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Working with multilingual children and families in early childhood education and care (ECEC): guidelines for continuous professional development of ECEC professionals

Executive summary



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Executive summary

An increasing number of children are growing up in environments in which more than one language is spoken. For many of these children, early childhood education and care (ECEC) is often their first contact with the majority language of the country in which they are growing up. This situation adds to the crucial role that ECEC professionals play in children's education.

Children from multilingual families bring an added richness to the ECEC centre. Their full language repertoire is both a resource for the child's own holistic development, and enriches the learning experiences of the other children. Policy recommendations at European level, as well as the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child advocate for language learning from a young age and promotion of multilingual education in ECEC.

However, multilingualism presents specific challenges for ECEC professionals. To support multilingual children and families, ECEC staff must possess complex knowledge, skills and competences, as well as an understanding of child development and early childhood pedagogy. Many ECEC professionals feel an insecurity or lack of experience about working with multilingual children and families. In addition, educational practices are often geared toward monolingualism, and approach diversity and multilingualism as a problem instead of a resource. Multilingual parents (or non-native speakers of the institutional language) may also be uncertain when faced with making choices for their child, and often face barriers to engaging in reciprocal relationships with ECEC professionals.

Some of these challenges may be overcome through the participation of ECEC professionals in continuous professional development (CPD), which can positively impact the quality of pedagogical practices towards children and parents. However, CPD must be of high quality and must meet specific criteria – which, as evidenced by the findings of recent research, is not always guaranteed. CPD in relation to multilingualism in the ECEC context is often not attuned to the complex realities of multilingual families and may not always incorporate up-to-date scientific insights. To overcome this, CPD requires ongoing review and development. With this in mind, **the purpose of this report is to formulate research- and practice-based policy recommendations for high-quality CPD to support ECEC professionals working with multilingual children and families.**

This report is built upon two sources of secondary data: 1) a literature review on multilingualism, CPD, ECEC and diversity, which draws on scientific research articles, international reviews and reports of relevant European projects (presented in Chapter 2); and 2) two case studies: one on *Griffbereit* and *Rucksack KiTa* in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Germany, and another on *Elmer Childcare services* in Brussels, Belgium (presented in Chapter 3). Chapter 4 of the report provides general recommendations, while Chapter 5 explores how the report's key findings and recommendations apply to CPD relating to working with multilingual children and families with a refugee background.

Key findings and recommendations

We present five recommendations for CPD on multilingualism in ECEC. These recommendations are based on key findings about multilingualism in early childhood, and the necessary conditions for effective CPD. The recommendations offer concrete avenues for consideration by policymakers, centre leaders and ECEC professionals.

Recommendation 1

The development and implementation of CPD on multilingualism in ECEC should follow a step-wise design, in which the desired outcomes for multilingual children and families are defined in advance of selecting the targeted practices and CPD delivery modes.

To address the complexity of multilingualism and CPD in ECEC, a multifaceted approach is required. The step-wise pathway proposed in this report provides a framework that can be used by policymakers, ECEC leaders and trainers to successfully implement CPD on multilingualism in ECEC. It comprises the following steps:

1. Why? – Reflecting on the desired outcomes for multilingual children and families.
2. What? – Targeting specific practices to support multilingual children and families in ECEC.
3. Who? – Analysing the baseline situation and needs of the ECEC professionals involved.
4. How? – Selecting specific CPD delivery modes.
5. Where? – Adjusting the CPD to macro-context conditions for sustainable implementation.

Recommendation 2

The development and implementation of CPD on multilingualism in ECEC should emerge from a positive vision of multilingualism and through collaboration with parents. The development of CPD should draw on scientific knowledge, and also work well with existing policies.

Language policy is shaped by the social, economic and cultural landscape and history of a country or region. Any disconnect between multilingualism policies and scientific knowledge is a barrier to the implementation of practices for multilingual children and parents, as well as to the development of CPD on multilingualism. The existence of such disconnects calls for a rethinking of linguistic and cultural diversity at policy level, and a shifting of perceptions about multilingualism, from being regarded as a problem to being a resource.

Such a shift should be based on the following principles:

- CPD should start from a holistic strengths-based and rights-based vision for child development. Multilingual children should be seen as competent and resourceful.
- Desired outcomes for children's language development in ECEC should be directed towards both the institutional language and the home language(s). There is growing evidence that creating opportunities to integrate children's home language(s) into ECEC can foster general institutional language development and multilingual development.
- From a social justice perspective, the inclusion and participation of multilingual parents in the ECEC centre, as well as in the wider community, should be promoted. CPD should help ECEC professionals to develop reciprocal relationships with multilingual parents, which enhance parents' confidence and agency.
- Opportunities for dialogue about multilingualism should be created at various policy-making levels (e.g. by organizing joint conferences for stakeholders and practitioners, or through innovative European projects involving ECEC centres and

decision-makers), in order to achieve a shared vision and to align with existing scientific knowledge.

- ECEC curricula should be reviewed, revised and/or adapted to ensure they provide space and legitimacy for ECEC professionals to explore and implement practices supportive of multilingual children and families.

Recommendation 3

The development and implementation of CPD on multilingualism in ECEC should be tailored to the needs and capabilities of professionals. CPD should be adapted to specific contexts, and a range of practices and delivery modes should be put forward.

There is no clear, single answer to any of the complex questions inherent in pedagogical work with multilingual children and their families. Families, communities and professionals must take account of this complexity by interpreting and 'customizing' their practices. CPD trajectories should be adapted to the specific contexts and needs of the professionals concerned, meaning that both ECEC practices and CPD must be able to respond to the diversity of paths towards multilingualism, the diversity of contexts, and diversity in the needs and capabilities of ECEC staff.

This should be based on the following principles:

- Experimentation by ECEC professionals with different possibilities to integrate home language(s) within meaningful, high-quality interactions, taking advantage of the language repertoires of staff, parents and children.
- Systematic mapping and use of existing (multilingual) resources within a team, where possible pairing multilingual staff with multilingual children and families.
- Sustaining constant reflection and experimentation by ECEC professionals to support and fine-tune the choices made between different practices.
- Defining parallel professional outcomes with ECEC professionals in order to consolidate individual and team-based reflective skills, as well as fostering their engagement in defining centre-based language policies.
- Favours a menu-based approach to CPD (i.e. proposing various delivery modes that embody the criteria for effective CPD, which can be combined together to adapt CPD to different contexts and the needs of different professionals).

Recommendation 4

The development and implementation of CPD on multilingualism in ECEC should be embedded within a sustainable, system-based policy on staff professionalisation.

Because multilingualism is complex and multi-faceted, it is necessary to consider all criteria for effective CPD that can promote high-quality ECEC practices:

- CPD should be a long-term, sustainable trajectory.
- CPD should be planned at a system level, and require collaboration at different levels.
- CPD should provide different types of knowledge (i.e. theoretical knowledge as well as practical knowledge linked to the day-to-day practice).

- CPD should address ECEC professionals' beliefs and should align with scientific knowledge.
- CPD should include components of reflection and enactment by creating the conditions and space for ECEC professionals to experiment with new multilingual practices.
- CPD should include provisions for individualised feedback facilitated by a pedagogical coach or tutor.
- CPD should support the involvement and agency of ECEC professionals.
- CPD should be supported by strong leadership at national or regional level to ensure the necessary preconditions for sustainable implementation.

Recommendation 5

The development and implementation of CPD on multilingualism in ECEC should be integrated into an ongoing focus on quality within ECEC.

The 2019 Council Recommendation on High Quality ECEC Systems formalises the position of European Union (EU) Member States with regard to the importance of quality ECEC. This comprehensive framework provides a unifying foundation to support the important role played by ECEC services in promoting social inclusion. Multilingualism is a reality, as well as a right, during a child's early years. For this reason, quality ECEC cannot be achieved without the integration of multilingualism into all five domains of the European Quality Framework on ECEC: access; workforce; curriculum; monitoring and evaluation; and governance and funding. In this sense, multilingualism should be considered a transversal topic, rather than a separate one. Furthermore, an explicit focus on multilingualism in CPD might offer a refreshing angle from which to reinforce commitment to quality ECEC. Designing and implementing CPD for multilingual children can, in turn, strengthen and transform ECEC practices for *all* children.

This should be based on the following principles:

- ECEC practices presented in CPD should centre around creating opportunities for meaningful, high-quality interactions with multilingual children throughout daily life in ECEC.
- Practices to increase collaboration with multilingual parents can be supported by creating a welcoming environment, engaging in constant dialogue, and seeking opportunities to collaborate, such that parents' competences and expertise are valorised.
- Exploration of multilingual activities in CPD should not overshadow the importance of child-centred interactions during such activities.
- Broader reflection on the accessibility of ECEC services to multilingual families should be incorporated within the CPD trajectory, in alignment with ECEC practices that support collaboration with multilingual parents.

Furthermore, **specific recommendations on CPD, and on working with refugee children and families in ECEC**, highlight the need to consider the particular legal situations of these families, as well as the extra stressors that influence their experiences, emotions and sense of belonging. Also important is the conceptualisation of language development within a holistic vision for child development, ensuring that development of the home language is maintained in parallel with that of the institutional language.

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