



## **Key points: How early childhood education and care (ECEC) and their workforce can help Europe's youngest citizens** **9 December 2010, Brussels**

*The conference presented the key messages from the 2-year cross-European programme **Working for inclusion: the role of the early years workforce in addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion**, and placed these in the context of current developments in early childhood education and care policy and practice at local, regional, national and international levels across the European member states.*

*The **Working for inclusion** programme has encouraged discussion and an exchange of ideas and information across member states; it has produced important research findings that give a clear picture of early childhood education and care provision throughout Europe; and it has highlighted the economic value of investment in early childhood and education, both in the present and the future.*

*Speakers included Nora Milotay (Policy Officer European Commission, DG EAG); Irena Woycicka (Undersecretary of State, Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland); Bronwen Cohen (chief executive of Children in Scotland and Working for Inclusion programme director); Stig Lund (European Trade Union Committee for Education); Jana Hainsworth (Secretary General of Eurochild); Peter Moss and John Bennett (Working for Inclusion researchers); Margarida Gameiro (Head of Unit, DG Education and Culture) and Marie-Anne Paraskevas (DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities).*

*Representatives of the lead countries (Scotland, Norway, Italy and Poland) joined practitioners, policymakers and politicians from across Europe to discuss the programme's findings. The conference was chaired by Mary Honeyball MEP, Rapporteur EP Report on Early Years Learning for the Culture and Education Committee, and Catherine Stihler MEP.*

### **Among the key points raised:**

- **Early years is currently a focus for Europe – the time is right:** The findings from **Working for inclusion** are timely. 2011 will bring an EC Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care; the Education and Training Strategy 2020 has a

significant early years dimension; and in January Hungary will take over the EU presidency with early years a stated priority. The programme also addresses issues related to poverty and exclusion raised during the European Year for Combating Poverty 2010. Each of the partner countries have significant developments taking place at all levels in relation to early years. *Nora Milotay* reinforced the point that the context and political will are there to bring change, following ministers' repeated interest in cooperating on issues related to Early Childhood Education and Care that culminated in the ET2020 strategy in 2009.

- **Fully integrated systems are the most effective:** This was the strongest single finding of the **Working for inclusion** programme. The countries with the lowest levels of child poverty and inequality are those which offer universally available, accessible services that are fully integrated. Where responsibility for ECEC services is split, for example by function (education, health, social services) or by age (0–3, 3–6, 7 and over) there is a marked inequality in access to services.
- **A well qualified, appropriately remunerated workforce is essential:** It was felt there is value in exploring the pedagogue model as a means of creating a more effective, flexible, and coherent approach to Early Childhood Education and Care across Europe. Childcare workers are almost universally less well paid and less well regarded than those whose role is considered to be education: this should change. *Stig Lund* commented: “A well qualified professional is the single most important element for quality”.
- **Fairness:** Universalism, with equitable social welfare systems and strong income redistribution, is a key feature of systems that achieve the best levels of equality.

### Other key points

- **Collaborative partnership and cross learning:** *Bronwen Cohen* highlighted how the sharing of experience, ideas and thinking had contributed to **Working for inclusion**, and how this way of working could be of value to member states in other contexts. For this to be effective it requires openness to and respect for others, and an appropriate awareness of cultural and societal differences.
- **Complex challenges require multidimensional solutions:** *Margarida Gameiro* spoke of the need for: “... political commitment, matched with financial investment and evidence-based policymaking” to create conditions where member states are not just providing the minimum, but where children, parents and communities can “have the maximum”. *Marie-Anne Paraskevas* reinforced this view, pointing to the need for tax and benefit structures, parental leave policies and all services that have contact points with families (such as health, education and social care) to be taken into account if effective services are to be created.
- **Value of Structural Funds:** These were acknowledged to have made a valuable contribution to work in Poland, and there was interest in promoting their availability to develop work within Early Childhood Education and Care. Other funding possibilities should also be publicised more widely to encourage takeup.
- **Good European models already exist:** There is a need to recognise, value and build on work already being done. *John Bennett* commented: “Why do we continue to be tempted by Anglo-American models when we have much better models here in Europe?”
- **Economic value of developing Early Childhood Education and Care:** The early years workforce can become a source of good quality employment. Developing Early Childhood Education and Care has economic value both now (galvanising local economies, developing smarter working practices, and tackling poverty) and in the future (preventing more expensive interventions, developing better educated and skilled citizens).

- **Change is possible:** It was pointed out that all those countries now performing best in terms of equality of access to services began with split models similar to those in many member states at present. While a number have well established tax and benefit systems to support this approach, Slovenia was highlighted as a member state that has developed an effective integrated approach based on a far less well established tax system and lower levels of funding.
- **Clear leadership is required:** A fully integrated approach to early years at national and international level would help people deliver services at a local level. There was felt to be a clear role for the EC in providing a strong lead on the importance of early years and the development of early years services across member states.
- **There is a need to challenge our perceptions of children:** A child-centred approach is important. Often the subconscious (or conscious) image of the child is of someone who is weak, vulnerable and in need of care and protection: but children should be participants, actively engaged in the systems and processes that affect them, with a voice that can be heard.
- **Rights and citizenship:** Children are citizens now, not only in the future, and to have 20 million of Europe's citizens living in poverty should be a cause for concern. The children's rights agenda, enshrined in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, should be driven forward as a means of reinforcing this. *Jana Hainsworth* commented: "It's important to recognise that children have rights from the day they are born and before ... I'd like to focus on how we take this forward and where it sits in the bigger picture."
- **Wellbeing:** Good Early Childhood Education and Care services were shown to make a real contribution not just to children's wellbeing, but also to that of parents and their communities.

The **Working for inclusion** programme presents a persuasive call for national, regional and local governments to invest in developing higher quality services for our youngest children, and for a strong lead to be given on the importance of early years as a means of challenging poverty and social exclusion both in the present, and for the future.

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