

## Executive Summary

This report considers the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) curriculum throughout Europe. It explores the *official curriculum*, specified by national or regional governments, along with the *implemented curriculum* that is provided 'on the ground' by staff to enhance children's development. The official curriculum documents at national or regional level are often called 'steering documents'. Moreover, the implemented curriculum is sometimes called the 'experienced' or the 'realised' curriculum, i.e., what the staff realise in their daily practice and what the children experience day by day.

The CARE project has studied European curriculum in three ways:

- (1) by developing a template according to which the 11 partners in the CARE Consortium described the curriculum in their own countries;
- (2) by analysing the responses of our partners across 11 countries to the CARE curriculum template, with the aim of identifying commonalities and differences in the broadly representative sample that comprises the CARE consortium;
- (3) by considering information from the templates in light of selected research literature on effectiveness - NOT through a formal literature review which is the task of another Work Package in the CARE project (Melhuish et al., forthcoming) - but by comparing the template findings with widely cited, key studies.

The analytic template originated as a series of questions at a curriculum conference held in Oxford (March 2014). This template was further refined as members of the CARE consortium provided information about ECEC in their home countries. The conclusions and recommendations presented in this report are based on analysis of the completed country templates (i.e. the survey of countries represented in the CARE Consortium), but also on recent EU reports and selected international literature.

Figure 1 shows that National/Regional Official Curriculum Framework Documents, coupled with less formal Curriculum Guidelines, have direct impact on curriculum implementation in ECEC settings. The Guidelines often make explicit reference to pedagogy, i.e., the means by which the curriculum should be offered to the children or how the curriculum should be experienced by them. However, implementation is also shaped by what we call 'enabling' or 'constraining' influences, such as training of the workforce or governmental regulation and monitoring. Figure 1 summarises these enabling or constraining factors and their influence on implementation of ECEC curriculum. Study of the official documents alone therefore fails to provide an accurate representation of what is on offer to children in ECEC settings. This 'offer' is adapted according to the circumstances of each ECEC environment, such as the training of the staff, the physical resources available, the daily routines and the conversational style of practitioners.

Figure 1 illustrates a direct link between Curriculum Implementation and children's learning and development. Implementation can be seen to be 'effective' when the aims of the curriculum are achieved through children developing in positive ways that are in keeping with the aspirations of educators, families and society. The country templates that are analysed in this report include information on the enabling and constraining

influences, as well as the official ‘steering’ documents. Few country reports addressed the effects of curriculum implementation at a national level, although the EPPSE study conducted by Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj and Taggart (2014) established the effects of the Early Years Foundation Stage on a large, broadly representative sample of children in England. There are several other studies that assess the effects of features of the national curriculum on smaller samples (e.g. Slot, Mulder, Verhagen, Boom & Leseman, in press), or on specific regions in a country (Anders, Grosse, Rossbach, Ebert & Weinert, 2013; Anders *et al.*, 2012; BIKS, Lerkkanen *et al.*, 2012).

Fig. 1: National curriculum, and enabling/constraining influences on its implementation



In keeping with the European Working Group report (2014), this report distinguishes between official steering documents which are usually devised at a national level (in green), and informal curriculum guidelines which supplement and expand official steering documents (in red). Ten of the 11 countries in our sample have a national ECEC steering document, and many also have less formal guidelines (non-statutory) which are often more detailed and devised at a regional or local level.

Moreover, while approximately half of the countries have one official steering document that defines ECEC provision from birth to school entry, there are many other countries with curriculum documents addressing ECEC provision for children above and below the age of 3 years separately. In this case, official curriculum steering documents are often only devised at a national level for the older age group. The official steering documents of the vast majority of countries in our sample is the responsibility of just one ministry, most commonly but not always, the Ministry of Education. In fact, there has been a growing trend for ECEC to be under the aegis of the Ministry of Education. This makes good sense since the years between birth and school entry are increasingly viewed as an important foundational phase in life-long education.

Analysis of the template fields revealed two main ways to organise the content of the curriculum: according to (1) *developmental domains* in children such as language or identity, or (2) the *kinds of experiences* children should have to support their development, such as play or interactions with early years practitioners. Although some countries in our sample lean heavily in one of these directions, all of them include some mention of both approaches. The documents of every country in the CARE sample include aims to enhance *social, cognitive, linguistic, and personal* development in children. Some countries added other domains to the commonly agreed ones, such as *citizenship, the creative arts or a healthy body*. Just as there is agreement on developmental domains that ECED should enhance, agreement was also found amongst the countries that young children should benefit most from experiences centred on *play and caring relationships expressed in social interactions*. The latter was just as important for children over three as under.

The curricular principles shared across Europe and based on common intellectual traditions can be summarised as:

- Holistic pedagogical philosophy
- Child-centeredness
- The child as a unique human being
- Inclusion and equality

Thus, at the global level there is widespread agreement about the content of the curriculum, although there are differences in the relative balance of its components. The Italians appear to place more emphasis on creative arts, the English on the sounds of spoken language and their links to reading, and the Norwegians on ‘the child’s voice’. Yet, these three aspects of practice can be found across most of Europe, in differing degrees of emphasis.

Will there be a common European ECEC curriculum? Replies to the template survey suggest that European ECEC curricula are the consequence of different cultural, political and historical traditions. Moreover, they all have a strong values base, and these vary across countries. Finally, the primary and secondary curricula are quite different across European countries and this has an impact on ECEC. From analysis of the template survey, it has become clear that one commonly agreed curriculum across Europe is unlikely in the immediate future; national traditions are too strong and national identity is at stake.

The survey also showed agreement in relation to pedagogy and this may have its roots in the great European philosophers of Early Childhood. The template survey found that almost all countries shared ‘theoretical’ or

'philosophical' antecedents as regards to pedagogy. The two theorists cited most often in the survey were Froebel and Montessori, one northern and one southern. There were other theorists cited by many of the survey respondents, including the European psychologists Piaget and Vygotsky. Thus the main pedagogical traditions are widely shared across Europe, and are different, for example, from the theoretical traditions in the U.S. which include Behaviourism.

Because of shared philosophical and pedagogical traditions, broad agreement was found in the survey concerning those pedagogical principles in good quality practice in ECEC. These are described in Themes 5-8 of the report and summarised below:

- Focus on pedagogical interactions with emphasis on relationships and social interaction
- Enabling learning through exploration, project based activities, play and narratives
- A balanced approach where adults guide, support and facilitate, and ensure that experiences in all areas of development are offered, while giving enough room for the child's choice and interests
- Focus on observation as a means to reflect on children's development
- Environment that is stimulating, and gives children enough space and time
- Focus on co-operation and partnerships with parents
- Importance of institutional bodies which support and guide pedagogical practices

The CARE survey showed that most countries steer away from 'learning objectives' and concentrate more on 'learning experiences'. However, the last decade has witnessed new pressures, often from government, for a curriculum that makes explicit its aims for providing a sound foundation for learning in school. Some researchers (See Theme 5, Section 4) argue that a pedagogy oriented towards cognitive objectives may be more beneficial for promoting the child's readiness to learn at school. However, it remains unclear if a more academic or more comprehensive approach produces the largest (long-term) benefits for children. A cautious conclusion is that both are necessary as suggested by EPPSE, the largest study in Europe on the effects of ECEC (Sylva *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, the benefits of a more learning oriented curriculum may vary with the demand of the primary education system.

'Many European countries strive towards overcoming the strong dichotomy between an academic approach and a holistic approach. This may be a good way forward but has inbuilt tensions. More research is needed to clarify the benefits of the academic, comprehensive, or combined approaches across different country specific ECEC contexts' (pp40-41). Many countries in the survey favoured a 'balanced' approach and that is what is recommended here; several countries made explicit reference to 'balance': i.e., more comprehensive ('whole child') for the younger child and more academic (the 'learning child') for those nearing school entry. This compromise is not novel, but it is sensible and something on which agreement may be reached. Much more research is needed to unravel the benefits (and disbenefits) of structured, academic learning in ECEC. (See recommendation 6.)

There remains the thorny issue of 'quality' in implementation. Structural aspects of high quality, such as low ratios, good professional development, well-resourced space and exciting/aesthetically pleasing equipment, are

agreed by all of the respondents in the survey. Ratios in particular were cited as constraining the capacity of staff to fulfill the requirements laid down in curriculum documents and there is very wide variation in ratios across Europe. Staff training was also cited as vital for implementing high quality provision. Process quality was considered as well, although disagreement was found about whether the observational scales of the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (revised edition, ECERS-R; Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2005) or the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, LeParo & Hamre, 2008) are a more valid way to measure process quality. Case studies of quality which are also part of Work Package 2 will deal with observed quality in the practice of six countries (forthcoming from WP 2). Quality is so important that its study merits a separate report altogether based on new, empirical work.

With so much agreement on curricular goals and pedagogy, where are the strong differences? Why does the visitor feel that the Dutch pre-school centre s/he observes is different from an Italian or Norwegian one? It is in implementation that stark differences are found. No matter how committed an early years practitioner is to treating each child as a 'unique human being', s/he cannot do this well with a group of 22 children (ratio), in a small room (resources), and with no assistant (staffing). No matter how committed to helping children understand their environment, an 18-year-old practitioner with little science education cannot give an adequate answer to a child's question about floating and sinking objects in a pool of water. The implementation of the curriculum is sharply constrained by a host of factors, including workforce training, ratios, and budgets – to name but a few constraining or enabling influences. This report describes the official steering documents in 11 countries in the sample; it also considers the implemented curriculum in these countries, but here we can only make inferences because we do not have rigorous research to describe practice across entire countries. However, the CARE survey made very clear that official documents tell but a fraction of the story; other factors determine the realisation of the official steering documents and many of these are sharply influenced by resources, especially staffing and salaries.

In order to understand the implemented curriculum across Europe, the template asked for information about 'enabling/constraining' factors which are coloured blue in Fig. 1. A full understanding of the implemented curriculum requires all the enabling/constraining fields in the template and the survey enquired about many of them. For example, every country is now committed to an inclusive curriculum but replies to the survey indicated that successful implementation of an inclusive approach demands expertise and time. The government can set targets which require that ECEC provision responds to the needs and rights of diverse populations, but under-qualified staff working with high ratios cannot deliver such ambitious aims. Greater public funding is necessary in order to attend to the organisation and management of inclusive ECEC settings: specialised staff have to be trained, allocated and supported; premises need to be adapted to the diverse needs of children; culturally appropriate educational materials (*e.g.*, books, music) and language support have to be made available; outreach to parents and communities and strong partnerships have to be ensured; co-operative agreements with community, health and social service agencies have to be put into place; group sizes, staff ratios, and rooms have to be organised more flexibly to cater for specialised sessions; and services have to be flexible in terms of setting, hours, and programme options to meet the diverse needs of children and parents.

Curricular partnerships are another ‘enabling influence’ and there is widespread agreement in steering documents about the vital role of parents as partners in the child’s education. Their views need to be taken into account in planning provision, but there is no argument about this. What leads to disparate practice across Europe is the fact that parental partnerships take time, as inclusion does, and limited resources often constrain the best intentions of ECEC staff. So once more, good intentions (and national mandates) are often constrained by financial resources.

Finally, how can monitoring and /or regulation support or hinder the implementation of curriculum? The report documents several examples of local monitoring, some including parents, and means by which it can improve practice. Some countries, such as England, have well established national regulatory bodies that inspect the quality of practice to (1) inform government about quality, and (2) provide feedback to ECEC settings about their strengths and limitations. Other ways to monitor the curriculum include national surveys of parents on the internet and /or interview research on the views of parents and other stakeholders.

Several countries reported increasing pressures from government to demonstrate the effectiveness of ECEC in enhancing children’s development, especially children from disadvantaged backgrounds, often of migration status. Some pressures for testing children to demonstrate the effects of early education were reported in the survey, but this kind of testing was hotly contested as being inappropriate for very young children.

A list of 14 recommendations follows. We have kept the list short in order to focus on those we consider to be the most important ones that arose from our survey of CARE partners. These recommendations are based on the CARE template survey (as shared and discussed amongst the partners), but also on recent documents from the European Union, especially the recent reports from the European Commission working group (2014) and Eurydice and Eurostart (2014) on ECEC in Europe. Whereas the CARE survey provided firm evidence about national steering documents, the evidence on enabling factors was more suggestive because of gaps and limitations in the research base.

#### Part 1: Recommendations about national steering documents

1. Europe should aim at agreement on concepts and terminology to facilitate discussion amongst countries about the aims of the curriculum and effective ways to support policy developments and everyday practice. (This recommendation accepts curricular differences across Europe but supports informed discussion as the basis for reform guided by research and policy dialogues.)
2. National/regional steering documents for the ECEC curriculum should be created and reviewed by a wide range of stakeholders including professionals (practitioners, teacher educators, and researchers), parents, community leaders, and government officials.
3. There needs to be concerted efforts to describe high quality practices considered in the context of research (Realising national aims rests on high quality practices).
4. The acquisition of social skills and personal identity is equally important for life-long learning as is the development of cognitive skills and communication.

5. Successful implementation of the curriculum requires articulation of a broad range of pedagogical strategies that include *play, exploration, and interactions/dialogue between adults and peers*.
6. Recent policy documents and research point to the role of adults in guiding children's learning. While avoiding didactic instruction, adults should use modelling, questioning and conversation-extension to support the child's cognitive development.
7. Countries without a curriculum framework for younger children (0-3) should consider the benefits of a guidance framework for the youngest children in harmony with the curriculum for older ones.
8. Documentation of children's learning and development is a central component of curriculum implementation; it can support professional development and planning for individual needs (Testing is widely criticised, except for research or assessment of children with special needs).
9. National steering documents should support the involvement of parents in decisions concerning the wellbeing and learning of children.

#### Part 2: Recommendations about enabling or constraining influences on the implemented curriculum

10. Monitoring at a national and local level should emphasise its formative and supportive role in addition to any regulatory requirements to improve quality.
11. Successful implementation of the ECEC curriculum depends on high quality professional training and development, especially with regard to pedagogical practices across the age range.
12. Pay and status of the ECEC workforce must be sufficient to attract high quality staff.
13. Curriculum must be sensitive to all sections of society and formal means should be in place for all groups to contribute to curricular decisions.
14. Two kinds of research are needed: (1) studies on the relative strength of the enabling/constraining factors that lead to high quality implementation of the curriculum (e.g., ratios, qualifications, and professional development); (2) research on the effects on children and families of discrete elements of the curriculum (e.g. focus on academic skills, use of documentation, and types of outdoor activities).

This report aims to stimulate discussion and to articulate choices for individual countries to make.