

## Children as first lifelong learners: a holistic approach to early childhood education and care

Ever since its establishment, the Lifelong Learning Platform (LLL) has been striving to promote a holistic approach to education and training<sup>1</sup>, spotlighting the undisputed role of lifelong learning in improving individual and societal conditions. A holistic approach to all education sectors is a necessary - yet not sufficient - prerequisite towards a society that privileges human connections, well-being and organic development over economic growth. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is no exception: this statement defines how this approach should inform ECEC policies in Europe and beyond, and exemplifies LLL's position in the sector. Throughout this document, we will advocate for both an evidence-based and a value-based approach to ECEC, in line with LLL's vision and mission.

### A holistic approach to early childhood education and care

There is an overwhelming amount of evidence on the importance of positive early childhood experiences for children's healthy development and a fair start in life<sup>2</sup>; and the best child care is the one that is centred on the children's needs. Adopting a "holistic approach" means to look at the **learning process as an indivisible whole in its social, pedagogical, emotional, psychological and neurological dimensions**; this approach focuses on the process rather than on its outcomes, it highlights the transformational power of learning rather than its end results; crucially, it places learners' needs before the settings in which learning takes place, as it caters for individuals' well-being and makes use of the full range of learning environments available to us<sup>3</sup>. This approach identifies how the educational environment is nested within all other sectors of learning and within the larger formal education system. This allows for them to influence each other, creating opportunities for different sectors and disciplines to work together<sup>4</sup>. **An education informed by a holistic approach achieves its purpose by transforming society, rather than by describing it<sup>5</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Lifelong Learning Platform, [LLL Manifesto](#), October 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Eurochild and the International Step by Step Association, ["First Years, First Priority" campaign](#)

<sup>3</sup> Lifelong Learning Platform, [LLL Position Paper "21st-century learning environments"](#), October 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Learning for Wellbeing Foundation, [Towards systems competent for nurturing children's holistic development from birth through school: Coherence and continuity](#), April 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Lifelong Learning Platform, ["LLLGlossary: Review of Lifelong Learning Terminology"](#), July 2022

In ECEC, this means supporting children's early cognitive, physical, social and emotional development needs all the while introducing young children to learning stimuli outside of the family context. In the peculiar context of early childhood, it is necessary to move away from the specialisation agenda we see in other sectors of education for a holistic development of the child and to consider the mission that all stakeholders have in building up a context that supports children's development - especially those that are closest to the child. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) services for children under 6 years of age play a fundamental role in laying strong foundations for their cognitive functions, especially in the first 3 years of life. A holistic view of children considers all actors involved and looks at education as the main part of a wider array of care services generally falling under "care".

As a matter of fact, good education and training functions as an enabling right: **the cognitive empowerment that tends to come along with education and learning processes in general is the key and root cause of many of the other desirable developments<sup>6</sup> in a child's life.** The Lifelong Learning Platform believes that complementarity between formal and non-formal education and learning systems allows for a holistic approach to personal development<sup>7</sup>. In fact, a quality ECEC system also looks at non-formal pedagogies and methodologies within formal and institutionalised learning environments when children reach the school age.

## Investing in quality ECEC...

The current state of play puts an enormous and often unbearable pressure on families to manage a child's early moments, including their learning: support to parents is improving<sup>8</sup>, but is still fragmented despite the fact that they are the first and primary educators of children; investment in public structures is marginal. In such conditions, ECEC systems suffer, and so do children.

Quality ECEC services can make an extraordinary difference in children's lives, especially for the most disadvantaged. In this respect, **quality ECEC that is accessible to all is key for tackling child poverty and promoting inclusion:** research indicates that children from disadvantaged groups derive even greater benefit from high-quality ECEC than their peers from wealthier families<sup>9</sup>. This is all the more true as inequalities are typically established well before a child is born and can permanently influence their life-course opportunities, well-being, and health later in life<sup>10</sup>.

LLL calls on EU Member States to ensure universal access to high-quality ECEC systems, through a sound, harmonised implementation of the European Child Guarantee, including special funds for children with disabilities, and children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. This is true even within households: the substantial difference in parental responsibility between mothers and fathers, for instance, makes inequalities arise even within families; national funding should

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<sup>6</sup> S.E.L. Bengtsson, B. Barakat, and R. Muttarak, [The Role of Education in Enabling the Sustainable Development Agenda](#), 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Lifelong Learning Platform, LLLP Briefing Paper on "[Community Lifelong Learning Centres](#)", May 2019.

<sup>8</sup> [EurofamNet, Catalogue of Family Support Programmes](#)

<sup>9</sup> First Years, First Priorities campaign, [Thematic Paper on the professionalisation of ECEC staff](#)

<sup>10</sup> EU Alliance for Investing in Children, [Recommendations for the 2023 Port Social Forum](#), May 2023.

harmonise maternity, paternity and parental leaves with the highest standards to meet the needs of the child without neglecting the overwhelming amount of responsibility that is normally borne upon by mothers alone. Informal training opportunities for parents should be mainstreamed to reach out to all segments of society. If education, and specifically early childhood education, is recognised as the single most effective and enabling factor to reducing inequalities later on in life, what is keeping us from giving it the emphasis it deserves?

The European Union has laid the foundation for a more harmonised effort in ensuring high-quality ECEC. Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights states that “a) Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality; b) Children have the right to protection from poverty; children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities”<sup>11</sup>. LLLP recognises that ECEC, and in particular thriving learning environments, are one of those contributing factors to enhance equal opportunities in life.

To achieve ecosystems that enable full development of a child’s potential, **we urge EU Member States to redirect public investment in high-quality services and high-quality ECEC systems for children across Europe**. A high-quality ECEC system is a system that ensures regular access to a variety of responsive, sensitive interactions with adults, peers, and materials in playgroups and early education classrooms for every child<sup>12</sup>. Endless efforts should be made to ensure that children from lower socio-economic classes can benefit from high-quality ECEC systems.

### ...means investing in educators

Investing in educators plays an important role to support the development of agency in children. Educators, practitioners and caretakers (including parents and families) are crucial actors to accompany children in pivotal transitional moments, i.e. from home to kindergarten, from kindergarten to school, etc. Special attention and support should be given to these moments and, therefore, to the people that guide children through them.

The professionalisation of staff is an undeniable precondition for quality ECEC and it needs to be accompanied by substantial investments that include *ad-hoc* and long-term measures. Recognising the fundamental role of educators - in all learning environments - goes hand in hand with a robust investment in their profession: training opportunities, career development, and a considerable improvement of working conditions including adequate remuneration remain today pressing priorities despite the policy efforts to regulate the sector.

Moreover, we call upon all European decision-makers and Member States to understand and prioritise the societal value of ECEC services and ECEC profession above other economic considerations. Similarly, measures that bring more diversity in the ECEC workforce (gender,

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<sup>11</sup> European Commission, [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), November 2017.

<sup>12</sup> COFACE Thematic Note, [High-quality early childhood education and care: low children-to-staff as primary driver for children’s well-being and families’ engagements](#), May 2023.

cultural background, etc.) should be implemented and mainstreamed to ensure the development of intercultural understanding since the first years of life<sup>13</sup>.

Once again, the shortage of skills for caretakers at large is crystal clear also when it comes to the most important caretakers in a child's life: the parents. At the same time, this should not discourage us from filling the gaps in their knowledge, skills and competencies through publicly-available training that truly fosters inclusion, for all parents.

## A matter of policy coherence?

As the European Union focuses its political and economic efforts on markets before people<sup>14</sup>, it is important to point out the contradictions of this approach. Most of the time, in fact, the increasing privatisation and atomisation of our societies brought by neo-liberal policies<sup>15</sup> show presumptions of being fact-based. The past decades have ushered in a normalisation of a narrative under which abiding to economic principles, such as efficiency, in education and training is ensured by cutting costs and increasing the number of graduates joining the labour market. But economic principles, by nature, are not neutral: they are rooted in political beliefs.

The LLLP Position Paper 2022 detailed how the narrative has spread, leading the privatisation of education and training under the misconception that the invisible hand of (self-interest in) the markets would deliver the best possible outcomes for learning<sup>16</sup>. Unsurprisingly, this approach led to chronic underfunding of education (including ECEC), widening social and economic gaps in the population and failing to realise that core capacities, life skills and competences develop over the early part of the life course<sup>17</sup>, and they not only contribute to children's well-being and development, but also to forming more resilient individuals later on in life. Importantly, these core capacities, from the various perspectives, do not promote economic, social or civic returns above one another, but rather seek to promote holistic child development and well-being<sup>18</sup> - and, to date, are the best way to achieve precisely those economic, social and civic returns.

**The current understanding of ECEC is coated with good intentions and poor investments**, and it does not even do justice to the fact-based approach that the European Union professes; good intentions (such as the Barcelona targets and their revision<sup>19</sup>, the EU Care Strategy<sup>20</sup>) are not met with the adequate amount of funding, especially not with funding towards ensuring that no child is left behind. A few examples help us frame this issue. The new comprehensive EU Strategy on the

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<sup>13</sup> First Years, First Priorities campaign, [Thematic Paper on the professionalisation of ECEC staff](#)

<sup>14</sup> Lifelong Learning Platform, [LLL Reaction to the European Year of Skills](#), May 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Lifelong Learning Platform, [LLL Position paper: Investment in education & training, a public good for all](#), November 2022.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> UNICEF Innocenti and Learning for Well-Being Foundation, [What Makes Me? Core Capacities for Living and Learning](#), September 2022.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> Council of the EU, [Council Recommendation on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona targets for 2030](#)

<sup>20</sup> European Commission, [EU Care Strategy](#)

Rights of the Child<sup>21</sup> and the European Child Guarantee<sup>22</sup> are major policy initiatives put forward by the European Commission in the last few years to better protect all children. At the same time, these initiatives have been implemented with very different approaches throughout Europe. The same can be said for the EU Care Strategy: on average, the Barcelona Targets<sup>23</sup> have been reached in the EU but there are enormous differences between Member States; and at the same time, the targets do not adequately address children in alternative care, nor put in place particularly effective measures for children in poverty<sup>24</sup>.

Additionally, ECEC policies seem to work in silos as they tend to regulate very specific aspects of a child's life as if they were not indivisible. Think, for instance, of the different Directorate-Generals in the European Commission that are responsible for early childhood: DG EAC, DG EMPL, DG JUST, just to name the main ones. Contradicting values, management and agendas among and intra-institutions contribute to the patchy legislative scenarios that the sector is experiencing: **in ECEC, the lack of a holistic approach is reflected in the policy fragmentation and lack of coherence.** It is our role as civil society organisations to remind that these gaps and shortcomings not only exist, but also hinder the achievements of collective objectives.

## Key takeaways and further steps

Ensuring that ECEC policies are guided by a holistic lifelong learning approach is a matter of values: the values that underpin children's rights and inclusion. But they are also a matter of fact: scientific evidence points at sound and solid ECEC systems as the foundation of many aspects of societal life, including economic prosperity that benefits all.

LLLIP urges the European Union and its Member States to:

- Implement ECEC policies with a learner-centred, holistic approach
- Make efforts to promote complementarity between formal and non-formal education systems in ECEC settings
- Ensure universal access to high-quality ECEC systems, through a sound, harmonised implementation of the European Child Guarantee, including special funds for children with disabilities, and children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds
- Redirect public investment in high-quality services and high-quality ECEC systems for children across Europe
- Invest in the professionalisation of ECEC staff, including (but not limited to) continuous training opportunities, career development and decent working conditions
- Allow and encourage the wider system of educators around children - including parents and foster families - to access training opportunities

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<sup>21</sup> European Commission, [EU Strategy for the Right of the Child](#)

<sup>22</sup> European Commission, [European Child Guarantee](#)

<sup>23</sup> The Barcelona Targets have now been reviewed and aim to at least 45% of children below the age of three to participate in ECEC, and at least 96% of children between the age of three and the starting age of compulsory primary education to participate in ECEC. See: European Commission, [European Care Strategy](#), September 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Eurochild, [Eurochild's Response to the European Care Strategy](#), September 2022.

- Improve paternity and maternity leaves, as well as general support to mothers, to make sure that parents share responsibility equally.
- Prioritise the societal value and role of ECEC services above other economic considerations.

At LLLP, **we want to make sure that ambition on paper is met by commitment and investment in practice.** To consolidate current efforts we urge the EU and its Member States to look at best practices around Europe, and ensure that the wider group of educators and carers around children are empowered to do what they do best: care for children.

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### Best practices and resources in the sector

- EPA, [Family Skills Project](#)
- EPA, [Children's Rights Up Project](#)
- EPA, [Sequences Project](#)
- EPA, [Beyond Project](#)
- EPA, PSPS - Cross European Project to develop a model of support for transitions from preschool to primary school with parental involvement
- International Step By Step Association, [Intesys Toolkit](#)
- PICUM, [Access to early childhood education and care for undocumented children and families: Obstacles and promising practices](#)
- ISCTE, [Participa](#)
- [Family-Nurse Partnership](#), intensive programme for first-time young mums and families to improve child development and school readiness
- [Alberta Family Wellness Initiative](#) and [Alberta Family Wellness Initiative on How Brains are Built](#)
- [Personal archeology: discover your inner diversity through childhood artefacts](#)