

RECOMMENDATIONS

COUNCIL

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

of 22 May 2019

on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems

(2019/C 189/02)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Article 165 thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas

- (1) The European Pillar of Social Rights⁽¹⁾ states as its 11th principle that all children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality. This is in line with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union⁽²⁾ which recognises education as a right, with the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child and with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 that foresees that all girls and boys should have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education by 2030.
- (2) In its Communication 'Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture'⁽³⁾ the European Commission sets out the vision of a European Education Area acknowledging the role of early childhood education and care in laying solid foundations for learning at school and throughout life. The Council Conclusions on school development and excellent teaching⁽⁴⁾ and the Council Recommendation on Key Competences for lifelong learning⁽⁵⁾ reiterated the pivotal role that early childhood education and care can play in promoting learning of all children, their well-being and development.
- (3) Both policy makers and researchers recognise that it is in the early years⁽⁶⁾ that children create the foundation and capacity to learn throughout life. Learning is an incremental process; building a strong foundation in the early years is a precondition for higher level competence development and educational success as much as it is essential for health and the well-being of children. Therefore, early childhood education and care needs to be regarded as the foundation of education and training systems and be an integral part of the education continuum.
- (4) Participating in early childhood education and care is beneficial for all children and especially for children in a disadvantaged situation. It helps by preventing the formation of early skills gaps and thus it is an essential tool to fight inequalities and educational poverty. Early childhood education and care provision needs to be part of an integrated child-rights based package of policy measures to improve outcomes for children and break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage. Improving provision therefore helps to deliver on commitments made in the Commission Recommendation on Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage⁽⁷⁾ and the 2013 Council Recommendation of effective Roma integration measures in the Member States⁽⁸⁾.

⁽¹⁾ Doc. 13129/17.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 326, 26.10.2012, p. 391.

⁽³⁾ COM(2017) 673 final.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 421, 8.12.2017, p. 2.

⁽⁵⁾ OJ C 189, 4.6.2018, p. 1.

⁽⁶⁾ Definition of early years is from birth to usually the age of 6, corresponding educational level ISCED 0.

⁽⁷⁾ OJ L 59, 2.3.2013, p. 5.

⁽⁸⁾ OJ C 378, 24.12.2013, p. 1.

- (5) Participating in early childhood education and care has multiple benefits⁽⁹⁾ both for individuals and for society as a whole, from improved educational attainment and labour market outcomes to fewer social and educational interventions and more cohesive and inclusive societies. Children who attended early childhood education for more than one year scored higher in language and maths in the PIRLS⁽¹⁰⁾ and the PISA studies⁽¹¹⁾. Participating in quality early childhood education and care has also been shown to be an important factor to prevent early school leaving⁽¹²⁾.
- (6) Education and care from the earliest stages has an essential role to play in learning to live together in heterogeneous societies. These services can strengthen social cohesion and inclusion in several ways. They can serve as meeting places for families. They can contribute to developing language competences of the children, both in the language of the service and the first language⁽¹³⁾. Through social-emotional learning, early childhood education and care experiences can enable children to learn how to be empathic as well as learn about their rights, equality, tolerance and diversity.
- (7) Returns on investment in early stages of education are the highest of all educational stages, particularly for children in a disadvantaged situation⁽¹⁴⁾. Spending on early childhood education and care is a high return early investment in human capital.
- (8) The availability, accessibility and affordability of high-quality childcare facilities are furthermore key factors that allow women, and also men, with care responsibilities to participate in the labour market, as recognised by the 2002 Barcelona European Council, the European Pact for Gender Equality⁽¹⁵⁾ and the Commission's Work-Life Balance Communication adopted on 26 April 2017⁽¹⁶⁾. Women's employment is directly contributing to improving the socioeconomic situation of the household and to economic growth.
- (9) Investing in early childhood education and care is a good investment only if the services are of high quality, accessible, affordable and inclusive. Evidence shows that only high-quality early childhood education and care services deliver benefits; low quality services have significant negative impact on children and on society as a whole⁽¹⁷⁾. Policy measures and reforms need to give priority to quality considerations.
- (10) Overall, Member States spend significantly less on early childhood education and care than on primary education. As shown by the report assessing progress on the Barcelona targets⁽¹⁸⁾, currently there are not enough places in early childhood education and care services available and demand outstrips the supply in nearly all countries. Lack of availability, accessibility, and affordability has been shown to be one of the main barriers to the use of these services⁽¹⁹⁾.
- (11) The European Parliament, in its Resolution of 14 September 2017 on A New Skills Agenda for Europe⁽²⁰⁾, calls on Member States to enhance quality and broaden access to early childhood education and care and to address the lack of sufficient infrastructure offering quality and accessible childcare for all income levels as well as to consider granting free access for families living in poverty and social exclusion.

⁽⁹⁾ Benefits of early childhood education and care and the conditions for obtaining them, Report of the European Expert Network on Economics of Education (EENEE).

⁽¹⁰⁾ The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS).

⁽¹¹⁾ The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), OECD (2016), Education at a Glance.

⁽¹²⁾ European Commission (2014), Study on the effective use of early childhood education and care in preventing early school leaving.

⁽¹³⁾ First language: language variety (-ies) acquired in early childhood (approximately before the age of two or three years) in which the human language faculty was first acquired. This term is preferred to mother tongue, which is often inaccurate as the first language is not necessarily that of the mother alone.

⁽¹⁴⁾ The Economics of Human Development and Social Mobility. *Annual Reviews of Economics*, Vol.6 (2014), 689-733.

⁽¹⁵⁾ OJ C 155, 25.5.2011, p. 10.

⁽¹⁶⁾ COM(2017)252 final.

⁽¹⁷⁾ A Review of Research on the Effects of Early Childhood Education and Care on Child Development. CARE Project Report (2015).

⁽¹⁸⁾ COM(2018) 273 final.

⁽¹⁹⁾ OECD (2017), Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care; Eurofound (2015) Early childhood care: Accessibility and quality of services.

⁽²⁰⁾ P8_TA(2017)0360.

- (12) Early childhood education and care services need to be child-centred; children learn best in environments that are based on children's participation and interest in learning. The organisation, the choice of activities and objects for learning are often communicated between the educators and the children. Services should offer a safe, nurturing and caring environment and provide a social, cultural and physical space with a range of possibilities for children to develop their potential. Provision is best designed when it is based on the fundamental assumption that education and care are inseparable. This should be based on the understanding that childhood is a value in itself and that children should not only be prepared for school and adulthood, but also be supported and appreciated in their early years.
- (13) Within a context that is set by the national, regional or local regulations, families should be involved in all aspects of education and care for their children. 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. Early childhood education and care services are an ideal opportunity to create an integrated approach because they lead to a first personal contact with the parents. Parents who experience problems could be offered individual counselling services during home visits. To make their involvement a reality, early childhood education and care services should be designed in partnership with families and be based on trust and mutual respect ⁽²¹⁾.
- (14) Early childhood education and care participation can be an effective tool to achieve educational equity for children in a disadvantaged situation, such as some migrant or minority groups (for example Roma) and refugee children, children with special needs including disabilities, children in alternative care and street children, children of imprisoned parents, as well as children within households at particular risk of poverty and social exclusion, such as single-parent or large households. Refugee children, due to their vulnerable situation, need enforced support. Poverty, physical and emotional stressors, traumas and missing language skills can hinder their future educational prospects and successful integration into a new society. Participation in early childhood education and care can help to mitigate these risk factors.
- (15) Providing inclusive early childhood education and care can contribute to delivering on commitments made by Member States in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that all Member States are signatories of.
- (16) The 2014 publication of a proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework ⁽²²⁾ was the first statement from European experts from 25 countries on quality in early childhood education and care. The statements are based on five dimensions: access; staff; curriculum; monitoring and evaluation; and governance and funding. A total of ten statements are made on strengthening the quality of early childhood education and care provision. This document was shared in many countries by local stakeholders engaged in policy advocacy, research and training initiatives. In these countries, the draft framework acted as a powerful catalyst for change by contributing to policy consultation processes that sustained existing reform pathways.
- (17) All five dimensions of the quality framework are essential for guaranteeing high-quality services. Especially, the work of early childhood education and care professionals has a long lasting impact on children's lives. However, in many countries the profession has a rather low profile and status ⁽²³⁾.
- (18) To fulfil their professional role in supporting children and their families, early childhood education and care staff require complex knowledge skills and competences as well as a deep understanding of child development and knowledge about early childhood pedagogy. Professionalisation of staff is key because higher levels of preparation positively correlates with a better quality service, higher quality staff-child interactions and therefore better developmental outcomes for children ⁽²⁴⁾.

⁽²¹⁾ A *Children in Europe* policy paper (2008), Young children and their services: developing a European approach.

⁽²²⁾ Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (2014), report of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission.

⁽²³⁾ Eurofound (2015), Early childhood care: working conditions, training and quality of services — A systematic review.

⁽²⁴⁾ European Commission (2011), CoRe: Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care.

- (19) Many service providers work with assistants whose main role is to support educators, working directly with children and families. They usually hold a lower qualification than educators and in many countries there is no qualification requirement for becoming assistants. Therefore, professionalisation of staff, including assistants, is necessary ⁽²⁵⁾. Continuing professional development is an integral part of raising the competences of assistants.
- (20) A quality framework or equivalent document can be an efficient element of good governance in early childhood education and care. According to expert opinion and a recent policy review ⁽²⁶⁾, countries that develop and implement quality frameworks have more comprehensive and consistent approaches to reforms. It is important that the relevant stakeholders and professionals are involved in the design and feel ownership of the quality framework.
- (21) Member States have set benchmarks and targets on children's participation in early childhood education and care. In 2002, the European Council in Barcelona set targets ⁽²⁷⁾ for the provision of formal childcare to be at least 90 % of children in the Union between the age of three and the mandatory school age, and that at least 33 % of children under the age of three should have access by 2010. These targets were reaffirmed in the European Pact for Gender Equality 2011-2020. Analysis on the progress towards these benchmarks is detailed in the Commission report on the Barcelona Objectives ⁽²⁸⁾. The Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training ⁽²⁹⁾ set a 95 % participation benchmark for children between four and the start of primary education.
- (22) Member States have made good overall progress in recent years in improving the availability of early childhood education and care services. The Education and Training 2020 benchmark and the Barcelona target for children under the age of 3 have been achieved. The Barcelona target for children from the age of 3 until mandatory school age has not yet been achieved despite the progress made since 2011. In 2016, 86,3 % of children in that age group participated in early childhood education and care. However, these averages hide significant differences between Member States, regions and social groups ⁽³⁰⁾. Further efforts are needed to ensure that all children have access to high-quality early childhood education and care as early as parents request it. In particular, specific measures are required to create greater access for children in a disadvantaged situation ⁽³¹⁾.
- (23) This Recommendation seeks to establish a shared understanding of what quality means in the early childhood education and care system. It sets out possible actions for governments to consider, according to their specific circumstances. This Recommendation also addresses parents, institutions and organisations, including social partners and civil society organisations as well as researchers seeking to enhance the sector.
- (24) Early childhood education and care as understood in this Recommendation ⁽³²⁾ should be understood as referring to any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to the compulsory primary school age — regardless of the setting, funding, opening hours or programme content — and includes centre and family day-care; privately and publicly funded provision; pre-school and pre-primary provision.
- (25) This Recommendation fully respects the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

HEREBY RECOMMENDS THAT MEMBER STATES:

In accordance with national and European legislation, available resources and national circumstances, and in close cooperation with all relevant stakeholders:

1. Improve access to high-quality early childhood education and care systems in line with the statements set out in the 'Quality framework for early childhood education and care' presented in the Annex to this Recommendation and with the 11th principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

⁽²⁵⁾ Professionalisation of Childcare Assistants in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC): Pathways towards Qualification, NESET II report (2016).

⁽²⁶⁾ The current state of national ECEC quality frameworks, or equivalent strategic policy documents, governing ECEC quality in EU Member States, NESET II Report 4/2017.

⁽²⁷⁾ SN 100/1/02 REV 1.

⁽²⁸⁾ COM(2018) 273 final.

⁽²⁹⁾ OJ C 417, 15.12.2015, p. 25.

⁽³⁰⁾ COM(2018) 273 final.

⁽³¹⁾ European Commission (2017), Education and Training Monitor.

⁽³²⁾ ISCED 0.1 and ISCED 0.2.

2. Work towards ensuring that early childhood education and care services are accessible, affordable and inclusive. Consideration could be given to:
 - (a) supporting child development in a consistent way starting as early as possible by using early childhood education and care services;
 - (b) analysing the supply and demand from families in order to better adapt the offer of early childhood education and care services to their needs, respecting parental choice;
 - (c) analysing and addressing the barriers that families might encounter when accessing and using early childhood education and care services, such as costs, poverty-related barriers, geographical location, inflexible opening hours, barriers related to inadequate provisions for children with special needs, cultural and linguistic barriers, discrimination as well as a lack of information;
 - (d) establishing contact and cooperation with families and especially those in a vulnerable or disadvantaged situation, in order to inform them about the possibilities and benefits of early childhood education and care participation and, where relevant, about available support, and build trust in the services and encourage participation from an early age;
 - (e) ensuring that all families who want to make use of early childhood education and care services have access to affordable high-quality early childhood education and care, ideally by working at the appropriate governance level towards a right to an early childhood education and care place of high quality;
 - (f) providing inclusive early childhood education and care services for all children, including children with diverse backgrounds and special educational needs, including disabilities, avoiding segregation and incentivising their participation, regardless of the labour market status of their parents or carers;
 - (g) supporting all children to learn the language of education while also taking into account and respecting their first language;
 - (h) strengthening preventive actions, early identification of difficulties and adequate provisions for children with special needs and their families, involving all relevant actors, e.g. educational, social or health services as well as parents.
3. Support the professionalisation of early childhood education and care staff, including leaders. Depending on the existing level of professional qualification and working conditions, successful efforts can include:
 - (a) raising the status of the early childhood education and care profession by creating high professional standards, offering attractive professional status and career prospects to early childhood education and care educators, striving to reach a better gender balance and creating professionalisation pathways for staff with low or no qualification as well as specific pathways to qualify assistants;
 - (b) improving initial education and continuous professional development to take full account of children's well-being, learning and developmental needs, relevant societal developments, gender equality and a full understanding of the rights of the child;
 - (c) providing time for staff for the purpose of professional activities such as reflection, planning, engaging with parents and collaborating with other professionals and colleagues;
 - (d) aiming at equipping staff with the competences to respond to the individual needs of children from different backgrounds and with special educational needs, including disabilities, preparing staff to manage diverse groups.
4. Enhance the development of early years' curricula in order to follow children's interests, nurture their wellbeing and meet the unique needs and potential of each individual child, including those with special needs or in a vulnerable or disadvantaged situation. Approaches supporting holistic learning and children's development could include:
 - (a) ensuring a balance in the provision of social-emotional and cognitive development, acknowledging the importance of play, contact with nature, the role of music, arts and physical activity;
 - (b) promoting participation, initiative, autonomy, problem-solving and creativity and encouraging learning dispositions to reason, investigate and collaborate;

- (c) fostering empathy, compassion, mutual respect and awareness in relation to equality and diversity;
 - (d) offering opportunities for early language exposure and learning through playful activities; and
 - (e) considering, where possible, tailored multilingual early childhood programmes, which also take into account the specific needs of bi/multilingual children;
 - (f) offering guidance for providers on the age-appropriate use of digital tools and emerging new technologies;
 - (g) promoting further integration of early childhood education and care in the education continuum and supporting collaboration between early childhood education and care and primary school staff, parents and counselling services for a smooth transition for children to primary school;
 - (h) fostering an educational environment which is inclusive, democratic and participatory, embracing and integrating the voice of all children.
5. Promote transparent and coherent monitoring and evaluation of early childhood education and care services at the appropriate levels with a view to policy development and implementation. Effective approaches could include:
- (a) using self-evaluation tools, questionnaires and observation guidelines as part of quality management at system and service level;
 - (b) using adequate and age-appropriate methods to foster children's participation and listen to their views, concerns and ideas and take the children's perspective into account in the assessment process;
 - (c) implementing existing tools to improve the inclusiveness of early childhood education and care provision such as the Inclusive Early Childhood Education Learning Environment Self-Reflection Tool developed by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education.
6. Aim at ensuring adequate funding and a legal framework for the provision of early childhood education and care services. Consideration could be given to:
- (a) scaling up investment in early childhood education and care with a focus on availability, quality and affordability, including making use, where appropriate, of the funding opportunities offered by the European structural and investment funds;
 - (b) creating and maintaining tailored national or regional Quality Frameworks;
 - (c) promoting better cooperation among services or further integration of them for families and children, most importantly with social and health services as well as schools, at national, regional and local levels;
 - (d) embedding robust child protection/safeguarding policies within the early childhood education and care system to help protect children from all forms of violence;
 - (e) developing a system that strives at:
 - (1) a strong culture of dialogue and reflection, fostering a continuous process of development and learning between actors at all levels;
 - (2) a high quality of early childhood education and care infrastructures and appropriate geographical distribution in relation to the children's living environment.
7. Report through existing frameworks and tools on experiences and progress regarding access to and quality of early childhood education and care systems.

HEREBY WELCOMES THE COMMISSION'S INTENTION TO:

- 8. Facilitate the exchange of experiences and good practices among Member States in the context of the Strategic Framework of cooperation in education and training and successor schemes, as well as in the Social Protection Committee.
- 9. Support the cooperation of Member States, based on their demand, by organising peer learning and peer counselling.

10. Support the cooperation with the OECD Network on Early Childhood Education and Care in order to facilitate dissemination of results and avoid duplications.
11. Support the development of high-quality inclusive early childhood education and care services by making Union funding available, particularly in the framework of the Erasmus+ programme and, where appropriate, the European Structural and Investment Funds, including Interreg, without any prejudice to negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework.
12. Propose an updated European benchmark or target on early childhood education and care aiming at the provision of services, in line with revised ET2020 benchmark and Barcelona targets, following consultation with Member States. This proposal for a benchmark together with other proposed European education and training benchmarks should be discussed and decided by the Council in the context of setting up the new strategic framework in education and training after 2020.
13. Report to the Council on follow up of the Recommendation in line with reporting modalities of the existing frameworks and tools.

Done at Brussels, 22 May 2019.

For the Council

The President

C. B. MATEI

ANNEX

‘Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality.’

The European Pillar of Social Rights

Learning and education start from birth and the early years are the most formative in children's lives as they set the foundations for their lifelong development. This Quality Framework provides key principles and a European approach to high-quality early childhood education and care systems based on good practices in the EU Member States and state of the art research. It comprises ten quality statements which are structured along five broader areas of quality: access, staff, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and governance and funding. The ten quality statements describe the main features of high-quality services as identified in practice. The quality framework is a governance tool aimed at providing orientation for the development and upholding of early childhood and education care systems.

The framework's main objective is to describe a system which can provide high-quality early childhood education and care for all children and its development; it is guided by the following principles:

- high-quality services are crucial in promoting children's development and learning and, in the long term, enhancing their educational chances;
- parents' participation as partners of such services is essential — the family is the most important place for children to grow and develop, and parents (and guardians) are responsible for each child's well-being, health and development;
- early childhood education and care services need to be child-centred, actively involve children and acknowledge children's views.

THE EU QUALITY FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

ACCESS to quality early childhood education and care services for all children contributes to their healthy development and educational success, helps reducing social inequalities and narrows the competence gap between children with different socioeconomic backgrounds. Equitable access is also essential to ensure that parents, especially women, have flexibility to (re)integrate in the labour market.

*Quality Statements:***1. Provision that is available and affordable to all families and their children.**

Universal legal entitlement to early childhood education and care services provides a solid basis for reaching out to all children. Population data and parents surveys on the demand for early childhood education and care places can serve as a basis for estimating further needs and adjusting capacity.

Provision can address barriers that may prevent families and children from participating. This may include an adaptation of the requested fees for early childhood education and care to allow also low-income households' access. There is also evidence that flexibility in opening hours and other arrangements can enable participation especially for children of working mothers, single-parent families and from minority or disadvantaged groups.

Provision that is equally distributed across urban and rural areas, affluent and poor neighbourhoods, and regions can widen access for disadvantaged groups in society. Availability and affordability of high-quality services in neighbourhoods where poor families, minorities or migrant or refugee families reside is reported to have the biggest impact on supporting equity and social inclusion.

2. Provision that encourages participation, strengthens social inclusion and embraces diversity.

Early childhood education and care settings can actively encourage participation by involving parents, families and carers in decision-making processes (e.g. in parental committees). Reaching out to families — especially to single-parent and disadvantaged or minority or migrant families — with targeted initiatives allows them to express their needs and enables services to take these into account when tailoring provision to the demands of local communities.

Recruitment of staff from marginalised, migrant or minority groups can be encouraged as it has proven to be of advantage if the composition of staff in early childhood education and care settings reflects diversity in the community.

Creating a welcoming environment for children that values their languages, culture and home backgrounds contributes to the development of their sense of belonging. Appropriate continuous professional development also prepares staff to welcome and support bilingual children.

Early childhood education and care settings can develop good practices in families for a smooth transition from the home environment to the setting, as well as foster high levels of parental participation by organising specific initiatives.

STAFF is the most significant factor for children's well-being, learning and developmental outcomes. Therefore staff working conditions and professional development are seen as essential components of quality.

Quality statements:

3. Well-qualified staff with initial and continuing training that enable them to fulfil their professional role.

Effective early childhood education and care systems consider raising the professional status of staff, which is widely acknowledged as one of the key factors of quality, by raising qualification levels, offering attractive professional status and flexible career prospects and alternative pathways for assistants. This can be supported by aiming for a pedagogical staff that is composed of highly qualified professionals holding a full professional qualification specialised in early childhood education, in addition to assistant staff.

State-of-the-art initial education programmes are designed together with practitioners and provide a good balance between theory and practice. It is also an asset if education programmes prepare staff for working collectively and for enhancing reflective competences. Such programmes can benefit from training staff to work with linguistically and culturally diverse groups, from minority, migrant and low-income families.

Staff that are equipped to follow the developmental needs, interests and potential of young children and able to detect potential development and learning problems can more actively support child development and learning. Regular, tailor-made and continued professional development opportunities benefit all staff members, including assistants and auxiliary staff.

Regarding the necessary elements of child development and psychology, competences for staff should, in line with the different structures of training in the Member States, include knowledge on child protection systems, and more generally on the rights of the child.

4. Supportive working conditions including professional leadership which creates opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation with parents.

Early childhood education and care systems that aim at improved working conditions, including more adequate wage levels, can make employment in early childhood education and care a more attractive option for better-qualified staff, looking for proper careers.

Adult-child ratios and group sizes are most adequate if designed in an appropriate manner for the age and composition of the group of children, as younger children require more attention and care.

Professional learning communities, where they exist within and across settings, have shown a positive impact through assigning time and space for staff collegial practices and joint work.

Offering mentoring and supervision to newly recruited staff during their induction can help them to quickly fulfil their professional roles.

CURRICULUM is a powerful tool to improve well-being, development and learning of children. A broad pedagogical framework sets out the principles for sustaining children's development and learning through educational and care practices that meet children's interests, needs and potentialities.

Quality statements:

5. A curriculum based on pedagogic goals, values and approaches which enable children to reach their full potential addressing their social, emotional, cognitive and physical development and their well-being.

Child-centred pedagogical approaches can better sustain children's overall development, provide support for their learning strategies and promote their cognitive and non-cognitive development by building more systematically on experiential learning, play and social interactions.

There is strong evidence that an explicit curriculum is an asset as it can provide a coherent framework for care, education and socialisation as integral parts of early childhood education and care provision. Ideally, such a framework defines pedagogical goals enabling educators to personalise their approach to the individual needs of children and can provide guidelines for a high-quality learning environment. It gives due consideration to including availability of books and other print material to help literacy development of children.

By promoting diversity, equality, and linguistic awareness an effective curriculum framework fosters integration of migrants and refugees. It can nurture the development of both their mother tongue and language of education.

6. A curriculum that requires staff to collaborate with children, colleagues and parents and to reflect on their own practice.

A curriculum can help to better involve parents, stakeholders and staff and to ensure that it responds more adequately to the needs, interests and the children's potential.

A curriculum can define roles and processes for staff to collaborate regularly with parents as well as with colleagues in other children's services (including health, social care and education sectors).

Whenever possible, the curriculum can provide guidelines for early childhood education and care staff to liaise with school staff on children's transition to the primary and/or pre-primary schools.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION sustain quality. By pointing to strengths and weaknesses, its processes can be important components of enhancing quality in early childhood education systems. They can provide support to stakeholders and policy makers in undertaking initiatives that respond to the needs of children, parents and local communities.

Quality statements:

7. Monitoring and evaluating produces information at the relevant local, regional and/or national level to support continuing improvements in the quality of policy and practice.

Transparent information on service and staff or on curriculum implementation at the appropriate – national, regional and local – level can help to improve quality.

Regular information feedback can make the process of policy evaluation easier, also by allowing to analyse the use of public funds and of what is effective and in which context.

To identify staff learning needs and to make the right decisions on how best to improve service quality and professional development, it is beneficial that early childhood education leaders collect relevant data in a timely manner.

8. Monitoring and evaluation which is in the best interest of the child.

In order to protect the rights of the child, robust child protection/child safeguarding policies should be embedded within the early childhood education and care system to help protect children from all forms of violence. Effective child protection policies cover four broad areas: (1) policy, (2) people, (3) procedures, and (4) accountability. More information on these areas can be found in 'Child safeguarding standards and how to implement them' issued by Keeping Children Safe.

Monitoring and evaluation processes can foster active engagement and cooperation among all stakeholders. Everyone concerned with the development of quality can contribute to – and benefit from – monitoring and evaluation practices.

Available evidence indicates that a mix of monitoring methods (e.g. observation, documentation, narrative assessment of children competences and learning) can provide useful information and give account of children's experiences and development, including helping a smooth transition to primary school.

Monitoring tools and participatory evaluation procedures can be created to allow children to be heard and be explicit about their learning and socialising experiences within settings.

GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING are crucial to enable early childhood education and care provision to play its role in the personal development and learning of children and in reducing the attainment gap and fostering social cohesion. Quality results from comprehensive and coherent public policies that link early childhood education and care to other services concerned with the welfare of young children and their families.

Quality statements:

9. Stakeholders have a clear and shared understanding of their role and responsibilities, and know that they are expected to collaborate with partner organisations.

Early childhood education and care provision benefits from close collaboration with all services working for children, including social and health services, schools and local stakeholders. Such inter-agency alliances have shown to be more effective if governed by a coherent policy framework that can proactively foster collaboration and long-term investment in local communities.

Stakeholders' involvement has been shown as crucial to design and implement early childhood education and care provision.

The integration or coordination of services in charge of different regulations on early childhood education and care can have a positive effect on the quality of the system.

10. Legislation, regulation and/or funding supports progress towards a universal entitlement to high-quality affordable early childhood education and care, and progress is regularly reported to relevant stakeholders.

Improvement of quality in service provision for all children might be better achieved by progressively building up universal legal entitlement. This includes promoting participation in early childhood education and care from an early age. It can be useful to evaluate whether market based early childhood education and care services create unequal access or lower quality for disadvantaged children and, if necessary, make plans for remedy actions.

A close link to labour, health and social policies would clearly be an asset as it can promote a more efficient redistribution of resources by targeting extra funding towards disadvantaged groups and neighbourhoods.

