

Community-based Early Years Services: the Golden Triangle of Informal, Nonformal and Formal Approaches

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This paper is a plea to validate nonformal and informal Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as indispensable for the wellbeing and healthy development of young boys and girls. It argues that ECEC as it is discussed in national and international forums, has been mainly restricted to formal approaches and that the resources that are available in the family or in the community are, however, largely ignored or are looked upon as less effective if not inferior to those offered by formal settings.

Children's learning and development takes place in a range of settings and in this paper ECEC is considered within three related and mutually supportive forms or settings: informal, non-formal and formal that forms a relationship called the golden triangle. It is claimed that to fully grasp what is possible within community-based ECEC, it is necessary to recognize the value of all forms in them and in their interaction with each other. This makes possible the necessary flexibility and responsiveness to local needs inherent in community-based ECEC.

As quality assessment of ECEC programmes are notoriously difficult to assess, an approach, using a spider-web diagram, is being offered as interesting way to come to grips with this difficulty. The evaluation tool involves a simple method of identifying critical dimensions in early childhood care and applying a point-system of elimination to determine where an institution stands in relation to what is deemed ideal within that particular context. The tool is considered effective for the very fact that it is contextual in nature and as such unique.

Keywords: early childhood care and education, nonformal, informal and formal education, golden triangle, quality assessment early education, spider-web diagram, community-based early childhood care and education, early childhood development.

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Introduction

A number of recent policy and discussion documents in Europe and further afield have pointed to the role community-based early childhood education and care (ECEC) services play in strengthening the capacity of families to raise their children and to enrich young children's lives, learning and development [1; 10; 11]. In particular, the potential of community based services to be more inclusive of, and responsive to children and families from diverse backgrounds has been highlighted [1; 9].

There is diversity in understandings of functions of ECEC across the countries of Europe. However, it is also possible, and necessary to agree on some basic principles.

When thinking explicitly about ECEC *service provision* in Europe, the working definition used by Eurochild's Early Years Education and Care Thematic Working Group (TWG)¹ provides further elaboration:

What then is particular to community-based ECEC?² The broad tenets of community-based provision are that:

- The service is seen as a community asset and the children, parents, families and community benefit from it;
- Collectivity, partnership, and participation are hallmarks of decision-making;
- The full funding from public resources goes into educating the children and supporting their family [10].

The current wave of interest in community-based ECEC provision stems from a number of sources. Firstly, there are the concerns regarding large-scale market-standardisation of provision prevalent in countries such as the UK

and the Netherlands. A second and related force driving the debate is the extent to which current ECEC provision in Europe respects diversity and adequately includes and serves the most vulnerable and excluded groups for example, children experiencing poverty, migrant groups and ethnic minorities, children with disabilities, children living in remote and isolated regions.

Amongst the issues raised at the European Commission symposium on improving ECEC, *Early Matters* was the need for more quantitative and qualitative, interdisciplinary and context sensitive European-based research in ECEC.

I. THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE OF INFORMAL, NON-FORMAL AND FORMAL APPROACHES

ECEC is more than formal, centre based approaches

ECEC as it is discussed in national and international forums, has been mainly restricted to formal approaches in centre-based settings and in many instances initiated by ministries of education. In recent decades this discussion has been enriched by issues such as maintaining and upgrading quality standards, and improving the accessibility for minority groups of children and for those with mental or physical disabilities. "Inclusion" and "respect for diversity" are key concepts in this regard.

The resources that are available in the family or in the community are, however, largely ignored or are looked upon as less effective if not inferior to those offered by formal settings. This attitude should be challenged as not only incorrect but also as highly unproductive. Chil-

¹ Early Childhood Education and Care are all arrangements providing care and education for children under compulsory school age, regardless of setting, funding, opening hours or programme content. ECEC also includes out-of-school provision (OSP) for young children up to their 12th birthday. 'Education' and 'care' are combined in the phrase to underline that services for young children should combine care, developmental and learning opportunities, and that education and care should not exist apart in approaches to young children. When referring to government policy, ECEC services also encompass parental leave (with a replacement income) and family-friendly policies, as these policies have a major impact on early childhood provision, promote the involvement of parents with their children, and assist toward gender equality (Eurochild TWG, principles & definitions, 2009).

² According to the Quality Public Early Childhood Education Project "Strengthening Community-based Early Childhood in New Zealand".

dren's learning and development takes place in a range of settings. In this paper ECEC is considered within three related and mutually supportive forms or settings: informal, non-formal and formal³. It is argued that to fully grasp what is possible within community-based ECEC, it is necessary to recognize the value of all forms in them and in their interaction with each other. This makes possible the necessary flexibility and responsiveness to local needs inherent in Community-based ECEC. But first, what is informal, nonformal and formal ECEC?

Informal, nonformal and formal ECEC

The Informal: These include all those activities that are not officially controlled and not backed up by written agreements or regulations. The concept could better be explained by examples. Thus, informal ECEC takes place in the family, in the interaction between parents and young children, among the children, in the spontaneous encounters between people, things and the children, both inside and outside the house in the local neighbourhood

and further afield. Informal ECEC however is also codetermined by messages given out by media – TV, radio, newspapers, Internet, and other sources such as announcements by the municipality, medical centers or the commercial sector.

The Nonformal: These embrace those activities that are governed by agreements or regulations that may be written up and spell out rules of behaviour and of membership. They are, however, often made on the basis of voluntariness and without or little public interference, although they should function within the framework of the law. Examples are parents' groups, parent and toddler groups, play groups, family day-care/child minding, or home-visiting programmes and out-of-school or free-time provision. Instead of 'nonformal' the term semi-formal is also often used. Their degree of non-formality can vary from rather loosely to strictly organized. Also, the degree of public regulation and professionalism of these types of ECEC varies from country to country.



This situation in a street is completely informal. It is a casual, unregulated encounter among young boys and girls. A great deal that is of importance to their well-being and future development is going on. They socialise, develop their language, investigate, make fun, and experiment, among other things. The way they have parked their bicycles also forces adults to pay attention to them. An important issue here is that, although this interaction is in all likelihood a spontaneous one, parents and communities can create the conditions for this sort of events to happen. It is safe and unsupervised play.

³ The choice of this terminology is based on terminology used by UNESCO and UNICEF.



Here a group of parents and toddlers meet together once a week, at an agreed time and place. Membership is loose – the parent and toddler group is “welcome to all”. The participants, parents and children abide by a minimal set of rules of behaviour . Again, it would be worthwhile to observe, list and give meaning to the wide range of interactions, exchange of emotions, activities, thoughts and demands and expectations that are at play before and after the weekly sessions both inside and outside these families and relate this to their well-being and overall development.

The Formal: These constitute statutory forms of provision that are framed by statutory laws introduced and monitored by the central or local authorities. ECEC is here part of the established system and is characterized by such things as formally-trained teachers, an officially-backed up curriculum and standards, external monitoring and inspection, and ongoing financial inputs. Kindergartens or preschool programmes and ‘downward-extended’ classes of primary schools form prime examples. The following picture is a typical illustration of

formal ECEC provision. The services offered by these providers are part of a formally recognized system with official rules regarding the staffing, implementation, financing and monitoring. Instead of the word ‘formal’ the term ‘centre based’ is often used.

Formal ECEC practice in Europe draws on a rich, diverse and long tradition of ECEC pedagogical practice underpinned by the ideas and philosophies of pedagogues such as Froebel, Montessori, Steiner, Malaguzzi amongst others.



Strengths and weaknesses of the three ECEC approaches

The two approaches, informal and nonformal ECEC, share common features. Perhaps the most important is that in the main, women play a pivotal role in them. Another joint feature is that the attention is on the 'whole' child, which means that all aspects of the children are being addressed and no artificial boundaries between educational, physical or social components of development are drawn. Informal and nonformal ECEC is also less concerned about dividing children according to age groups; typically the younger and older children are grouped together. They are also, as a rule, low cost. The role of the local or central authority is less defined. In some cases, they can come in as a resource for support; in other instances they may be absent. But the most exciting aspect of both is that they tend to validate and to build on the strengths that are present in the parents, families and communities. Successful informal and nonformal both draw on these assets and at the same time help to develop them, thus in fact empowering those who are involved. Possible weaknesses of informal and non-formal provision are that they are often dependent on one or two charismatic individuals and may be less sustainable.

The advantages of formal ECEC are, however, also impressive. In general, there are existing mechanisms to improve quality. They offer an enriched environment to the children and are, by their very nature, easy to monitor and sustainable. They are, though, more expensive and run the risk of being less contextually sensitive than the other two approaches.

The Golden Triangle

It is evident that all forms of ECEC have a role to play in the lives of young children and their families and that all of them have the potential to contribute to their health and development. It is therefore essential that informal and nonformal approaches are given the status they deserve and are taken seriously and

supported through a variety of means. This entails, as is the case in many countries, that ministries of education, normally in charge of ECEC matters, acknowledge the participation of other ministries and partners in the debate and practice of ECEC and validate their work, or if this responsibility has been delegated to the municipal level, that the municipalities take on this assignment.

II. ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF ECEC: EUROPEAN POLICY PERSPECTIVES

Much of the debate around quality in ECEC in European policy has been around the competing demands of economic development, gender equality, women's labour force participation, and to a lesser extent, about the provision of ECEC services which are in the best interests of children.

The economic argument is in essence about increasing the number of childcare places so more mothers are available to work. The best interests of the child argument, increasingly influenced by children's rights discourses focuses on the provision of services which support the all round development of all young children. This is apparent in the vision for early childhood education presented in General Comment 7 on 'Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood'⁴.

There is broad agreement that firstly, ECEC services can enhance children's subsequent school performance and development only if they are of a high quality and secondly, that poor quality ECEC may do more harm than good, especially to children from poorer backgrounds [11].

However, defining high quality ECEC, deciding on what should be measured, conducting cross-national and cross-cultural comparisons, agreeing on common indicators and finding the right balance between economic, pedagogical, social inclusion and rights interests is a complex issue. These concerns have commanded some attention at a European policy level over the past three decades.

⁴This notes that the goal of education "is to empower the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self confidence and that this must be achieved in ways that are child-centred, child-friendly and reflect the inherent dignity of the child" (para. 28, General Comment № 7, United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006).

Attention is drawn to the following European and International documents for vital information on key developments:

- The 1992 *Council Recommendation on Childcare* (92/241/EEC) (article 1);
- The 1996 Report *Quality Targets in Services for Young Children* published by the European Commission's Childcare Network;
- The OECD Starting Strong reports (2001 and 2006);
- *Diversity and Equity: Making Sense of Good Practice* 2007, published by the Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training network, DECET;
- *Young children and their services: developing a European approach*. Children in Europe (2008).

The current policy challenge with respect to quality in ECEC in Europe has been synthesised as being able to "arrive at a satisfactory and culturally relevant definition of "quality" and ways to monitor it" (NESSE, 2009:32). Further elaborated, with particular attention to needs of minority groups in Europe, Leseman describes the challenge as follows: (re)build (current) systems of ECEC to meet crucial design features "to provide quality ECEC services for all children that are "integrated and attractive and affordable to all families regardless of social class or minority status", yet sensitive to differing educational needs (Eurydice, 2009:39 cited in NESSE, 2009:30).

However, there are approximations on how to solve this problem and one of these is spelt out in the tool mentioned below. This tool was initially piloted with a community group in Serbia and has been further developed within a community in Khanty-Mansiysk in Russia.

Making community ECEC quality visible via a 'spider-web chart'

Using a spider-web diagram is one way of making quality visible.

A first step is to determine the crucial dimensions that make up good quality ECEC. This could best be done by involving all the major stakeholders of a particular activity or programme. These discussions could take place within focus groups, individual interviews, simple questionnaires, or any other low-threshold

method as long as the stakeholders can explain what they understand about a particular dimension and its critical elements. What matters is that people's views are optimally incorporated. Equally important is to arrive as close as possible to a consensus.

To facilitate the discussion here, a simple, but hypothetical ECEC community-based programme is introduced; this is done in a global manner, just sufficient to make the point.

The place of action is in a section of a provincial town where many 'blue collar' workers live; they once worked in factories that now have been closed down with the result that a lot of them are un- or underemployed. The streets make a depressive impression and are in a bad state of repair and are littered with uncollected garbage. Young people hang about and are often engaged in petty crime and drugs and most of the shops sell cheap consumer goods, mainly foodstuffs, alcohol and DVDs. The majority of young mothers work outside the house, leaving their children to grandparents, siblings or to fend for themselves. A bus service connects the neighbourhood with the rest of the town.

There's a small park and it is here that a local CBO has started a play group for children 3-5 year old. Twice a week, under the supervision of a volunteer and one or two parents, some twenty children play games, sing, and do physical exercises or other group activities for about two hours. When the weather is foul, they use the reception hall of the church. The volunteer, a divorced mother of school-going children, has worked as a preschool teacher. She receives a small stipend from the CBO.

In this hypothetical case, the following dimensions could be listed:

○ **Child friendliness**

Are the adults friendly with the children? Do they hit them when they are 'misbehaving'? Are children listened to? Is the group open for 'special' children, this is those with disabilities or from minority families? Can children choose their own games? Is the group leader and her helpers open for individual wishes/complaints by the children? Do the group leader and her helpers know the families/backgrounds of the children? Is there an awareness of the Rights

of the Child (CRC)? Do children enjoy themselves? Is the programme of activities in line with the needs and possibilities of children? Are the toys, materials and equipment used exciting and challenging for the children?

o **Connectedness**

Are parents interested and involved in the play group? Does the group leader get support from the CBO? Is the play group known by the Municipality? Are other members of the community aware of the initiative? Does the group leader have access to other play group leaders? Do the group leader and her helpers have access to information on young children? Are other sectors –media, commercial, churches– aware of the play group activities? Do the play group and local kindergarten work together?

o **Safety and Health:**

Is there glass or other dangerous materials on the ground? Can stray dogs or undesirable elements (such as drug addicts) enter? Is the equipment reliable? How can children be prevented from running away? Is there access to telephone to call the police or medical centre in cases of emergency? Does the group leader have first-aid experience? Are there toilet facilities? Does the group leader pick up signals of discomfort?

o **Staffing**

Does the activity leader possess the right kind of skills to be entrusted with the group? Do her helpers have the right kind of skills to deal with the group? Is there sufficient adult supervision? Does the activity leader know the neighbourhood and the families? Is the activity leader motivated to work with the children? Does the leader have the trust of the parents? Are the activities supervised, monitored by third party (CBO, parents' committee, municipality)?

o **Sustainability**

Does the programme stick to its regular schedule? Are parents keen on having their children participate in the play group? Are parents prepared to put in voluntary work (to make toys, clean the field, repair equipment, and act as helper)? Are other groups in the community willing to donate in kind or money? Is the funding by the CBO ensured? Is the technical support by the CBO ensured? Would the Municipality be willing to contribute to the initiative?

The following step is to choose from each dimension an *equal* number of critical components that are essential to the manner by which the dimension is understood. Again, for the sake of making the point, these critical components have been selected and those which pertain to the play group have been highlighted and the total number of 'positives' indicated:

Child friendliness:

1. *Children do enjoy themselves*
2. Leader listens to individual children
3. *Children are not beaten when 'unruly'*
4. Group is open to 'special' children
5. *Activities are in line with children's needs and potential*
6. Toys and equipment are in line with children's needs and potential
7. *Leader is aware of CRC*

Total positives: 4

Connectedness

1. Parents are meaningfully involved
2. *CBO supports group leader*
3. Wider community is aware of initiative
4. Municipality is positively interested
5. Group leader has access to information
6. *Group leader is in contact with kindergarten*
7. Group leader is in contact with other play group leaders

Total positives: 2

Safety and Health

1. *There are no hazardous matters on the play ground*
2. Group leader has access to telephone for emergencies
3. *Children can not run away unnoticed*
4. Group leader has first-aid kit and the skills to use it
5. There are no threatening youngsters or adults about
6. *Group leader responds to signals of discomfort*
7. There are toilet facilities nearby

Total positives: 3

Staffing

1. *Group leader has the right kind of skills*

- 2. There is sufficient adult supervision
- 3. Group leader enjoys the trust of the parents
- 4. The group leader enjoys her work
- 5. The group leader knows the background of the children
- 6. The helpers know the children well
- 7. The activities are monitored by third party

Total positives: 6

Sustainability

- 1. Activities adhere to schedule
- 2. Parents endorse initiative

- 3. Parents put in voluntary time and labour
- 4. Community puts in resources
- 5. CBO continues to provide technical inputs
- 6. CBO continues to provide financial inputs
- 7. Municipality is willing to fund activities

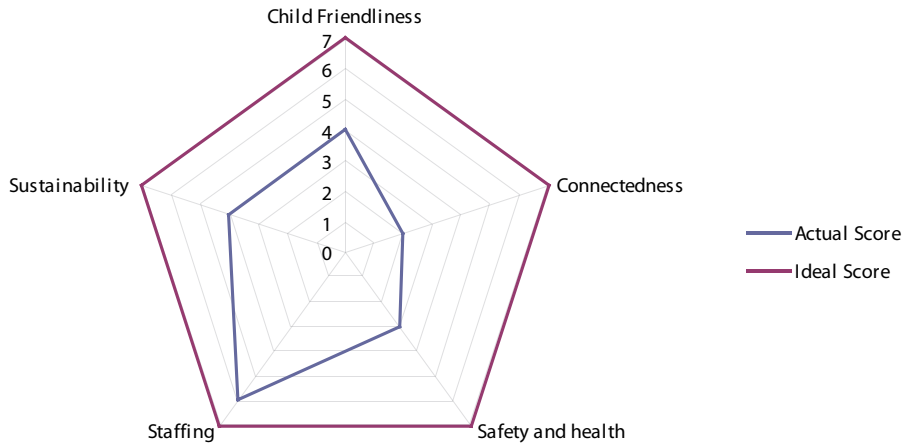
Total positives: 4

The Spider-Web Chart

The play group can now be transformed in a spider-web chart, using the table below:

Play group and its dimensions and their positives	
Dimension	Number of positives
Child friendliness	4
Connectedness	2
Safety en health	3
Staffing	6
Sustainability	4

This table, in turn, produces the desired spider-web chart:



A spider-web chart showing the rating of a playgroup

The chart allows for the issuing of a quality report card. The outer lines illustrates the ideal situation, the inner lines the state of affairs on the ground. It shows that, according to the joint opinions of the stakeholders in the community-based playgroup, that current conditions are far from ideal. Only the staffing of the activity approaches it; there is sufficient faith in the leadership of the play group. The other dimensions are weakly developed. Especially the safety and health conditions give cause for concern; the same applies for the connectedness of the play group and the other three dimensions need serious looking into. All in all, no reason to be content with this particular play group!

The spider-web chart could be enriched with another feature, that of minimum standards. In other words, which scores are absolutely unacceptable and which ones could be allowed to be neglected for some time? It is obvious that when there are dangerous objects on the play ground or when the group leader beats up the children that the activities should be discontinued at once, which is not the case if the municipality does not lend its support or when the group leader is not *au fait* with the Convention of the Rights of the Child. One way of resolving this problem is to go back to the stakeholders and discuss with them which components have 'threshold values', thus which components have to be satisfied without which the activities cannot go on.

Some dimensions of the spider-web could be filled in for the picture above. The place looks clean and is nicely fenced off so that children can't easily wander off, nor can dogs for that matter enter. There is also sufficient

adult supervision and the play equipment is quite safe and sound. It is also obvious that the municipality has taken an interest in the playground.

A community-based ECEC quality assessment tool

By introducing this particular use of the spider-web diagram a feasible helpful tool has been created to assess community-based ECEC. It is argued that the same method could be applied for any other activity, service or provision. It has also the added advantage that it permits comparisons over time as well as among play groups. It is also likely that they will retain their sensitivity to local contexts of the play groups.

It is to be expected that the dimensions and its components, when applied to more play groups, may change a little or be re-constituted. It is conceivable, for example, that a new dimension 'parental involvement' may be split off from 'connectedness' or that the overlap between 'connectedness' and 'sustainability' will become so strong that they may be better merged into one. In any event, the more this approach is applied, the more its dimensions and components will become meaningful and solid.

At some point research will be needed to see whether the dimensions are indeed as different as they are claimed to be or if in fact mutual relationships exist among them. For the time being, however, it could be a helpful tool in the hands of people who are interested in coming to grips with the question as to how to get an impression of the quality of community-based ECEC.

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