**Getting its Act Together: Why we need stronger EU leadership in developing a common EU framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)**

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A cold and crisp Brussels greeted those attending a 2016 end- of- year conference organised by two Directorates (Departments) within the European Commission. DG Education and Culture and DG Research and Innovation gave it the optimistic title: *A* *Great Start in Life! The Best Possible Education in the Early Years*.[[1]](#footnote-1) Billed as an occasion to bring together researchers, policy makers and practitioners to discuss how to create the conditions ‘for the best possible education in the early years’, it covered services for children up to the age of 12 and transitions between home, childcare and school, with a particular focus on inequalities and vulnerable groups.

Some 250 people accepted the invitation. I was one of some 20 participants from the UK. Why was I there? A long story, but it derived from a trip down memory lane. I first became involved with EU policies in this area over thirty years ago when working on early initiatives on maternity and parental leave and subsequently as a member of the European Commission’s Childcare Network. Various research projects and helping to launch the magazine *Children in Europe* (of which more later) followed. Such a long period of involvement offered an opportunity, or even a responsibility, to try to fill what some of us feel to be a gap in EU documentation: the history of its many initiatives. So, in collaboration with my Hungarian colleague, Marta Korintus, a colleague from other projects who had been an expert member of the most recent working group that prepared the *Quality Framework* (European Commission 2014), we embarked on an historical investigation of EU policies and proposals in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), sharing our findings in an article for TACTYC’s international research journal (See Cohen and Korintus, 2016). And having written our article, we thought it might also be a good idea to send it to those within the European Commission with ultimate responsibility for shaping policy proposals. Our invitation to the conference came out of this correspondence - an opportunity to share our thoughts with others …

**A great start in life…**

The conference was chaired as crisply as the Brussels weather by Shada Islam from the Brussels-based think tank *Friends of Europe* <http://www.friendsofeurope.org>, driving us expertly through an agenda packed with research findings, practice and ideas from around the EU. The conference language was English. Only platform speakers were allowed to use their own language and very few did, although one of the most interesting presentations, on ‘living multilingualism’,was delivered in German by two Spanish researchers at the Cologne Centre for Multilingualism and Integration. [www.zmi-koeln.de](http://www.zmi-koeln.de) In so doing they made a point that I for one appreciated…

One of the high points for me was the launch by Peter Moss, Emeritus Professor of Social Policy at the Thomas Coram Research Centre in London, of the long awaited *Children in Europe* ‘dossiers’, intended to amplify the ten principles published by the magazine in 2008 (Children in Europe 2016; 2008). I should declare an interest, as one of the dossier authors. But his assessment of its significance as ‘a unique multilingual and multinational project to create dialogue and exchange across the EU’ was particularly germane to a policy area where some national governments assert sole responsibility as a means of preserving national differences but appear increasingly content to use English as a *lingua franca*. The *Children in Europe* network is reduced in size but copies of the dossiers can be downloaded in English and French at <http://www.grandirabruxelles.be/index.php/77-2/> and are likely to be translated into other languages soon.

Discussion offered some opportunity to discuss lack of coherence in ECEC policies at an EU level – and brought some assurance of improved cross -directorate working. And indeed there is some evidence of this in the establishment of an Inter-Services group in Autumn 2015 (Cohen and Korintus 2016 10). However, there was no reference on the list of participants to representation from either DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion or DG Justice and Consumers, both of which carry responsibilities in this area, and the conference title itself, with mention only of education, is an indication of the problem.

The conference proceedings were captured by cartoonists on the day (as can be seen at [https://ec.europa.eu/education/great-start-in-life\_en#graphics](https://ec.europa.eu/education/great-start-in-life_en" \l "graphics) and a report prepared by the Commission can be downloaded here <https://ec.europa.eu/education/great-start-in-life_en>

**On reflection…**

EU events of this nature remind us of the wealth of research that it has supported. Commissioned reviews, EU statistical data, networks and cross-national research have made the EU a global leader in this area, with arguably the best data in the world on many aspects and dimensions of services and other provisions (Cohen and Korintus 2016,6,12). But in our article for *Early Years*, Marta Korintus and I sought to understand why the EU has failed to effectively respond to the evidence it has itself accumulated on internal governance issues. Coming from the UK, I certainly understand the problem, which results from a lack of enthusiasm for EU social policy initiatives of governments such as this. But could the European Commission itself do more if it was less fragmented in its own approach, and able to take advantage of the varying powers of the different Directorates to initiate actions under the current Treaty? It is dispiriting and counter-productive for those working in this field to hear about contradictory targets emanating from different Directorates. The Barcelona childcare targets (European Council 2002) focused on childcare for working parents whilst the Quality Framework working group had to adopt –at least for the time being- the low ET2020 benchmark of participation of at least 95% of children between 4 and compulsory school age participating in early childhood education without reference to a minimum number of hours (European Commission 2014, 11-12). Amongst the absurdities that this leads to is that in the Eurostat data collected on this basis, Finland and Croatia, with higher levels of full-time integrated services, are described as being amongst countries that have a long way to go to achieve the target whilst the UK, where educational provision is part-time, is amongst those that have exceeded the target (Eurydice and Eurostat 2014 61-66).

In our correspondence with the European Commission, begun immediately following the UK BREXIT vote, DG Education and Culture acknowledges the split of education and care between two of the Directorates, but seeks to assure us that the Commission follows an approach which sees care and education as interrelated and not separable concepts. It also defends an approach that is non-prescriptive and notes that the content and organisation of education is solely the responsibility of member states. And that brings us to the nub of the problem. In most countries with integrated ECEC systems, the lead responsibility is now with national education departments and many countries are following this trend. But unlike DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and DG Justice and Consumers, DG Education and Culture cannot initiate actions; it can only support, coordinate or supplement. What is therefore required is leadership on a basis that can draw on the stronger treaty powers available to DGs Employment and Inclusion and Justice and Consumers alongside DG Education and Culture. We do not need another set of quality -free Barcelona targets. We do need the European Commission itself to lead and model an integrated approach to improving services and other work and family provision.

The UK ‘BREXIT” Referendum convinced me that in this policy area ‘more’ and not ‘less’ Europe is required. Back in 1988 the EC Childcare Network recommended two directives[[2]](#footnote-2) (ECCN 1988). A recommendation for a Maternity Leave directive (92/85/EEC), to supplement the Parental Leave Directive already proposed (EEC COM(83) 686), led to the 1992 Pregnant Workers Directive (92/85/EEC). This is now in great need of updating although a more generous maternity leave proposal, as amended by the European Parliament, (A7-0032/2010) was withdrawn in 2015 as a result of the opposition of the UK government, amongst others. The other recommendation, for a Framework Directive on ECEC[[3]](#footnote-3), was last referred to in 1996 and has never seen the light of day.

Ivanka Shalapatova, a conference participant from the Bulgarian children’s rights agency *For Our Children* [[4]](#footnote-4) captured the frustration of many with her comment: “It’s time for a much firmer approach from the European Commission. We don’t want to meet again in ten years and still be discussing what we should do”. I agree. In our article for *Early Years* and in subsequent correspondence with the European Commission, we argued that it is time to revisit this recommendation for a Framework Directive on ECEC and for the Commission to provide much needed leadership in forging a common framework and coherent targets for improving ECEC across the EU. And in doing this, the Commission needs to resolve its own divided responsibilities.

***What do others think?***

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1. Brussels November30th-December 1st 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A Directive places an enforcable requirement on member states. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Set out principles and objectives for member states to develop a coherent system of publicly funded childcare services for children at least up to the age of ten on a basis that recognised diversity of needs (ECCN 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.detebg.org/en/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)