

The Development of a Non-Formal Training Programme for Extra-Institutional Pre-School Child Care: the LiMERiC Project

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Abstract

The level of migration across Europe has vastly increased over the years. In order for the successful integration of migrant families to occur in their new homeland, it is important to understand the process of language development and to encourage intercultural awareness and tolerance.

High quality early years education and care has been defined as a priority and pre-school education has a key role and responsibility for fostering cultural inclusion. The stage of child development during which language acquisition takes place is seen as a vital period in which to nurture social participation. But it also coincides with a time where children from immigrant backgrounds will face difficulties when presented with a lack of support in bilingual language acquisition. The extra-institutional education sector plays a very important role in childcare but there appears to be a lack of general knowledge in educators and adults working in this sector on the topics of supporting language learning and intercultural competences.

A European partnership was set up to address the need to improve the level of competency, in adults working in extra-institutional child care, about language development and intercultural issues. The Language Meets Intercultural Competencies (LiMERiC) project aimed to gauge the level of knowledge of language development and intercultural issues of those working in pre-school child care and to develop a blended learning training programme.

A target group of adults working in the early years child care sector was identified in each partner country. A needs analysis questionnaire was then developed to gauge the level of need and interest for a non-formal training programme. Data from the needs analysis survey provided a snap-shot of the current level of knowledge, awareness and competencies in language development and intercultural issues and provided the starting point for the development of the LiMERiC curriculum. Ten modules were written; each consists of e-learning and face-to-face units. The module contents were then incorporated into a handbook for the course trainers which included detailed notes together suggested didactics and methodology. The training programme was implemented in 4 of the partner countries and evaluated using pre- and post- course self-rated questionnaires. Overall, the course was evaluated as being appropriate for the target group and response was positive for both the topics covered and content. The e-learning sections of the course proved to be quite challenging for most participants and was also more time consuming than had been expected.

The LiMERiC project has developed and piloted a non-formal training programme for adults working in the early childhood education setting. Those working in this sector are often a parent's first experience of a country's education system and have a vital role to play in promoting inclusion and maintaining cultural diversity in Europe.

Introduction

The level of migration across Europe has vastly increased over the years. In order for the successful integration of migrant families to occur in their new homeland, it is important to understand the process of language development and to encourage intercultural awareness and tolerance.

On a European level, high quality early year's education and care has been defined as a priority. It is also the case that early childhood education has a key role and responsibility for fostering cultural inclusion. The stage of child development during which language acquisition takes place is seen as a vital period in which to nurture social participation. But it also coincides with a time where children from immigrant backgrounds will face difficulties when presented with a lack of support in bilingual language acquisition. This might be due to limited understanding and/or knowledge by both parents and in the childcare sector.

For the majority of European countries there are two main sectors of early year's education; institutional and extra-institutional education. Institutional education encompasses pre-school education; institutions such as kindergarten and nursery school provision for example, which appears similarly organised when comparing across European countries. Extra-institutional education, such as untrained forms of child care, au pairs and family members acting as carers, however, appears in different formats across Europe, with differing levels in the quality of training and is also being delivered by people with varying backgrounds. The extra-institutional education sector plays a very important role in childcare but it is often difficult to reach those working in this sector in order to conduct training as they are widely dispersed across regions. In addition, there appears to be a lack of general knowledge in educators and adults working in extra-institutional child care and pre-school education especially on the topics of supporting language learning and intercultural competences. There was, therefore, a need to provide training for early childhood education and care systems in most of the European countries as this was clearly lacking.

Project aims

A European partnership – led by Tagesmütter Steiermark, Austria and including representation from INIT Developments Ltd., Germany; FormAzione Co&So Network, Italy; Soros Educational Center Foundation, Romania; ARIADNE, Switzerland; İzmir Governorship, Turkey and The Dyscovery Centre, UK – was set up to address the need to improve the level of competency, in adults working in extra-institutional child care, about language development and intercultural issues. The Language Meets Intercultural Competencies (LiMERiC) project was funded by the European Commission, DG Education and Culture within the Lifelong Learning Programme.

The project aimed to, in the first instance, gauge the current level of knowledge of language development and intercultural issues of those working with children aged 0-6 years. The second aim of the project was the development of a non-formal, blended learning training programme by the partnership which could be piloted on a target group sample.

A core target group of adults working in the extra-institutional early year's child care sector was identified for each partner country. A needs analysis questionnaire was then developed, with agreement by all of the partner countries, to gauge the level of need and interest for a non-formal training programme to improve competencies in language development and intercultural issues. This was achieved by posing a range of questions on the level of understanding on topics such as language development, multilingualism, language and communication difficulties and intercultural issues. The survey also asked about the language diversity in their child care setting (including the range of languages spoken by themselves and the children in their care) and about their past and future training needs. The survey was written in English and translated into the partner countries languages. Participants wishing to complete the survey could do so via the Survey Monkey™ online tool or by filling in a paper version.

Project findings

In total 154 questionnaires were completed by the target group in the seven partner countries. Data from the needs analysis survey provided a snap-shot of the current level of knowledge, awareness and competencies in language development, multilingualism, attitudes to multilingualism, language and communication difficulties and intercultural issues across the partner countries. The survey also suggested that there was indeed demand for a programme specifically targeted at those working in child care. The findings of the analysis have been summarized in a report entitled: "New educational challenges in extra institutional child care in Europe".

The needs analysis provided the starting point in the development of a blended learning programme. Together with the experiences of the partner organizations, the consortium developed the LiMERiC curriculum. A draft of the contents and structure of the training was agreed as well as the shared task plan of work for the single modules. Ten modules were developed; each consists of four e-learning units (200 minutes) and six face-to-face units (300 minutes). The training began with a 'getting started' module which allowed participants to introduce themselves to one another and to the trainers. It also helped familiarize the group with the e-learning platform. The second and third modules covered language development and fostering language development. These modules provided an overview of the stages of typical development

of language in children aged 0 – 6 years and raised awareness of when language is delayed or disordered. In addition, the development of more than one language (multilingualism) was also briefly covered in this module. Module 3 discussed the role of professionals and the terminology used when working with a child whose language is developing atypically. It also facilitated a practical understanding of ways to encourage language development in children. The concept of multilingualism was introduced in module 4 in order to strengthen the knowledge and competences of child minders in the area of early childhood language development and multilingualism. The module also aimed to stimulate positive attitudes towards multilingualism and linguistic diversity. Module 5 was developed to promote learning in early childhood. Behaviors and attitudes which enable facilitation of intercultural dialogue and allow the deconstruction of stereotypes was the focus of module 6. An ethos which recognizes different points of view and nurtures an understanding of the real needs, development and growth opportunities inherent to the educational relationship (with children, families and within the social context) was introduced in this part of the training. Module 7 focused on childhood as the starting point of possible positive connections among different cultures in order to build innovative conditions for the development of equal opportunities and reciprocal recognition. The basics of communication and differences in communication were introduced in Module 8. Participants learned about conflict management strategies and acquired an awareness of their own style of communication and conflict management. The module also aimed to improve skills of effective nonviolent communication and conflict management. Module 9 suggested ways that child minders might promote an environment that includes parents in the learning process using a range of activities which foster cooperation. Strategies to support parents with little or no language skills (of the host country) and the need to maintain cultural identity through the child's use of their own language were discussed. The final module provided an opportunity for the group to reflect on the content of the training programme and to celebrate the successful completion of the course.

The contents of the LiMERiC curriculum were then incorporated into a handbook for course trainers which included detailed notes together suggested didactics and methodology and additional reading (such as useful websites or books). Any resources required for activities during the face-to-face sessions were also listed. The training programme was implemented as test beds in four of the partner countries – Austria, Italy, Switzerland and Turkey. The pilot modules were evaluated using pre- and post- course questionnaires which were completed by the individuals who took part in the training. Seventy-four individuals aged between 20 to 65 years completed both the test modules and the evaluation process. Overall, the course was evaluated as being appropriate for the target group. Response to the pilot training was extremely positive and the majority was very happy with the topics and the content of the course. Interestingly, the majority of the child minders would have liked the modules to have been longer in order to have more time for discussion and reflection. Participants also suggested that the programme could provide more depth within each topic. However, the e-learning sections of the course proved to be quite challenging for most of the participants. This aspect of the course was also more time consuming than had been expected.

In addition to the participant feedback on the course content and delivery, an external evaluation of the handbook was conducted by BIFIE (Bundesinstitut Bildungsforschung, Innovation & Entwicklung des österreichischen Schulwesens) an Austrian educational research institute. The experts from the institute described the handbook as a very "useful and innovative instrument to educate and train child minders". They went on to say that "the handbook particularly stands out with regard to its clearly arranged structure. It picks up relevant topics, represents the contents sufficiently for the target group and provides comprehensive inputs to the trainers regarding didactics and methodology."

Conclusions

The LiMERiC project aimed to develop and pilot a non-formal training programme for adults working in the pre-school child care / education setting. The 10 module course provides child minders with the basic skill set to (a) recognise typical and atypical language development, (b) foster a harmonious multi-cultural and multi-lingual environment – both for the children in their care and their parents and (c) create an atmosphere of inclusion and belonging for those from migrant backgrounds. Pre-school child care is often a parent's first experience of a country's education system. Those working in this sector have a vital role to play in promoting inclusion and maintaining cultural diversity in Europe.