Brief introduction to the cross-cutting themes to be discussed at the CARE Conference in Lisbon, 6-7 October 2016[1]

Below, brief descriptions of some of the main findings in the different work packages (WPs) are presented and combined in four main themes that cut cross WPs. Findings from WPs are sometimes confirmatory and sometimes contradictory, sometimes they reveal tensions between the perspectives of different stakeholder groups and sometimes findings from one WP suggest solutions for dilemmas uncovered by another WP. At the Lisbon conference, WPs join forces to treat the themes in an integrated manner. They prepare per theme a joint presentation for the discussion. Note that there may be some overlaps between the cross-themes. Note also that the issues raised and questions asked are by no means exhaustive. The final product of CARE, in addition to the overall research report, is the concrete recommendation of a set of quality and well-being indicators for ECEC, included here as Theme 5. A first and rather preliminary draft of such a set is already proposed by WP6 – the report will be made available separately. Purpose of the discussions per cross-theme is to work towards indicators that can be included in this preliminary framework.

Theme 1 - Process Quality & Curriculum

A comparative overview of early childhood curricula across Europe and an evaluation of their effectiveness (D2.1) shows a high degree of agreement across countries, an emphasis on academic skills and still limited articulation of new (21st century) skills like self-regulation, creativity and collaboration. Insight into what parents, professionals and policymakers across Europe consider important developmental and educational goals in early childhood (D6.2) shows a strong common ground with some interesting cultural differences and discrepancies with national curricula. Common is the relatively strong value parents and educators attach to new 21st century skills. Differences between countries occur in the value parents attach to pre-academic skills and the role of ECEC in preparing for school readiness. Do national curriculum guidelines and parents' and educators' views converge? Do we need updates of curriculum guidelines? What about findings regarding the (long term) impact of ECEC – what is, in terms of curriculum and pedagogy, needed for impact (D4.1, D4.2)? What is the role of play in the curriculum in view of stimulating 'hard' and 'soft' skills (D2.3)?

An overview of the common and culturally varying aspects of curricula and their quality based on in-depth observations of ECEC practices across Europe, showing agreement among observers of different cultural backgrounds regarding process quality in centers in different cultural contexts, remarkable shared understandings, but also interesting differences and unique European perspectives (D2.3). A critical cultural analysis of standard quality assessment instruments and a proposal for extension and modification of such instruments, fitting European traditions and currently highly esteemed developmental goals better, with explicit attention to educators' facilitation of group processes, peer collaboration, inter-personal skills and belongingness. But do findings across WPs converge (D2.3, D5.2, D6.2)? Can we think of a largely shared (European) view on quality (and wellbeing)? How can we adapt quality assessment instruments to fit the European perspective? What about socioeconomic and cultural differences within countries?

Theme 2 - Structural Quality, Professional & Organizational Development

Professional development and inclusive organizational culture in ECEC as core characteristics of structural quality. Evidence from meta-analytical reviews, secondary data-analyses and

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[1] The numbered D's refer to Deliverables produced by the WPs.

multiple case-studies, shows how different configurations of structural quality (e.g., group size, children-to-staff ratio, pre-service education level of staff, implementation of in-service professional development) can produce equal process quality (D2.2, D3.1, D3.3). Showing a central and a critical role of continuous professional development in mitigating negative effects of unfavorable structural conditions. How can we include the seemingly 'systemic' and 'multiplicative' (instead of single factor additive) effects of structural characteristics in quality monitoring and governance? What is the role of organizational characteristics and type of ECEC provision (including public vs. private)?

In-depth and comprehensive insight in 'good practice' models of continuous professional development and quality improvement based on case studies in Denmark, Italy and Poland, reveals the effects of dynamic factors (e.g., frequent feedback and regular team-based reflection sessions), the importance of time for reflection in the job contract, the critical role of pedagogical leaders, the importance of inter-organizational networking within the locality, and the facilitating role of collaboration with research institutes (D3.3). Do the findings in different WPs converge? Can we abstract general principles of 'good practice' that can be applied in diverse (local, national) contexts to monitor and assure quality (D4.3)? How can we include concrete indicators of 'good practice' regarding professional development and continuous quality improvement in a European quality framework?

Theme 3 - Impact, Monitoring & Governance
A review and several meta-analyses of research on the impact of ECEC on children's wellbeing and development by age group and target population attest to the potential of ECEC (D3.2, D4.1, D4.2). Based on secondary analyses of major longitudinal ECEC evaluation studies in Europe, new insights emerge into the determinants of quality and child outcomes (D2.2). Reviews and meta-analyses may also point to possible differential effects of play-based, academic and mixed curricula on children's hard and soft skills development as related to children's background. Views of parents regarding the balance between hard vs. soft-skills in the curriculum and ECEC's pedagogical orientation, views of parents with immigrant and/or low-SES background and the need for balance in the curriculum to serve all children optimally poses challenges as well for curriculum and quality (D6.2). What factors (system characteristics (universal, targeted; daycare - preschool), structural and process quality characteristics, and curriculum characteristics are systematically associated with (long term) outcomes? Is it 'one size fits all' or should we differentiate by age and community? How can we include indicators of effectiveness in a quality framework?

A review of quality monitoring and quality assurance systems in Europe and relations to ECEC effectiveness based on educational research (D4.3) reveals fragmented and inconsistent monitoring and quality assurance regimes, the more so in split systems, with a predominant emphasis of characteristics that may not be strongest related to outcomes (see also D2.2). What could be the role of national curriculum guidelines (D2.1)? What do economic studies into the relations between system design, type of funding, governance model at the state/national level and child outcomes suggest (D5.1, D5.3)? A costs-benefits analysis of investments in ECEC in relation to employment of mothers and educational outcomes for children, reveals weak relations between investments in ECEC and female employment (D5.3). What can be our recommendations for system design, quality monitoring and governance at regional and state level?

Theme 4 - Access, Inclusiveness & Equal Outcomes
A review of impact and (differential) effectiveness of universal and targeted ECEC programs by age group and target population shows differential impact of universal vs. targeted

programs, also in relation to children's background (D4.1, D4.2). A secondary data-analysis of longitudinal European data sets reveals among other things that targeted policy results in higher quality provision for disadvantaged children (D2.2). A review of the governance and funding strategies that can increase inclusiveness and improve the costs-benefits ratio of ECEC, discussing critically the return on investments in universal vs. targeted systems with a tentative conclusion that targeted programs seem most costs-effective (D5.1, D5.3). A costs-benefits analysis of universal and targeted investments in ECEC reveals (rather unexpectedly) benefits of investments in ECEC in terms of PISA reading scores for high SES children due to the fact that high SES groups tend to participate more in (improved) universal day care (D5.3). What can we learn about the systemic relations between accessibility, quality and impact, in particular regarding children at risk? Is there an undesirable trade-off between universal investments and compensatory quality for children who need it most? How can we address these potential tensions in the indicators of a quality framework?

Objective and subjective barriers to access and use of ECEC among disadvantaged groups exist. Using both large quantitative data sets and small in-depth focus group interviews, work in CARE reveals higher perceived accessibility in unitary systems compared to split systems and cultural barriers to access and use that relate to neglect of cultural/religious food preferences in ECEC, lack of knowledge of and respect for other cultures and religions among ECEC staff, and the devaluation of the first language (use of which is often forbidden in ECEC; D5.2). Views of teachers and policy makers on diversity and inclusiveness (D6.2), showing remarkable variation within and between countries. In-depth (observational) case studies show inclusive classroom practice by fostering group belongingness and peer-interaction. Can we find clues for combining the best of both worlds – universal access with integrated (instead of segregated) arrangements, targeted investments to reach equal outcomes, inclusion and special support at the practice level?

Theme 5 - A European framework…
A draft proposal is presented (D6.3) and will be discussed for a new set of culture-sensitive European indicators of curriculum, quality and wellbeing in ECEC, based on the evidence collected in the CARE project, including initial ideas about comprehensive 'configurational' indicators of structural quality conditions, indicators of curriculum quality fitting the views of stakeholders on important developmental goals, indicators addressing the importance of in-service professionalization, and indicators of inclusiveness of ECEC with the potential of reaching equal outcomes.