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

Executive Summary

NESET

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The Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI) is responsible for the administration of the NESET network. For any inquiries please contact us at: info-neset@ppmi.lt

Contractor:

PPMi

Gedimino ave. 50, LT - 01110 Vilnius, Lithuania
Phone: +370 5 2620338 Fax: +370 5 2625410
www.ppmi.lt

Director: Rimantas Dumčius

AUTHORS:

Katrien VAN LAERE, VBJK (Center for Innovation in the Early Years), Belgium
Nima SHARMAHD, VBJK (Center for Innovation in the Early Years), Belgium
Arianna LAZZARI, University of Bologna, Italy
Martino SERAPIONI, University of Bologna, Italy
Sanja BRAJKOVIĆ, Open Academy Step by Step, Croatia
Ingrid ENGDAHL, Stockholm University, Sweden
Henriette HEIMGAERTNER, International Academy of Berlin, Germany
Liesbeth LAMBERT, VBJK (Center for Innovation in the Early Years), Belgium
Hester HULPIA, VBJK (Center for Innovation in the Early Years), Belgium

PEER REVIEWERS:

Dragana AVRAMOV, NESET Scientific Coordinator
Kitty STEWART, Associate Professor in Social Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science and Associate Director, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE)

LANGUAGE EDITOR:

James Nixon, freelance editor

Executive summary

This report explores the different ways in which European Union (EU) Member States (MS) have attempted to ensure high-quality ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) for children and families in the era of COVID-19. The rationale for the report builds on the Conclusions of the European Council concerning the fight against COVID-19 in education and training, which stipulate that Member States should share information and best practices and continue exchanging information about possible ways to adapt to this new situation at the level of education and training (Council of the European Union, 2020).

All children, and particularly those who are most societally disadvantaged, risk being among the biggest victims of the pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020; Muroga et al, 2020) due to both 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 (United Nations, 2020). By interconnecting its functions – 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) – ECEC can play a key role in supporting all children and families to face the crisis, and especially 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 (European Commission, 2013; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2018; European Commission, 2021a; 2021b). 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 central aim of this study is to examine what measures have been 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.

The European Quality Framework (EQF) on ECEC (Council of the European Union, 2019) has been used as a lens with which to explore aspects including accessibility, workforce, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, finance and governance. After an introductory first chapter, Chapter 2 analyses the effects of the pandemic on children and families, to explore what role ECEC can play in addressing their needs in times of crisis. Chapter 3 focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on the societal functions of ECEC. Chapter 4 explores in greater depth the various aspects of quality that may have been affected during this crisis, while Chapter 5 reports on the relevant lessons learned and policy guidelines.

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[1] to the policy decisions taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in line with the findings of other research (Gromada, Richardson and Rees, 2020). This highlights the need to raise the profile of ECEC within the field of education/care sector policies. In addition, the importance of ECEC must be recognised as part of emergency response strategies, in order to urgently accelerate efforts to address gaps in access, as underlined in the last Unicef-Innocenti Working Paper (Muroga et al., 2020).

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[1] By 'vulnerable' we mainly refer to the fact that priority has generally been given to other levels of education when it comes to accessibility, workforce, curriculum, monitoring, governance and finance.

Key findings

Taking into account the areas of the European Quality Framework (EQF) (Council of the European Union, 2019), the report underlines the following key findings:

Accessibility: at present, complete statistics regarding accessibility of ECEC during the Covid-19 crisis are still unavailable. However, it has been widely reported that the pandemic has had a particularly negative effect on ECEC attendance among societally disadvantaged children and families, whose participation has been constrained by a large number of factors. Some countries/regions employed policy measures to support access to ECEC among societally vulnerable groups in society. Priority access was in some cases adopted to achieve this aim. In both Germany (Berlin) and Belgium (Flanders), societally disadvantaged families were assigned priority status for ECEC services during both the lockdown and reopening phases. Croatian authorities implemented large-scale temporary fee reductions, with the aim of ensuring affordable ECEC options for all key workers and two-earner households without alternative childcare arrangements. Outreach initiatives were also put in place in certain contexts. In Italy, governmental guidelines emphasised the pedagogical importance of carefully planned transitions 'back' into ECEC, to make the process of 're-familiarization' between families, children and staff as welcoming and inclusive as possible. However, guaranteeing wide access to ECEC on a structural level remains in general a challenge.

Workforce: the COVID-19 emergency has highlighted more explicitly how the quality of ECEC depends in large measure on the level of support received by its workforce. Nonetheless, the recognition and support accorded to ECEC staff have varied between contexts. In Sweden and Germany (Berlin), ECEC professionals received widespread accolades for their crucial contribution to the public good during the most challenging months of lockdown. However, even in these cases, their voices were not always taken into account when designing recommendations and measures concerning ECEC. In Belgium (Flanders) and Italy – both countries with a 'split' ECEC system[2] – childcare workers in particular (working with children aged 0-3 years) reported feeling unacknowledged. ECEC staff in Croatia also reported feeling undervalued. In terms of support, pedagogical coaching frameworks and continuous professional development (CPD) schemes became crucial for ECEC staff throughout the crisis. In Croatia, CPD programmes were rapidly converted into online activities, which had the two-fold consequences of, on the one hand, a lack of face-to-face contact, and on the other, an increase in staff attendance compared with pre-COVID periods (due to easier access to online training for participants from remote areas). In Belgium (Flanders), in-person pedagogical coaching within small ECEC centres was discontinued, while preschool staff reported an overall increase in the provision of guidance programmes in comparison with previous years. In Italy, ECEC centres for the under-3s could rely on traditional in-house coaching by pedagogical coordinators. This displayed a certain degree of efficacy in realigning pedagogical practices with frequently changing health protocols. State-maintained preschool settings, on the other hand, suffered a near-total suspension of in-service training programmes and coaching schemes. In general, the more access ECEC centres had to leaders or coaches who combined pedagogical vision with steering capacity, the better they were able to deal with the unpredictable nature of the crisis. With regard to protective materials, there was a general lack of good-quality provision to ECEC staff, which negatively influenced anxiety levels among professionals. Continuity of salary is another crucial issue to address. In some of the countries/regions examined (e.g. Sweden), ECEC staff have been paid throughout the

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[2] ECEC systems may be integrated or split: in the former case, centres for children aged 0-6 years are managed in an integrated way under the auspices of the same ministry (as in Sweden, Croatia and Berlin); in the latter case, an institutional split exists between centres for children aged 0-3 and 3-6 years, which are managed by different ministries (as in Belgium and Italy, although the latter is currently in a transition phase from split to integrated). The two systems carry a number of consequences on the level of pre and in-service training for ECEC staff, working conditions, management and governance.

whole period of the pandemic (including during lockdown), while in others (e.g. Croatia), staff have been paid less or were temporarily made at least partially unemployed. Greater efforts were needed on the part of some governments to plan compensation measures for ECEC centres, particularly those in the private sector. These issues are of particular importance, especially given that staffing shortages are a generalised problem, both during the pandemic and beyond.

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. One of the biggest challenges in this process appears to have been promoting children's participation and autonomy within a context in which (for hygiene reasons) certain materials can no longer be used, groups cannot be mixed, etc. In fact, these challenges provide opportunities to rethink materials and activities based on goals and vision. For example, many professionals (e.g. in Berlin, Italy, Belgium (Flanders)) have found that working in 'bubbles' with continuity of staff members has provided an opportunity to offer a warmer and more holistic pedagogy to young children, giving staff more time to observe and work in a child-centred way. Professionals also faced challenges in their relationships with families, since face-to-face contacts were limited or non-existent. While ECEC centres have developed alternative ways to involve and connect with parents, the lack of in-person contact has been very challenging. Meanwhile, the accelerated digitalisation of ECEC settings, dictated by the need to improve cooperative communication between staff and families, has led to a significant leap in digital competences among ECEC staff. In Croatia, the development of IT infrastructure is reported to have improved the transparency of ECEC centres in the eyes of families, particularly in terms of communication opportunities and channels for exchange.

Monitoring and evaluation: the data show that 'supportive' elements of monitoring processes (as opposed to 'controlling' ones) have been appreciated by ECEC staff during the crisis. For example in Belgium (Flanders), the preschool sector (between 2.5 and 6 years old) witnessed a shift from external controlling audits by the inspectorate to visits with a supportive role. In Germany (Berlin), established self-assessment procedures continued to be carried out at centre level throughout the emergency, in accordance with regional guidelines. In Italy, in the absence of national measures specifically targeting ECEC evaluation across the whole sector, quality management at municipal ECEC centres continued to be carried out internally by pedagogical coordinators within a collegial framework.

Governance and funding: responding to the crisis demanded both rapid decision making and comprehensive collaboration – thus, institutional fragmentation emerged as a major challenge in governance across all of the countries/regions analysed. Countries/regions such as Sweden and Germany (Berlin) (both with integrated ECEC systems), which were well organised and financed as integrated systems, appeared able to face the crisis without the need for extreme measures to ensure the viability of the ECEC sector. In Belgium (Flanders) and in Italy, on the other hand, more energies and resources were needed to align the different levels of the split and fragmented ECEC system. In Belgium (Flanders), municipalities faced significant challenges in laying down protocols governing cooperation between childcare and preschool personnel. In Italy, the implications of institutional splits and the inadequacy of current provision became the focus of considerable debate during the crisis, leading to a strengthening of calls to allocate larger budget lines for ECEC as part of Italy's recovery and resilience plan. Cooperation between ECEC structures and health authorities has also presented challenges. Positive experiences were reported in both Germany (Berlin) and Croatia, where existing modes and frameworks for trans-institutional collaboration appear to have improved as a result of the COVID-19 emergency. In addition, the data reveal that clear and unambiguous communication with the ECEC sector and with the families turned out to be crucial in order to manage the crisis.

Lessons learned and policy guidelines

EU countries have implemented a variety of policy responses to the COVID-19 emergency. These were informed by different sets of ideas, interests, and existing organisational constraints. Choices have been made at different levels within systems, according to the governance structure in each context. In this respect, the multi-layered structure of national ECEC systems, characterised by the presence of various layers of governance, requires that interventions should be tailored to the specific administrative level in question. The following policy guidelines (see Chapter 5 for a full text) are conceptualised at a general level, so as to be adaptable to the various EU contexts and different levels of governance within national ECEC systems. The guidelines are presented in accordance with the five ECEC quality pillars identified by the EQF (Council of the European Union, 2019).

Accessibility

Ensuring the continuity of educational relationships with children and families is paramount, especially during the period of the pandemic, which has been characterised by discontinuities in attendance at ECEC centres. This is particularly important for children and families in societally disadvantaged positions. Ensuring access to ECEC during the pandemic therefore helps to safeguard children's rights to wellbeing, learning, play, socialisation, and equality of opportunities.

Policy guidelines

1.1. Access to high-quality ECEC is important for all children, as a child right emanating from UNCRC (1989) and EU policies (European pillar of social rights, 2017; Council Recommendation on high quality ECEC system, 2019). Particularly in times of crisis, ensuring access to high-quality ECEC provision guarantees that children's rights to education, wellbeing, socialisation and play are taken into account.

1.2. Striving for inclusiveness of provision should remain a key target, even where policies are designed to ensure uptake of ECEC among priority groups. Efforts should be made towards ensuring that ECEC remains available, accessible and affordable for vulnerable groups and for those families most affected by the socio-economic impact of the pandemic crisis.

1.3. National, regional and local authorities should devise comprehensive joint strategies to continuously reach out to the most vulnerable groups in society, in collaboration with ECEC providers and social welfare organisations.

1.4. Adequate digital equipment and in-person home visits are crucial tools for maintaining regular communication with children and families who are not attending ECEC centres.

1.5. Ensuring warm and welcoming transitions from home to the ECEC centre is crucial, not only for newly enrolled children and families, but also for those who have been absent from ECEC for a while.

Workforce

Providing job security and adequate compensation to ensure the motivation and retention of staff is key to the sustainability of high-quality ECEC in times of crisis and beyond. Although the crisis has highlighted the importance of ECEC centres, the overall social recognition of ECEC professionals remains low. Meanwhile, the pedagogical and policy-making capacity of ECEC leaders has proved crucial in supporting ECEC professionals to deal effectively with the COVID-19 crisis. Accordingly, both the working conditions of ECEC staff and the pedagogical and policy capacity of ECEC leaders should be strengthened.

Policy guidelines

2.1. Structural measures should be considered to address shortages in the ECEC workforce, in order to avoid overworking the existing staff, which would negatively affect the quality of education and care practice.

2.2. Given the importance of maintaining contacts with children and families during prolonged periods of closure of ECEC settings, continuity of salary for ECEC staff should be guaranteed.

2.3. Pedagogical coaching, collegial reflectivity and planning should not be discontinued during the crisis and beyond.

2.4. Staff conditions and concerns should be acknowledged and taken seriously into account through the provision of pedagogical guidance and professional development opportunities. In addition, because ECEC workers are exposed to close contacts with children and parents as part of their daily work, consideration should be given to the possibility of including them among priority groups for vaccination.

2.5. ECEC leaders play a key role in providing organisational, pedagogical and emotional support to their educational teams. It is crucial that adequate decision-making infrastructure, operating in accordance with the principles of distributed leadership, is in place at the level of each institution.

2.6. ECEC leaders should be granted the opportunity to systematically engage in peer-learning initiatives and advocacy processes within locally established professional networks, umbrella organisations or trade unions.

2.7. The procurement and supply of protective equipment to staff should not be delegated to individual ECEC centres, nor to ECEC staff.

2.8. Investments should be made towards improving ICT infrastructure, as ECEC staff have been highly appreciative of the opportunities offered by digital tools to document children's experiences, carry out meetings and conduct exchanges with parents.

Curriculum

In the process of striking a balance between the implementation of safety/hygiene measures and the pedagogical vision of ECEC, priority should be given to nurturing children's well-being, participation and learning, as well as fostering meaningful and respectful relationships with families. Raising awareness of such dilemmas – and supporting teams of ECEC professionals in adopting innovative approaches/practices – could represent an opportunity for ECEC centres to revisit their pedagogical identities from a perspective that places equal value on the educational and the social functions of ECEC.

Policy guidelines

3.1. Given that young children have been highly affected by the negative consequences of lockdowns and restrictions during the pandemic, the educational and care practices adopted within ECEC centres should guarantee that children's rights to socialisation, play and learning are foregrounded.

3.2. In times of crisis, ECEC centres can become places of resilience, where children can share their lived experiences and emotions with adults and peers through interaction and play. This role of ECEC becomes even more salient when considering the increase in difficult home situations (such as domestic violence) during lockdown.

3.3. Compliance with safety/hygiene protocols should not hinder children's agency and participation, nor should it limit their communication and expressions through play, body language and movement.

3.4. Specific initiatives should be put in place to sustain the development of relationships of trust between parents and professionals.

3.5. Alternative methods, including online communication, should be explored to involve families in the everyday life of ECEC centres.

3.6. When ECEC centres are closed or children/families are in self-isolation, digital tools can also be used to ensure the continuity of educational relationships.

Monitoring and evaluation

While quality monitoring and evaluation processes can be undertaken through a combination of top-down 'controlling' approaches and bottom-up 'supportive' approaches, the evidence analysed for this report indicates that supportive elements of monitoring proved to be particularly useful for sustaining teams in reviewing their practice during the pandemic crisis. In addition, data regarding ECEC attendance should be collected and monitored as a means of identifying those groups who are less well catered for by existing provisions, and to design initiatives to ensure that ECEC remains accessible to those families who were most affected by the socio-economic impact of the pandemic crises.

Policy guidelines

4.1. Investing in a monitoring infrastructure that systemically supports ECEC centres and teams in the process of pedagogical planning, evaluation and the review of educational practices is paramount, and is preferable to external processes of control during times of crisis.

4.2. The systematic collection of reliable data in relation to ECEC attendance is necessary to continuously monitor the accessibility of provision during times of crisis, and to design appropriate *ad hoc* measures to ensure equitable access.

Governance and funding

The study reveals that concerns such as children's rights, early learning, parental support and the reconciliation of work and family life were assessed and weighed differently between countries during the pandemic. In countries where ECEC has been framed since its inception with a strong focus on children's rights, ECEC systems tend to be regulated and funded within a coherent public governance framework that recognises the educational and social value of ECEC. In those countries where the educational, social and economic functions of ECEC have traditionally been split into separate domains – i.e. childcare and early education – governance tends to be weaker and more brittle, leading to greater fragmentation of initiatives and discontinuity in public funding. Analysis of the data shows that fragmented and under-financed ECEC systems require a greater number of means and measures to be activated in times of crisis. Stable ECEC systems that are coherently organised and financed were significantly better prepared to deal with this crisis, and required fewer *ad hoc* measures to ensure the viability of the sector. It can be inferred that an integrated system of governance is better suited to facing the multiple challenges arising from the pandemic crisis.

Policy guidelines

5.1. A clear flow of communication between national, regional and local authorities, via existing umbrella and statutory bodies, can facilitate decision-making processes when swift decisions are required, as well as assisting in the smooth implementation of policy measures.

5.2. During the pandemic, a need has emerged within systems of ECEC governance to improve the balance between centralised processes of policy and regulatory design, and decentralised implementation.

5.3. Clear and unambiguous crisis communication is vastly important, both with families directly and with the ECEC sector.

5.4. Integrated measures are needed that combine ECEC with family financial support schemes, to allow more flexible responses to the ever-changing scenarios created by the pandemic.

5.5. Inter-institutional communication protocols between ECEC, health care and welfare services should be more widely promoted, as these could provide a basis upon which to create platforms for cross-sectoral collaboration in the future.

5.6. Fragmented and under-financed ECEC systems have required higher levels of support during the pandemic. In contexts where the ECEC sector largely relies on private for-profit organisations rather than publicly subsidised provision, emergency financial assistance has become the only viable approach to avoid the closure of centres and ensure the continuity of salaries for staff.

5.7. To advance and mainstream the lessons learned during this crisis, greater financial resources are required at statutory level: now is the time to honour the responsibilities undertaken by EU Member States in ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.