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RECLAIMING TRANSITIONS AS INCLUSIVE RELATIONAL SPACES IN TIMES OF CRISIS AND BEYOND:

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the lives of young children and their families around the globe. As the far reaching effects on the economic and social well-being of families and children are likely to disproportionately affect children from societally disadvantaged backgrounds, the pandemic crisis is expected to exacerbate existing inequalities if mitigating measures are not taken (United Nation, 2020).

By interconnecting its *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) *functions*, ECEC can play a key supportive role in facing the crisis for all children and families, especially those who are at risk of social exclusion (Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025, 2020; Council Recommendation on High Quality ECEC, 2019).

Against this background, the findings of recent studies, examining policy responses to COVID-19 crisis undertaken in EU Member States, show that ensuring equitable access to high quality ECEC proved to be challenging even in those countries where ECEC institutions were maintained (partially or totally) open during lockdown periods (Van der Graaf et al., 2021; Van Laere et al., 2021 *forthcoming*). Considering that children and families from societally disadvantaged background were less likely to benefit from ECEC during the pandemic, counteracting this trend in the post-pandemic crisis is imperative. Failure to adopt counteracting measures will not only threaten the gains in expanding access to quality of ECEC provision made by EU Member States in recent years. It will also inevitably induce long-term damaging effects on children's present and future opportunities to contribute to society (Proposal for a Council Recommendation in Establishing a European Child Guarantee, 2021).

Removing structural barriers related to availability, accessibility and affordability of provision is certainly a first step to be undertaken in this direction. However, the evidence collected during the first and second waves of the pandemic revealed that implementing such measures do not suffice to ensure participation of societally disadvantaged groups to ECEC (Van Laere et al., 2021 *forthcoming*). As advocated in the '*Toolkit for Inclusive ECEC*' (European Commission, 2021), these measures should be complemented with proactive initiatives aimed at reaching out to families and building relationship of trust between parents and professionals. Research shows that building relationships of trust with children and families is of uttermost importance to reduce the risk of withdrawal and ensure continuity of children's attendance.

This calls for a renewed attention to transitions as in-between spaces where relationships of trust can be nurtured, and inclusive practice developed in dialogue with children, families and local communities. Drawing on the policy guidelines elaborated within the NESET study '*Governing quality ECEC in a global*

crisis: lessons learned from Covid-19 pandemic' (Van Laere et al., 2021 *forthcoming*), the **INTRANS project** has identified **five key actions** that policy decision-makers, providers and leaders should undertake – in social dialogue with trade union organizations – to enhance the participation of children and families to ECEC in times of crisis and beyond:

- 1) National, regional and local authorities should devise comprehensive joint strategies for continuously reaching out to the most vulnerable groups, in collaboration with ECEC providers and social welfare organisations.**

In contexts where outreach strategies were used to complement other targeted measures for inclusion, children and families from societally disadvantaged groups were more likely to attend ECEC provision, even in the face of changing pandemic scenarios. Networking and integration with other services – such as health and social services – can facilitate ECEC centres in the process of reaching out to most vulnerable groups and addressing responsively the complex needs of children and families during the crisis.

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

During the first and second wave of the pandemic the experiences of children and families attending ECEC have been frequently characterised by discontinuity and fragmentation for multiple reasons (i.e. prolonged closure of ECEC settings due to lockdown, quarantine measures, ...). Therefore, investing in good (re)familiarisation trajectories seems to be of uttermost importance, not only for children who are accessing ECEC institutions for the first time, but also for those who are back attending the centre after a long period of absence.

- 3) Daily interactions between parents and professionals (at the beginning and at the end of the day) should be prioritized, as they are key in laying the foundation of mutual trust relationship. These interactions nurture a reciprocal dialogue with families, which in turn sustain the inclusiveness of ECEC centres.**

In contexts where the implementation of sanitary protocols might pose restrictions to parents entering ECEC institutions, outdoor and indoor spaces should be rearranged in order to create the conditions for everyday face-to-face exchanges between professionals and parents. Not being able to meet parents on a daily basis has several effects on the wellbeing of children (and families), and it impacts especially the accessibility and participation of more societally disadvantaged groups.

- 4) Ensuring continuity of relationships despite discontinuity of attendance: when ECEC centres are closed or children/families are in self-isolation, digital tools can also be used for enabling continuity of educational relationships. Alternative face-to-face meetings can be encouraged too.**

Keeping contact with those children and families who are not physically attending ECEC settings during the pandemic is crucial to: a) ascertain that parents are adequately supported during a challenging period; b) ensure that children experience relational continuity with ECEC staff. Clear guidance should thus be provided to ECEC staff on how online and in-person exchanges are to be conducted safely, in order to foster meaningful interactions while respecting privacy and safety. The reciprocity of communication exchanges (respecting the individuality of each child and family, valuing children's gains in the home environment,...) should be prioritised over the implementation of home-based learning activities (parents should be viewed as co-educators instead of substitute teachers).

- 5) Pursuing parents' engagement and active participation in the everyday life of ECEC centres by exploring multi-modal documentation and online communication exchanges.**

Knowing that parents' involvement has a direct effect on the quality of children's experiences in ECEC, it is important to adopt a variety of tools that allow professionals to meaningfully engage with families by valuing their role as primary educators of their children. In this regard, the use of digital tools for sharing documentation and fostering reciprocal communication exchanges with parents has been considered an interesting discovery by ECEC staff. Technology should be used for partnership building, and not just for sharing information. Digital tools should be employed for providing ECEC staff, children and families opportunities to meaningfully interact with each other and to learn from each other.

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