

Council conclusions on early childhood education and care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow

(2011/C 175/03)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

HAVING REGARD TO:

- the conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, of 14 November 2006 on efficiency and equity in education and training ⁽¹⁾;
- the conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, of 21 November 2008 on preparing young people for the 21st century: an agenda for European cooperation on schools ⁽²⁾;
- the Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) ⁽³⁾;
- the Council conclusions of 26 November 2009 on the education of children with a migrant background ⁽⁴⁾;
- the Council conclusions of 11 May 2010 on the social dimension of education and training ⁽⁵⁾.

RECALLING THAT:

improving the efficiency and equity of education and training systems at all levels — from the early years through to adulthood — has a fundamental role to play in achieving the Europe 2020 goals of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth ⁽⁶⁾.

REAFFIRMING THAT:

while responsibility for the organisation and content of education and training systems rests with the individual Member States, cooperation at European level via the open method of coordination, together with the efficient use of EU programmes, can contribute to the development of quality education and training by supporting and complementing measures taken at national level and helping Member States to address common challenges.

AND IN THE LIGHT OF:

the Presidency conference on 'Excellence and equity in early childhood education and care', held in Budapest on 21-22 February 2011, which emphasised the need to combine the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of early childhood education and care, and of the communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — 'An EU agenda for the rights of the child' ⁽⁷⁾.

TAKES NOTE OF the Commission communication — 'Early childhood education and care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow' ⁽⁸⁾.

RECOGNISES THAT:

1. high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) ⁽⁹⁾ provides a wide range of short- and long-term benefits for both individuals and society at large. Complementing the central role of the family, ECEC lays the essential foundations for language acquisition, successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and employability. If solid foundations are laid during a child's formative years, later learning becomes more effective and more likely to continue throughout life, increasing the equity of educational outcomes and lowering the costs for society in terms of lost talent and public spending on welfare, health and even justice;
2. high quality ECEC is beneficial for all children, but particularly for those with a socioeconomically disadvantaged, migrant or Roma background, or with special educational needs, including disabilities. By helping to close the achievement gap and supporting cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional development, it can help to break the cycle of disadvantage and disengagement that often lead to early school leaving and to the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next;
3. in this respect, the provision of generalised equitable access to high quality ECEC can make a strong contribution to the success of the Europe 2020 strategy, and in particular to achieving two of the EU headline targets: reducing early school leaving to below 10 %, and lifting at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion;

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 298, 8.12.2006, p. 3.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 319, 13.12.2008, p. 20.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, p. 2.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 301, 11.12.2009, p. 5.

⁽⁵⁾ OJ C 135, 26.5.2010, p. 2.

⁽⁶⁾ European Council conclusions of March 2010 — doc. EUCO 7/1/10 REV 1.

⁽⁷⁾ Doc. 7226/11 — COM(2011) 60 final.

⁽⁸⁾ Doc. 6264/11 — COM(2011) 66 final.

⁽⁹⁾ For the purposes of these conclusions, the term 'early childhood education and care' refers to any arrangements providing education and care for children aged 0 to compulsory school age — regardless of the setting, funding, opening hours, or programme content — and includes pre-school and pre-primary provision. (Source: OECD Starting Strong I (2006), p. 7).

4. moreover, since ECEC provides an opportunity for the early detection of learning difficulties and early intervention, it can help to identify young children with special educational needs and, wherever possible, facilitate their integration into mainstream schools;
5. while the Member States have made good overall progress in recent years in improving the availability of ECEC, further efforts are needed in order to reach the objective of a 95 % rate of participation by 2020 agreed under the 'ET 2020' strategic framework⁽¹⁾, and in particular to ensure greater access for children from disadvantaged backgrounds;
6. providing high quality ECEC is just as important as ensuring its availability and affordability, and attention needs to be devoted to issues such as environment and infrastructure, staffing, the curriculum, governance and quality assurance;
7. a systemic and more integrated approach to ECEC services at local, regional and national level involving all the relevant stakeholders — including families — is required, together with close cross-sectoral collaboration between different policy sectors, such as education, culture, social affairs, employment, health and justice;
8. increasing the proportion of men in ECEC is important in order to change attitudes and show that not only women can provide education and care. Having role models of both sexes is positive for children and can help to break gender-stereotyped perceptions. A workplace composed of both sexes contributes to widening children's experience and can also help to reduce gender segregation in the labour market;
9. ECEC tends to receive less attention than any other level of education and training despite evidence that investing efficiently in quality early years education is much more effective than intervening later and brings considerable returns throughout the lifecycle, particularly for the disadvantaged;
10. there has been comparatively little research on young children's education undertaken or gathered at EU level which can inform the development and implementation of ECEC policies in the Member States. There is a need to make existing research evidence more widely accessible,
- and to supplement this with more extensive research into ECEC provision and its effects across the Member States, taking account of cultural diversity and recording examples of good practice and experience.
- AGREES THAT:
- measures to meet the dual challenge of providing generalised equitable access to early childhood education and care, while raising the quality of provision, could include the following:
1. providing equitable access to high-quality, inclusive ECEC, in particular for children with a socioeconomically disadvantaged, migrant or Roma background, or with special educational needs, including disabilities;
 2. designing efficient funding models, including targeted funding, which strike the right balance between public and private investment in accordance with national and local circumstances;
 3. promoting cross-sectoral and integrated approaches to care and education services in order to meet all children's needs — cognitive, social, emotional, psychological and physical — in a holistic way, as well as to ensure close collaboration between the home and ECEC and a smooth transition between the different levels of education;
 4. supporting the professionalisation of ECEC staff, with an emphasis on the development of their competences, qualifications and working conditions, and enhancing the prestige of the profession. In addition, developing policies aimed at attracting, training and retaining suitably qualified staff in ECEC and improving the gender balance;
 5. promoting developmentally appropriate programmes and curricula, which fosters the acquisition of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills, whilst recognising the importance of play, which is also crucial to learning in the early years;
 6. supporting parents in their role as the main educators of their children during the early years, and encouraging ECEC services to work in close partnership with parents, families and communities, in order to increase awareness of the opportunities offered by ECEC and of the importance of learning from an early age;
 7. promoting quality assurance with the participation of all key stakeholders, including families;

⁽¹⁾ See Annex I to the conclusions (OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, p. 7): By 2020, at least 95 % of children between four years old and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education. In 2008 the European average rate of participation stood at 92,3 %.

8. promoting European research and data collection on ECEC, where appropriate in cooperation with international organisations, in order to strengthen the evidence base for policy-making and programme delivery in ECEC.

ACCORDINGLY INVITES THE MEMBER STATES TO:

1. analyse and evaluate existing ECEC services at local, regional and national level in terms of their availability, affordability and quality, as outlined in these conclusions;
2. ensure that measures aimed at providing generalised equitable access to ECEC and at reinforcing its quality are in place;
3. invest efficiently in ECEC as a long-term growth-enhancing measure.

INVITES THE COMMISSION:

1. to support the Member States in identifying and exchanging good policies and practices via the open method of coordination;
2. to broaden the evidence base in the field of ECEC, by building on and supplementing international research with

EU-wide research and making the results of such research more easily available;

3. within the 'ET 2020' strategic framework, to monitor and report on progress towards the 'ET 2020' benchmark target for participation in early childhood education, and towards achieving the aims set out in these conclusions of broader access and better quality.

AND INVITES THE MEMBER STATES, WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE COMMISSION:

1. to engage in policy cooperation via the open method of coordination with the relevant sectors (such as education, culture, social affairs, employment, health and justice) and involving all relevant stakeholders, with a view to producing reference tools at European level which will support policy development in the field of ECEC at the appropriate local, regional and national level;
 2. without prejudice to the negotiations on the future financial framework, to make efficient use of all relevant EU instruments in the fields of lifelong learning and research, as well as the European structural funds in line with the goals of the Europe 2020 strategy, in order to promote the above aims.
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