Early childhood curriculum for children from low-income and immigrant backgrounds

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1. Introduction and definitions

In this background paper, the intention of the author is to inform and support discussion about inclusive curricula for the early years. Sourced in the available research, the paper is also based on multiple observations of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and on conversations with young children, educators, parents, pedagogical advisors and kindergarten inspectors. It seeks to provide an overview of the main issues that arise in discussions about effective curricula for children from highly disadvantaged backgrounds.

Despite a certain ambiguity in the title, it is important to underline that the paper does not advocate a ‘special’ curriculum for children from ethnic, migrant or low income backgrounds. This has been attempted in some European countries in regard to Roma children, leading to even lower expectations from educators, the distrust of employers, and disastrous outcomes for the children (RECI Report, 2012). Every child has a right to the national core curriculum or a recognised equivalent. What is at stake is the capacity of the national curriculum to meet the strengths and needs of diverse groups of children and ensure equitable education outcomes for all social categories.

As used in this paper, educational disadvantage is closely – but not exclusively – related to being born into or belonging to a household ‘at risk of poverty’, as defined by Eurostat (2012) (http://ec.europa.eu/Eurostat):

Persons at-risk-of-poverty are those living in a household with an equivalised disposable income below the risk-of-poverty threshold, which is set in the EU at 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income (after social transfers). The equivalised income is calculated by dividing the total household income by its size determined after applying the following weights: 1.0 to the first adult, 0.5 to each other household members aged 14 or over and 0.3 to each household member aged less than 14 years old.

2. Kindergartens in the European sense are (normally) services for children aged three years to school entry, whereas in anglo-phone North America the term denotes an early education service for children 5-6 years. In the Nordic countries, the terms kindergarten or preschool (Sweden) denote an educare service for children from one year to entry either to a kindergarten class (6-7 years) or to primary school at 6 years.

3. A useful distinction can be made between ‘equitable’ education outcomes and ‘equal’ education outcomes. An equitable education outcome is one that retains the child effectively in education until at least the age of 16 years and provides him/her with the attitudes, knowledge and skills that enable employment or apprenticeship in the current labour market.

4. Using this measure, the average child poverty rate across Europe is 27%. Applied to the USA, the EUROSTAT definition would produce an American child poverty rate of over 40%. However, as American incomes are higher on average than in Europe, the poverty threshold in the USA is higher in income terms than in most European countries.
Depending on the country in question, children born into poverty constitute a large group in European school populations, ranging from 14% in Finland to 49% in Romania. In some neighbourhoods and isolated rural regions, the entire child population may be at-risk of education failure. As understood in OECD documents:

‘the educational needs of students that are considered ‘at-risk’ arise primarily from socio-economic, cultural and/or linguistic factors. There is present some form of background, generally considered to be a disadvantage, for which education seeks to compensate. The definition encompasses children living in poverty; children living in areas where services are less accessible (e.g. rural areas); children from low-income families; children with a migrant and/or second language background; and children belonging to very disadvantaged groups, such as Roma (OECD, 2006).’

It is important, however, to broaden the understanding of ‘at-risk’ beyond the notion of income. In a recent publication, UNICEF (2013) measures five dimensions of child well-being: material well-being, health and safety, education, behaviours and risks, and housing and environment. Weak public policy in any one of these domains may place a child at-risk of educational under-achievement. Bourdieu (1993) has likewise suggested that variations in social and cultural capital (non-material resources) constitute the major difference between the classes and determine substantially the educational opportunities available to children. In addition therefore to low income and jobless households, at-risk indicators include social contexts that may prevent or reduce participation in mainstream society. Personal and family factors also increase the risk of education failure, for example, having a disability, family ill-health or other dysfunction, homelessness, weak social networks and low parental education.

Children from immigrant backgrounds are defined in this paper as children from another country, within or outside Europe, whose parents or grandparents have settled in the host country, or who may be present in the country either while seeking legal entry. Although some few countries require proof of residence prior to admitting children into the school system, most EU countries extend the right to education to all children of compulsory school age irrespective of their immigrant status. Where early education is concerned, we also include children from families who have been settled in the host country for more than two generations but who are still excluded as a group because of phenotype, culture, religion, social status or other discriminatory factor. Some of these children may have weak official language skills and can benefit from curricula focussing on inclusion and oral language proficiency (see below, 3.d).

The term ‘early childhood education and care’ is used in a broad sense in this study. It covers all publicly funded services aiming to ensure the well-being, health and education of young children from pre-natal to primary school entry. These services can be provided by a variety of formal, non-formal and informal settings, including perinatal and mother-child services, home-based and community-based childcare.

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5. Here, we follow the OECD distinction between ‘children with special educational needs’ (that is, educational needs deriving from sensory impairments or from organic disabilities, including communication and processing disorders), and ‘children at-risk of educational failure due to a disadvantaged background’. This paper does not provide advice concerning early childhood intervention (ECI) for children with special needs, as the educational needs of these children is a specialised policy area and central to the work carried out by European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE).
programmes, crèches, play groups, kindergartens and preschools. In sum, early childhood care and education services aim to meet the particular needs of children, parents, and communities, as well as those of society as a whole.

Following a central tradition of early childhood education and care, curriculum is defined as the entire range of developmental care, formative interactions, learning experiences, and supportive assessments provided by centres to young children from different socio-cultural backgrounds, with the purpose of advancing their personal and social development and preparing them for life and citizenship in their society. A more restricted view would see the early childhood curriculum as the various experiences and instruction provided by educators to ready children for school, including the development of early skills in literacy and numeracy. This goal is also important, not least for children from very disadvantaged backgrounds who, without the benefit of early education services, run the risk of poor language performance in the official language and lack of knowledge of school routines and expectations. An early start in an educational environment is critical for these children, but it should not be forgotten that an appropriate curriculum will also cover nutrition and health screening, positive identity formation and inclusion. A secure socio-emotional start for these children will also include respectful outreach to their families.

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6. Much of the perceived language delay in children at-risk of education failure is not so much a question of competence (innate knowledge of language rules and grammar) as much as of performance, that is, how different individuals and groups form sentences and express meaning (Chomsky, 1965). What is considered as acceptable use of vocabulary, syntax, accent and style is defined by the dominant social groups, who often pass negative judgements about speakers of ‘nonstandard’ varieties of language (Wolfram et al., 1999, p.12).
2. Curriculum in early childhood services

Before addressing in detail the strengths and needs of children from low-income and immigrant backgrounds, some general remarks about children’s learning and appropriate curricula to meet their needs and strengths may be helpful. Much has been written on both subjects, e.g. recent work undertaken in the USA on 21st century skills, blended learning, service learning, ‘flipped’ classrooms and other aspects of curriculum and pedagogy. There is also a growing consensus across both continents about the characteristics of children’s learning, viz:

*Learning is meaning-making, that is, making sense of the world around us;*

*Learning is about the construction of knowledge, rather than transmission of knowledge;*

*Learning is about experience, hence “learning by doing”—real life experience is the best learning;*

*Learning is about understanding and using knowledge—you can’t claim understanding before you can successfully apply it in practice; and*

*Children learn best in groups.*

There is also some agreement about the following principles of early childhood curriculum design, although not necessarily about the implementation of these principles in practice.  

*a. The early childhood curriculum is research-based and proposes appropriate goals and pedagogical approaches.*

It should go without saying that a national curriculum for young children should be based on up-to-date research and that its effectiveness should be regularly evaluated. However, experience from Europe and recent curriculum evaluations in the United States suggest that the research basis for early childhood curricula can be weak (Institute of Education Sciences, 2013). In many early childhood curricula:

- The role of the educator may be assimilated to that of a teacher and her primary role as a facilitator of the child’s agency and thinking may be poorly understood.
- Socio-emotional development may be seen from the sole perspective of school readiness, for example, curricula may favour compliance, ability to focus, the capacity to understand and follow instructions given by teachers, “motivation (to learn), perseverance, and tenacity” (Heckman, 2010). The need for excluded children to develop positive personal and group identities may be neglected. As noted by Vandebroeck (2012) vis-à-vis migrant children:

> For many children, their introduction to ECEC represents their first step into society. It presents them with a mirror on how society looks at them and thus how they may

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7. I am indebted for the following to a paper that I prepared with Y.Kaga for the Council of Europe and UNESCO (in press).
8. A study from the federal Institute of Education Sciences found that two well-known early-learning programs, the *Creative Curriculum* (fourth edition), and *Bright Beginnings*, show no discernible effects on oral language, print language, phonological processing or math for preschool children.)
look at themselves, since it is only in a context of sameness and difference that identity can be constructed. It is in this public mirror that they are confronted with these essential and existential questions: Who am I? And is it OK to be who I am?

- The opportunity that the early childhood period offers for partnerships with families and communities may be neglected. Discussions with parents – both formal and informal - about the goals of the curriculum help parents learn about child development and encourage them to ensure a good home learning environment for young children.
- Curricula often do not cover the under-3 age group - a critical period for brain development, infant health, language and socio-emotional development (Center of the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2013). Neurological research indicates that hearing, vision, brain sensitivity to language, emotional control and socialisation develop significantly before the age of four, which suggests that ECEC before this age matters greatly for the development of key skills and abilities.

In recent decades, many countries in Europe have attempted to address these weaknesses through national curricular frameworks for young children and their families. In the box below, we call attention to curricular reform in Germany during the last decade:

**Box 1 Curricular reform in Germany**

Early childhood curricular reform began in the German Länder around 2003. The resulting new curricula innovate in the following areas:

- **The pedagogical concept**, which brings together Bildung (education), Betreuung (care) and Erziehung (nurturing or upbringing). This comprehensive concept of pedagogy ensures that all the basic needs of young children are more adequately met, regardless of the child’s family background (OECD, 2004).

- **The content of educational work with young children**: Educational plans for young children embrace all the main developmental areas. Goals do not channel children toward knowledge acquisition in selected areas, but privilege holistic development and the child’s involvement in personal and group learning. At the same time, the interests of society are served: for example, curricula place a strong emphasis on socially skilled and competent children, on language and communication abilities in the many languages of children, and on democratic participation.

- **The pedagogical approach**: German pedagogues privilege group project work in which a range of developmental areas and the different intelligences of children and learning strategies of young children are simultaneously involved.

- **A focus on learning processes (meta-cognition) and self-regulation**: Children’s self-regulation of their own lives (socio-emotional development) is regarded as a necessary pre-condition of effective learning, for example, their growing capacity to delay gratification, their ability to play and work with other children; their growing recognition of organisation and time needed; their appreciation of effort and perseverance; their ability to transfer knowledge or skills acquired in one area to another... Appropriate mediation by teachers is also stressed, for example, encouraging holistic pedagogies and active group work, particularly for the age group 3-6 years; sensitising children to learning styles and learning moments; the use of appropriate scaffolding and teaching methods, such as challenging and extending the child’s
understanding, demonstrating and modelling skills or behaviours; and an emphasis on relationships, language and communication.

In Bavaria, Berlin and Hesse, the educational plans were developed, as in the Nordic countries, after widespread consultation of teachers, parents, and providers, as well as of administrators and curriculum experts (Prott & Preissing, 2006). The plans also address different places where children learn, and not just the early childhood centre: they include home learning and the role of parents, leisure-time activities, the primary school, the potential contribution of local communities and youth welfare to social learning and culture. In this sense, the focus is on the learning biography of the child, and not simply on the early childhood institution (Fthenakis, 2006). Within the early childhood centre, education is increasingly understood as a social process, involving staff, parents and above all, the agency of children. Curricula encourage educators to respond flexibly to the social context and to engage with the local community in the care, upbringing and education of young children.

b. The early childhood curriculum addresses the holistic development of young children

Because of the foundational nature of early childhood development, a strong rationale exists to encourage caregivers and educators to focus on the holistic development of young children. When children come from low-income and immigrant backgrounds, greater attention to basic health, nutrition, socio-emotional development and language is often needed. An early childhood curriculum will address children’s socio-emotional and learning needs, introduce them without harshness to the demands of society and the adult world, and be based on natural learning strategies - play, experimentation, interactions with each other and freedom of movement.

It is important to mention these matters as the word ‘curriculum’ is often defined and understood as ‘the subjects comprising a course of study in a school or college’ (Oxford English Dictionary). This definition applies imperfectly to early childhood education and care. The cognitive life of the young child does not match a traditional ‘subjects’ approach. Rather, it is focused on meaning-making – his/her place in the family; the roles and work of significant adults; forging a personal identity; how to communicate needs and desires; how to interact successfully and make friends; how things work; the change of the season and other remarkable events in the child’s environment. These and other developmental tasks are the subject matter of the early childhood centre and are expressed constantly in the child’s make-believe play (Pramling, 2008; Bodrova, 2012). While ensuring common goals, an open curriculum allows educators to address the interests and needs of the children and families in their care.

9. ‘Foundational nature’ suggests that if basic health and well-being are not ensured in infancy and early childhood, the risk of ill-health and anxiety in later life are greatly increased. A similar level of risk occurs if challenges to sensing pathways (vision, hearing...), socio-emotional development or language use are not addressed during early childhood.
How can the educator link the child’s quest for meaning with the demands of curriculum?

In the school context, sequenced instruction by teachers – that is, moving logically from A to B to C within specific learning areas - is often considered as the key to children’s learning. As noted by van Kuyk (2006), the author of the Piramide programme extensively used in the Netherlands, the approach has certain shortcomings in the early years:

"The sequential approach is primarily teacher directed and offers limited opportunities for children to develop self-regulation. Activities often fail to tap into children’s intrinsic motivation, because they do not authentically meet the needs and interests of children. When this intrinsic motivation is missing, the teacher will have to work harder to engage the children in learning... learning becomes artificial and uninteresting. Children seek a meaningful context for learning, and when learning activities are decontextualised, the teacher has to entice the children with functional contexts and playful activities. Even though the learning goals are very clear in the sequential approach, the developmental areas lack natural connection and integration."

The educator is here faced with a dilemma: whether, on the one hand, to teach the curriculum or, on the other, to respect the initiatives and interests of the young children in her care. Recent research from Sweden brings a response to the issue through the ‘education encounter’ between teacher and child, each making an essential contribution to the interaction (Pramling & Pramling, 2011).

Box 1 The education encounter

Swedish researchers underline that the authentic world of the child (her actual experiences, interests and make-believe play) should be worked on in the classroom, e.g. themes such as: the family and its members, parents’ work and interests, the local community and its concerns, nature and the changing seasons, or the professions that fascinate young children. The early childhood teacher has, however, a particular role, namely, to transform authentic experiences into an educational encounter. An educational encounter occurs when children and teachers working together on a theme or event or idea of interest – in, for example, a conversation, play or project work – create a new or more complex understanding of the event or concept and/or acquire a new or improved skill.

The various knowledge strands of the curriculum, which a particular society identifies as important, are also approached, but do not become the subject of direct teaching. They emerge rather from the broad themes chosen by children in their make-believe play and project work. These themes can then be further developed by the teacher through questions, shared thinking and other pedagogical approaches. It is important that the teacher is clear about the intention of a particular activity from his/her perspective as a teacher as well as from the child’s perspective. Effective teachers know how to co-ordinate these perspectives, without diminishing the initiative (protagonism) of the child.


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10. In this regard, educators need to have cultural competence, that is, to know the background of the children and their families.
c. The early childhood curriculum is inclusive and equitable. It seeks to ensure an even level of quality across different forms of provision and for different groups of children

In addition to providing strong guidance to educators and centres in pedagogical matters, a national curriculum framework helps to ensure an even level of quality across different forms of provision and for different groups of children. A national framework will set standards and orientations for all owners and educators concerning centre responsibilities toward young children and their families. It will clearly set out government requirements in regard to the development, learning and care that young children should experience when attending a setting outside the family home. These requirements will provide a basis for licensing, a regulatory regime, and for regular inspection.

d. The early childhood curriculum promotes agreed democratic values

A national curriculum framework can put forward the agreed values of democratic societies, in particular, the aspiration to remove discrimination and provide equality of opportunity to all children. It can encourage centres to ensure that every child is included and will not be disadvantaged “because of ethnicity, culture or religion, home language, family background, learning difficulties or disabilities, gender or ability.” (UK Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, 2008). For this reason, many European countries refer explicitly to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in their curricular frameworks.

For example, the Berlin curriculum Bridging Diversity: an early childhood curriculum (Prott, R. & Preissing, C., 2006) calls on educators to encourage democratic reflexes and attitudes in children, e.g. “forming an opinion and having a standpoint”; “developing ideas, taking the initiative, inspiring others, ‘asserting oneself’”; “having the confidence to stick up for one’s own rights and defend oneself against injustice”, “forming an opinion and accepting other views”; “expressing and accepting criticism”; “being able to distinguish between one’s own experiences and those of media productions”, “knowing and using decision-making processes”.

A national framework can also orient educators to address issues important for society at a given moment, for example, growing cultural and ethnic diversity. It can encourage children to avoid aggression, to learn to live together, to respect the natural environment, to eat and live healthily. An example is provided in the Swedish Preschool Curriculum, (2009):

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11. Various early childhood services forms are characterised by weak inspection standards, incomplete background checks, weak basic health and safety standards, weak training requirements, and weak early learning standards.

12. Because individual development in early childhood takes place in sporadic bursts and because young children develop at very different rates, we do not recommend learning standards for young children matched to a particular age but rather broad goals that children can aspire to. Standards are better applied to adults and centres, e.g. health and hygiene standards, the ratio of qualified staff, the child:staff ratios, the comprehensiveness of the curriculum in use, regular and appropriate assessments of children’s progress, space per child – all of which have been show by research to contribute to the quality of early childhood services.
Preschool should be characterised by care for the individual’s well-being and development. No child in the preschool should be subjected to discrimination due to gender, ethnic group, religion or other faith, sexual orientation of a family member or functional impairment, or be subjected to other degrading treatment. Preschool should aim to develop the child’s sense of empathy and concern for others, as well as an openness and respect for differences in people’s views and ways of life. The child’s need to reflect on and share their thoughts with others in various ways about questions of life should be supported.

e. The early childhood curriculum encourages staff to have a positive view and high expectations of each child, whatever his/her origin.

The views held by educators about the young children in their care deeply influence the relationships and pedagogical practices within the early childhood centre. The early childhood curriculum takes the view that each and every child is capable, can succeed in education and contribute to society. Too often, children from low-income and immigrant backgrounds are seen as victims and difficult to educate. This is an image of what Loris Malaguzzi termed the ‘poor’ child, the child in need of help. To the contrary, every child is born with great potential, with intelligence and curiosity, an active learner who seeks the meaning of the world from birth. This is “a child who needs and wants connections with other children and adults; a citizen with a place in society, a subject of rights whom the society must respect and support” (Children in Europe, 2008: 6). It is important to hold the view that every child is capable of contributing strongly to society in many different fields if he or she is accepted and nurtured in inclusive kindergartens and schools.

f. The early childhood curriculum encourages staff to work collegially, to assess their performance continuously and engage in regular professional development.

Collegial teamwork in the preschool is an important factor in raising quality levels. The early childhood curriculum encourages staff to work cooperatively with each other and engage in collegial reflexion and regular professional development. Regular reflexion on practice through, for example documentation, allows staff to respond to new challenges in everyday life and work and increases their ability to advocate for quality education for all children. The collegial practice of educators spills over into co-constructing educational practices in dialogue with children and involving parents as equal partners in pedagogical decision-making. A primary duty of the early childhood centre is to create among educators and parents a common culture of acceptance and achievement for all children (ISSA, 2010).

Weekly meetings and shared documentation also allow educators both to create a comprehensive learning record for each child and to evaluate their own practice. Children express what they have learned in different ways, in what Malaguzzi has named as “the hundred languages of children”. Some prefer learning and expressive styles that are predominantly oral; others prefer to present visual, musical, or dramatic expressions of what they have learned. Shared documentation encourages educators to collect, on a regular basis, examples of each child’s learning and to organize, display and analyse that learning.
Professional development is an essential mechanism for increasing educators' capacity to support children’s development and to understand new challenges and new advances in pedagogy, e.g. outreach to immigrant families or new approaches to emergent literacy and numeracy education. It is important, therefore, that the national or state curriculum framework should advocate professional development for educators, as both time and financing need to be foreseen for the activity. In sum, an entitlement to adequate periods of professional development should to be agreed and a budget provided to support the professional development plan, including registration, travel expenses, materials and educator credits.

**g. The early childhood curriculum is both experiential and educational**
An early childhood curriculum is both experiential and educational, that is, the educators help children to transform their life and daily experiences into learning moments. When, as will often be the situation for children from low-income backgrounds, the range of cultural experiences to which they have been exposed is narrow, educators will create a stimulating environment and arrange visits to widen the experience of these children. The fostering of experiential, self-motivated learning in the child also requires a pedagogy that puts children’s participation at the centre of curriculum. This calls for specific training of educators in the competencies that allow this to happen. An educational encounter occurs when children and educators working together on a theme or event or idea – especially in conversation, play or project work – create a new or more complex understanding and eventually, acquire a new or improved skill. For this to take place, the educator needs to enter authentically the children’s world and transform their interests and questions into shared meaning and understanding. She will lead children toward second level thinking through her discussions with them and will link their interests to the more academic aspects of the curriculum, including language, literacy, numbers and other knowledge and skills useful for the children.

**h. The early childhood curriculum encourages educators to plan an interesting classroom layout**
In the Ten Action Points of Experiential Education, no fewer than four are devoted to stimulating the child’s involvement in learning through giving greater attention to classroom layout and the activities within it (Laevers and Moons, 1997). This corresponds to Malaguzzi’s insight when he refers to the environment as ‘the third educator’ (after parents and educators). Among the initiatives that educators can take are the following:

- Rearrange the classroom in appealing corners or areas;\(^\text{13}\)
- Check the content of the areas and make them more interesting and challenging;
- Introduce periodically new and unconventional materials and activities (one change at a time, observing how children react);

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\(^{13}\) In particular, reading and dramatic play corners are important for language development, but all corners (dolls, home, water, construction, nature, sand box, etc.) are useful for interaction between children and lend themselves well to questions by teachers to lead children to second-level thinking.
Identify children’s interests and offer activities that meet these (changing) interests;
Replace corners or activities in which children are not interested.

Cultural and educational visits are also means to widen the children’s experience, arouse their curiosity and extend their concepts and vocabulary.

### i. The early childhood curriculum encourage the use of outdoor spaces:

In many countries, the indoors is considered to be the primary learning space for young children and all resources are focused there. By contrast, in the Nordic countries, indoors and outdoors have equal pedagogical importance. Young children may spend three or four hours daily out of doors, both in winter and summer. The outdoors is healthy for young children. It is also an ideal place for young children to play and to learn respect for the environment and its protection.

In the outdoors, children learn about the cycle of life through observing living things and gain respect for both life and nature. If carefully guided, they will become skilled at classifying, experimenting, and observing – and in drawing what they see. A natural or intelligently constructed outdoor environment places the focus on “experiencing” rather than “teaching”. Young children learn much through discovery and self-initiated activities and their learning is multiplied through active involvement with each other. Natural elements provide for open-ended play and creative exploration with diverse materials.

*Guided by experienced staff, children learn colours, numbers and vocabulary experientially in natural settings. They can experience the basic principles of scientific enquiry in manipulating and collecting natural objects and in observing plant, animal and bird life.* (OECD, 2006)

### 3. What curriculum and pedagogy for excluded children?

Given the presence of a well-researched, open curricular framework, what further emphases can better support the development and learning of children from low-income and immigrant backgrounds in our early childhood centres? Vandenbroeck & Lazzari (2013) have to some extent covered this ground when, during the first meeting of the Forum, they proposed a framework for successful access and inclusion. While referring again to some of the points raised in that framework, we focus more closely in the following pages on curriculum and pedagogy and propose for reflection the following list of ‘good practices’:

*The early childhood curriculum recommends respect for the background and cultural identity of low-income and minority children while promoting socio-economic mixing*

Like all children, children from low-income and immigrant backgrounds differ greatly from each other in terms of appearance, family background, personal attitudes, aptitudes, and attitudes to education. Among immigrant children, differences also include levels of wealth and social class. Whatever their background, these – and other children - should, first of all, be respected as individuals, with educators acknowledging
the unique talents and desires of each child. At the same time, educators will value positively the history, language and culture of immigrant children and their parents. All too often, kindergarten is seen as a place where immigrant children are to be socialised in the norms and values of majority society, without reference to their own culture and social identity (see 3:e below).

Among the goals that the early childhood curriculum can set in regard to diversity, the following have been identified by DECET (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training: http://www.decet.org/) and ISSA (International Step by Step Association) (http://www.issa.nl/)

- Promoting a perceptible ethos in each centre, grounded in a commitment to social justice and respect of diversity;
- Ensuring that children’s needs, interests and experiences remain the focal point of educational initiatives;
- Adopting a child-centred pedagogy that reflects societal diversity and promotes holistic development;
- Supporting the development of children’s individual and group identities by nurturing their feeling of belonging in a positive climate that welcomes diversity;
- Sustaining the competencies of educators through continuous professional development that supports them in responding to the changing needs of children, families, communities and society;
- Creating democratic decision-making structures within the centre that encourage educators and parents to express divergent views;
- Co-constructing educational practices in dialogue with children and parents through collegial reflection and documentation; involving parents as equal partners in pedagogical decision-making;
- The active involvement of staff in issues that concern the local community.

Research suggests that socio-economic mixing assists the language and social skills of both low-income children and their middle-class peers (Harlen & Malcolm, 1999). In practice, however, because of housing segregation and ‘white flight’ from ‘immigrant’ centres and schools, integration can be very difficult to achieve (see, for example, the US experience of bussing or attempts to include the poorest Roma children in schools in CEE countries). Some success has been achieved in the Netherlands through remapping school districts and renewing housing and community infrastructure in deprived neighbourhoods.

b. The curriculum framework is properly financed to take into account the need to provide comprehensive services

There is little point is talking about effective early childhood services for excluded children if the early education and care centres they attend do not have the funding to supply comprehensive services, that is, services that support the health, nutrition and social needs of young children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition, these children need more enriched pedagogical environments, more experienced teachers, and smaller group sizes. Disparities between rich and poor neighbourhoods need to be
corrected and, in fact, positive discrimination in favour of poorer neighbourhoods and their children put into place.

The Nordic countries are exemplary in this respect and provide free tuition, meals, health screening and family outreach to children from low-income and immigrant backgrounds. Countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands\(^\text{14}\) and the UK also set a good example by co-ordinating services around low-income children. In these countries, early childhood centres are encouraged to cooperate across sectoral and institutional borders (e.g. education, health, housing, community renewal, adult education...) in order to address the complex needs of children and families living in difficult conditions.

c. The early childhood curriculum strikes an appropriate balance between curricular learning and the well-being of children

Based on the EPPE study, (Sylva et al. 2004), the English curriculum framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) gives much attention to socio-emotional development. It identifies the closeness and quality of relationships between teachers and children as being of core importance. The study found that centres in which staff showed respect for children, listened attentively to what they said, responded sympathetically and used reasoned language to explain rules and requests achieved better socio-emotional outcomes for children. For this reason, the EYFS curriculum encourages educators to give particular attention to the development of autonomy, self-regulation and positive social behaviour (cooperation, sharing, and empathy) in young children. The EPPE study also found that adequate space and a better physical environment were associated with decreased antisocial and worried behaviours. It also identified pedagogical aspects that are particularly important for child cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes:

- The quality of staff–child interaction: EPPE showed that cognitive achievement was more likely to occur when adults worked one-to-one with children and during focused small group work;
- The availability of rich learning resources;
- Programmes that are attractive to and engage children; and
- A supportive environment for children to work together

Anxiety and stress are major impediments to learning among young children from disadvantaged backgrounds, which over-concentration on ‘what is to be learned’ can increase. At different ages, young children – from all backgrounds – have urgent developmental tasks to cope with, before achieving the mental well-being that allows them to focus on learning.\(^\text{15}\) Rather than aiming at school readiness within a short period, the curriculum framework can encourage centres to enrol children from disadvantaged backgrounds earlier, and to provide them with a wide range of learning opportunities.

\(^{14}\) Co-operation across services to take in charge more effectively children from disadvantaged backgrounds has decreased in EU countries in recent years due to the recession. The growing marketisation of early childhood services in the UK and the Netherlands since 2005 may also have contributed to restricted cooperation.

\(^{15}\) According to some estimations, one fifth of children and young people in Europe experience developmental, emotional or behavioural problems, and one in eight suffers from a mental disorder (Jané-Llopis, E. & Braddick, F. eds., 2008).
experiences that bring self-confidence, vocabulary and a love of learning. A warm, accepting and inclusive environment is perhaps the most important element to encourage learning among excluded children. If children feel unwanted, they and their parents will not be motivated to make the effort to enrol in services early or persevere in education. The climate of the preschool is critical and the early curriculum should encourage kindergarten teams to establish supportive, nurturing relationships with excluded children and their families.

**d. The early childhood curriculum provides a strong focus on oral language, particularly – but not exclusively – in the official tongue.**

Children’s groups need to be organised to facilitate exchange and authentic language use. This applies obviously to children from second-language backgrounds but also to children from low-income families already speaking the national language(s). Many of these children are already statistically at risk of school failure by virtue of their background characteristics and experiences. They may risk further alienation and potential failure due to their patterns of language use, e.g. dialectal, socially marked language, limited formal vocabulary…

Conscious of its implications for later success in school, educators need to give attention – but without criticism\(^\text{16}\) - to language variation and to the development of acceptable oral language skills in young children from both low-income and immigrant backgrounds. They will articulate clearly, model appropriately, intervene and scaffold effectively desired uses of language in the early childhood centre. Such practice suggests that recruitment to an early childhood contact post should require a good general level of education.

Where young immigrant children are concerned, preschool educators have the important responsibility of introducing them to the official majority language(s). Realistic expectations of what young second language learners can learn in the space of one or two years (the normal pre-school attendance period by children from very disadvantaged backgrounds) may help educators to approach the task without placing undue pressure or stress on the children. Research on second language learning suggests that:

- It takes around ten years for most second language learners to reach a degree of proficiency equal to native language speakers (Hughes et al., 2010). In other words, second-language children generally score significantly less well on language and communication until well into secondary school.

- There is evidence too about intergenerational illiteracy, namely, that the children of illiterate parents are more likely to have limited literacy, particularly in the early years (Beller, 2008).

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16. In general, the need for linguistic adjustment is placed squarely on vernacular speakers when there should be an equally strong moral responsibility placed on the mainstream population to alter its prejudices and respect dialect differences for what they are – a natural manifestation of cultural and linguistic diversity. In particular, educators should clearly understand that language variation does not imply inferiority, either cognitive or linguistic. Cregan (2008)
These findings should not be allowed to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and lead educators to have limited aspirations for immigrant children. Preschools that employ clear diagnostic procedures, followed by early intervention, can enable virtually all children to achieve good oral language levels and become literate. The involvement of parents in literacy programmes, even those with limited literacy themselves, has also been shown to have a positive effect on their children’s literacy (see section g. below on parent involvement).

In situations where large groups of immigrant children from different language backgrounds are together – as happens frequently in Europe – early childhood centres have little choice but to focus on oral language skills in the national language(s). The approach may change when one particular second-language group predominates in a centre. On such occasions, some research suggests that dual language immersion, e.g. in English and Spanish, positively influences the language development of the children concerned in both languages (Collier & Thomas, 2004). As this situation occurs more often in the United States than in Europe, we rely here on American research which generally advocates recruiting and training more bilingual teachers and providing opportunities for Hispanic children to integrate more with English-speaking peers (Carter & Welner, eds. 2013).

### Box 2 Pre-literacy strategies in the kindergarten

Early literacy and numeracy are among the skills useful for children as they move toward school. In the classroom, educators can employ strategies that help children to develop early literacy and numeracy in a non-formal way. Among these are:

- **Giving children many first-hand experiences and ask them questions to extend their understanding, vocabulary and communications skills**, for example: Why did this happen? What would happen if ….? What do you think about ….? Have you seen this elsewhere?). Such questions foster thinking, and stimulate the child’s verbal production.

- **Reinforcing children’s vocabulary through interacting with them individually and in small groups on a broad range of topics**;

- **Privileging the interests of children in organising project work and offer suggestions that comply with the curriculum**, e.g. families, professions, descriptions of the school, the neighbourhood, how things work, etc. Accompany the children's work through questions, writing for them, showing them where to find knowledge, supporting their organisation, etc.;

- **Encouraging purposeful and meaningful play in specific work areas** (water area, construction, art, dramatic role-play with props; intentional outdoor play, etc.) and be present with words for objects or other concepts that young children may not know.

- **Matching children from different backgrounds** so that children from low-income or second language backgrounds can benefit from the vocabulary of other children;

- **Creating a print rich environment** with labels (accompanied with a picture) for children’s names, attendance cards; the daily schedule; play corners; job charts, materials, etc.;

- **Making the reading corner attractive** with many relevant picture books, including picture books in the different languages spoken by children;

- **Exposing children to the sounds of the language** through reading aloud, story-telling, nursery rhymes, simple phonics (which sound begins these words?), etc. but avoid formal language
teaching, such as grammar, vocabulary lists and the like. Young children learn better in authentic language situations, that is, in situations where they experience new things and wish to communicate their thoughts and feelings;

- **Involving families in children’s learning and literacy.** Research shows that family support for education and children’s learning is a critical element in children’s success (Sylva et al. 2008, Vandenbroeck, Van Nuffel, De Visscher & Ferla, 2008).

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e. The early childhood curriculum encourages centres to employ bilingual teaches and other staff members from ethnic and cultural minorities

The employment of diversity staff sends out a clear message to parents that their particular group is welcome in this preschool. Diversity employment also helps to broaden the understanding of majority staff of how to respect and live with diversity. In addition, the curriculum framework will advocate that majority staff should be trained to reach a high level of cultural competence, that is, the ability to interact effectively with people and families of different social backgrounds and cultures. Many mainstream staff and administrators are often unaware of the extreme mono-cultural nature of national kindergarten services. Frequently, services make no reference, either in their programmes or in the centre’s décor, to the presence of children from minority or immigrant backgrounds: no short notices or greetings in minority languages; no reference to minority customs, food or feasts; no photos of immigrant dress, flags or countries… The box below provides some ideas about how to acknowledge diversity with respect:

**Box 3  A diversity checklist**

- Check all the imagery on the walls, play materials, jigsaws, food, toys, books. Have they been selected with diversity in mind? Make certain that images of children with special needs are included and that immigrant life is illustrated in a positive way.
- Keep in mind language issues in labelling equipment, room names, groups, etc.
- Provide attractive toys and equipment for both girls and boys.
- Examine what messages are being given or not given in the children’s books and texts provided.
- Ensure that the necessary environmental adaptations have been made for children with visual impairment or with a disability.
- Ensure that at least one member of staff has been trained in sign language.
- Information for families and children: does it exist? Is it accessible? Is there someone available to help illiterate parents?
- Books and materials for children: Are materials accessible to all children? Are they placed at eye level and within reach of young children? Are they clearly labelled, both pictorially and in letters?

**Source:** Adapted from the Office of the Minister of Children (2006), Ireland: *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers*
Children’s assessments are greatly influenced by the goals set for young children, the education concept in use and the requirements of curriculum. If a country uses a broad holistic curriculum, then assessments will most likely be broad, use multiple instruments and take place regularly over a longer period of time. If a narrow curriculum is used in kindergarten, with a strong emphasis on teaching predefined content, then assessment is likely to be narrow and may ignore the health, motor and socio-emotional development of the child. The focus on academic content can also distract educators from the intense relational and pedagogical work that young children need. It can also lead young children to think negatively about their abilities at a moment when identity formation is intense. In sum, when catering for disadvantaged children, assessments should be inclusive and governed by the following principles:

- **A focus on holistic development and general skills**: Assessment should be broader than ‘academic’ knowledge. There are many domains of development, such as the child’s exploration of who she is and where she belongs. For example, a child’s ability to communicate with other children is just as important a skill as early mastery of certain letters, which will come, at any rate, when the child is ready. Some countries, for example, New Zealand, examine broad generic skills, such as being involved, self-regulation, persisting at a task, taking responsibility, expressing an opinion, etc.

- **The use of multiple types of assessment**: Within the early childhood centre, the learning of each child is followed and documented, e.g. through systematic daily observation, child portfolios, documentation (as theorised and practised in the Reggio Emilia schools), parent interviews, learning stories… Families, parents and children themselves can also be invited to validate the learning of the child. In sum, multiple perspectives are brought to bear on the child’s learning, which is examined in far greater detail than a simple test can uncover.

- **A strong focus on what children are able to do**: True assessment of children’s work can be achieved in inter-cultural settings if assessment is seen, as defined by Rinaldi (ibid.), as the process of “making learning visible”. Educators document regularly what the child is able to do rather than focussing on deficits or whether the child has achieved some education goal or developmental norm. The dangers of assessing children from disadvantaged backgrounds in the context of discourses about attainment and expectation are illustrated well by Bradbury’s (2013) analysis of EYFS assessments in the UK. The result can lead to a further reproduction of
patterns of inequality, but this time from an even earlier age and with a strong impact on the children’s school careers.

- **A realisation that variations in the performance of young children are much wider in the early childhood period than later in school.** Because of the uneven rate of development during the early years, wide variations appear both between children and even within the same child’s performance at different moments.

- **Respect for valued dimensions of education voiced by parents:** Congruence between the aims of the early childhood centre and parental values and aspirations for their children is important (Vandenbroeck et al. 2008). This respect for parental values should be reflected also in assessment: Does assessment include discussion with minority parents concerning what they want for their children and their feedback on how the centre is performing vis-à-vis their wishes? Are elements from the child’s home and culture included in the assessment portfolios? Do educators show parents respect by asking their advice and opinions? The issue is important not only at the kindergarten level but more widely as an issue of democracy. Such dialogue offers to low-income parents an opportunity for civic participation and one that could have a significant impact on how their children view education.

**g. The early childhood curriculum sets standards of welcome for parents**

It is most important the kindergartens build and maintain trusting relationships with minority communities. As child-rearing is so intimately linked to culture, minority parents and children need to be reassured in word and practice that their culture, language and child-rearing practices will be respected by majority educators, who fully recognise that parents play a central nurturing and educational role in their children’s lives, particularly in the early childhood period.

In the early childhood years, parents can be encouraged to support their children’s learning by following their progress in preschool and school, and at home, through daily conversation, out-loud reading of children’s books and stories, and broadening the children’s experience of the external world. When outreach to parents is well organised, initiatives for parent groups, job-related training and community building can also be introduced. Parent outreach is also very beneficial to educators and children: the continuity of children’s experience across the preschool and home environments is greatly enhanced when parents and staff-members exchange information regularly and adopt consistent approaches to socialisation, daily routines, child development and learning.

Because of the importance of the family environment, the early childhood curriculum should encourage centres to formulate an annual plan for parent outreach, focusing on the development of the child and home learning. Indeed, the engagement of parents could be quickly increased if this became a statutory requirement for all early education centres. Long-term research on the impact of classroom councils is scarce, but cooperative activities between educators and parents has been well-researched and shows good results. For example, the Abecedarian project in the United States works with very poor Afro-American families. It has formulated a number of teaching strategies for involving lowly educated parents in their children’s learning. Special attention is given
to: enriched care giving; language development; the use of learning games at home; and conversational reading. The rate of success is high for these activities (http://www.teachingstrategies.com/page/FC_Abecedarian-Studies.cfm).

Some guidelines for parenting programmes
Moran et al (2004) writing for the Department of Education and Skills in the UK have identified some of the requirements of effective parenting support:

- Awareness that families under multiple stresses will not be able to benefit fully from parenting support interventions unless their basic needs (food, shelter, employment...) are met as well;
- Effective multi-agency working is required to enable parents to access the range of services usually needed. It is unrealistic to expect a single service to meet all needs – hence “joined up” services are necessary. Programmes should have more than one method of delivery;
- Although parents may draw a wide range of benefits from a parenting intervention, the blanket application of a particular type of programme can be counterproductive. Services should provide multiple routes in for families, that is, should have a variety of entry or referral routes.
- It is more effective to use well-tested parent programmes with a strong underlying theory that can describe the mechanisms of change to be expected. It is useful also if the programme can provide some evidence on how they will improve outcomes for children and parents.
4. Discussion: How useful is a curriculum debate when addressing the development and learning needs of young children from excluded backgrounds?

In responding to the question, it is useful to give attention to two sets of factors that impinge on education outcomes, viz. in-school factors and out-of-school factors. It is our contention that both sets of factors weigh far more heavily on children’s well-being, development and learning than the single presence of a good early childhood curriculum. For example, in-school factors such as the employment of a low-education, low-compensation, high-turnover workforce will undermine any curriculum. Because this and several other important in-school factors have been covered already in the Vandenbroeck & Lazzari (2013) paper for the first meeting of the Forum, we focus in this discussion on out-of-school factors.

*Out-of-school barriers to the development and education of children from low-income and immigrant backgrounds*

European and American research indicates that social, out-of-school factors far outweigh in-school factors in determining the educational outcomes of children. Some research indicates that 50 to 80 percent of the variance in school achievement is due to factors outside the school and only 20 to 50 percent to factors inside the school (Levin, 2013). Even within the in-school factors, curriculum has limited significance compared to effective pedagogical practice and what Levin calls “supporting conditions”, viz. the ongoing engagement and commitment of school leaders and teachers, professional development opportunities and appropriate allocation of resources.

Above all, socio-economic and socio-cultural factors weigh heavily on the outcomes of children. Children born into severe poverty are disproportionately exposed to factors that impede their psycho-motor development, socio-emotional growth and cognitive processes (Shore, 1997, Fraser Mustard, 2002, McCain et al. 2011). The malnutrition of expectant mothers, teenage pregnancy, and severe stress or insecurity during the pregnancy period all impinge negatively on infant health and can lead to stunting, disability and persistent ill-health (Lancet 2005, 2007). Socio-emotional development is likewise undermined when in the first years of life, young children and their mothers experience high stress on a daily basis (Greenspan & Shanker, 2004, Shanker 2011). A recent longitudinal study from Sweden on the 1950 birth cohort (Bäckmann & Nillson, 2010) identifies long-lasting periods of poverty in childhood as being most detrimental for future educational and social achievement. When linked with deprived or neglectful family backgrounds and poorly educated parents, poverty becomes the single greatest barrier to educational achievement (Coleman, 1996; Duncan et al. 1998; Heckman, 2006).

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19 A very recent study of the early childhood workforce in the USA shows that despite some improvement since 1990 (especially in family daycare), almost 40 percent of workers in the ECCE field have no more than a high school degree, and on average they earn only $11.70 per hour. They also leave the field at very high rates. About one quarter of ECCE workers in 2009 were no longer a part of ECCE in 2010 (Bassok et al. 2013)

20. These include socio-economic status, differences in ability, cultural and language background, educational background of parents, etc.
2008; Melhuish et al. 2008; EACEA, 2009; Del Boca, 2010; Ladd, 2011). For this reason, many governments invest significantly in family home-visiting programmes to support mothers and young children, especially in expectant and first-time families (Avellar et al., 2012). A far smaller number of government invest sufficiently, however, in social policies that might significantly reduce family poverty and the inter-generational transmission of disadvantage.

In a key piece of research, Schools, Skills and Synapses, Heckman (2008) argues that:

- The greater part of education financing is directed toward the later stages of education, secondary and tertiary. Early childhood services generally receive the least investment;
- Current public policy discussions focus on promoting and measuring cognitive ability through IQ and achievement tests;
- Cognitive abilities are important determinants of socioeconomic success, but so also are socio-emotional skills, physical and mental health, perseverance, attention, motivation, and self confidence. These skills are often lacking in families suffering from multiple disadvantage;
- Ability gaps — cognitive and non-cognitive — between the advantaged and disadvantaged open up early in the lives of children. The family environments of young children are major predictors of cognitive and socio-emotional abilities, as well as crime, health and obesity.
- Family environments in the U.S. and many other countries around the world have deteriorated over the past 40 years. (For example, in Europe, EAPN and EUROSTAT data show that child and family poverty has grown alarmingly in the EU in the last five years owing to the EURO crisis and ill-conceived austerity measures).

Child and family poverty is, in fact, ‘the elephant in the room’. It is huge, clearly obvious and growing in size, but because our societies choose to contain but not to prevent poverty – and even segregate and blame the victims – the needs and potential of young children from disadvantaged backgrounds are often ignored. Early childhood services do help but they cannot alone lift children out of poverty. Even if curricula were highly effective at this age, too many social and family obstacles prevent children at-risk from completing successfully a normal (graduation from high school) education cycle.

<p>| Table 1. EU-27: Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age group, 2010 % |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children (0-17 years)</th>
<th>Working age population</th>
<th>Elderly (65 years and over)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

21. A very recent American study shows once again that student achievement is highly influenced by the family income and school quality. Where the interaction of these two influences is concerned, the crucial variable is not the average neighborhood income, but the average income of the school's students. If the latter does not change, student achievement will not change.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>2020</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU27*</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>23.2</td>
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<td>21.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>55.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>10.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>19.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>21.7</td>
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<td>14.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>27.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>25.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
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<td>Italy</td>
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<td>Latvia</td>
<td>42.0</td>
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<td>Lithuania</td>
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<td>Luxembourg</td>
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<td>Malta</td>
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<td>Netherlands</td>
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<td>Switzerland</td>
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It is understandable that early childhood administrations and professionals will defend the contribution that early childhood services can make to the lives of young children, to equality of opportunity, and to education efficiency. For the sake of a significant percentage of children, they need also to combat the illusion that ECEC can, in any universal way, transform the destinies of children from severely disadvantaged background without the contribution of supportive economic and social policies. Ed Zigler, one of the founders of Head Start in the US, has asked: *Is there a magic potion*
that will push poor children into the ranks of the middle class? He answers without ambiguity in an article entitled *Forty years of believing in magic is enough!* (Zigler, 2003):

> Only if the potion contains health care, childcare, good housing, sufficient income for every family, child rearing environments free of drugs and violence, support for parents in all their roles, and equal education for all students in school. Without these necessities, only magic will make that happen.

If one looks at the countries that succeed in achieving child well-being across all social groups, one notes that their governments are strongly egalitarian and have put into place effective social protection systems. They collect taxes *pro rata*, organise their societies to redistribute wealth, provide effective public services (in particular, health and education) and seek to ensure an acceptable level of well-being for families and children. As noted by Pasi Sahlberg, the Director General of the Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation at the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture:

> High-equity education in Finland is not a result of educational factors alone. Basic structures of the Finnish welfare state play a crucial role in providing children and their families with equitable opportunities for starting a successful educational path at age of 7. Early childhood care, voluntary free preschool (attended by 98%), comprehensive health services, and preventive measures to identify possible learning and development difficulties before children start schooling are accessible to all. The education system performance has to be seen in the context of other systems in society, for example, health, environment, rule of law, governance, economy, and technology. It is not only that the education system functions well in Finland, but that it is part of a well-functioning democratic welfare state. Attempts to explain the success of the education system in Finland should be put in the wider context and seen as part of the overall function of a democratic civil society.:[1]
5. Conclusions

Given the critical impact of socio-economic status and family influences on education outcomes and the greater importance, within the early childhood centre, of the inter-relational and pedagogical skills of educators, one must conclude that the formal curriculum has a limited impact on the development and learning outcomes of children from low-income backgrounds. Its influence is far outweighed by other factors, including:

- Social inequality and *de facto* discrimination, which cause poverty and lessen the access of low-income families to public services, not least to peri-natal care, maternal well-being and early childhood services;
- The negative impacts of poverty and family dysfunction on the health, functioning and development of young children. The evidence on this point is overwhelming (see among many others: The Lancet, 2005 and 2007; Irwin, Siddiqi & Hertzman. 2007; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Marmot Review, 2010…)
- The fact that many children from disadvantaged backgrounds are obliged to attend poor quality early childhood services, preschools and schools (for the state of American childcare and preschool, see NICHD, 2005 and 2010; Barnett et al, 2013).

Because of these factors, the European *Decade for Roma Inclusion* has identified four major ‘pillars’ that countries need to address simultaneously in order to ensure a future for Roma children: housing and infrastructure; health (especially infant and maternal health); education for all; and employment (RECI, 2012). At the same time, Levin (2013) points out, that while social conditions matter greatly, early childhood centres, schools and their curricula can make a difference, once children have regular access. Countries such as Finland, Korea and Singapore have moved from mass illiteracy to very high education levels across all social groups in the span of three decades. An analysis of the PISA results shows that these countries are able to combine high levels of educational achievement with low levels of social inequality within the school system.

Within education, therefore, the major challenge is to ensure that the centres enrolling large numbers of low-income and immigrant children consistently achieve developmental and school readiness outcomes at least equal to outcomes achieved by middle-class children. To achieve this goal, early education services in disadvantaged areas must provide a secure and safe environment for young children; properly qualified and certified educators who ensure that no child is left behind; a holistic approach to the young children in their care; and continued outreach to parents and local communities. In addition, if comprehensive services (health screening, meals, medical and social referrals, community outreach…) are to be provided, these centres need to be properly financed.

22. The slogan ‘No child left behind’ is an excellent one when put into effect. The Finnish education system ensures that every child can read at a high level by the time s/he reaches 3rd grade. This is achieved through strong investment in language and reading during the first classes in primary school when up to a quarter of pupils receive additional tuition and assistance in learning to read. Early childhood services and the pre-school class provide a wide variety of learning experiences that help to build up concepts and vocabulary.
Our conclusion - though perhaps pessimistic for traditional curriculum designers – points therefore to the need for social reform and more comprehensive policies for young children and families if the ‘education gap’ is to be closed. Slogans like ‘No excuses’ are unhelpful as they suggest that poor families are to blame for the late entry of children into early childhood services or that educators are lazy and not doing their job. At the same time, we, as educators, must trust in the much confirmed research finding, namely that, given a positive social environment, high quality early childhood services can provide to young children the foundations for lifelong health, educational achievement, economic productivity, and responsible citizenship.
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Annex I

Inequality rising in wake of crisis

by Brian Keeley. OECD

‘There’s a lot of little kids going hungry round here,’ explained one friend, who works in a local community centre. Indeed, just the other day she had spoken to a family where the child had been chewing wallpaper at night. ‘He didn’t want to tell his mum because he knew she didn’t have the money for supper,’ she explained.”

That’s not from Dickens or George Orwell’s Down and Out in Paris or London, but from a recent column by Gillian Tett in the Financial Times. And she’s writing not about Lagos or Lahore, but Liverpool, a modern city in one of the world’s wealthiest countries.

Of course, the presence of poverty amid plenty – inequality – is not new. In reality, it’s hard to imagine any society functioning without some sort of wealth gap. But the past few decades have seen inequality rise in much of the world. That’s causing concern, and not just for reasons of social justice: A number of economists, most notably, perhaps, Joe Stiglitz, argue that excessive inequality undermines the foundations of growth by restricting the ability of poorer people to develop their human capital and by encouraging what economists call “rent seeking” – in essence, instead of creating a bigger economic pie, the well-off use their economic and political strength to take a bigger slice of the existing pie.

High levels of income inequality also seem to be linked to low levels of social mobility – in effect, it becomes more difficult for people to reach a position where they earn more than their parents did. Why? As Timothy Noah has memorably explained, “it’s harder to climb a ladder when the rungs are farther apart”. Alan Krueger, who chairs the panel of economists that advise President Obama, calls this phenomenon “The Great Gatsby Curve”. The fact that it’s getting attention at the highest levels of the U.S. government is indicative of growing concern over inequality.

Unfortunately, there’s no sign of it going away: New data from the OECD today show that the Great Recession has done nothing to narrow the gap between rich and poor – quite the opposite, in fact.

The numbers focus in part on what economists call “market income,” essentially the income households earn from work (as well as from investments), but excluding money they give to the state in tax and receive from it in the form of benefits. The data show that inequalities in market income in OECD countries rose by 1.4 percentage points between 2007 and 2010. That may not sound like much, but it’s equal to the increase seen in the previous 12 years.

Of course, for most families, market income is, at most, an abstract concept; what really matters for them is take-home income – in other words, the money they have after paying tax and receiving payments from the state. As taxes have tended to rise since the crisis struck, and as more people are now receiving payments like unemployment benefits, much of the increase in market income inequality has actually been cancelled out.
Does this mean it doesn’t matter? Not necessarily: Firstly, the data released today go up only to 2010. Since then, presumably, many long-term unemployed have seen a fall-off in their benefits, so reducing take-home income. As the OECD paper notes, “... these results only tell the beginning of the story”. Secondly, governments in many countries have moved to tighten spending in response to rising debt burdens. In her FT column, Gillian Tett touches directly on this point: “[T]ucked away behind (cheap) curtains on the estates, thousands of poor households are being quietly hammered by a myriad of subtle, hard-to-understand cuts.”

Her image of a hungry boy eating wallpaper also introduces another key aspect of the inequality story – namely, the impact on children and young people. As the OECD paper notes, poverty among children rose in 16 of the OECD’s 34 countries between 2007 and 2010 (although, it declined in the United Kingdom), while poverty among young people went up in 19. This links to a longer-term trend that has seen “youth and children replacing the elderly as the group at greater risk of income poverty across OECD countries,” as today’s paper notes.

Indeed, a recent Unicef report on child well-being showed that in eight OECD countries, more than 15% of children live in relative poverty. Some might argue that relative poverty shows only where someone stands in material terms in their own society, not an absolute sense of their ability to meet their needs. Nevertheless, as the Unicef authors note, the reality for children living in relative poverty is that they are “to some significant extent excluded from the advantages and opportunities which most children in that particular society would consider normal”.

**The Long-Term Impacts of Teachers: Teacher Value-Added and Student Outcomes in Adulthood**

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Are teachers’ impacts on students’ test scores (“value-added”) a good measure of their quality? This question has sparked debate largely because of disagreement about (1) whether value-added (VA) provides unbiased estimates of teachers’ impacts on student achievement and (2) whether high-VA teachers improve students’ long-term outcomes. We address these two issues by analyzing school district data from grades 3-8 for 2.5 million children linked to tax records on parent characteristics and adult outcomes. We find no evidence of bias in VA estimates using previously unobserved parent characteristics and a quasi-experimental research design based on changes in teaching staff. Students assigned to high-VA teachers are more likely to attend college, attend higher- ranked colleges, earn higher salaries, live in higher SES neighborhoods, and save more for retirement. They are also less likely to have children as teenagers. Teachers have large impacts in all grades from 4 to 8. On average, a one standard deviation improvement in teacher VA in a single grade raises earnings by about 1% at
age 28. Replacing a teacher whose VA is in the bottom 5% with an average teacher would increase the present value of students' lifetime income by more than $250,000 for the average classroom in our sample. We conclude that good teachers create substantial economic value and that test score impacts are helpful in identifying such teachers.

Dual Language in Early Education Best for Youngest ELLs, Report Says
By Lesli A. Maxwell on May 14, 2013 10:29 AM

Young English-language learners who are still developing oral and literacy skills in their home languages benefit most in early-childhood programs that regularly expose them to both languages.

That's one of several major takeaways in a new federally funded analysis of the large, and growing, population of dual-language learners, ranging from birth to 5, already enrolled in, or headed for, early-childhood-education programs.

The analysis, released today, also underscores that dual-language learners develop language skills differently than their monolingual, English-speaking peers. Young dual-language learners, who are using two separate language systems, will take longer to reach proficiency in both languages than their peers learning only one.

"Their development is different," said Dina C. Castro, one of the report's lead authors. "It's not better, it's not worse, just different. We need to understand their development by looking at all the other factors that surround them that will also interact with their ability to learn." Too often, Castro said, dual-language learners' school readiness gaps in kindergarten are assumed to be language related, rather stemming from other factors, such as poverty.

Done by researchers affiliated with the the Center for Early Care and Education Research—Dual-Language Learners, the analysis is a summary of more than 200 studies, including research done at the center itself, that shed light on how dual-language environments and bilingualism impact language and cognitive development in young children and how early-childhood practices can hinder or help dual-language learners. The center, based at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, started its work in 2009 and is funded through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the federal agency that oversees public early-childhood programs for poor children, namely Head Start and Early Head Start.

Many existing dual-language programs for young learners are currently found in Head Start and Early Head Start, which established standards that require its providers to address the needs of dual-language learners and "principles" that direct Head Start programs to develop children's first languages, as well as English. Some state-provided early-learning programs—Illinois, for example—also require development of home languages and English.
Overall, however, there are few early-childhood programs that feature what the researchers call "intentional" home language instruction and support.

Their review also highlights early-childhood practices that have shown the most impact on dual-language learners.

Among those: Using the home language of young children, in addition to English, is probably "the most important aspect" of effective early-childhood education for dual-language learners. And when early-childhood classrooms emphasize English-language development only, a dual-language learners' first-language skills can decline and harm their progress toward English-language proficiency later.

"Young children really benefit when they are exposed to two languages, there is a good research base for that conclusion," said Linda M. Espinosa, an author on the report. "But children need to also be exposed to English in those early years."

Espinosa, a retired professor of early-childhood education at the University of Missouri-Columbia who has written extensively on young dual-language learners, said dual-language programs in early-childhood settings "vary enormously." Many classrooms, for example, don't have fully bilingual teachers, she said, but still offer frequent opportunities for children to hear, speak, and interact in their first language.

The report recommends the expansion and availability of dual-language environments in early-care-and-education programs. To do that, the authors write, will require federal and state policymakers to support more preparation and training programs for early-childhood educators to support the literacy and language development of young dual-language learners. The authors also say there needs to be much tighter coordination between early-childhood programs and K-12 systems, so that the early dual-language development skills aren't lost once children move to kindergarten and beyond.

Eugene E. García, an emeritus professor of education at Arizona State University and the former head of the office of bilingual education in the U.S. Department of Education when Bill Clinton was president, said the research shows clearly that language development problems for young English-learners crop up when support for their home language is not provided. "It's counterintuitive," said García, also a lead author on the analysis. "But building the literacy and language skills in the first language helps students build their proficiency skills in English."

That conclusion is still debated in some circles, especially because of the controversial nature of children being taught in any language other than English. Certainly, the focus of federal education policy for K-12 English-learners for years has been squarely on them acquiring English and not on developing their first language to become fully bilingual/biliterate. So maybe the early-childhood folks will be the ones to help change the conversation about language learning and the best practices to pursue in the K-12 realm, especially in the earliest grades when language is still developing.

García thinks the potential is there. "We haven't made much headway in reducing the achievement gaps for English-learners," under current policy, he said.