teachers have the opportunity to talk about the kindergarten's pedagogical work.

"Hand in hand" (source: Elmer, Belgium; tested in VRTEC, Slovenia): this activity provides an opportunity for interaction between kindergarten and primary school children. It was developed together by a kindergarten teacher and a toddlers' mother, who teaches in the primary school. The two groups of children go on a walk and play games together. Photographs are taken and shared with the parents.

"Parents' council" (source: Liepāja, Latvia; tested in Linköping Kommun, Sweden): the practice consists of conducting meetings (one or two per semester) between parents and their children's teachers, providing families with the opportunity to participate and give their opinion on the kindergarten's work. Parents have the opportunity to suggest topics for the meeting's agenda and express their views personally or through a representative.

"Participation committee" (source: Elmer, Belgium; tested in Forlì, Italy): this practice involves a committee made up of: parents who participate in a range of projects run by the city council's Family Centre (Stork Groups, meeting spaces, workshops and other activities for parents and children, self-help groups, etc.); parents who do not attend the Family Centre, but have children in the nursery, kindergarten or primary school; nursery and kindergarten teachers; pedagogical coordinators; and teachers/assistants representing a variety of areas linked to the

Family Centre. The Committee meets 4/6 times a year to plan and programme the activities offered by the Family Centre to parents and children. Parents make proposals, compare their views with those of the educational staff and, together, assess what is proposed to the local families.

"Intergenerational exchange in the neighbourhood" (source: VRTEC, Slovenia; tested in Elmer, Belgium): once every fortnight, the children visit a nursing home and perform mobility activities together with the elderly. Parents are invited to participate in the activity. Upon arrival, children and the elderly gather in the motricity room, where they are joined by the nursing home's care workers and therapists and the children's teachers. One of these professionals runs the activity which last 1 hour.

Reflection and analysis of the 10 Toolbox practices by education professionals, produced the following comments:

On "Breakfast with parents" - the practice was considered of interest, but could be extended to other family members (not just parents) and possibly transferred to tea time (in the afternoon) to enable wider family participation. Description of the activity could be clearer (for example, indicating if parents and children are meant to attend together).

On "Parents' council" – the fact that the practice gives a voice to parents/legal guardians was seen by the education professionals as an advantage and acknowledged as an effective way to involve parents in the pedagogical work and curricular planning. In terms of practice implementation, it was suggested that the parents should be previously notified about the procedures and decisions agreed at previous meetings and the skills to be worked on throughout the year.

On "Participation committee " – it was pointed out that there is a need for better information/explanation about the "Family Centre " and its legal relationship to/dependency on the City Council/Municipality. The practice was considered interesting in terms of family involvement, but similarities to the "Parent's council" were mentioned and it was suggested that the two could be merged into a new practice for the Toolbox.

On "Intergenerational exchange in the neighbourhood" – it was stressed that the activity is mainly related to partnerships with the community and not directly focused on family involvement. Suggestions included information about the children's age and the need for more detail to be added to the activity description (particularly regarding the activities to be carried out with the elderly). The need to diversify the activities with the elderly was also mentioned and it was suggested that these should not be restricted to mobility activities, but could include music, dance, theatre, storytelling, etc. Further suggestions included the idea that the activities

could be proposed and submitted by the elderly and the possibility of conducting the activity with the elderly visiting the kindergarten.

On "Parents share their emotions about the first weeks in the baby-group " - it was suggested that this activity could be extended to other age groups and commented that clarification is needed regarding the use of keywords and the presentation of actual images. It was also suggested that children should not be present during the activity.

On "Bank hours" – suggestions included having greater flexibility on timetables and activities to reflect the availability and skills of the families involved. It was also suggested that family participation should relate to the projects/practices developed in the kindergarten and that a list of suggested activities should be made available to help families decide their form of participation.

On "School market" – education professionals stressed the need to involve families according to their possibilities and to include a variety of flavours and cooking recipes that reflect the traditions and identities of each participant family. They have also suggested the creation of a logbook or activity diary to register activity improvement suggestions. Activity description comments included: the need for clarification about the sharing of information/dissemination to other families via Facebook; better explanation of the value of the activity to the child; and clarification of the tasks to be undertaken by the families; finally, they considered it important to clarify what happens to the income generated through the market.

On "Our little blanket for all" – the education professionals suggested improvements to the activity description, including: the workshop process; clarification of the last goal presented; and replacing the word "parents" by "families" which is better suited to the contemporary context.

On "Hand in hand" - it is recommended that the activity description starts with a presentation of the objectives to make the explanation clearer. The description of the steps to be taken needs to be more specific; and the involvement and role of parents in the activity needs to be clarified.

On "Creative workshop" – it is suggested that the workshops should be related to the projects/practices developed in the kindergarten; that there is a need for pictures that illustrate the work done in the workshops; and that children should have a more active role during the activities.

General recommendations (across all practices) suggested the addition of captions to the photographs featured on the sheets; an improvement in the quality of the pictures used; greater suitability of the images used to illustrate the practices; video resources; standardisation of the whole structure and numbering of the stages that illustrate the development of each activity.

## General conclusions:

The Portuguese stakeholders involved have rated the EQuaP Project, its Toolbox and the parental involvement practices presented, as something of real interest which provides a tangible and evidence-based product that meets the schools' needs. According to the Portuguese stakeholders, being able to build a tool which has an imminently practical purpose, might be a significant step towards raising awareness, disseminating and increasing the quality of parental involvement in school.

Despite not presenting completely unknown and innovative practices, the Toolbox has the merit of being able to articulate, in a single product: the need for greater parental involvement felt by teachers; the visible representation of the importance of their work; and the presentation of concrete practices based on quality indicators that act as a departing point for a development exercise, to be conducted as a partnership between schools – as the Toolbox will be continually distributed and implemented in several schools for a number of years.

Overall, the Toolbox received very positive feedback from all the project partners across different countries (as shown by the records of a succession of meetings on the course of the project). This is particularly due to its power to inspire the development of parental involvement work. The process led to a review of the Toolbox practices, with a view to turning it into a relevant and functional tool for the European early childhood education institutions.

This toolbox is intended to introduce some innovation and act as a resource in the field of parental involvement, supporting, through its best-practice examples and practical quality indicators, the reflection and educational practice of the European teaching community.



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#### Key Legislation

- Law no 5/97, 1st February
- Decree-Law n.o 115-A/98 4th May
- Regulamentary Decree n.o 32/2007, 29th March
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