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*Early childhood education and care: promoting quality for individual, social and economic benefits*

**Deliverable 6.2**  
**Stakeholders Study. Values, beliefs and concerns of parents,**  
**staff and policy representatives regarding ECEC services in**  
**nine European countries**

**First report on parents**

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CARE Curriculum and Quality Analysis and Impact Review of European Early Childhood Education and Care:

Stakeholders study - Results from the interview and survey study among parents, practitioners and policy representatives in nine European countries

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is part of the project *Curriculum Quality Analysis and Impact Review of European Early Childhood Education and Care (CARE)*, a collaborative project funded by the European Union to address issues related to quality, inclusiveness, and individual, social, and economic benefits of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Europe. The project started in January, 2014, and will continue until December, 2016.

The Stakeholders Study is part of work package 6 (WP6) *European Indicators of Quality and Wellbeing in ECEC*. The Study involves parents, ECEC-staff working with children and policy makers in this field, and aims to provide policy relevant and research-based knowledge to support the European Union's efforts towards excellence and equity in early childhood education and care in all member states.

Nine European countries participated in the study: England (EN), Finland (FI), Germany (DE), Greece (EL), Netherlands (NL), Norway (NO), Poland (PL) and Portugal (PT). In these countries about 2500 parents, 2172 staff working with children and 277 policy makers responded either to a personal interview (PI) or to an internet-based survey (IBS). The data collection for the current report was conducted between February 1<sup>st</sup> and May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Since the date of delivery for this report was June 30<sup>th</sup>, only the parental data have been analysed and the main aim of this report is to provide a first comprehensive presentation of commonalities and differences in parents' values, beliefs and expectations regarding the quality and curriculum of ECEC-provisions and children's well-being across the participating countries. In addition, this report presents findings on parents' considerations when choosing particular ECEC services and parent's views on the appropriateness of using ECEC for young children.

In a mixed method design both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. A questionnaire was developed that could be used in personal interviews (PI) and in an internet-based survey (IBS). In addition to structured questions, the questionnaire contained also open-ended questions for an in-depth qualitative analysis of stakeholders' views on quality and well-being. The questionnaire has been developed in close cooperation with the partners in the nine countries with a particular focus on the cultural validity of the instrument. The questionnaire was carefully piloted in several rounds in all countries and the pre-final version was translated in all relevant languages and then formally checked by external bilingual professionals to detect remaining difficulties with the translations. The quantitative and qualitative analyses reported in this report were carefully conducted to ensure the cultural validity and cross-country comparability of the findings. Advanced statistical methods were applied for assessing the measurement equivalence across countries of the quantitative data. A grounded theory approach was used for the interpretation and contextualization of the qualitative data across the nine countries. The results until now are satisfactory and provide a valid basis for comparing countries and for evaluating what is common and what differs between the countries.

## RESULTS

**Research question 1** examined which educational and developmental goals should be fostered most in ECEC according to parents. To be able to make meaningful comparisons of the mean importance ratings, both within countries between age groups, and between countries within age groups, we constructed several confirmatory factor models and assessed their measurement equivalence across countries. Overall, satisfactory measurement equivalence was found. Finding full measurement equivalence is quite unique, pointing to largely shared thinking (using comparable cultural-conceptual frameworks) about early development and learning among parents across the nine countries. This finding may reflect a common tradition of thinking and theorizing on early education and care (see also Sylva et al., 2015, D2.1, regarding European ECEC curricula). Yet, clear differences remain in the mean importance attached to the different domains of development as areas for stimulation in ECEC, which reflect perhaps differences in systems and socioeconomic circumstances. In addition, several items did not fit into the constructed scales and warrant further investigation.

In general, all developmental goals – interpersonal skills, interest in diversity, pre-academic skills, learning related skills, physical-motor skills, emotion regulation, and personal learning attitudes – increase in importance with age. The increases in the importance of children’s emotional regulation and personal learning attitudes were similar across countries. For all countries, we saw the strongest increase in importance of stimulating children’s pre-academic skills, followed by stimulating children’s learning-related skills.

The average (unstandardized) differences in developmental goals between countries were smaller for children between 3 and 6 years of age than for children younger than 3 years of age. A possible explanation for this fact could be that this age-range is more fully covered by ECEC in all countries. For both age-ranges, the largest differences between countries are found for children’s pre-academic ‘hard’ skills. Whereas parents in Greece, Norway, and Portugal score relatively high across both age ranges, parents in Germany and Finland score relatively low.

The patterns of the relative importance of developmental goals are rather similar across countries, especially for the more ‘soft’ skills, which are deemed highly important in all countries for both age ranges. Within countries there was more diversity in the importance of developmental goals for children younger than 3 years of age. The most prominent difference was that parents attach higher importance ratings to ‘soft’ interpersonal, emotional and personal skills than to ‘hard’ pre-academic skills as areas that should be fostered in ECEC. This difference was less strong for children between age 3 and 6, although it was still apparent in some countries (e.g., Finland and Germany).

The finding that there is more diversity in importance ratings for younger children than for older children suggests a lack of shared conceptual framework that addresses the specifics of development and learning in the very early years. This is in line with another finding from the CARE project that there are less curricula for the below threes.

**Research question 2** focused on the importance that parents attach to different structural quality indicators: Aspects of the physical environment (e.g., safety, outdoor space), organizational aspects (e.g., group size, stability of group) and staff characteristics (e.g., educational level, stability team). Several items which are generally regarded as indicative of structural quality were selected. Since these items were all quite different from each other and not intended to constitute scales, simple means and standard deviations were compared across the nine countries.

Regarding the physical environment, parents rate all aspects (outdoor play space, supportive environment supporting independence, and varied equipment, toys and materials) at least as important, although the patterns of relative importance diverge somewhat across countries. Having a safe environment is rated as most important by parents in all countries.

Concerning the organizational aspects of ECEC-settings, parents attached most importance to children's physical health and safety to prevent infections and diseases and least importance to having a stable group of children, with few changes in composition over time. However, there was relatively large variation regarding this last issue, indicating low agreement among parents. There are some clear differences between countries with respect to a low adult-child ratio, which is deemed more important by parents in Finland, Greece, and Poland, than in the Netherlands, Portugal and England, although the latter still consider it to be important. Finally, parents in the Southern European countries and Poland attach most importance to healthy food.

Finally, with respect to the selected staff characteristics, parents rate being part of a stable team and providing practical and educational support for parents when needed as more important than having enough relevant work experience and having a high educational level. For these latter two characteristics, there was more variation, and thus less agreement among parents.

**Research question 3** focused on parent's opinions on the most important aspects of ECEC for children's well-being and well-becoming through two open-ended questions. Do parents' expressed views on well-being and well-becoming differ between countries? Starting with a grounded theory approach, a list of codes was developed for both open-ended questions. In addition, a first pilot was conducted for 10 parents in five countries: Netherlands, Finland, Italy, Greece, and Norway.

When we compare the quantitative findings from research question one and two and with the first, preliminary qualitative findings of the pilot, we see that the qualitative material highlights more differences between the five countries than the quantitative data. However, as we did not reach saturation for the qualitative analyses yet, we cannot draw any firm conclusions. Nevertheless, this preliminary finding supports our mixed-method approach of including both structured and open-ended questions. Through this approach we may gain a more differentiated and nuanced picture of the aspects that parents think are most important for children's current well-being and future well-becoming.

In general, we see that both in the quantitative and qualitative data, there is a stronger emphasis on children's 'soft' social, emotional and personal skills than on children's 'hard' pre-academic skills. In addition, the high importance of process quality when choosing an ECEC setting is reflected in the qualitative finding that parents mentioned more often process quality characteristics than structural quality characteristics or curriculum (content) quality aspects.

**Research question 4** concerned the aspects of ECEC-settings parents consider to be most important when choosing for a particular ECEC provision. Based on theory and exploratory factor analyses, we tried to estimate a five-factor model referring to practical considerations, the availability of ECEC, process quality characteristics, structural quality characteristics, and inclusiveness and diversity policies. Although this theoretical model was confirmed in a fully constrained model for the total group, we ran into many problems when we constrained the model to be equal across countries. We were not surprised by this finding, since there are large differences between national ECEC systems, specifically with regard to practical considerations (e.g., has low costs) and the availability of ECEC (e.g., Is available the whole year, also during holidays). Therefore, we cannot assume that these items are interpreted and considered in exactly the same way across all nine countries (i.e. they are not measurement-invariant). Nevertheless, this finding does not mean that we can never compare parents from different countries on these constructs. Based on an analysis of structural differences in national ECEC systems we can decide which items or constructs would be appropriate to compare for these specific countries.

For three items on process quality and two items on structural group characteristics we could estimate a measurement invariant confirmatory factor model across all countries. In general, we see that parents do not seem to distinguish that much between children younger than 3 years of age and children between 3 and 6 years of age. For process quality characteristics we see that the scores are really high for all countries (average means above 4.60). For structural group characteristics we also see that all average scores are quite high. In general, it is interesting to see that parents think that structural group characteristics are as important for older as for the younger age group.

Finally, **research question 5** examined to what extent parents feel that using ECEC for young children as complementing care in the family and as supporting parents to combine parenthood and work is appropriate. In general, the overall low mean scores indicate that, across countries, parents tend to disagree with statements expressing the inappropriateness of ECEC, the more so for older children. It should be noted though, that we targeted parents with at least one child in ECEC. Parents in Finland, followed by Germany and Poland differentiate more clearly between the two age groups when evaluating the appropriateness of ECEC than parents in other countries, such as England, Netherlands and Italy. Regarding cross-country differences for younger children, Netherlands and Norway think that ECEC is least inappropriate, less so than Poland, Greece, and England. For older children, Norway, Finland and Germany think that ECEC is least inappropriate, less so than Poland, Greece, and England.

A final interesting observation is that the standard deviations are larger in Germany, the Netherlands and Finland for younger children, and that they are still quite large for Germany and the Netherlands for the older children.

These findings indicate that in these countries there is more variation in how parents think about the appropriateness of ECEC for children than in other countries.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results summarized above, we formulated some first, preliminary recommendations:

1. It appears to be possible to define quality and curriculum indicators at an overall European level, at least as far as based on the shared understanding that was found in this study. Nevertheless, the definition of bench marks or criteria should respect cultural differences that may relate to systems differences, socioeconomic circumstances, coverage issues, et cetera.
2. It is important to create a stronger shared understanding of early development of the younger children, for which developmental science can give us important inputs. Yet, preferences of parents, and local and national traditions may remain, especially regarding the benchmarks/criteria and the role division between ECEC-settings and the family.
3. Overall, parents attach higher value to soft cognitive, social, emotional and personal skills (i.e., a more broad/holistic development) whereas an emphasis on academics seems less valued, especially for younger children. The emphases of parents do align with recent insights from developmental science and with from studies examining the long-term effects and social and economic benefits from ECEC programs. This is an important message for both national and EU educational policy.