



Bottom-up Quality Practices in ECEC Services – The SEQUENCES Project

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Abstract

The Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care indicated that “the early years from birth to compulsory school age are the most formative in children’s lives and set the foundations for children’s lifelong development and patterns for their lives”. Additionally, many research studies show that quality ECEC services have positive impact on children as well as on their parents and families, on women employability, well-being and quality of life. In particular, the use of the term “quality” implies the analysis of a wide variety of variables that contribute to the definition of dynamic quality models, which calls for a greater attention to minimum standard of service requirements to be shared and agreed with public institutions and relevant ECEC stakeholders (parents, educators/carers/auxiliary staff, trade unions etc.). Based on these statements and on the context of 6 EU countries, namely Italy, Romania, Lithuania, Malta, Hungary, Ireland along with the long term experience of the European Parents’ Association, the SEQUENCES project aims to improve the quality of ECEC services. With a bottom-up approach and starting from the educators’ experience, it aims to develop and implement adequate tools for self and external evaluation of quality. To achieve these goals, partners have designed a Toolkit containing 33 ready-to-use tools referred to the 5 quality areas indicated by the European framework (access, workforce, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, governance and funding). Alongside with it, a training curriculum has been developed, to prepare and support the ECEC staff during the 6 months piloting phase of tools. Having the opportunity to test these tools and bring the direct experience of different countries is a response to the need for quality services. Finally a Multi-stakeholders’ Guidelines will be created, for promoting quality assurance in ECEC targeting policy-makers, services and parents/families. The SEQUENCES project is expected to lead to significant improvements in terms of developed competences and a positive spillover effect in the Quality Assurance management of ECEC settings.

Keywords: ECEC, early years education, quality framework, self-evaluation, external evaluation;

1. Background

“Learning and education do not begin with compulsory schooling – they start from birth. The early years from birth to compulsory school age are the most formative in children’s lives and set the foundations for children’s lifelong development and patterns for their lives. In this context, high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is an essential foundation for all children’s successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability” [1].

Many research studies show how ECEC services have positive **impact** not only on children, but also on their parents and families, on women employability, well-being and quality of life. They become an aid for the life and work balance, and at the same time a place to share, debate and develop the parent dimension. Investing in quality of early childhood is thus a priority that guarantees equitable and good quality level of services in both public and private ECEC providers. Latest EU projects and the related literature often tackle the topic of quality and quality assurance in ECEC, the need of awareness raising among providers and the large public, and, in the same time, they highlight the inequality across Europe among ECEC service providers.

In “Culture of Quality”, Maurizio Parente highlights that the quality evaluation of ECEC service providers such as – quality of organisation and management of the service, quality of the context, quality of processes, quality of project designing, quality of personnel and educators and their training, quality of relations etc. – has revealed its complex nature. The use of the term “quality” implies the analysis of a wide variety of variables (and often very different from each other) that together contribute to a dynamic concept of quality, which calls for a greater attention to minimum standard of service requirements to be shared and agreed with public institutions and relevant ECEC stakeholders (parents, educators/carers/staff, trade unions etc.) [2].

However, what is still lacking is the adoption of an agreed Quality Framework to assess ECEC services (as already developed in other educational **sectors**, like the VET sector through EQAVET)

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that builds on the Key principles and other significant policy documents such as “An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training” of 16.12.2008, “Early childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow” of 17.02.2011 and Recommendation “Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage” of 20.02.2013.

In addition, the Country Reports of the 6 partner countries involved in the SEQUENCES project show that accessing quality ECEC services is still a challenge:

- in RO, only 6% of children less than 3 years old were looked after by formal arrangements for more than 30 hours a week in 2013, that is significantly below the Barcelona target of 33%; while for children aged 3 to 6, there are major disparities in access to ECEC. The Recommendation is to increase the provision and quality of early childhood education and care, in particular for Roma;
- in IE, the major concern remains regarding the quality of childcare provision, where the percentage of graduates working in the sector is at 15%, therefore below the 60% recommended level;
- MT in 2014 achieved 21% of children under 3 years of age were enrolled in formal childcare, still below Barcelona target and EU average (27%);
- for IT, availability of childcare services remains a challenge since 21% of children for age group 0-3 benefit of childcare facilities;
- in LT, participation of four-year-olds in early childhood education and care was 86.5% in 2013, below the EU average of 93.1%. There is no provided data for children aged 0 to 3 years.
- in HU, there is insufficient provision of childcare facilities; in 2013 the share of children aged 0 to 3 covered by childcare is of 10%, 17 points below the EU average, particularly problematic remains the provision of ECEC services for children under 3 years.

High quality early childhood education and care can make a strong contribution in order to achieve first the Barcelona objectives (“to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age, and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age”) [3] and following the two of the Europe 2020 headline targets (reducing early school leaving to below 10%, and lifting at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion).

Based on this context, the SEQUENCES project aimed at developing and implementing self and external evaluation tools, through a bottom-up approach, to assess the quality of ECEC service providers in various European countries. It is financed under the Erasmus+ KA2 Strategic Partnership strand, running from 2016 until 2019, and it gathers a total of 8 partner organisations coming from 6 countries: one private and one public ECEC service providers respectively from Italy and Romania, 2 trade unions of teachers from Lithuania and Malta, an Irish nationwide network representing childcare members, the European Parents Association, Corvinus University of Budapest and the project coordinator FORMA.Azione srl, a VET and AL training centre from Italy.

2. The Toolkit

The SEQUENCES Toolkit is the first Intellectual Output developed throughout a year, with the active involvement of ECEC service providers and educational staff, relevant stakeholders (mainly Trade Unions and parents) ECEC experts, that currently gathers 33 tools to concretely implement quality in ECEC settings, according to the European Quality Framework. From a methodological point of view, the quality areas defined in the framework such as Access, Workforce, Curriculum, Monitoring and Evaluation, and Governance and Funding were considered as basis to identify and structure a list of tools to be piloted accordingly in the ECEC services involved from different EU countries. The structure of each single tool follows a scheme, indicating the following: the title, the quality area addressed and related statement, a short description of the tool, the objectives, the direct and indirect groups, the children age group, the timing for implementing, a wider description of the steps and process, links with other tools in the Toolkit and other resources and good practices with examples from the European countries involved. The target groups include ECEC staff, networks of ECEC settings, children, parents, families, policy makers while the child age group indicates if the tool is to be approached with children from birth to 3, from 3 to 6 years of age or both. For the description of the tools, the partners worked in mixed groups, coordinated by a leader, responsible of gathering the different contributes and publish the tools on a shared platform. Each partner organisation commented and revised the tools, so that the coordinator finalise them in the version currently available.

The next step was to include examples on how the tools are delivered in the countries, so to have a thorough understanding and more clear indications on how it is or can be put into practices. Among the challenges we can mention the choice of words, that thanks to the English speaking partner, it helped in shaping the content such as to appropriately reflect the principles and values shared in the introduction. The Governance and funding area raised some issues, because it is perceived as an

area where educators have little to say about and influence, but the given examples are however based on actual practice, calling also for a possible more active role of the ECEC services staff. Thanks to this great and deep work of analysis and self-reflection, partners came out with the designing of a transversal Common Quality Area, gathering quality management tools, mainly experienced in different organisational contexts, such as: setting SMART Goals, the PDCA Cycle or Participative Leadership Approach. The last version was edited in English and was translated in Italian, Lithuanian, Romanian and Serbian.

3. The Training and Piloting

The SEQUENCES project foresees a 6-month piloting of the tools on behalf of ECEC settings, on voluntary basis. It is currently carried out in 6 countries – Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Ireland, Romania and Serbia; the latter was not foreseen, it was an expression of interest on behalf of one of the members of the European Parents Association. Beforehand, partners participated in a training for trainers held in Budapest in November 2017 on the activities and materials on how to transfer and implement the tools at national level. Following, a training kit was created including a general framework and approach for a 2-session training, specially tailored activities co-designed by partners for each tool and the related learning outcomes, a needs analysis table with specific questions related to the quality areas, ex-ante/ex-post analysis and a customer satisfaction questionnaire. The trainings were delivered in the piloting countries within a period starting from December 2017 to May 2018 and in many cases extra-material was produced by trainers in order to further facilitate ECEC staff and transmit the values and principles of the Toolkit. In order to assure a sound piloting process, FORMA.Azione acts as general coordinator and each of the 6 partners as national contact points to monitor the piloting process and support the ECEC services, when needed. As a general approach, each country was requested to involve 5 ECEC settings and a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 15 participants, as teachers/educational staff attending the training and the piloting phase. Each setting will pilot one tool per area, in accordance to the needs assessment conducted during the training. In practical terms, Italy involved 13 participants, Lithuania 20, Malta 10, Serbia 15, Ireland 12 and Romania 10. In many countries there were more than 2 training sessions and in Malta and in Ireland there will be further special facilitation during the piloting process in each ECEC setting involved. All materials produced will become part of the Training Curriculum, available in 5 languages. In addition to these, a Multistakeholder's Guidelines will be created, targeting policy-makers, services and parents/families. The SEQUENCES project is expected to lead to significant improvements in terms of developed competences and a positive spillover effect in the Quality Assurance management of ECEC settings.

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