

Inclusive Early Childhood Education: Contribution from a European Study

Pedagogia inclusiva della prima infanzia: il contributo di uno studio europeo

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abstract

This article presents the European research project “Inclusive Early Childhood Education” (IECE), which was promoted by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, from 2015 to 2017. Sixty-four inclusive early years education experts from across Europe contributed to the project.

The aim of the project was to explore the main characteristics of high quality inclusive early years education for children from two years of age to the start of primary school.

According to recent international and national research, the years from birth to starting school are considered crucial to children’s intellectual, social and emotional development. Furthermore, high-quality inclusive early years education is considered an opportunity for children with disabilities, learning disorders and social-cultural disadvantages.

Keywords: *Early childhood education, Inclusion, Ecosystem model, Self-reflection tool, Special needs*

Questo articolo presenta il progetto di ricerca europeo “Inclusive Early Childhood Education” (IECE), che è stato promosso dall’Agenzia europea per i bisogni educativi speciali e l’educazione inclusiva dal 2015 al 2017. Sessantaquattro esperti dell’educazione della prima infanzia di tutta Europa hanno contribuito al progetto.

Lo scopo del progetto era quello di esplorare le principali caratteristiche di un’educazione inclusiva di alta qualità rivolta a bambini dai due anni fino al primo anno della scuola primaria.

Secondo recenti ricerche internazionali e nazionali gli anni dalla nascita all’inizio del percorso scolastico sono considerati cruciali per lo sviluppo intellettuale, sociale ed emotivo dei bambini. Inoltre, l’educazione iniziale di alta qualità inclusiva è considerata un’opportunità per i bambini con disabilità, con disturbi dell’apprendimento e con svantaggio socio-culturale.

Parole chiave: Educazione della prima infanzia, Inclusione, Modello dell’ecosistema, Strumenti di auto-riflessione, Bisogni educativi speciali

Inclusive Early Childhood Education: Contribution from a European Study

Early childhood education has become a prominent issue for stakeholders and educators, as well as for many international and European organizations, such as OECD, UNESCO, UNICEF, the European Commission and Eurydice.

Early childhood education comprises a fundamental period of learning and holistic development of a child's personality. It prepares the way for lifelong learning and an active participation in society (European Commission, 2011; 2014; OECD, 2017).

Children who are involved in pre-primary educational programmes demonstrate higher intellectual development (Pianta *et alii*, 2009) and a positive social and emotional attitude.

It has been recognized that early intervention in the presence of special needs and learning disabilities may help to limit the negative effects of these problems on a child's development.

The need for this kind of intervention has given rise to the decision to carry out a project to improve the quality of inclusive early childhood education at the European level.

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education conducted a project entitled "Inclusive Early Childhood Education" from 2015 to 2017 in response to this need.

The project involved sixty-four inclusive early education experts, including the author of this article, from across Europe.

The experts started with examining the latest policy documents and research on the topic. Subsequently, the main characteristics of quality inclusive early childhood education for children from three years of age to the start of primary education were explored.

After collecting the data from the inclusive educational experiences in each participating country, the experts analyzed the data using descriptions provided by the experts from the individual coun-

tries. This phase was followed by observations and discussions during field work and case study visits.

The European Agency for Special Need and Inclusive Education followed with a report setting out the main policy and practice developments towards inclusive early childhood education specific to European policy issues.

The project presents three contributions for improving the quality of early childhood inclusive education:

- a rationale for and an analysis of an inclusive vision and goals to create standards for policy and provision. As a primary outcome of this inclusive vision, the resulting high quality services benefited all children in the form of each child's belongingness, engagement and learning. The focus of the project was on "working with the child" towards a holistic approach to provide an inclusive environment for all children's learning and engagement;
- a Self-Reflection Tool to monitor the level of inclusiveness of the educational environments in terms of social, relational, affective, physical, as well as other learning dimensions;
- a new Ecosystem Model of Inclusive Early Childhood Education to support policy makers and practitioners to collaborate in planning, monitoring and improving the quality of IECE (Inclusive Early Childhood Education). The model is guided by three major frameworks for quality IECE:
 - The structure-process-outcome framework used by European and International policy makers (European Commission, 2014; OECD, 2017; European Agency, 2009).
 - The ecological systems framework by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006).
 - The inclusive education perspective (European Agency, 2015).

At the end, the report of the project makes a series of recommendations directed at policy makers and practitioners to collaborate with the aim of ensuring quality provisions in planning and implementing IECE.

1. Frameworks for Quality IECE

Quality in Early Childhood Education (ECE) is of utmost concern to policy-makers, pedagogists, teachers and parents.

Many European and international studies have demonstrated that positive aspects of child development depend on quality issues in ECE (European Commission, 2014; Pianta *et alii*, 2009). At the same time, there is no common definition of “quality” in ECE, nor are there quality indicators for inclusion in ECE, although we do have the Index for Inclusion (Booth, Ainscow, 2011) which presents a series of indicators to measure the level of inclusion in schools. These indicators, however, are not specific to all early childhood education environments.

The ECE programme to define standards in quality evaluation generally focuses on funding, standards, safety, staff-child ratios, enrolment rate, indoor/outdoor spaces, staff qualification and so on. There is also a special focus on pedagogical approach and parental involvement.

Research shows that pedagogical factors such as relationships, interaction between children and adults in pre-school, interaction among children, play, learning activities and participation have a great impact on the quality of the children’s experiences and outcomes. However, there is still too little available research (Imms, Granlund, 2014) on how to create and evaluate ECE provisions to enable all children, even those with special needs, to actively participate and learn within an inclusive environment. This kind of research will be the challenge for the future.

As we mentioned before, the IECE project used three different frameworks: the structure-process-outcome, the ecological systems and the inclusive education perspective.

Using structural, process and outcome indicators is a way of looking at quality features. Structural indicators focus on those elements that can influence the quality of the children’s experiences, such as the staff qualification levels and laws regulating ECE provisions.

Process indicators focus on the interactions between children and the staff and children and peers while taking into account the ECE physical setting (materials, furniture, room set-up and so on).

Outcome indicators are concerned with the influence that structures and processes have on the children's well-being, learning and engagement. (European Agency, 2015; European Commission, 2014; Pianta *et alii.*, 2009). This project has also used the ecological system model by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), which considers the different complex influences that impact children from their surroundings (family, school, extra-school agencies, country and so on), termed micro- meso- exo and macro-systems (Winnicot, 1974). It is worth noting that most studies tend to focus on the influences coming from the micro-system (mother, parents, family, educators, nursery and pre-school settings). It has been found that influences coming from the wider systems (meso-exo-macro) have less of an impact on children's development (Fenech, 2011; Odom *et alii.*, 2004) and has been applied only to the special education provision (Hebbeler et al., 2012) and to one curriculum area (Chau-Ying Leu, 2008).

The third framework is the inclusive education model, whereby quality provisions must be inclusive.

The OECD and the European Commission (Flisi *et alii.*, 2016) have attempted to establish key comparable international indicators to determine quality in ECEC. These indicators are access and governance, equity, financing, curriculum, the teaching workforce and parental engagement. Both the OECD and the European Commission present results based on participation ("being there" and not "being engaged while being there").

The research suggests that the "process" quality of the children's direct experiences has the greatest effect on quality of learning and development (Pianta *et alii.*, 2009).

It is worth noting that in the United States, the National Early Childhood Inclusion Institute identifies inclusion as it relates to children with disabilities and vulnerable children. This differs from the European view, which focuses on inclusive settings for all children.

2. European Key Principles to improve Inclusive Early Childhood Education

The European Commission proposed a quality framework for IECE with an emphasis on three issues:

- the holistic approach: each child is unique, capable, and co-creator of knowledge. His whole personality must be considered in all its dimensions: kinesthetic, cognitive, relational, affective, esthetic, ethical, religious, spiritual, playfulness.
- The importance of a close relationship with the family, which is “the first and most important place for children [...] to develop” (European Commission, 2014, p. 8).
- Quality standards must be set while taking into consideration diversity of provision. The European Commission recommends a balance between defining objectives, applying them and supporting diversity (European Commission, 2014, p. 8).

The quality Framework for ECEC consists of five key action areas to improve ECE quality:

- access to quality ECE for all children especially for those who are vulnerable (children with disabilities and special educational needs, immigrants, newcomers and other children at-risk and their families;
- workforce quality. This means on-going training for the staff and adequate conditions at work. Importance is placed on leadership and support staff, positive parental cooperation and inter-disciplinary and inter-agency collaboration. Quality curriculum and content are to be child-centred in order to promote child well-being and learning needs;
- evaluation and monitoring: this refers to monitoring the child’s development and learning and evaluating the effectiveness of the ECE provisions in meeting quality standards;
- governance and funding: this refers to how effectively public funding and leadership models ensure quality service for all children.

In order to collect data on these five key action areas, a group of experts from the European member states created a questionnaire which was sent to all Agency member country representatives. The responses illustrate the initiatives, achievements, opportunities and regulations for each country regarding inclusive early childhood education.

3. Ensuring that all children participate actively in IECE

The IECE project data focused on each child's active participation, meaning that each child must be appreciated as a member of the pre-school community and consequently, is able to progress. This results in a feeling of belongingness, which supports the child's participation in learning and social activities. Site visits in eight European countries allowed those involved in the project to gather further evidence from parents. In these interviews, parents declared that their children were enthusiastic about attending pre-schools that made them active participants in all learning activities.

Some examples included debriefing activities after organized play, deciding on which activities children preferred, and cooperating in group learning activities. In addition, parents were encouraged to organize activities for children, such as putting on a play, teaching dance, having cooking lessons and so on. Active participation was an indicator of the child's learning, progress and preparation for lifelong learning and social participation. Such outcomes were also linked to the inclusive processes in the IECE setting, as can be seen in the Self-Reflection Tool created by the experts working on the project.

4. The Self- Reflection Tool

The Self- Reflection Tool was another contribution made by the project to ensure that the inclusive aims of belongingness, active participation and learning were being met. The idea of creating a new instrument to observe the IECE settings was inspired by the analysis of several examples that focus on the pre-primary environment. The following were used:

- Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Curricular Extension (ECERS-E) (Sylva *et alii.*, 2010);
- Measure of Environmental Qualities of Activity Settings (MEQAS) (King *et alii.*, 2014);
- Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (Pianta, 2015);
- Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP) (Soukakou, 2012).

The main features of the above were combined to describe the characteristics of quality inclusive ECE for all children.

The content of the Self-Reflection Tool is made up of a set of questions regarding children’s participation and learning in the pre-school environment, with an added focus on:

- overall welcoming environment;
- inclusive social environment;
- child-centred approach;
- child-friendly physical environment;
- materials for all children;
- opportunities for communication for all;
- inclusive teaching and learning environment;
- family-friendly environment.

The Self- Reflection Tool examines inclusive processes and structures that determine quality in IECE settings. As Pianta says: “Process quality refers to children’s direct experiences with people and objects in the child care setting” (Pianta *et alii.*, 2009, p. 66).

This means that the quality inclusive processes need to include a concern for setting (Bateson,1976; Bronfenbrenner,1986; Montessori,1992) along with a provision for the formation and training of pre-school teachers and educators in order to correspond to the child’s needs for belongingness, engagement and learning. Another element that can influence children’s belongingness, engagement and learning is represented by peers, which forms another part of the Self-Reflection Tool.

The set of questions contained in this tool can be used for a variety of purposes, such as providing a description of the situation of inclusiveness in pre-school settings and a basis for discussion among stake-

holders about inclusiveness, identifying problem areas, planning interventions to ensure inclusiveness, evaluating inclusive methods and introducing inclusion indicators into national standards for quality in ECE. This tool can create a basis for interesting studies about the quality of inclusiveness in early childhood education, especially in the 0-6 system of education in Italy. A study on the use of the Self – Reflection Tool has been utilized by the author of this article since January 2018 with children of two nursery schools and with children from two pre-school classes. Eighty children and eight adults, including teachers and educators, are involved in the study. The first data from the research highlight the validity of this tool, which provides a clear picture of the quality of inclusion in educational environments for children from 0 to 6 years of age. This study is on-going, the results of which will be presented at the completion of the research.

The Self-reflection Tool can also form a basis to facilitate cooperation among policy-makers and practitioners. A further tool, namely comprehensive Ecosystem Model of IECE, can support more significant collaboration to ensure IECE. The following paragraph describes this tool.

5. An Ecosystem Model of IECE

The third contribution of the IECE project is the Ecosystem Model, which represents a framework to plan, improve, monitor and evaluate the quality of IECE at different levels.

Data of a best practice of IECE can be identified at the micro-system level, which corresponds to pre-school processes and the influence of the surrounding structures, at the meso-system level, which corresponds to the structural factors of home and community, and finally, at the macro-system level, which corresponds to the regional or national structures. This model is composed of five dimensions:

- outcomes. The main outcomes of a quality IECE project are represented by “child belongingness, engagement and learning”, an expression of the child’s active participation;
- processes. The processes are those in which the child is directly in-

volved, and are the focus of the Self- Reflection Tool described previously. The indicators of these processes are:

- positive interaction with adults and peers;
- involvement in play and other daily activities;
- child-centred learning;
- personalised assessment for learning;
- accommodations, adaptations and support;
- supportive structures within the ECE setting.

The above processes are supported by structural inclusive factors, also represented in the Self-Reflection Tool questions incorporating the following:

- a welcome for every family and child coming to nursery or pre-school;
- family involvement within the IECE setting;
- a holistic curriculum designed for all children;
- properly qualified staff for IECE;
- a social and physical environment that is culturally responsive;
- inclusive leadership and shared responsibility among staff and stakeholders;
- respect and engagement for all individuals;
- collaboration among staff, families, stakeholders and policy-makers;
- supportive structures within the community.

There are more distant structural factors in the home and community which also have an influence on the quality of inclusive processes. These factors are:

- collaboration between the IECE setting and the children's families;
- relevant in-service training for IECE staff;
- wider commitment and support for serving all children;
- inter-disciplinary and inter-agency cooperation that serve the children in the pre-school;
- smooth transitions from home to the IECE setting and from the IECE setting to the primary school;
- supportive structures at regional or national levels.

The final structural factors influencing the quality of inclusive ECE operate at regional and national levels. These are:

- a rights-based approach;
- provision for mainstream IECE access for all;
- setting up national standards for an inclusive, holistic curriculum,
- availability of initial education for teachers and educators;
- good governance and fundings for IECE;
- regular monitoring and evaluation;
- research on factors that facilitate or hinder the development of quality IECE.

A previous report (European Agency, 2016), based on qualitative analysis of thirty-two examples of European IECE settings, provided a detailed account of the above processes and structures at the micro-meso-macro levels.

The Ecosystem Model can support both policy makers and practitioners, focusing on the priority areas to improve the quality of early childhood education and care and to promote collaboration between the two.

6. The Ecosystem Model focusing on priority Inclusive Early Childhood issues

The following issues focus on one of the above-mentioned processes that support the engagement of children with special needs. They also focus on some inclusive and supportive structures within the setting.

As stated before, the IECE project data consisted of practitioner descriptions and experts' observation of the European examples of inclusive early childhood education in eight European States. A specific questionnaire was also prepared by the project experts and presented to the national and regional level government managers in order to have a clearer picture of the quality of inclusive education in early childhood educative settings in all 32 states involved in the project (European Agency, 2016).

The experts cooperated in studying the characteristics of IECE in

each state and then chose eight examples to study IECE quality standards. These examples had been proposed to the experts to examine as inclusive examples in terms of accessibility for attendance and active participation by all children in the nursery and in the pre-school. This right-based inclusive attitude was stated in all the educative settings observed by the experts in the eight states chosen in the project study.

During the visits, it was evident that the inclusive attitude was not very common at the same level in every state. Children with disabilities had often been excluded from several services before their parents chose to send them to the example setting. According to the Ecosystem Model, the rights-based approach that allows all children to have a qualified inclusive setting depends firstly on the responsibility of national and local-level governments. The responses to the project questionnaire show that half the European states already provide a guaranteed place in IECE (European Commission, 2016). This depends mostly on the policy-maker's engagement for inclusive education. Thus, there is a need for inclusive education training as part of the initial staff training, as well as continuous professional training to develop IECE provision for all children. A recent United States research study demonstrated that the main element that can affect the inclusion of children with disabilities in pre-school is represented by "attitudes and beliefs" (Barton, Smith, 2015). This confirms the importance of staff training and formation provided by national and regional policy makers and practitioners (European Agency, 2015).

The project found that the best practices of readiness to welcome children with disabilities or other difficulties were bolstered by the intention to upgrade staff skills and allocate resources whenever new challenges arose.

Important features in the project examples were the staff's attention to removing any barriers to attendance and to avoid labelling children into a category of disability; this constituted an additional support in any difficult situation that would facilitate the children's full participation in their peer group's activities and benefit from the setting's available resources to answer all the children's needs.

Another striking feature of inclusiveness described in the project is the importance of offering a warm welcome to and ensuring a caring

environment for each child and family (European Agency, 2016). There is particular care taken in the transitional phase (from home to the nursery or pre-school) and during the child's attendance. Several examples show how families are prepared for each child's inclusive engagement following procedures for each child's smooth transition from home to the inclusive, educative setting. This includes dissemination activities by local agencies, such as the parish and local council, to make all parents aware of the need for inclusive early childhood education services. Before each child's attendance, the staff, along with the nursery coordinator or the pre-school principal, dedicate time to getting to know the child and his family. At the beginning of the attendance, families can participate in a number of interesting welcome activities, such as playing, infant massage sessions (for the 0-6 months of age), nursery rhyme sessions and toddler playgroups. Home visits by the nursery or pre-school staff are suggested to create a positive relationship between the child and family and the educative centre staff. The data collected during the project visits confirm the importance of a welcoming and caring environment to facilitate the process of inclusion, as Booth and Ainscow also state in their Index (2011).

The importance of family involvement in the process of inclusion, particularly in the early childhood period, has been confirmed in various studies (Cottini, 2017; Machaliger, Lang, Roulston, 2015; Ianes, Cramerotti, 2008; Mortari, 2006; Mura, 2004). During the project visits, experts were able to observe children's engagement in meaningful learning by the participation of parents in practical daily activities during the nursery and pre-school time. In the Zaleo School in Madrid, for instance, an Italian immigrant mother, with the help of the class teacher, conducted a hands-on session for four-year-old children on how to make dough and use a spaghetti machine. This experience was an educational opportunity to learn about dough and food preparation. The Italian lady was the mother of a child with a disability attending that class. This is an example of one of the opportunities to involve parents inspired by the widely-known Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education (Boyd Cadwell, 2018; McNally, Slutsky, 2016; Edwards, Gandini, Forman, 2012; Vakil *et alii*, 2003, Angelini, Bertani, 2015). This approach also provides for an IECE setting that involves families to ensure that each child is actively involved in school

activities and makes progress. In the IECE project, families are also encouraged to participate in parental involvement programmes before taking up a placement for their child, according to the Reggio Emilia approach. Centre staff supports local nurseries and pre-schools to create parent and toddler groups in neighbourhoods.

Another aspect of the Ecosystem Model is represented by the holistic curriculum, which is an important element of quality IECE. The curriculum mentioned is organized according to each child's personal learning process, starting from his needs, interests, curiosity, choices and strengths. The holistic curriculum is akin to the strategy of "Child Initiated Learning". After the observation made by the teacher, the children are encouraged to give their reasons for choosing each activity they carried out, or explain how they carried out the activity. On the basis of each child's answers, further questions are posed to help the little ones to become more and more aware of what they are doing.

This phase precedes the didactic planning activity of the curricular path and is part of the exercise of metacognitive activities for children. It also allows the setting of a didactical approach centered on the attitudes of discovery and wonder, typical of kindergarten children, and preparation for any metacognitive attitude (Lindon, 2012; Aitken *et alii* 2015). There was also a special focus on play in the double aspects of indoor and outdoor play. Children are considered according to their personal needs; this means, for example, that structured play is proposed to some children to encourage their participation while other children are more engaged in free play. This is in line with the Commission's recommendations that "Children's experiences and their active participation are valued, and the significance of learning through play is understood and supported (European Commission, 2014, p. 40).

The holistic curriculum is considered a valid opportunity for learning and a preparation toward active participation in primary school and in "life in society" (European Agency, 2016, p. 39).

Inclusive leadership is another significant issue in the Ecosystem Model. The examples examined in the project demonstrated that inclusive leadership enables quality processes in teaching and learning. The leadership structure enables the staff and parents to participate collaboratively. Staff meet daily to plan according to children's interests, skills and learning levels and to evaluate teaching activities and

results. Staff alternate being responsible for teaching every fortnight and work in different classes or learning zones (European Agency, 2016). Literature on the importance of leadership in early childhood educational environment is scarce. There are two European Agency project research studies on leadership in inclusive compulsory education: Organisation of Provision to Support Inclusive Education (European Agency, 2014) and Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education (European Agency, in press). These two projects underline the responsibility of the leader to create and facilitate an inclusive setting and the participation of all types of staff as well as parents.

Cultural responsiveness is another fundamental issue of the Ecosystem Model. It is related to the meaning of “diversity” which, throughout Europe, includes children with disabilities and learning disorders, children vulnerable to exclusion, such as those coming from immigrant families and those from deprived socio-economic environments. The pilot-experiences in the IECE project demonstrated that most programmes depend on staff who can involve children and families with different cultures or with disabilities in pre-primary activities that give value to their culture and their person. The teachers and educators also work on the inclusion of these children so that they can interact with adults and peers and “become with their families, full members of the pre-school community” (European Agency, 2017, p. 44).

Conclusion

The Ecosystem Model and the Self-Reflection Tool are the two “products” of the work of experts from the 32 European States in the last three years of the IECE projects. These two tools can serve as further resources to improve inclusion at the early childhood level. They offer new indicators of the inclusion level of setting, learning process, quality of didactical activities, family involvement, and staff formation and training. The two tools can also inspire further conceptual work on a holistic perspective of inclusion. Given the fact that the tools have only been recently presented, further research should be done on developing Self-Reflection indicators and Ecosystem Model issues.

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