Researchers continue to find overwhelming evidence of the beneficial effects of high-quality early childhood care and education, especially for disadvantaged groups. However, they often lack a common language to share this relevant input with policymakers. A consortium of EU and US foundations set up the Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years to facilitate dialogue between these groups, enabling interaction and the sharing of knowledge, experiences and innovative ideas, with a focus on the contexts of poverty and migration. Many of these issues are also the main themes in the European Quality Framework for ECEC (Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2015).

Over the past three years, the Forum – led by the Belgian King Baudouin Foundation, with operational partners Centre for Innovations in the Early Years (VBJK) for Europe and the Migration Policy Institute for the USA – has held seven high-level meetings summarising the current state of research, testimonies of inspiring practices and policy debate on topics including accessibility, workforce preparation and curriculum, parent involvement, evaluation and monitoring, integrated services, multilinguism and multiple identity.

The final meeting – in February 2016, in Turin, Italy – took stock of the main conclusions. These included:

- ECEC really does matter for educational, social, economic and democratic reasons, with multiple proven benefits for children’s well-being, socio-emotional and cognitive development, academic performance and social cohesion; but beneficial effects require services to be of high quality and accessible for children from vulnerable groups.
- All children should enjoy the same opportunities to get into the same high-level ECEC services (‘progressive universalism’). Separate servicing for disadvantaged groups is not advised, as all children profit from a social mix and mainstream provision needs to be flexible enough to be affordable, available, desirable, useful, meaningful and welcoming for the families that need it.
- Guaranteeing quality demands a qualified workforce, in terms of not only initial training but also continuous professional development, with a balance between theory and practice and a focus on reflective competences, and engaging with parents and partner organisations in the community.
- For children’s holistic development, curricula need to be designed to cover more than just cognitive development. They need to focus less on addressing deficits and more on building children’s overall potential, integrating care and education, offering a warm educational climate and investing in a co-education approach with parents.
- ECEC needs to develop close links to the ‘real’ world and other services that can support families (such as health, education, housing, employment), and take a welcoming and tolerant attitude towards social diversity.

While consensus was found on these major issues, different ideas came up on the question of how all this needs to be financed. Looking at ECEC as a basic provision and a right for children, it is self-
evident for some that it needs to be publicly funded. Others advocate private, corporate funding, given the long-run economic benefits, as today’s children are the workers and employers of the future.

Reference


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