



The role and place of ECEC in integrated working, benefitting vulnerable groups such as Roma

Executive Summary



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While the benefits have been widely evidenced of high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) for young children, especially those from vulnerable groups, it is clear that efforts to improve the holistic development and well-being of children and families must involve a wide range of policies, services and actions. No single intervention, service or sector on its own can hope to achieve sustainable improvements. There is a growing recognition among researchers, policy makers and practitioners that policies and services need to become better integrated if they are to effectively address complex issues such as poverty and promote social inclusion. Only multi-dimensional, aligned and integrated responses and interventions in early years can address the complex and multi-faceted needs of all children and their families, especially those in vulnerable situations, such as families living in poverty, Roma families, or families in the contexts of migration or asylum.

As a concept, integrated working covers a multitude of cooperative systems and models. It is context-specific: different models exist, starting from the specific needs of children and families, with different partners and/or sectors involved in distinct policy settings. Integrated working approaches are often seen as a continuum ranging from cooperation, through collaboration and coordination, to full integration, in which different services are united into a single organisation in order to enhance service delivery. A wide range of sectors and services can be involved in integrated working, depending upon the needs of children and their families. These include: early childhood education and care services; preventive health centres; preventive family support services; schools; out-of-school care; as well as services from the cultural sector (such as libraries, community centres). Integrated working can refer to specific types of integration (vertical integration, e.g. linking childcare to early education, with both being part of an integrated ECEC system); or it can go broader, linking ECEC provision to services in other sectors such as health or social services (horizontal integration). In this report, we consider integrated working to be a form of professional cooperation within a network or partnership, which provides a range of support services for families and children, accessible to all, in which families and children can participate and where parents are respected as first educators (Gordon et al., 2016).

The main purpose of this report is to examine the added value provided by, and the prerequisites for, integrated working – as well as the crucial role played by ECEC services – in order to better serve all families, but especially vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families. Separate attention is devoted to Roma children and their families as one of the most vulnerable groups in Europe, often trapped in a vicious circle of poverty, exclusion and discrimination.

The report is written for policy makers and professionals working in the field of early childhood education and care. It is guided by the following questions:

- What services or functions should be involved in integrated working, paying specific attention to the role that ECEC can play?
- What inspiring examples of integrated working already exist in Europe?
- What is the added value of integrated working (for children and families, for professionals, for policy makers) in general, and specifically for Roma?
- What are the prerequisites for integrated working in general, and specifically for integrated working aimed at addressing the needs of Roma?

The report focuses on different groups of vulnerable children and families – and, in particular, on Roma. It is based on a literature review and six case studies illustrating different ways of integrated working in a variety of contexts. Specifically, the case studies look at the Early Years Children and Family Centre in Newry (the UK); bridging professionals in Ghent pre-schools (Belgium); the *Sprungbrettangebote* in Berlin, which links refugee

centres to childcare (Germany); Sure Start Children's House in Porcsalma (Hungary); the municipal kindergarten network in Tundzha municipality (Bulgaria); and the 'Ready Set Go!' project (Romania). The evidence from the case studies (Part II) frames and supplements the more theoretical part of the report (Part I). It serves as a basis from which to discuss the added value of, and prerequisites for, integrated working (covered respectively in Parts III and IV), and feeds into the report's policy recommendations.

Key findings

Place of ECEC in integrated working

- Integrated working aims to better serve all children and families, and especially vulnerable children and families, by responding to their multi-faceted situations and actual needs. It can render ECEC and other support services more accessible, as well as better known and understood. By making services better connected to one another, integrated working can help to avoid abrupt transitions from one service to another, and avoid overlaps in service delivery.
- ECEC plays a crucial role as an essential partner or even initiator within the context of integrated working. ECEC services can fulfil a pivotal role in connecting children and families with services that can support them: providing adequate referrals; connecting services together; cooperating to improve service delivery; helping children and families to get to know other services; and making ECEC known to other services. It is vital that policies and services recognise parents as first educators, and work together to support them in a way that makes them feel appreciated instead of judged, and which addresses their actual needs.
- This report identifies the existence across Europe of a wide range of diverse services and functions that could be combined or connected with ECEC. These include:
 - fully integrated centres, such as Sweden's Family Centres and Sure Start centres in the UK;
 - integrated collaboration and coordination, such as the Flemish *Huizen van het Kind* ('Houses of the Child'), which facilitate cooperation between different partners in the field of preventive family support; or the initiative of the Tundzha municipality in Bulgaria, which combines together services and uses ECEC as a portal to the community through which other services can be delivered;
 - integrated programmes and projects, such as the 'Ready Set Go!' project in Romania.
- Furthermore, integrated ECEC systems and services should be based on support for children's rights, and upon a commitment to promoting universal services, rather than through increased targeting, conditionality and 'temporary support'. Universal services do not exclude a targeted approach: within universal services, actions can be developed that put extra effort into reaching specific groups, and which are tailored to the needs of specific groups, without stigmatisation.

Benefits of integrated working

- Strong evidence exists in the literature and from case studies that high-quality ECEC provision which integrates childcare with education, health, social and other services is associated with improved cognitive and behavioural outcomes, and better health and well-being for children. This was also stated in the ISOTIS report on interagency working (Barnes et al., 2018).
- Increasing evidence from Sure Start in the UK and Sure Start Children's Houses in Hungary suggests that early support is of critical importance, and requires improved cross-sectoral integration. A comprehensive

system of early years intervention should be based on the needs of children and families. These include, for example, pre- and post-natal health, early childhood education and care services, and preventive family support.

- Integrated work at the service level can have a positive impact on children and families in terms of improved access and speedier responses; better and clearer agreements on information sharing and communication between services; greater consultation on case planning; a more holistic approach; and seamless services. The case of the bridging professionals in Ghent preschools demonstrates that parents are positive about integrated working in early years, because they value greater accessibility and the smoother transition between services.
- Evidence from the evaluation of projects such as ‘Ready Set Go!’ in Romania shows that when integrated working combines an expansion of the capacity of ECEC settings with an improvement in the institutional quality of ECEC services and the provision of support for parents and Roma empowerment activities, it can bring measurable improvements in ECEC access and attendance and easier transition to primary schools.
- Evidence from projects such as the Sure Start Children’s Houses in Hungary and from regional-level initiatives such as in Tundzha municipality, Bulgaria, confirms that integrated working which focuses on early intervention, and which places ECEC at its centre, contributes to the strengthening of communities and the development of stronger local partnerships, and increases the social inclusion of Roma.
- Integrated working is beneficial for ECEC organisations and professionals, as well as for policies. Integrated working can reduce the duplication of efforts across sectors and maximise scarce financial, human and material resources at national, regional and local levels. Combined delivery and integration of services can improve efficiency and increase cost-effectiveness via synergies between interventions, as well as by promoting social inclusion.

Key prerequisites for integrated working

Integrated working must always start from the needs of children and families living in the local context. It requires careful planning, commitment and enthusiasm on the part of partners, who may be required to deal with organisational, structural and cultural barriers, and to develop new skills and new ways of working. Based on the literature review and case studies, this report highlights four crucial prerequisites for integrated working:

1. A shared vision, starting from the needs of children and their families in the community.
2. A competent system with strong leadership and reflective staff.
3. Supportive policy and funding.
4. Family and community participation.

The following conclusions and recommendations relate to these four key prerequisites.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. A shared vision, starting from the needs of children and their families

A shared vision at the national level

A shared vision at the national level is a fundamental requirement for full cooperation between the various sectors relating to early childhood development (health, social welfare, the educational system and services, employment, housing), in order to ensure the coherence and continuity of provision throughout the period from pregnancy to long after a child starts primary school. It is important that the vision and, for that matter, the strategic plans and/or national policy frameworks, are discussed by all key stakeholders – policy makers across various sectors, service providers, parents and other actors – in order for them to become reality. This requires leadership, political will and commitment as well as the allocation of time, financial and human resources.

‘Getting it Right for Every Child’ in Scotland, ‘Better Outcomes Brighter Futures’ in Ireland, ‘Every Child Matters’ in England and Wales, the Flemish decree on preventive family support (2014) regarding the *Huizen van het Kind* (‘Houses of the Child’), are all examples of landmark national policy frameworks for improving children’s well-being and promoting cross-sectoral collaboration and integrated working in early years.

Recommendations:

- Policy makers should develop a **national vision on early childhood** which is shared across all relevant sectors. Such a vision (e.g. a national policy framework) should be based on children’s rights and respect for diversity, and should aim to integrate ECEC in its broadest sense, including health and well-being, childcare and education, social inclusion and equality.
- Policy makers and service providers need to allow sufficient time and resources to enable the dialogue and discussions necessary to support integrated working.

A shared vision at the local and service levels

Examples of integrated working from the Sure Start programme in the UK; the bridging professionals in Ghent, Belgium; the Sure Start Children’s House in Porcsalma, Hungary; and the initiative of the Tundzha municipality, Bulgaria, highlight that a **shared vision at regional/local level and at the level of service provision** is required to affirm the commitment of the relevant services to an integrated approach that promotes the best possible response to the needs of every child and family. In particular, this shared vision should include ECEC services (childcare as well as preschools); preventive family support services; preventive health services; and social services. Central to this shared vision should be a discussion of why and how the integration should take place.

Recommendations:

- Regional/local authorities, service providers and professionals involved in early years services should discuss and agree a common vision and goals in order for integrated working to act in the best interests of children and be **responsive to the multi-dimensional needs of vulnerable children and families**.
- Local authorities, service providers and professionals should clearly define and agree upon the roles and responsibilities of the integrated network, and of each service.

2. A competent system with strong leadership and reflective staff

Evidence from projects and initiatives such as Sure Start in the UK, Sure Start Children's Houses in Hungary, bridging professionals in Ghent, Belgium, and from Tundzha municipality in Bulgaria, shows that integrated working cannot be considered the sole responsibility of individual professionals, but rather as a joint effort that involves the services of multi-disciplinary teams, training centres and local authorities. The 'Ready Set Go!' project in Romania further highlights the important role played by local NGOs and community organisations in the success of collaborative working.

A competent system

Research evidence further suggests that implementing integrated working on a large scale requires the creation of competent systems to provide guidance and support, and to develop competences at different levels (individual, team, and institutional). This includes the creation of multi-agency teams, team learning, clear protocols and mandates, joint training, the sharing of expertise, frequent and regular information sharing, and reflective practice.

Integrated working in a competent system also requires the creation of necessary structural conditions. These include the allocation of appropriate time and resources to developing a shared vision, and establishment of collaboration and trust among staff and families, as well as the setting-up of actions to meet the needs of children and families.

Recommendations:

- Policymakers should support the development of competent systems in early childhood education and care in order to provide guidance and support to professionals, facilitate service management, and enable service providers to **develop the competences required for integrated working**.
- Policymakers should create **structural conditions** to promote integrated working among services in various sectors. ECEC services can be used as an entry point for integration.
- Service providers and management should **facilitate the provision of time and resources for integrated working**, including frequent, meaningful communication among services, e.g. by providing child-free hours to create time for reflective practice, team meetings, case reporting, exchanging experiences, training and coaching.
- Service leaders and staff should **develop clear and transparent codes of professional conduct**, including regulations on the sharing of information and data.

Leadership

Strong, engaged and inspirational leadership was a key prerequisite for success in all six cases included in this report – Sure Start in Newry, UK; the bridging professionals in Ghent, Belgium; the *Sprungbrettangebote* in Berlin, Germany; Sure Start Children's House in Porcsalma, Hungary; Tundzha municipality, Bulgaria; and the 'Ready Set Go!' project in Romania. Such leadership is required at national, regional and local government levels to ensure the coherence between services that is necessary to achieve common goals and move away from fragmented models. At the service level, this would involve motivating, supporting, valuing, communicating clearly, clarifying expectations for everyone's role, and maintaining their focus. Furthermore, the right people need to be in the right places – meaning that organisations should provide clear mandates to the professionals engaged in integrated working, and must ensure they are competent to function in those integrated settings.

Recommendations:

- Policymakers should invest in **developing leadership capacity** at the level of regional/local government (including mayors, heads of department responsible for early years services, designated coordinators); at the level of the integrated network (the network coordinator); and at the service level (leaders and senior management in ECEC, health, family centres etc.), in order to promote integrated working among relevant early years services. Specific training courses and seminars, networking and information sharing should be provided to enhance the competences of leaders. Leadership skills are required, including change management, promoting collaborative working, as well as inspiring and motivating integrated teams.
- Leaders at the service level should **facilitate** and shape the preconditions for cooperative and integrated work in ECEC, promote mutual respect and solidarity, and foster **democratic decision-making**.

Reflective staff

A more integrated working context requires well-qualified, experienced and competent staff with additional competences or attitudes such as the willingness to cooperate with others and reflect on one's own practice; open-mindedness to shared learning; and an enabling, welcoming, participative and inclusive work attitude. Professionals must also be equipped with skills in family and community engagement, in laying the groundwork for mutual respect, and in building relationships. Evidence from the literature review and from all six case studies highlights that in order to develop these skills, urgent investment is required to build capacity across services (including assistants, outreach workers and other support staff), and to systematically promote staff diversity.

Recommendations:

- **Preservice training** institutions that prepare professionals to work in early years (ECEC, health, social care etc.) should develop more joint courses, engage in greater collaboration, and offer more joint internships.
- Policymakers should **ensure policies and funding are in place to provide continuous professional development opportunities** for leaders and management from ECEC and other services, for teachers and other professional staff, and for paraprofessionals (e.g. teaching assistants, community mediators, bridging professionals). **Integrated** training courses and seminars, professional learning communities, as well as networking and mentoring, **should be available to develop skills and competences** on the central issues involved in integration, such as networking, cooperation and functioning within integrated services.
- Policymakers should develop **national quality standards and guidance** for staff on integrated working.
- Policymakers should actively promote balance between the qualification requirements for assistants and outreach workers, and the need **to ensure staff diversity and community representation**.

3. Supportive policy and funding

Supportive policy

Integrated working requires firm political will and commitment at national and regional/local government levels. Examples from the bridging professionals in Ghent, Belgium; Tundzha municipality in Bulgaria; and other cases, suggest that collective ownership and responsibility across policy and service areas is required to promote coordination and integration between sectors. Furthermore, careful attention should be paid to the structural requirements: clear policy frameworks; effective governance and monitoring processes; and adequate funding and financing mechanisms. Programmes such as Sure Start in the UK and Sure Start Children's Houses in Hungary highlight the need for integrated policies to focus on early years services and preventive family support, and for this commitment to be shared across all the services involved.

Recommendations:

- Policymakers should develop broad **policy and legislative frameworks for universal, inclusive and comprehensive ECEC systems** that are based on children's rights, and which promote an **integrated, multi-sectoral approach to early years intervention and prevention**.
- Policymakers should promote a **progressive universalist approach** that combines universal policies and services for all children with well-targeted, well-coordinated, cross-sectoral and multi-professional programmes and initiatives to increase the accessibility of these services among vulnerable groups such as Roma.
- Policymakers should support **different forms of integrated and high-quality ECEC services, including community-based programmes**, to ensure that they are responsive to the specific needs of children and their parents.

Adequate and sustainable funding

The allocation of sufficient long-term financial resources is necessary for integrated policies and services to be effective and sustainable. Adequate funds are needed to ensure the continuity of services, staffing and support for staff, as is the allocation of adequate time.

Due to restricted state budgets for ECEC, innovative integrated early years services often require a combination of funding from various levels of administration (national, regional and local government budgets). EU funds and other external resources (e.g. funding from donor agencies) have proved to be an essential element in ensuring appropriate funding for programmes and initiatives that focus on the inclusion of Roma, such as the Sure Start Children's House in Porcsalma, Hungary, and the 'Ready Set Go!' Project in Romania. These examples highlight the need for EU funding instruments to be more explicitly directed towards investments in inclusive, accessible, high-quality and comprehensive early childhood services and integrated working. In particular, increased long-term funding is required to promote integrated approaches to ECEC for all children and families, but is especially necessary to enable the extra efforts required to make services accessible to vulnerable and marginalised groups such as Roma.

Recommendations:

- Policymakers should ensure adequate and sustainable funding **to provide resources for the time, efforts and workforce necessary for integrated working in early years services (ECEC, health, social work, etc.)**.

- Policymakers should **provide funding to ensure secure working conditions** (such as wages, support and coaching, working hours, and an adequate child-adult ratio and caseload), in order to attract well-qualified professionals to work as part of an integrated approach to early years services (ECEC, health, social work, etc.).
- Policymakers at national, regional and local government levels should ensure that adequate funding resources are allocated to promote integrated approaches to ECEC, including cross-sectoral service provision, preventive family support, and community involvement.
- For the forthcoming EU funding period 2021–2027, **early childhood should become an investment priority for EU funding instruments**, and in particular for the European Structural and Investment Funds and Erasmus+.

4. Family and community involvement

Family involvement and support

The success of integrated working ultimately depends upon the quality of the reciprocal and equal relationships established between professionals and families, both at individual and at group level. Parents possess expert knowledge of their children, and need to be involved as such. A mutual relationship between parents and professionals is essential to ensure better-quality and more accountable service delivery. The Sure Start Children’s Houses in Hungary, Tundzha Municipality in Bulgaria, and the ‘Ready Set Go!’ project in Romania, confirm that meaningful and respectful family involvement has a positive impact on children’s outcomes and upon families as a whole. Families, both children and parents, need to be involved in the development and delivery of services, as well as in evaluation and monitoring.

Recommendations:

- Policymakers should recognise the central role played by parents in their child’s development, and thus in ECEC services, and should **ensure that legislation and policies are in place to promote the active involvement of parents** in ECEC, health, social care and other relevant early years services.
- All services should develop a **policy on accessibility** and ways to reach all families, including vulnerable families, using an integrated approach.
- Practitioners should **work towards reciprocal and equal relationships with parents, strengthening parents in their role** as first educators and experts on their own children. Practitioners should not take the parent’s place or decide for them.
- Staff in integrated ECEC networks should **exchange information** about the children and families they serve (or should be serving). This should be carried out with due respect for data protection regulations, but with especial respect for the families themselves.

Community involvement

Active community participation is essential for services to become more responsive to community-specific needs. This is particularly important for vulnerable and excluded groups such as Roma, as it helps to develop mutual trust between families and service providers – as documented in, for example, the Sure Start Children’s House in Porcsalma, Hungary. Community engagement can help services to respond more effectively to children’s needs, with greater understanding of their strengths and difficulties. Evidence from Tundzha

Municipality; the bridging professionals in Ghent, Belgium; and the 'Ready Set Go!' project in Romania, confirms the findings of previous research: that outreach workers such as community mediators and health visitors play a significant role in bridging the gap between education, health and social services, and marginalised communities, particularly the Roma community and Roma parents. By building mutual trust and tapping into community resources, they can facilitate an approach that is better tailored to the needs of specific communities.

Recommendations:

- Policymakers at national and regional/local levels should provide the resources required at community level to **develop and support community-based integrated working**.
- Policymakers at municipal and local levels should **engage communities in planning and designing services** to ensure that interventions are adapted to community needs and circumstances. Outreach programmes should be put in place to connect services with communities.
- Service providers and practitioners should develop **innovative and flexible outreach strategies** to engage with vulnerable children and families.

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