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Early childhood education research in Europe: contexts, policies, and ideas

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Introduction

In 2002 the European Council set for the first time targets for the provision of childcare across the European Union, aiming to capture at least 90% of children between the age of 3 and mandatory school age (SN 100/1/02 REV 1). The emphasis in the 2002 so called “Barcelona targets” was primarily on childcare as a policy mechanism that would increase women’s participation in the labour market. Almost twenty years later, the policy discourse around early childhood education (ECE) has changed dramatically. In the latest Council Recommendation of the EU, ECE is discussed as a fundamental part of the European Pillar of Social Rights, and links high-quality and inclusive early education to children’s rights, acknowledging its role in “laying the foundations for learning at school and throughout life” (Council of the EU, 2019). ECE is seen to benefit all children, with particular references to its impact on children from disadvantaged areas, and children who experience inter-generational cycles of poverty and discrimination. Such policy discourses are now quite common, and reflect (and are often driven by) research debates on the significance of Early Childhood Education. All countries in the EU and increasingly many countries globally have adopted such policy positions, made investments in early childhood, increased access, and have often introduced (or revised) curricula and teacher education for the sector (OECD, 2015).

But, the reality for many children does not reflect the high ambitions of the political discourse. In many countries of the world, access to ECE is still problematic, the quality of the ECE provision is poor, and there are large discrepancies between regions of different levels of development (UNESCO, 2019). Even though these problems are more pronounced in countries beyond Europe, they are certainly also present within the European landscape of early childhood education. In his keynote address to the 2019 EECERA conference, Jan Peeters put the question of “good quality in ECEC” at the centre of his presentation, and made direct connections between policies around “quality and effectiveness”, “equality” and children’s outcomes. Drawing on the pedagogy of hope of Paolo Freire, he called for a more critical approach to the definition of purposes in early education, as well as to who participates in such definitions. Far too many children, within Europe still live in conditions of poverty, face discrimination, and many still have poor access to quality early childhood with highly qualified competent staff (Peeters, 2019). But, even for children who do not face such difficult conditions, the experiences of early childhood education may be defined by an uncertain focus of ECE systems in transition from “care” to “education”, and under constant reform of their curricula and staff development.

In recognition that ECE is a very diverse research field where various methodologies, theoretical and cultural approaches shape the field, it is urgent to keep an open dialogue between practice in the early childhood community, policy and research. This Early...
childhood education research in different European contexts aims to contribute to this goal and asks the question how do policies as well as cultural and social positions affect early childhood education in the contexts of different countries? It brings together scholars from across Europe who present research in early childhood education in Bulgaria, Germany, Greece and Sweden, and examine ECE from within different education systems and ideological positions towards early childhood. The articles of the special issue contribute to our evolving understanding of these debates across different parts of Europe, and can be read through such prism. They explore social and policy contexts of early childhood in different countries, the rationales and practices that define the parameters of practice for preschools, and how these are experienced by participants who engage in them.

We highlight here two core issues that are important in the contributions, and we hope illuminate significant dimensions for further discussion on the future of ECE in Europe.

Policy and practice: a dialogue in the making

One of the important discussions around early childhood education focuses on a (re)definition of the goals of the sector in different countries. How does a sector originally established as a facilitator to female employment transform to a high quality education and care institution? Should ECE serve primarily as preparation of children for school, and for participation to a democratic society? Should it try to balance “care” with “education”, and if so, how? These are debates that draw on different pedagogical assumptions about practice, and find varying expressions depending on the institutional contexts they are played out. Helen Knauf in her article discusses how the understanding of ECE and its implementation have evolved in Germany. Drawing on the analysis of documentation as well as observations of educators in their everyday educational life, she contrasts the social-constructivist with the school-oriented normative perspective on the educational tasks of ECE. Her analysis of “learning histories” reveals contradictions between the requirements of various policy reforms and the convictions of the educators around pedagogic practice – throwing to sharp relief the unsettled debate around the goals of early childhood education and care in Germany, but also the role of educators in their definition.

The dissonance between intended policy reform and practitioners’ autonomy and professional practice, is also reflected in the contribution by Maria Birbili and Alexandra Myrovali who present their analysis of a new curriculum implementation and its reception by preschool educators in Greece. The way teachers understand their professional contexts, and their capacity to make decisions within such contexts, mediates how they interpret and respond to the new curriculum. The new set of guidelines on “portfolio-based assessment” are seen as vague and confusing, and to have been developed without connection to education practice. Drawing on interviews with preschool teachers, the authors conclude that these negative features of the new reform, seem to also leave large scope for professional interpretations and enactment, allowing individual teachers and preschools to exercise pedagogical judgement in their everyday pedagogical work. In doing so, teachers become policy makers in using their agency to actively construct their approach to the new curriculum through professional learning. The authors still highlight the need for systematic support of professional development opportunities. Curriculum development and implementation are of higher quality and value when they are collegial enterprises, informed by collective
“sense making” and in collaboration and synergies between practitioners, researchers and coordinators of education work.

Both contributions by Knauf and Birbili & Myrovali raise the important question of integrating professional learning into practice, and point to the problems that arise when this is done without the active engagement of practitioners in the formation of policy directions. Better integration and active collaboration would also deal with the problem of lack of clarity over the purposes of early childhood, and the pivotal role of educators in their definition. Their conclusions agree with the findings of Peleman et al. (2018) who, in their review, drew on research evidence from country experts across the 28-EU Member States. They find that effective professional development in ECEC provision require both the practitioners “on board” but also “peer exchanges within a shared scientific framework” (p. 9).

**Goals, values and the role of ideas in early childhood education**

Still within the framework of goals and values in early childhood education, the next two contributions illustrate the power of ideas in ECE institutional contexts. In their study of teachers’ attitudes and approaches towards Roma children in ECE, Lambrev, Kirova and Prochner show that deeply ingrained prejudicial ideas can act as barriers to inclusive education and counteract any policy attempts to effect policy reform. Having interviewed preschool educators and conducted lengthy ethnographic observations in preschools and Roma settlements in Bulgaria, they conclude that the discriminatory convictions of individual teachers have a much stronger effect on the continuing negative experiences of Roma children than any political direction or policy effort towards inclusion. The non-Roma educators in the sample dismiss both the European Union and the national government attempts to adopt and implement integration strategies for the Roma population, justifying their position through narratives of biological and cultural inferiority of the Roma children. The pathologizing discourses against the Roma are absent from the interviews with the few Roma educators in the research. They instead identify poverty and related structural disadvantages the explain the poor participation and performance of Roma children in the education and preschool system. The authors are very aware that the national government reforms of the 2008–2018 period represent fairly weak attempts to deal with such structural problems (especially in a context of reduced budgets and continued segregation practices for Roma children). Still, their analysis points to the difficult task that any government will face in Bulgaria to transform the early experiences of education for Roma children, when teachers’ beliefs so powerfully shape their views of and practice towards these children.

Existing research in other European contexts highlights the problems of low quantity and quality of verbal and other interactions experienced by migrant or marginalised children (Peleman, Vandenbroeck, & Van Avermaet, 2020). This only compounds and reinforces the negative stereotypes and ideas educators hold over specific minority groups. Challenging and changing these ideas, requires lengthy and systematic policy action in many fronts, strengthening the relationship between ECE and families, but also intensive training and support for ECE practitioners to help them improve their

Socially shaped attitudes and pedagogical ideas are at the core of Carina Hjelmér’s contribution who reports research on gendered and classed patterns of play amongst preschool children, in different contextual settings in Sweden. The topic has attracted a lot of research interest in the field of early childhood, with earlier research showing a systematic reproduction of gender and class positioning through play, often projecting the educators’ own identities onto children’s play possibilities (Lynch, 2015). But, in this paper Hjelmér shows that even when educators try to work against gendered stereotyping, these are often pursued by young children themselves, who assume typical gendered roles during free play situations. Children’s own choices may be gendered and (often) class coded (see also Sotevik, Hammarén, & Hellman, 2019; Zachopoulou, Trevlas, & Tsikriki, 2004) but this produces a difficult paradox for teachers who want to encourage children’s initiative and value children’s voice. The results of the study show how young children normalise what is familiar in their particular family, social and cultural contexts (with interesting differences between children from rural, and urban-cosmopolitan backgrounds), and reproduce this familiarity through play. Pedagogically, preschool educators draw on strong equality discourses that are widely accepted in Sweden, as well as on discourses around the competent and independent child. When these are in tension, they need to explore further the possibilities of free play and the potential it offers for reconciling the two.

**Final comments**

From the very north to the south of Europe, the national examples in this Early childhood education research in different European contexts address remarkably similar issues around the definition of core values in early childhood education, and their impact on pedagogical work in preschools. Policy histories and frameworks matter, since they define the parameters within which these definitions take place and they determine resources given to preschool provision. But, our collection also demonstrates the significance of ideas and cultural frames as factors that often act independently to develop professional practice in different directions (see also, Löfdahl Hultman & Margrain, 2019; White, 2002). Education policy and policy reforms are formed often without the participation of professional educators, but they are mediated by practitioners who exercise significant discretion in how they implement them in their everyday work. Since education policy reforms are the result of a social negotiation process, the reforms reflect ideal, but also traditional and normative views on ECE. In this respect, the approaches in the European countries presented do not show great divergence. Where we do observe stronger differences, is in the ideas of educators around professional autonomy, practice, as well as certain social values.

This leads us to two conclusions. First, the success or failure of reforms in early childhood education depends on the extent to which the policy process accounts for not just administrative new requirements, but also the features of the institutional contexts of ECE, their historical evolution in different national contexts, and the role of ideas around the goals and purposes of the sector. Second, no new policy can be effectively applied, with positive transformative effects for young children’s lives, without the active participation of preschool educators in the process. As all the cases in this special issue illustrate, education change aimed to achieve any preschool policy goal (new assessment, inclusive classrooms,
gender equality, children’s agency) is a social process that requires professional engagement and learning, and in some cases a transformation of the attitudes of the educators themselves.

References


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