



Governing quality Early Childhood Education and Care in a global crisis: first lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic

NESET Analytical Report, 2021
Summary

This report explores the different ways in which European Union Member States have attempted to ensure high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for children and families in the era of COVID-19. The data analysed show that ECEC played a crucial role in countering the negative effects of the pandemic on children, families and communities. However, compared with other levels of education, ECEC appears to have been one of the sectors most vulnerable to the policy decisions taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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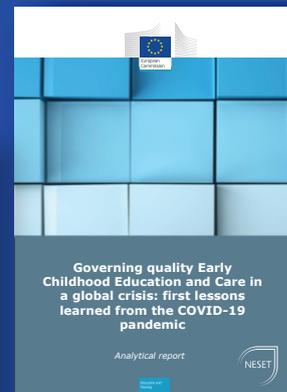
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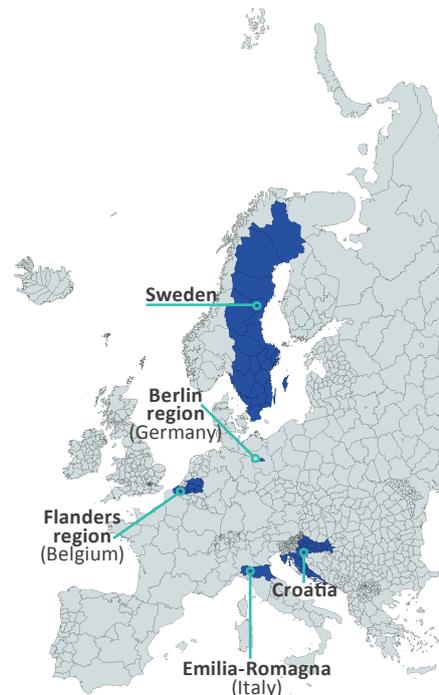
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Context

All children, and particularly those who are most societally disadvantaged, risk being among the biggest victims of the pandemic. This is due both to the socio-economic impact of the crisis on their families, and the consequences of the measures taken to contain the virus, which affect their learning and wellbeing. By interconnecting the functions of ECEC – educational (investing in children’s wellbeing, learning, participation); social (supporting families in the upbringing of their children); and economic (helping parents in combining work and household responsibilities) – the sector can play a key role in supporting all children and families to face the crisis, and in particular those at risk of social exclusion. ECEC can greatly contribute to breaking the cycles of poverty and discrimination, as already stated in many EU documents. The COVID-19 situation may, therefore, represent an opportunity for the ECEC sector to revisit its identity and evaluate the lessons learned, both in terms of its daily practice after the emergency, and as a possible preparation for future crises.



The report

The report examines the measures taken by selected EU member states – two countries (Sweden and Croatia), as well as three regions (Flanders in Belgium, Berlin in Germany and Emilia-Romagna in Italy) – to deal with the COVID-19 crisis during the first year of the pandemic (March-December 2020), in order to ensure quality ECEC for children and families. It is expected that this analysis of coping strategies and lessons learned will be relevant to other EU Member States and regions.

Key findings

Taking into account the areas of the European Quality Framework (EQF) on ECEC, the report underlines the following key findings: 1) **Accessibility**: it appears that the pandemic has had an especially negative effect on ECEC attendance among societally disadvantaged children and families. Some countries have employed specific policy measures to support these groups. In general, however, guaranteeing wide access to ECEC at a structural level remains a challenge; 2) **Workforce**: the recognition and support accorded to ECEC staff have varied between contexts, underlining the need to invest in recognising the value this profession at a structural level. The role of pedagogical coaches and leaders has also been found crucial in supporting ECEC staff; 3) **Curriculum**: the temporary suspension of in-person activities due to the COVID-19 emergency prompted a re-adaptation of pedagogical practices and the development of IT capabilities within ECEC organisations. Guaranteeing children’s autonomy and maintaining continuous relationships with families appear to have presented the biggest challenges; 4) **Monitoring and evaluation**: during the crisis, ECEC staff appreciated the ‘supportive’ elements of monitoring processes (as opposed to ‘controlling’ ones); 5) **Governance and funding**: institutional fragmentation emerged as a major challenge in governance across all of the countries/regions analysed. Countries/regions that were well organised and financed as integrated systems, appeared able to face the crisis without the need to take extreme measures to ensure the viability of the ECEC sector.

Recommendations for improving the accessibility and quality of ECEC for vulnerable children

Drawing on the data explored, the report provides policy guidelines for each area of the EQF analysed. Here is a selection of the most crucial ones:



Accessibility:

- Striving for **inclusiveness** of provision should remain a key target. Efforts should be made to ensure that ECEC remains available, accessible and affordable for vulnerable groups → **outreach**
- Adequate **digital equipment and in-person home visits** are crucial tools to maintain communication with children and families who are not attending ECEC centres.
- Ensuring **warm and welcoming transitions** from home to the ECEC centre is crucial.



Workforce:

- **Salary continuity** should be guaranteed for ECEC staff.
- **Pedagogical coaching, collegial reflection and planning** should not be discontinued after the pandemic.
- **Staff conditions and concerns** should be acknowledged and consideration should be given to the possibility of including them among **priority groups for vaccination**.
- **ECEC leaders** play a key role. **They should be granted the opportunity to systematically engage in peer-learning initiatives** within locally established professional networks, umbrella organisations and trade unions.



Curriculum:

- In times of crisis, ECEC centres can become places of **resilience**.
- Compliance with safety/hygiene protocols should not hinder **children’s agency and participation**.
- Specific initiatives should be put in place to sustain **relationships of trust between parents and professionals**. **Online communication can also help to achieve this**.



Monitoring and evaluation:

- Investments should be made in **monitoring infrastructure that systemically supports (rather than controls) ECEC centres**.



Governance and funding:

- A **clear flow of communication** should be ensured between national, regional and local authorities via existing umbrella and statutory bodies.
- Balance is required between **centralised processes of policy regulation and decentralised implementation**.
- **Fragmented and underfinanced ECEC systems required higher levels of support during the pandemic**. Investing in **well financed, structural ECEC** helps to manage crises in a more efficient way.