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Publication date

2018

Document Version

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Fukkink, R., Negenman, M., Vandekerckhove, A., Jorgenson, N. J., Larsen, V., & Jager, J. (2018). *A polyphonic perspective on socially inclusive early childhood education and care; Urban views from Belgium, Denmark, Slovenia and the Netherlands*. Hogeschool van Amsterdam.

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A polyphonic perspective on socially inclusive early childhood education and care;

Urban views from Belgium, Denmark, Slovenia and the Netherlands

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1. Introduction

The importance of social inclusion is widely acknowledged in the context of early child education and care (ECEC). Fitting in with the ‘three P’s’ from the UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child, inclusive education and care in the early years emphasizes the importance of the provision, protection and participation of young children and their families. This requires that ECEC effectively meets the academic and social learning needs of all the learners in the local community, including children and students with migrant background, a multi- or minority language background, gifted students, and students with disabilities, according to the European *Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* (Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014). Social inclusion means also tackling social exclusion and the elimination of all forms of discrimination (UNESCO IBE, 2008).

A strong interest in social inclusion began already to flag in the ‘80s when children from the first immigrant families with different cultural backgrounds entered into the sector in different European countries. More than three decades after major demographic changes in ECEC and theoretical developments in the scientific literature, significant changes in society pose new challenges for current ECEC professionals. A significantly large number of minorities, increasing heterogeneity between and among minorities, and a broader definition of identities of parents and children and their families have widened the horizon. In this review of our Erasmus+ project, we analyze the concept of social inclusion and relate it to competencies and professional development of ECEC staff.

Demographic developments in Europe

In many West-European urban regions there is no longer a small number of relatively homogeneous minorities. The number of minorities has significantly grown, particularly in urban regions. Cities like Amsterdam, Antwerp and London and other urban areas in Europe have become so-called ‘majority-

minority cities', where there is no longer one majority group and where everyone is member of a minority group. Also the cities included in our Erasmus+ project (Amsterdam, Berlin, Copenhagen, Ljubljana, Rotterdam) have extensive experiences with different minorities in their communities and with superdiversity (Vertovec, 2006). The diversification of diversity, as Vertovec has put it, has blurred strong differences between members from the 'same' minority group and have strengthened similarities with other groups. This context changes concepts like assimilation and integration and, in fact, may even render them meaningless from a theoretical point of view (Crul, Schneider, & Lelie, 2013).

Whereas economic motives played a major role for immigration in the 80's, Europe is currently facing a new challenge of including immigrants who come from war zones surrounding Europe. Worldwide there is an impressive estimated number of 5 million refugees below 18 year with a history of war. Also European countries face the challenge to include families with young children in early years education and care (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016).

Theoretical developments: social inclusion in the context of superdiversity

In earlier publications, the inclusion of families with young children in ECEC was discussed with a focus on ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity (see, for example, Bouwer & Vedder, 1995; Mac Naughton, 2006). Related to the growing diversity in current western societies, the concept of inclusion now encompasses more dimensions of diversity. In line with this perspective, UNESCO IBE (2008) emphasized that an approach to inclusion is needed that 'focuses on providing high quality education in mainstream schools that effectively meets the academic and social learning needs of all the learners in the local community, including children and students with migrant background or a multi- and/or minority language background, gifted students, and students with disabilities' (p. 18). Inclusion is not only related to children and parents from disadvantaged backgrounds but also comprises the inclusion of gifted students with different needs. Other individual characteristics may be identified as well, like lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender families (LGBT), socio-economic status, children with handicaps and families with different life styles. In sum, the concept of inclusion has broadened and comprises not only cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic and socio-economic diversity, but also children's disabilities, differences in academic level, and families with different sexual orientations.

This theoretical development requires a new perspective on the professional development of ECCE staff (see Vandenbroeck, 2007). Multicultural education (see Banks, 2004) or anti-bias curricula from the '90s (see Van Keulen, Malleval, Mony, Murray, & Vandenbroeck, 2004 and Murray & Dignan, *Diversity in early childhood education and training* curricula developed by *European Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training*, DECET) with their assumption of strong differences between clear-cut groups does not seem to fit in with the new

context of superdiversity (see Vandenbroeck, 2007). The Erasmus+ project aims to contribute to the professional development of (future) staff and the partners develop new learning materials related to social inclusion in ECEC.

Focus of this report

The demographic changes, which typify western European cities and urban regions and, related to this, new understandings require a re-definition of the theoretical concept of social inclusion. Current perspectives on social inclusion from recent policy papers and social science publications also need a clear connection with ECEC staff professional development. In this synthetic report for Intellectual Output 1 of our Erasmus+ project, we explore a twofold central question:

1. Which theoretical profiles are identified in recent ECEC publications for inclusive education?
2. Which professional competencies of staff are identified to tackle social exclusion and to promote social inclusion in ECEC?

We discuss these questions based on a systematic literature review from 21st century literature from four different European countries with a focus on urban ECEC in Belgium (Ghent), Denmark (Copenhagen), Slovenia (Ljubljana) and the Netherlands (Amsterdam). National databases for four countries were searched with a profile that included key words for social inclusion, early childhood education and care and interprofessional teams.¹ This general search was translated to other European languages by each partner and adapted to search national databases for sources in the Dutch-Flemish, French, Scandinavian and Slavic language. The retrieved literature from the four countries, which share an urban, diverse context and a tradition of inclusive ECEC, allows a complementary review of relevant publications (research question 1, §2), including both national policy documents (§2.1) and scientific reports (§2.2). Further, we discuss current challenges and promising strategies that promote self-efficacy of ECEC staff and social inclusion of families with young children (§3), partnerships with parents (§4), working in interprofessional teams (§5) (research question 2). In the final Discussion section (§6), we conclude with challenges and opportunities for future development of social inclusion in ECEC and vocational training.

¹ Key search words were: (“social inclusion” OR “social inclu*”), early childhood education and care (“ECEC” or “early childhood” OR “early childhood education and care” OR “preschool*” OR “childcare” OR “daycare” OR “day-care” OR “play-group*”), complemented with interprofessional teams (“cocurricular*” OR “co-curricular*” OR “crosscurricular*” OR “crossdisciplin*” OR “crossprofession*” OR “cross-curricular*” OR “cross-disciplin*” OR “cross-profession*” OR “interdisciplin*” OR “interprofession*” OR “inter-disciplin*” OR “inter-profession*” OR “multidisciplin*” OR “multiprofession*” OR “multi-disciplin*” OR “multi-profession*” OR “transdisciplin*” OR “transprofession*” OR “trans-disciplin*” OR “trans-profession*” OR “integrat*”).

2.1 Inclusive ECEC in national regulations and policy

All four countries in our Erasmus+ project which are involved in the first intellectual output, have regulations at national level for social inclusion, but there are differences in explicit reference to inclusion in national documents and the relationship with international frameworks. Below we sketch some national themes, including a casus, for each country.

Belgium

In the Flemish community, ECEC has been characterized by a policy focusing on equal opportunities and accessible services for all. The underlying notion in policy documents is ‘progressive universalism’: developing universal services for all, with specific attention – including additional public funding– for certain groups. The targeted approach, focusing on either groups or areas, has not been the choice of the Flemish policymakers, who preferred to invest in making services accessible for all, with additional funding for certain groups (for example, Belgium has centres for inclusive childcare, in Dutch: ‘Centra voor Inclusieve Kinderopvang’). In the educational sector (preschool, primary and secondary) a policy of equal opportunities has been established over the past 15 years.

The BIEM project in Ghent (ISSA-BVL 2016)

With Roma having become a significant group in the Ghent population, the city council started a mediator’s project in 4 primary schools, with highly diverse population, among which about 250 Roma children in total. The challenges for Roma children are limited school attendance (especially pre-school), learning and development delay (with negative effects on school career) and little or no parental involvement, often due to a lack of trust of the Flemish school system. At the same time, frustration and incomprehension was noticed among school staff. The idea was to work on better connections through mediators in this area.

BIEM mediators were appointed, one in each school, to build bridges between families and schools, with the overall aim to secure the right of every child to have access to education. All mediators were of Eastern-European descent with an in depth knowledge of the Roma and Belgium culture. They also received training and at the same time got involved in a 3 year training as social workers.

The role of the mediators was substantial: supporting parents (and their children), sensitizing the school teams and cooperate with neighbourhood organisations. The mediators needed to work in, out and all around the schools in building relations of trust and mutual involvement (fighting prejudices as well), linking schools with the community, increasing pupil’s access and attendance. In short, building bridges between schools and family life as well as with the outside world. At the core of this project was the building of trust, which the mediators succeeded in by their continuous active commitment and high level of personal involvement. In order to make this work, however, an explicit policy is needed as well, both on the level of the city and the schools.

Social function of childcare in Brussels

For over 10 years, the local Brussels Government funded a project for accredited Flemish childcare centres to develop a social intake policy, increase accessibility for vulnerable families and promote the idea of a ‘social mix’ in childcare provision. VBJK was engaged in this process, coaching and supporting a growing number of acceding childcare in regular meetings of learning communities, introductory training for new coordinators and working on the design of a structural intake procedure that would no longer favour the ‘first come, first served’ principle, but give every family maximum chances to access and guarantee places for specific groups (such as newcomers, parents in

training or looking for employment, ethnic minority groups) (see Vandebroek & Vandekerckhove, 2016). The project started with 3 childcare centres, focusing on (the increasing numbers of) newcomers and working alongside the Brussels service on integration. At the end of the project, after several years of continued support, about 90 to 100 centres were involved in the project, that was by then extended to all vulnerable groups and the overall issue of accessibility and social inclusion. This was possible thanks to the ongoing support and investment of the local authority and the commitment of the centres and the professionals. This interplay of top-down and bottom-up has shown to be the recipe for success. Over the years, the results were quite positive: there was a higher attendance in childcare of children from vulnerable groups, as well as an increased awareness among professionals of existing barriers and methods how to tackle that. In 2013, the 'project' ended by the Brussels local authority investing in a structural follow-up, creating an permanent support organisation for all Flemish accredited childcare centres in Brussels, taking over the work of VBJK, in supplying pedagogical coaching, training programmes and a common registration and intake system for the participating childcare centres.

Denmark

Denmark signed the Salamanca Declaration in 1994, but the inclusion agenda has primarily gained force in the recent decade, as for instance indicated by the establishment of a 'National Research Centre for Inclusion and Exclusion' (NVIE) in 2005 by the Ministry of Education and two university colleges. Also the Danish Ministry of Education highlights inclusion as a main pedagogical goal in Danish day care (0-6 years old). According to the official policy documents of the ministry, 'the aim of inclusion is that every child feels accepted and participate in the communities of the day care. This contributes to the development and acquirement of competences important for their future lives' (our translation). The ministry further notes that the municipal council is responsible for formulating a 'coherent child policy' and describing the role of day care centers in preventing exclusion.

In the day care system, inclusion is primarily addressed within the general pedagogical practice, with a key concept of 'inclusive children's communities' in the policy framework. Hence, regular inclusive ECEC practice instead of special intervention is emphasized. In Denmark, 'The Act of Day Care' (*dagtilbudsloven*) aims to stimulate children's well-being, learning and development, to provide work-life flexibilities for families, to ensure continuity and coherent transitions in and out of day care institutions and to prevent negative social heritage and exclusion. Since 2012, the ministry's department for inclusion has offered support to municipalities. According to a report from the Danish Evaluation Institute (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, 2014), in 98% of the Danish municipalities, inclusion has been on the agenda (*et indsatsområde*) with an articulated strategy or work-in-progress.

The VIDA project

In this large-scale project on knowledge-based efforts for socially disadvantaged children in day care have discussed inclusion with point of departure in professionals' approaches to socially disadvantaged children. The project from other research on children and social inclusion, as its aim has been to develop and test a special competence package.

The goal of the VIDA project (2010-2013) was to change practice in the day care settings, as Scandinavian research has demonstrated difficulties with including socially disadvantaged children. Professionals often tend to overlook these children's strengths and resources, the project suggested, and aimed for a situation in which every child be seen, heard and included. In total, 7000 children at 129 day care centers participated in the project and the project investigated in three "package of innovation". One group received VIDA-Basic, where staff were specially trained with a view to changing their practices. The second group, VIDA-Basis+, combined this training with a focus on parental involvement. The third group was a control group. The results showed that VIDA had positive effects on the children in terms of well-being and their social-emotional development, and that parental involvement had a positive effect reducing problems. The results also showed that there were no visible effect on the children's cognitive learning (Jensen, 2013).

Slovenia

The White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia (Krek & Metljak, 2011), as 'a steering document' in the field of education, emphasizes the importance of respecting the right to non-discrimination, emphasizing 'especially non-discrimination of persons or children from culturally and socially disadvantaged backgrounds and immigrants, non-discrimination in the difference among genders and non-discrimination of persons with disabilities' (ibid., p. 13). It draws attention to the importance of positive discrimination for eliminating unfair disparities and creating equal opportunities for all. The concept of 'equality of educational opportunities' is often understood as equity in education, while 'equality of opportunity of someone is in the society heavily dependent on his/her potential for education' (ibid., p. 14).

The increase of social and cultural capital in areas with a Roma population

Based on a review of relevant literature, Jager (2013) stressed that high-quality ECEC programs and competent professionals, who are sensitive to issues of social inclusion, significantly contribute to ensuring social inclusion of disadvantaged children (see also the project *The increase of social and cultural capital in areas with a Roma population*). During the project, different activities were implemented in a way of action research project, e.g. programs for empowerment of Romani parents for supporting their child's development; activities for children, who are not enrolled in ECEC institutions and for their parents; 'getting-to-know-you' days; development of culturally and linguistically appropriate materials for children; professional development activities for ECEC professionals; monitoring and mentoring activities. At the end of the 3-years project, an external evaluation was made, which proved that 'early education of socially disadvantaged children in the context of quality ECEC programs, ECEC institutions and local community can contribute the most in regard to tackling social exclusion, as it has already started to show during the implementation of this project' (Gril, 2013: 350).

The Netherlands

Since the introduction of the Childcare Act from 2005 (and its successor from 2018), it has been mandatory that a childcare centre must comply with four pedagogic objectives: providing a safe and caring environment, promoting personal and social competence, as well as passing on norms and values. Social inclusion is not explicitly mentioned as an important element. For elementary schools, including the kindergarten grades, inclusive education is incorporated since February 2006, when schools were supposed to encourage active

citizenship and social integration. Inclusion is also an important theme in the Act on Inclusive Education of 2014, which states that Dutch schools should offer inclusive education for as many students as possible. The focus here is on decreasing the number of students in special education and, therefore, to offer inclusive education within mainstream schools. Seen from this perspective, inclusion is narrowly defined from the perspective of special educational needs.

Diversity in Dutch childcare practice

The Dutch literature offers various publications for ECEC practitioners related to diversity and social inclusion (see, for example, *Samen verschillend. Pedagogisch kader diversiteit in kindercentra 0-13 jaar* of Van Keulen and Singer, 2012 and *De sociale functie van kinderopvang, inclusieve kinderopvang* of Huijbregts and Nohr, 2017).

Despite the historical and contemporary interest for social inclusion in the Dutch literature, surveys and large scale quality assessments have found only modest results for diversity in childcare. Cultural and religious diversity was not considered an important part of pedagogic quality by parents, staff and managers and other stakeholders in Dutch childcare in a survey (Fukkink, Tavecchio, de Kruif, Vermeer, & van Zeijl, 2005). A similar result was found in a recent survey by Slot et al. (2016). In line with this, a large scale assessment of Dutch childcare showed that the aspect of ‘encouraging the acceptance of diversity’, was inadequate, according to the standards of the internationally used ITERS/ECERS measure (Vermeer, van IJzendoorn, de Kruif, Fukkink, Tavecchio, Riksen-Walraven, & van Zeijl, 2005).

2.2 Theoretical perspectives on inclusion in the ECEC context

In the literature from the different countries, we see a number of broad and, often, shared themes. First, we see in more recent studies broader definitions of inclusion. Instead of only focusing on differences in culture or on differences in physical and cognitive abilities, diversity is increasingly seen as a broad concept comprising all kinds of differences, including differences between people in preferences, talents, temper, cultural background, parenting-style, gender, religion, social environment, employment, education and physical and cognitive abilities. Also diversity of families with regard to their composition (e.g., extended families, blended families, families with blended cultures, religions, languages, or gay-parent families, single-parent families) and parenting style are part of this diversity. The concept of inclusion which traditionally may have been related to ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity, has thus become a broader concept. Inclusion has become more inclusive and capture this reality better.

Following the theoretical concept of ‘superdiversity’ (see Vertovec, 2006) and the related concept of intersectionality from the U.S. literature (see Zwiier & Grant, 2014), several authors have emphasized the importance of a holistic view on separate characteristics of individuals and groups. According to this concept an individual’s position within society is determined by a combination of several factors like for example gender, age, cultural background and nationality. The combination or intersection of different factors influence each other and, in combination, they result into new identities of children and families. This

perspective makes also clear why individuals from the “same” group may show significant differences. This broader perspective on identities of children and parents is important and helps to strike a balance between denial of diversity (‘All children are the same’) and essentialism (reducing an individual to his/her background only).

Social cohesion is the society's ability to hear all and each of various groups and individuals (Opara, Kiswarday, Kukanja Gabrijelčič, & Rutar et al., 2011) in a superdiverse community. In this regard, there is consideration about the use of labels (e.g. children with special needs, gifted pupils), especially, if they are value-oriented. Labels often strongly influence the development of subjective, exclusionary theories of teaching that can be implemented on a level of hidden curriculum. Subjective theories of teachers include beliefs, attitudes, values and expectations, which tend to be lower for children with special needs (include fear, pity, weakness, etc.). In addition, teachers may also have implicit attitudes related to minorities (Oller, Vila, & Zufiaurre, 2012). If a teacher does not reflect and change inadequate subjective theories, he/she can hamper the child's development of autonomy, a sense of self-worth and efficiency, and limits him/her in providing opportunities for active participation in the group (Opara et al., 2011).

A further theoretical development in Slovenian publications is the recent introduction of the concept of 'community cohesion'. This concept underlines that, in order to achieve cohesion in the community, it is necessary to take into account a wide range of issues (Hozjan, 2011). This perspective fits in with the Belgian literature, which distinguishes five general criteria that have been ‘translated’ to the ECEC sector at community level (Vandenbroeck, 2016; see also the *European Quality Framework for ECEC*):

- Availability: it is important to have high quality services in the areas where vulnerable families live, as they are often less mobile.
- Affordability: families need to be able to pay for services.
- Accessibility: dealing with the many barriers (e.g. cost, language, procedures, waiting lists, administrative requirements) requires careful planning, analysing those barriers on the local level, creating partnerships, and e.g. outreach work to build relations of trust.
- Usefulness: families need to know that ECEC services can serve their actual needs, that they can be supportive. This also goes beyond mere practical issues (opening hours, language...) and these services really need to be known and ‘make sense’, to relate to diverse families’ needs and habits.
- Comprehensibility: making sense also refers to the extent in which ECEC is open to negotiate on values, beliefs and educational practices of both the service and the families. It requires designing participative structures and practices, involving families in democratic decision-making processes. This is also linked to engaging diverse staff, which potentially means creating more connection between professionals and families.

In the Belgium context, social inclusion is directly linked to respect for diversity and accessibility of children to ECEC provision and policies related to diverse groups, who experience far more barriers than others. The focus here lies on children from families that are living in disadvantaged situations such as poverty, migration background, low level of education, disability etc.. These living conditions that can lead to less opportunities to enjoy ECEC services. Increasing accessibility and creating systems that promote equal opportunities, by paying attention to all responsibilities, is therefore the core of the debates on social inclusion.

In the Slovenian context, social exclusion, is defined in relation to 'closed association with inappropriate access to opportunities and education and training institutions, bad position at the labor market and low income. The basic assumption is that unemployment and reduced social spending threatens social participation and integration as well as the social inclusion. Unemployment and lack of income are causing further deprivation and disadvantage in other areas of life (Socialni razgledi 2006, in Vehovar, 2011: 114).

Recurring concepts in the literature from the different countries are participation, accessibility and diversity. In Denmark, for example, social inclusion in day care is understood as children's possibilities to participate in different communities in the institution, and thus contains a focus on participation. At child level, participation includes child care and extra-school care, education, including preparation for school, play and exploration, healthcare, support in raising children and stimulation to development, help and care, and safety. The focus on participation in communities is reflecting the assumption that participation is key for children's possibilities to learn, to develop social competencies, and to become a social human being. Related to this, exclusion and exclusionary mechanisms in day care institutions is a relatively well-researched area in the Danish context and form an important background for discussions on approaches to social inclusion. Research focusing on exclusion in most cases draw attention to the ways in which pedagogical practices and institutional policies create or strengthen exclusionary patterns.

In addition to the abovementioned 'objective' indicators for social inclusion or social exclusion, a subjective dimension is distinguished in the Dutch literature. Fukkink and Steketee (2002) mention that individual children and families may experience feelings of equivalence (the feeling of not being treated as an equal citizen); respect and appreciation; self-image (e.g., negative self-image), trust (distrust in others, institutions and reasonableness of rules), and locus of control (perceived lack of control to influence one's future).

The various sources from different countries make clear that social inclusion (or social exclusion) can be distinguished at different levels. Theoretically, social inclusion is defined in the different countries at the

individual level of a child, parent or staff member. Several authors have also emphasized the importance of the group or the ECEC center, where different individuals meet. In addition, there is a higher community or municipality level and a national level.

3. **Competences of ECEC professionals that promote social inclusion**

In several competency frameworks, broadly defined competencies are mentioned as well. A survey in Belgium, England, France, Ireland, Mexico, Morocco, Scotland, Serbia, Spain and The Netherlands among practitioners working with children aged 0 to 6 years, pointed out five competences that, from the point of view of the practitioners themselves, are fundamental when working with children and families:

1. Working towards social change
2. Open communication
3. Critical reflection: exploring complex issues from various angles
4. Learning from disagreement
5. Co-constructing new practices and knowledge with children, parents and colleagues

From the study on professionalism conducted within the Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy of the Ghent University in collaboration with VBJK (Peeters, 2008; Peeters & Vandebroek, 2011), among practitioners working with children aged 0 to 3 years, researchers concluded that working with children and families requires the following categories of competences (Peeters, 2008: 248-255):

1. The ability to look for solutions in contexts of disagreement
2. The focus on meeting with the Other, the one we do not know
3. The ability to co-construct knowledge with others (colleagues, parents, children)
4. Acting with a focus on social change

The ECEC workforce has an important role to play in trying to meet the dual challenge of guaranteeing access for all to ECEC – including children from vulnerable groups – while maintaining the quality in services rendered, as formulated in different policy documents (see the European *Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care*; Lazzari, Peeters, & Vandebroek, 2013). The role of teachers, who daily face children from different backgrounds, families, cultures, are of different nationalities, socio-economic status, speak a different language, etc. is very important. In this context, each teacher must be capable of a high degree of responsibility and sensitivity for each child, as a joint education contributes to 'the development of open societies and individuals capable of respectful coexistence and cooperation with others' (ibid.).

Which specific competences are important for pedagogical professionals in dealing with children and parents with different backgrounds? According to Van Keulen (2000), the following four competences are of vital importance:

1. Awareness of the influence their own culture and background have on the education of children
2. Having knowledge of the differences amongst parents and within the team, like differences in background, lifestyle, parenting style and empathy and being able to communicate with them
3. Learning to recognize preconceptions and discrimination within childcare centers
4. Dare raising the issue of preconceptions and discrimination within childcare centers

Van Keulen (2013) also underlines that pedagogical professionals should focus on stimulating the feeling of togetherness between children, because when diversity is appreciated, feelings of social dominance and superiority of certain children can be prevented. Solidarity between children can be achieved by professionals by enhancing the self-confidence of children and giving all children the opportunity of being proud of their identity and background.

In the Danish literature, it is emphasized that ECEC staff should show affection towards children and perceive them active participants who act upon and struggle with different conditions and meaning making processes across contexts. Further, conflicts are part of everyday life and has an impact on the processes of social inclusion and exclusion (Bundgaard & Gulløv, 2008). Fisker argues for a focus on the development of interactional competences. According to Fisker, pedagogues' views on handicap based on an essentialist perspective, may work as a constraint to children's participation. However, a relational perspective may foster a positive attitude towards participation. Further, a basic assumption is that reflective practitioners can develop their skills and evaluate their own practice adequately. The Danish literature, for example, emphasizes that 'reflective methodians', approaching their own and other people's actions to systematic inquiry, are important. This reflection is not just an individual learning activity, but takes also place at team level, and also at the level of competent systems of effective (see Vandebroek, Urban, & Peeters, 2016). Second, ECEC staff should operate in professional environments in which they are supported, challenged and qualified to acting as reflecting methodians and they should have access to neutral, professional external supervision (Kjær, 2010: 260-261).

Co-construction may be facilitated by pedagogical documentation: by facilitating communication amongst actors, as well as with colleagues from other services, pedagogical documentation favours the development of a real inter-subjectivity (an exchange of perspectives amongst the actors involved). This exchange gives voice to the diversity within the group and becomes the basis to co-construct meanings' (Peeters & Sharmahd, 2014: 416), a way to listen and give voice, thus a way to express and built democracy (Rinaldi, 2009; Malavasi &

Zoccatelli, 2012). It should be noted that pedagogical documentation requires child-free hours (paid hours without children). Moreover, not only documentation requires childfree hours as part of the regular working conditions, but also team meetings, time for professional reflection and development require hours.

Several of the abovementioned competencies are included in national publications from each country. It should be noted, though, that these competencies may not be part of the formal curriculum of vocational training for a specific country (see also Child Care International, 2012; Ledoux, van Loon-Dijkers, Smeets, & van den Berg, 2016).

Related to this, it may be difficult for practitioners to be fully competent in the different domains. More specifically, practitioners acknowledge that competences ‘outside the classroom’ deserve attention as well, but there may be a tension between the perceived importance of competences that are useful for work in the classroom and for work outside the classroom. Most important, according to teachers’ and leaders’ opinions, are competences that are directly linked with the work in the classroom (holistic development, strategies of learning, communication and participation) (see Vonta in Gril, 2013). Competencies which were considered less important are not directly related with the work in the classroom but represent foundation for quality work in the classroom and connecting children and staff with real world outside the institution (like for example: parent and community involvement, context of diversity, broader context of ECEC).

In the Slovenian context, which is characterized by a mixture of multicultural and intercultural approaches (Turnšek, 2016), several authors have highlighted a lack of fit in evaluating the importance of the same competences’ categories on the level of knowledge, practice and values. For example, teachers and headmasters indicated that it is important to have knowledge and values in category ‘context of diversity’, but importance of practices in the same category were evaluated as less important. In other words, for them it is important to know about diversity and to appreciate diversity, but not so important to know how to cope with it in everyday life in ECEC institutions.

Overall, it seems that competence levels are broadened and deepened, which makes clear how much is expected from ECEC professionals. The focus on competencies of individual staff members should be complemented with a focus on competent systems for continuous professional development (see the CoRe report of Urban, Vandebroek, Peeters, Lazzari, & van Laere, 2011).

4. Contact between ECEC professionals and families

Cooperation among parents and ECEC institutions is an important aspect of quality early childhood education (Bahovec et al., 2007) and is particularly important for families of vulnerable children (see e.g. Kousholt & Berliner, 2013). Tireli (2014) draws on Epstein's work on parents involvement to suggest that support to parenting, communication (and translation), voluntary work, support to learning and development at homes, participation in decision making and cooperation with the local community are important ways to work with parent inclusion. Children's development is theorized in relation to taking part in different communities across different contexts. The children's developmental possibilities are shaped by the relations and connections between the day-care institution and home (Kousholt, 2011).

Involving parents and families in a meaningful way, within the concept of co-education (Catarsi & Fortunati, 2005; Jésus, 2010; Rayna & Rubio, 2010). ECEC centers are in fact meeting places between diversities and commonalities (Silva, 2011), between public and private, between different identities (Vandenbroeck, 1999). The continuous need of negotiation makes ECEC centers important “democratic micro-societies” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005), where participation becomes a way to build an active citizenship, capable of linking freedom of choices to social responsibility, thanks to the construction of a feeling of “belongingness” which creates the desire of “being part of” (Malaguzzi, 1972). Parents or grandparents spend a day with their children in an ECEC setting may contribute to this goal. Also home visits by professional staff of an ECEC institution at the child's home may help in building trust between the family and practitioners.

There are a number of challenges to parents' collaboration, including parents' busy lives, parents prioritizing of their own children, mutual lack of trust, some staff members' difficulties with appreciative dialogue with vulnerable families, and the enforcement of negative images of certain parents within a group of staff. Further, the parent population is heterogeneous, including parents with democratic ideals for upbringing; caring and concerned parents; parents valuing multi-cultural competences, and last, parents valuing traditional upbringing (Tirelli, 2014). These different parenting styles and beliefs have consequences for inclusion and exclusion processes in school and day care, and pedagogues need the ability to navigate this diversity. In addition, staff should find ways of supporting parents in working with, for instance, their own traumatic experiences, while simultaneously assisting the child, and to positive experiences with involving a larger parent group in inclusionary activities, supporting an open approach to the child and organizing playdates (Albertsen & Kjær, 2015).

5. **Interprofessional collaboration across disciplines**

In several publications, the importance of interprofessional collaboration across disciplines is emphasized in the context of social inclusion. Some authors emphasize the specific population of children with special needs in their writings, whereas other authors address social inclusion in a general sense (i.e. without reference to a specific target group).

PulecLah and Košir (2015), for example, underline that for better social inclusion collaboration between general education teachers and special educators is necessary, in so-called collaborative teaching or team teaching. The importance of collaboration between different professionals was stressed also in the work of S. Pečjak (2008: 84): “as a rule, the most effective form of assistance in order to enhance social inclusion is possible through joint, consultative work of the expert - usually a school counselor - and a teacher”. This becomes even more important, since PulecLah and Košir (2015) report that teachers often feel they are not adequately prepared for the inclusion of children with various needs.

In professional practice in Denmark, cross-professional cooperation is also considered to be crucial for the realization of social inclusion in ECEC practice. The cross-professional space is used to identify problems among children and to attempt to create inclusive solutions. While research supports this assumption to some degree, studies also point to numerous challenges and problems related to professional boundaries, professional identities and hierarchies between different groups of professionals. In the context of day care, the focus of the larger debate on inclusion is centered on the inclusion of all children into social communities (*‘sozialejællesskaber’*), debates about cross-disciplinarity/cross-professional cooperation address children with specific needs or challenges.

In their research on inclusion of children with special needs, Albertsen and Kjær (2015) have identified a number of challenges to successful cross-disciplinary dialogue on inclusion of children. These include a too limited focus on costs and resources, resulting demands for diagnoses or elaborate problem descriptions in order to obtain extra resources, leading to a focus on illness and lacking social competences rather than on the possibilities for developing inclusive children’s communities and positive parent cooperation. Furthermore, the authors, in line with Munck (2016), point to conflicts between, on the one hand, pedagogues’ general pedagogical knowledge and daily experiences with interacting with the children and, on the other hand, the expert knowledge of psychologists employed by the municipality. This, it is suggested, means that it is, in some cases, difficult to establish a common understanding of ‘the best interest of the child’ (Albertsen & Kjær, 2015). It should also be noted that what is ‘at the best interest of the child’ should not only be defined by professionals: the perspective of the child and the parents is very important here, and professionals should focus on the child and parent perspective.

Munck (2016) has suggested that the cross-professional cooperation focused on preventing exclusion of children with special needs or challenges has become a collaborative effort which emphasizes expert (psychological) knowledge about specific issues. Hence, the general pedagogical competences and everyday pedagogical practices come to be seen as irrelevant (Munck, 2016). This shows that inclusion and combining expertise from different disciplines may sometimes create a dilemma, as inclusion and exclusion become complementary processes (Hamre & Larsen, 2016; Røn Larsen, 2012). Røn Larsen has discussed the cross-professional cooperation as a conflictual social practice, underlining the ambivalence created by the way in which cross-professional cooperation often undermines children's own perspectives, while, simultaneously, children and families align their perspectives to the cross-professional cooperation, aiming to influence the process (Røn Larsen, 2012).

6. Discussion

This report – the first intellectual output from our Erasmus+ project – underscores the need for a well-articulated rationale and elaboration in future stages of the project distinguishing between a child, family, staff member and team level. Further, also a broader infrastructure should support the professional development of staff and the provision of available, affordable, accessible, useful and comprehensible services. Social inclusion as a broad concept not only includes children from disadvantaged groups or with a minority background, but encompasses a much wider variety of child and family characteristics. This wide and growing diversity implies diverse needs of children and their families in ECEC context.

Staff in ECEC have a pivotal role as they promote social inclusion inside and outside the classroom. The importance of individual professional competencies to promote social inclusion is acknowledged in the competency frameworks from different countries. An important general professional attitude is the ability and willingness to communicate in a dialogue with parents, dealing with and learning from disagreement, and exploring various angles from an open-minded approach. Also a focus on empowerment of families and social change is related to social inclusion. These general competences are often connected to different stakeholders, varying from children in classroom-related competencies to parents, and colleagues and external agencies. Depending on the specific framework, promotive competencies and protective competencies are listed in national frameworks and key publications. Some frameworks emphasize promotive strategies and social inclusion (e.g., promoting social inclusion), whereas other sources explicitly address fighting social exclusion (e.g., learning to recognize preconceptions and discrimination within childcare centers and dare raising the issue of preconceptions and discrimination within childcare centers).

However, not only individual staff from the ECEC center but other stakeholders are important as well in providing protection, provision and participation in socially inclusive education and care services that

are available, affordable, accessible, useful and comprehensible. Meeting this challenge to realize the ideal of social inclusion in ECEC requires, thus, a strategy at different levels. Below we have listed and categorized key themes derived from the literature and the collaborative progress in this first phase of our Erasmus+ project.

6.1 Implications for practice

Challenges and opportunities for future development: professional development

Several authors have stressed the need for continuing professional development and reflection on different levels simultaneously. This is important because teachers have often a feeling, that they ‘remain alone in a class with a diverse population, and they find themselves not sufficiently trained to work with students with pronounced disabilities’ (Magajna, Pečjak, Peklaj, Čačinovič Vogrinčič, Bregar Golobič, Kavkler, & Tancig, 2008, in PulecLah & Košir, 2015: 291; PulecLah, 2013, in PulecLah & Košir, 2015). However, the burden for those changes should not be put only to the teachers’ shoulders: we need changes in leadership on the level of ECEC institutions, and also changes in pre- and in-service training regarding topics and methods. One of the important factors that could contribute to raising the competence of teachers to work with students with different needs, it is therefore ‘carefully planned system of support for teachers’ (PulecLah & Košir, 2015: 291), as well as ‘intensive development of specific knowledge and skills and gaining practical experience in team-teaching’ (PulecLah & Košir, 2015: 305) already at the level of initial training of future professionals (ibid.).

Vonta and Gril (2014) concluded that there are gaps in the readiness to open their spheres of activities towards parents, community and life outside of the institution and towards contribution of ECEC to social cohesion. More specifically, three core competencies need more attention in the training of ECEC staff:

- cooperation with parents, community members and colleagues and institutions;
- context of diversity and broader context of early childhood education and care in order to be responsive on social justice questions in ECEC, and to be open and proactive towards diversity, social inclusion, multiculturalism;
- connect all three levels of competences (knowledge, practice and professional values) with reflection and be involved in team work and broader context of early childhood education and care.

Competences in the field of understanding, considering, and respecting the characteristics of families and their (families’) involvement in the educational process should be extended, especially in terms of taking into account their (families’) opinions on child’s development and learning, and involving them (families) in

decision-making. Future ECEC professionals should develop also greater awareness about understanding the child as a competent and active individual who initiates learning and makes suggestions for himself/herself.

Staff level: Professional development for social inclusion in and outside the classroom

Creating inclusive schools and dealing with diversity in daily practice can be a challenging task for ECEC staff though. Three policies are mentioned in the literature to face this challenge. First, investing in the initial training and continuous professional development (Peeters, Sharmahd, & Budginaitè, 2016) of the ECEC staff (Fukkink & Lont, 2007) is needed. Second, multidisciplinary teams and interprofessional collaboration are needed to combine complementary skills and expertise, which is needed with a child and parent population with diverse pedagogical and educational needs. Finally, increasing diversity of ECEC staff, considering gender, socio-economic background and ethnic-cultural diversity may add to a better understanding of families (Crépin & Neuberg, 2013; Peeters et al., 2016).

In the context of respect for diversity, the realization of equal opportunities, promoting inclusion, ensuring equity in education and training for (future) ECEC staff is needed to provide or create a school as an inclusive oriented institution (Lesar, 2010). This requires new pathways towards a qualification and a system of CPD for all staff with a specific focus on social inclusion (Peeters et al., 2016).

It is also important for (future) professionals to become acquainted with recent theoretical developments in this field. First, social inclusion has become a broad concept that encompasses not only ethnicity, language and socio-economic status but also giftedness, sex roles, and various other characteristics of individuals and/or groups. Moreover, parents and children have multidimensional identities, as stressed by super-diversity and intersectionality frameworks. These theoretical frameworks make clear that simple labels do neither adequately capture the identity of individuals nor determine the heterogeneous population that visits current ECEC (pre)schools, particularly in many European urban areas. It is also important to make a distinction between competencies related to the work in classrooms but also acknowledge the wider dimension of working with parents, other professionals, external agencies and the wider community.

Two possible risks deserve attention in future development in practice and research. First, there is the paradoxical situation that a focus on diversity and by distinguishing between several characteristic of children, parents or families to do justice to the heterogeneity of groups and the multiple identities of individuals, may evoke a deficiency perspective. Unintentionally, labels like ‘disadvantaged backgrounds’, ‘delayed development’, ‘low socio-economic status’, but also ‘the other’ and other labels may make ECEC staff may raise concerns with diversity. Teacher may experience a lack of self-efficacy when they face the responsibility for children with multiple “issues”. Pre- or in-service training or any other professional

development activity should be aimed at increasing teachers' self-efficacy. Professionals should, therefore, become aware of (possible) connotations of frequently used labels and find ways to differentiate between various individuals while maintaining an inclusive perspective on all children (and also parents) in the group.

It should be noted that 'being competent in working with children and families at risk is not an individual responsibility' (Peeters & Sharmahd, 2014: 422). A strong system of continuous professional development for the staff is needed (Urban et al.), including pedagogical coordination to accompany the group reflection of staff on daily practices (Peeters et al., 2015).

Team level: interprofessional and diversified teams for integrated services

Offering integrated services for a highly diverse population of young children and their families requires a team with staff with different and complementary professional backgrounds. Some children may need additional help in learning a new language or other cognitive development, whereas other children have difficulties with socio-emotional behaviour. In case of inclusion of newly arrived immigrants, children and their caregivers may experience post-traumatic stress and they may need social support to integrate in a new community. These are just some examples to give an indication of the different needs of the child and parent population at ECEC services. A multidisciplinary team with different expertise would then be more able to respond adequately to the highly diverse needs of different children and their parents.

Inter-professional practice is certainly not a straightforward solution for social inclusion. The widely acknowledged need for interprofessional collaboration to provide integrated services and inclusion of children with different needs has the inherent risk that a strong emphasis on professionals, which may undermine children's own perspectives. This also means that professionals should strike a balance between regular activities with the class and meeting the needs of different children (Røn Larsen, 2012). In addition, there is a challenge for professionals themselves as well as they need to coordinate their activities and current ECEC practice shows different visions of team coordination and development to promote social inclusion (see Balledux, Doornenbal, Fukkink, Spoelstra, van Verseveld, & van Yperen, 2017). Also parents should be embedded in this team perspective, contributing to an increased diversity of *ECEC staff*, considering gender, socio-economic background and ethnic-cultural diversity (Peeters et al., 2016). To conclude, effective social inclusion does not only need a strategy at child and family level, it also requires a strategy for inclusion at team level as well to match the different perspectives of professionals, children and families. Finally, also a policy level is needed that stimulates national or local policies and the implementation of structural quality indicators for continuous professional development in ECEC practice.

Challenges and opportunities for future development: interprofessional collaboration across disciplines

In order to take into account and respect diversity within the ECEC system, we need a ‘competent system’ (Urban et al., 2011; Vandenbroeck et al., 2016), which includes collaborations between individuals, teams and institutions, as well as competent governance at policy level. In order to respect diversity, a competent system should invest in several areas, such as:

- Investing in the initial training of the ECEC staff
- Building strong systems of continuous professional development (CPD) for the staff with effective pre-service and in-service approaches (Egert, Fukkink, & Eckhardt, 2018; Fukkink & Lont, 2007), including a strong system of pedagogical coordination to accompany the group reflection of staff on daily practices (Peeters et al., 2015)
- Increasing diversity within the ECEC staff, considering gender, socio-economic background, ethnic-cultural diversity (Peeters, Sharmahd, & Budginaitè, 2016). Research shows that in some cases families with a vulnerable background seen to prefer a relationship with this group of staff than with core practitioners, because they feel more at ease (Crépin & Neuberg, 2013). The NESET II study concludes that new adapted pathways towards a qualification and a system of continuous professional development for all staff are needed (Peeters et al., 2016).
- Supporting and valuing working conditions, such as child free hours, respectable wages, pedagogical support and coaching (see *European Quality framework for Early Childhood Education and Care*).

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See for further information on ECEC and professional staff in individual countries the following SEEPRO-R reports on early childhood education and care:

http://www.seeepro.eu/English/Country_Report_Belgium.htm

http://www.seeepro.eu/English/Country_Report_Denmark.htm

http://www.seeepro.eu/English/Country_Report_Germany.htm

http://www.seeepro.eu/English/Country_Report_Netherlands.htm

http://www.seeepro.eu/English/Country_Report_Slovenia.htm