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Executive summary

This report presents the findings of a multiple case study, conducted in seven European countries to examine common and culturally differing aspects of curriculum, pedagogy, and quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provisions in Europe. This multiple case study involved intensive data collection on structural characteristics, process quality, implemented curricula and pedagogical approaches in four ECEC centers in each of the seven countries that were considered examples of 'good practice' by national experts. A multi-method approach was used to obtain a comprehensive overview of the different aspects of quality in classrooms for 0- to 3 and 3- to 6-year-old children. Video recordings were made of four common situations in ECEC centers, i.e. play, mealtime, creative activities and educational/pre-academic activities, which were used to evaluate process quality with a standard observational tool, namely the CLASS Toddler and CLASS Pre-K and to analyse in-depth occurring educational dialogues. The CLASS was chosen as an example of a well-developed, theory-based standard observation instrument that is currently widely used in several countries in different continents. In addition, teacher reports were used to collect information on structural teacher, classroom and center characteristics as well as information on the curriculum of the provision of different types of activities focusing on (pretend) play, self-regulation and different types of pre-academic activities, including language, literacy, math and science activities. Finally, information on teacher's beliefs and perspectives on classroom quality was collected through personal interviews and focus group discussions with professionals in all participating countries.

A total of 28 ECEC centers participated in the case study, involving in total 77 teachers (of whom 41 worked in 0–3 classrooms). Videos were made of four common activity settings in ECEC (1) play, (2) meal- or snacktime, (3) educational/pre-academic activities, and (4) creative activities to increase comparability across countries, resulting in a total number of 56 videos for 0–3 classrooms and 56 videos for 3–6 classrooms (total number of 112 videos). The videos were coded using the CLASS Toddler and Pre-K versions by two experienced coders (from Finland and Portugal) and 25% of the data (i.e. one video per center) was double coded by an experienced coder from another country (the Netherlands) revealing good inter-observer reliability.

The results based on the video data showed that the emotional support and classroom organization was in the high range, whereas the instructional support was in the mid range. This pattern reflects the general pattern found in ECEC classrooms, but with somewhat higher average scores than previous European studies have found that used the CLASS, reflecting that, indeed, 'good practices' were selected for this study. The overall high level of process quality also indicated that what was thought good practice in one country was by-and-large also considered good practice in another country. However, there was also considerable variation in the quality assessments that could be attributed to the type of activity setting, group arrangement and to constellations of structural characteristics of the participating centres. For the 0-3 classrooms play and educational activities were associated with the highest process quality, whereas for the 3-6 classrooms educational/pre-academic and creative activities were related to higher process quality. Unlike in the 0-3 classrooms, play was not always actively guided by teachers in 3-6 classrooms. In 3-6 classrooms teachers were more often merely monitoring the play or not present at all during the play, which might explain these differing findings. Moreover, in the 3-6 classrooms the group size during educational/pre-academic activities was related to observed process quality as well. Process quality was rated lower during educational/academic activities that took place in larger groups compared to smaller groups,

which was particularly related to teachers showing less regard for children's perspectives and lower support to their cognitive and language development in larger groups. The content of the activity was also associated with process quality. Process quality was rated higher during science and maths activities than during language and literacy activities.

Teachers reported on the provision of activities in their classroom concerning the provision of pretend play, self-regulation activities, and different types of pre-academic activities, including language, literacy, math and science activities. There appeared to be differences between countries and differences between centers, reflecting variation in pedagogical traditions. Overall, there was a stronger emphasis on pre-academic activities for older children than for younger children. Moreover, there was a stronger focus on language and math activities than on literacy and science activities. When distinguishing between different types of curricula, it appeared that a balanced curriculum of (pretend) play, self-regulation activities and pre-academic activities was related to the highest observed process quality. A predominant orientation on play appeared to be related to lower process quality.

There was considerable variation in structural quality across countries, but different *combinations* of characteristics, rather than single aspects, appeared to be related to higher observed process quality and to the implementation of a balanced curriculum. Both a favourable group size and a favourable children-to-staff ratio were found to be related to higher process quality, although not in combination, which can be explained by the choices teachers make in preparing and organizing the day and the activities they provide to children. In classrooms with an overall more unfavourable group size, teachers provided more activities in smaller groups throughout the day, which can be beneficial compared to the classrooms with a smaller group size where all activities are provided in the whole group. Altogether, the findings indicate that a smaller group size with fewer teachers or a larger group size with more teachers were both related to higher quality and a more balanced curriculum.

Concerning additional in-service training and opportunities for professional development in the center, the findings were mixed. For teachers of the 0-3 classrooms both in-service training and professional development activities at the center were related to higher process quality and the provision of a balanced curriculum of pretend play, self-regulation and educational/pre-academic activities. Process quality was highest in classrooms with more experienced teachers who had also attended in-service training in the past two years. Noteworthy, is that 5 out of 6 teachers with the lowest pre-service qualifications reported not to have attended any in-service training the past years. The effects of in-service professionalization were strongest when teachers also evaluated the overall organizational climate of their center more positively in terms of collegiality, supportive supervision, joint decision-making and clearly defined goals based on a shared mission and orientation. For teachers of preschool classrooms the provision of continuous professional development at the center was related to both higher observed process quality and to the reported more frequent provision of self-regulation and educational/pre-academic activities. In addition, when continuous professional development was embedded in a more positively evaluated organizational climate in the center, there was a stronger focus on, in particular, educational/pre-academic activities, which in turn was related to higher observed emotional and instructional support and better classroom organization.

For the in-depth investigation of educational dialogues, the recorded play and educational/academic activities of the 3-6 classrooms were analysed using a qualitative content analysis. Educational dialogues are considered a specific form of collective, reciprocal, and purposeful interactions in which there are extended verbal exchanges between the teacher and children involving questioning, listening to each other and sharing of different ideas and points of view. In total, 8 educational dialogues were identified out of 28 video recordings, which mostly concerned educational/academic activities in both small and large group settings, mainly addressing topics of science and math (5 out of 8). The remaining educational dialogues were found in play situations. The educational dialogues that were identified in educational/academic activities were more likely to be teacher-initiated whereas the educational dialogues that emerged in play were all initiated by children. Not all children participated equally in the dialogues, although the *proportion* of actively engaged children was higher in small groups compared to large groups. The teacher's role in the dialogues varied from a more leading role to a role as facilitator. Children were more likely to engage in a dialogue when the topic was familiar, related to their personal experiences and when hands-on materials or concrete examples were used. The videos in which educational dialogues were identified were also rated higher on the CLASS Pre-K dimensions Concept development, Quality of feedback, and Language modelling, attesting to the validity of the concepts measured with the CLASS as a global quality assessment instrument. However, the in-depth analysis of educational dialogues provided more detailed information on how back-and-forth exchanges between teachers and children evolve, and on the specific strategies teachers use to initiate or maintain the educational dialogue.

There appeared to be a high level of agreement among professionals across countries about what constitutes high process quality. A group of 84 professionals from at least one center in each country participated in focus group discussions or in personal interviews to investigate their values and beliefs regarding classroom quality and to discuss their reflections on their own practices. The professionals mentioned three main goals of ECEC: (1) supporting children's autonomy, (2) creating a sense of belonging, and (3) fostering children's learning. There was wide consensus about the importance of a warm, positive classroom with sensitive teachers adopting a child-centered approach who can support children's learning. These aspects of quality were, generally, found to be well reflected in the standard assessment tool used in the current study for evaluating process quality, that is, the CLASS. However, the European professionals also strongly valued belonging to a group and being part of a community, the possibility to establish and develop peer relations, and a focus on broad developmental goals by striking a balance between 'soft' and 'hard' skills. These aspects were found to be less well reflected in the CLASS, which is more focused on dyadic teacher-child relationships and puts less emphasis on peer relations and peer learning. Altogether, the findings indicate a European perspective on classroom quality that is not fully captured by standard quality assessment tools that were developed in other cultural, more individualistic, contexts, such as the United States. This calls for extension of existing tools or for development of new tools that can capture the European perspective.

Recommendations

- 1) Current widely-used standard observation instruments to assess quality in ECEC, for 0- to 3- and 3- to 6-year-olds, such as the CLASS Toddler and CLASS pre-K, provide a framework to assess quality, but need to be complemented by observation tools that (a) address teachers' group-sensitivity and strategies to strengthen group-belongingness, peer-interaction and peer-learning, (b) assess the flexible use of subgroup arrangements within the larger group to provide more guided small group work, (c) focus more specifically on the occurrence of

educational dialogues, (d) evaluate to what extent social-emotional and personal 'soft' skills are fostered, such as self-regulation, problem-solving, creativity, collaboration and citizenship next to traditional 'hard' academic skills, and (e) determine to what extent inclusiveness and positive attitudes towards diversity are promoted. It is recommended to initiate the development of additional observation and self-evaluation tools that build on instruments such as the CLASS, but are extended as outlined here to serve the goals of European ECEC better.

- 2) Providing more small group activities can be an effective way to combine a more child-centered approach with stimulation of children's learning and development. Incorporating small group activities into the daily routines can be beneficial in terms of emotional and instructional process quality, meaning that the overall group size does not necessarily need to be favourable, as long as teachers use opportunities for the provision of activities in smaller groups balancing whole group and small group activities during the day.
- 3) The provision of science activities turned out to be related to the highest process quality, yet given the least emphasis in current ECEC curricula according to teachers' self-reports. Science activities, including exploration and discovery while using hands-on materials, provide ample opportunities for reflection and discussion and educational dialogues, and can facilitate deeper understanding, promote children's reasoning and thinking skills, and elicit complex language use, while allowing children initiative and self-determination.
- 4) In line with a stronger focus on collaborative and peer learning, the use of educational dialogues seems a good way to integrate child-centeredness with the stimulation of children's cognitive and language development from a collective, group-based perspective. Increasing teacher's knowledge on educational dialogues and how to incorporate them into daily activities can enhance process quality and increase children's involvement in activities, thus making these experiences more meaningful.
- 5) In view of enhancing process quality a promising way seems to be providing continuous professional development in the center, including having regular staff meetings to discuss, plan and evaluate the curriculum, the goals of working with young children and children with special needs; using collegial observation and feedback to improve practice; coaching; and team-based reading of professional literature. This seems especially effective when embedded within an overall good, supportive, inclusive and fair organizational climate characterized by collegiality, supportive supervision, joint decision-making and clearly defined goals based on a shared mission and orientation.
- 6) Relatedly, having a balanced curriculum of opportunities for play and the provision of self-regulation and educational/pre-academic activities, can enhance process quality as it can organize and structure the day and can support teachers in making pedagogical choices and using the time efficiently.