

Part B- Research guidelines

Enhancing quality in Early Childhood Education and Care through Parent Participation: a state of play in seven European countries

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this document is to present a general picture on parent participation in research and in international policy documents. Throughout this text, different approaches of parent participation are described, ranging from a rather outcome-related, instrumental view on the issue to a more intrinsic and fundamental democratic approach of developing quality in partnership with parents. This document is based on literature reviews of the University of Crete, the Ghent University (Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy), VBJK, (Centre for Innovations in the Early Years) and the University of Parma, and on additional input by all partners and on findings throughout the project. Besides findings on the value of parent participation¹, common challenges in developing and maintaining parent participation and possible ways of overcoming barriers are presented. In addition, an overview is given on the existing ECEC systems, good practices and quality indicators for parent participation in the partner countries of the EQuaP project. Finally, conclusions and further considerations about the important role of parent participation are put forward.

2. Getting parent participation on the agenda and why²

Since the Council Recommendation on Childcare in 1992, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has gained an increasingly prominent position on European policy agendas. Initially, the main rationale for investing in ECEC was driven by socio-economic concerns about employment, competitiveness and gender equality (Council of the European Communities, 1992). However, over the years **the quality of ECEC provision has emerged as a crucial**

¹ See also the EQuaP project proposal and the country reports.

factor for promoting children's cognitive and social development, and, in turn, for enhancing their educational chances in the long term. The deepening of the discussion on the characteristics of ECEC provision that are associated with good quality emerges as particularly important for the improvement of the educational offer at local level and for a strengthening of the skills and competence of ECEC staff (see e.g. the EQF, 2014). At the same time, the successful pedagogical approaches and educational experiences developed in many European countries tell us that **ECEC quality is also the result of a participatory process** that involve on-going negotiations with all stakeholders – children, parents, practitioners and local communities– rather than a measurable outcome that could be predetermined by scientific evidence (Dahlberg et al., 2007; European Commission 2014; European Commission Network on Childcare , 1996; OECD, 2006; UNESCO, 2008)

Although there is a growing consensus on the importance of parent participation in ECEC, **different discourses and underlying assumptions** can be identified (Hughes, & Mac Naughton, 2000). The underlying assumptions and perspectives, as they will be described, also give way to a variety of concepts and terms, such as collaborate, cooperate, involve, include, make decisions together, act together etc. Several terms are often being used interchangeably, which does not always lead to more clarity in the debate: 'parent participation', 'parental engagement or involvement', 'family involvement'.

As described below, research and policies often stress the importance of parent participation or parental involvement in relation to educational attainment of underprivileged children. While this is not problematic as such, it does bring the essence of parent participation to a mere instrumental level. In doing so, according to many other scholars, several of these studies and policies represent a 'democratic deficit' and leave little room for parents to also get involved in defining goals and modalities of their own participation (Brougère, 2010; Canella, 1997, Doucet, 2011; Garnier, 2010; Vandenbroeck, Hughes, & Mac Naughton, 2000; Vandenbroeck, De Stercke., & Gobeyn, 2013; Van Laere, 2017).

Recognizing **parents as the first educator** -in line with the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - leads the way to an increased attention that is noticed on the importance of a **reciprocal relationship** between parents and ECEC professionals as 'a fundamental element to build a co-constructive educational project between children, educators and their adult relatives' (Guerra and Luciano, 2014; Rayna, S., Rubio, M. N., & Scheu, H., 2010). Being involved in caring for and educating young children, is, or should be, therefore quite inconceivable without involving parents in a process of shared responsibility or co-education.

The **CRC** committee, in its General Comment nr.7 on children's rights in early childhood (par. 29b) clearly recognizes, over and over again, that parents are the first educators and states that

'In planning for early childhood, state parties should at all times aim to provide programmes that complement the parents' role and are developed as far as possible in partnership with parents including through active cooperation between parents, professionals and others in developing "the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" (art. 29.1 a)'

Both this specific interest in, and this complexity of parent participation were the reasons for developing the EQuaP project (Enhancing Quality in early childhood education and care through Participation), aiming at developing quality approaches of ECEC in which parents are considered and approached as important stakeholders and participants in children's education.

Partners from seven European countries (Belgium-Flemish community, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Slovenia, and Sweden) participated in the EQuaP project and have demonstrated the context, good practices and quality indicators of parent participation in their countries. They have also participated in activities (including job shadowing) and project meetings in order to exchange ideas and promote and improve parent participation practices in their country. During discussions in this project, a consensus grew on the idea that parent participation is a matter of principle, a way of working and not only a method to reach certain goals. Parent participation should be promoted and supported in ECEC, and can be meaningful in terms of quality even without proven results in terms of educational attainment of the children.

For the purposes of this document, we clarify some key terms that regularly will be used:

- **ECEC**

There has been some debate on how to label the provisions for children under compulsory school age and their families. In this report, we use the term 'Early Childhood Education and Care' (ECEC), since it is the term most commonly used in international and European policy documents, as well as in OECD reports. Some countries are characterised by a split system in which childcare centres and preschool education is organised for different ages, under the auspices of different governmental departments. Other countries have more integrated ECEC systems in which early childhood centres exist for children from the age 0 until 6. (Bennett, 2003; European Commission, 2011; Kaga, Bennett, & Moss, P., 2010). To add to the complexity, the divide between age groups and institutions (childcare / preschool) is often not the only divide in the early childhood system. In 'split' systems in particular, services tend to be fragmented, with different types of services (e.g. public, private, private-for-profit) existing in parallel (Urban et al, 2011). Parent participation as well, shows different features throughout this divide.

- **Practitioner**

As the SEEPRO and the CoRe project (Oberhuemer et al., 2010; Van Laere et al., 2011) made perfectly clear, there are many different professionals working in the field of ECEC, bearing different names according to the country and the type of services they work in, the qualifications they have, or the functions they fulfil. Their names may vary from teachers, teacher' assistants, childcare workers, pedagogues, ... When we talk about the people working in ECEC, we use the term *practitioner* throughout the document.

- **Parent**

Without denying the role of other family members in the education of children, the term 'parent' is used in this project. The word *parent* is used to refer to those adults within a family who have the legal responsibility for the children and who actually raise them. This can be the legal parents, guardians, adoptive parents, foster parents and so forth.

Importance of a participatory quality approach of the relationship between parents and ECEC

1.1 The European Union

On a policy level, the importance of parent participation is promoted in several **EU** documents. The European Commission has put forward the priorities that affirm the components of quality in education, where access, participation and parental involvement in education are defined as the main keywords (European Commission, 2014; Lindeboom & Buiskool, 2013). Parent participation is among the recommendations of European cooperation in quality evaluation in school education formulated by the European Parliament and the Council to the Member States (2001/166/EC). A European report of quality in parent participation (2001), has also identified parent participation as an important quality indicator in education. Moreover and specifically for ECEC, the European Quality Framework for ECEC (2014) is very clear on the matter of parent participation, considering it as one of the fundamental issues for the development and maintenance of high quality ECEC (p. 8): “parents are the most important partners and their participation is essential. The family is the first and most important place for children to grow and develop, and parents (and guardians) are responsible for each child’s well-being, health and development. Families are characterised by great social, socio-economic, cultural and religious diversity – and this diversity should be respected as a fundamental element of European societies. Within a context that is set by the national, regional or local regulations, the family should be fully involved in all aspects of education and care for their child. To make this involvement a reality, ECEC services should be designed in partnership with families and be based on trust and mutual respect. These partnerships can support families by developing services that respond to the needs of parents and allow for a balance between time for family and work. ECEC services can complement the family and offer support as well as additional opportunities to parents and children.” However, while the involvement of school leaders and practitioners is ensured to some degree almost everywhere, the practice of providing children, parents, and representatives of the local community with the possibility of expressing their voice, and taking their opinion into account, is still less systematic.

The policy commitment to ECEC at European level is characterised by the recognition that ECEC provision has to be of high quality (European Commission 2011, 2014). Definitions of quality in ECEC vary considerably across countries. Despite these varieties, there is a consensus amongst scholars and international networks that quality in ECEC should be contextualised and include a continuous revision of understandings and practices for the improvement of ECEC services in ever-changing societal conditions (Penn, 2009; Urban et al., 2011; Dahlberg et al.,

1999; DECET 2007; Children in Europe, 2008 and 2016; ISSA, 2010). Consequently, **quality is an on-going process** rather than as something that is either achieved or not.

1.2 International research: ambivalent notions on parental involvement

In terms of how parent participation relates to ECEC quality, research and international documents seem to cover the whole range of different perspectives and underlying assumptions, ranging from the 'instrumentalist' to the 'essentially democratic' approach. In some documents series we also notice changes throughout the years.

The **Starting Strong reports** (OECD, 2001, 2006, 2013) place the question of quality in the context of democratic ECEC governance. Beyond the minimum standard ensured by the basic regulations, defining and assuring quality should be a participatory and democratic process, involving different groups including children, parents, families and practitioners who work with young children (OECD, 2001, 2006).

"At centre level, touchstones of a democratic approach will be to extend the agency of the child and to support the basic right of parents to be involved in the education of their children. In this approach, the early childhood centre becomes a space where the intrinsic value of each person is recognised, where democratic participation is promoted, as well as respect for our shared environment. Learning to be, learning to do, learning to learn and learning to live together should be considered as critical elements in the journey of each child toward human and social development." (OECD 2006, 18)

These first two Starting Strong reports clearly underlined that parental involvement is not about teaching parents how to be involved or hold parents solely responsible for the difficulties a child may have. The relationship between ECEC staff and parents was understood as '*a two-way process of knowledge and information flowing freely both ways*' in order to foster continuity in children's learning and experiences between ECEC and the home (OECD 2001, 117). Accordingly, professional development should be more oriented on how professionals can learn to listen to parents and learn from the knowledge that parents from diverse backgrounds contribute, while at the same time being aware of the power dynamics that are at stake between parents and ECEC centers (OECD 2006, 2001).

Although research on the impact of early learning has existed for over 40 years, it is especially in the last decade that international policy debates (e.g. OECD, European Commission, UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank) massively adopted an early learning perspective. Many studies emphasized the importance of quality early learning of preschool children as a foundation for reaching high educational attainment and employment in later life (Unicef Innocenti Research Centre 2008, Matthews and Jang 2007, Melhuish et al. 2015, Leseman and Slot 2014, Shonkoff

and Phillips 2000, Barnett and Masse 2007, Heckman 2006). The last Starting Strong report stressed that, influenced by academic studies especially in the field of neuroscience, ECEC serves as a crucial foundation for children by fostering the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills that would matter for success later in life (OECD 2013, 2015).

We could then see how the former emphasis on the democratic approach of ECEC disappeared in the most recent Starting Strong reports and consequently the nature of the relationship between the ECEC professionals and parents changed as well: parents and communities needed to collaborate with ECEC staff to foster skill development and stimulate the healthy development of their children. Especially since there was recurrent available research evidence that correlated parental involvement in early learning of children with better learning outcomes and later academic success (Arnold et al. 2008, Carter 2002, McWayne et al. 2004, Sylva et al. 2004, Fantuzzo, Perry, and Childs 2006, Halgunseth 2009, Marcon 1999, Miedel and Reynolds 2000, Eldridge 2001, Castro et al. 2004, Galindo and Sheldon 2012)³.

In studies on the early childhood programs, **significant positive results** of parental involvement were found in helping children transition to kindergarten and succeed during the primary grades and even high school (Barnard, 2004; Carter, 2002). This was especially the case among children in a societal disadvantaged position and those at risk of school failure (Carter, 2002). Children are more motivated to learn and develop key emergent skills that are necessary for success in later life (McWayne et al., 2004). Greater parent involvement in preschool was also associated with stronger pre-literacy skills of children (Arnold, Zeljo, Doctoroff, & Ortiz, 2008). Some assume that when parents and practitioners cooperate, children will be affected as much as possible (Smith, et al, 2013; Westmoreland, Bouffard, O'Carroll, & Rosenberg, 2009). "When families of all backgrounds are engaged in their children's learning, their children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and pursue higher education" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; p. 73).

It is also observed that if parents are involved early, at the preschool level, they are more likely to continue being involved at the next educational levels (Barbour, 1996; Lindeboom & Buiskool, 2013). Furthermore, when parents and practitioners work together, they can deliver clear and consistent messages to children, encouraging the development of positive behaviors concerning the emotional and social development of their children (Smith, et al. 2013). Other programs aiming at the improvement of emotional health and the management of behavioral and emotional problems have also been implemented with positive results. (Evangelou, Brooks, & Smith, 2007; Evangelou, Coxon, Sylva, Smith, & Chan, 2011; Goff, Evangelou, & Sylva, 2012; Sylva, Scott, Totsika, Ereky-Stevens, & Crook, 2008). The kind of parent involvement by means of informing parents about issues of health, healthy eating, exercise and promoting physical

³ Although the first studies on parental involvement were predominantly situated in compulsory education, the notion of parental involvement also has gained ground in the academic field of ECEC (Jinnah and Walters 2008, Hughes and Mac Naughton 2000).

activity are also very common in all stages of education. (Herman, Nelson, Teutsch & Chung, 2012; McCurdy, McPhil, Winterbottom, Mehta & Roberts, 2010; Tomporowski, Lambouine & Okumura, 2011). Sylva et al (2002) argued that parent participation programs contributed not only to the academic and cognitive development of children, but also positively affected the parents' and practitioners' behavior. Involving parents, in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is acknowledged as a key component not only for their children's education, but also for the improvement of children's development in general. This has been reported in several studies (Berthelsen & Walker 2008; Epstein, 1995; Epstein, 2011; Smith, Robbins, Stagman, & Mathur, 2013).

Besides the beneficial outcomes for children, parent participation is also considered as an essential part, and even a **prerequisite for ECEC quality**. In the comprehensive CARE research (2016), the document on European Framework for Quality and Well-being Indicators formulates the parent participation as an indicator for quality (p. 20-21): "The centre communicates and engages in dialogue with important stakeholders, foremost the parents of the children, on a regular basis via accessible media, taking parents' language and media literacy skills into account. The centre actively involves parents, and builds collaborative partnerships with them, in developmental and educational goal setting, in curriculum and pedagogy development, in implementation and evaluation of curriculum and pedagogy, and in the periodic review of the pedagogical plan." And furthermore adds that: "The centre is sensitive to differences in views, values and priorities between centre and parents. Hence, where possible, alternative views, values and priorities are recognizably incorporated in pedagogical plans and practices. Where this is not possible, differences in views, values and priorities are respectfully discussed in constructive dialogues, in which professional knowledge is brought to bear on the issues. Consensus is sought through on reconstructed or reconsidered views, values and priorities."

1.3 Bridging the educational gap by more parent participation?

Adding the fact that the educational gap between children with high SES and low SES is very persistent (OECD, 2013, 2016), increased **parental involvement has been advocated as a means to close this gap** by several international organisations (European Commission, 2015, OECD, 2006, 2012). Already since the 60'ies the relationship between parental involvement and children's educational attainment has been of considerable interest to educational and sociological scholars and policy makers (Lareau and Munoz 2012, Brooker 2015). It is widely assumed that parental involvement in children's education in school and at home could prevent school failure and allegedly may contribute to 'bridge the gap' between children with lower and higher educational attainment (Barnard 2004, Carter 2002, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1995). That is why in contrast to the earlier OECD reports that were oriented on parents in

general, parental involvement in the latest OECD reports was considered especially important *'in low income, minority communities where differences in socio-economic background and cultural values about child rearing and education are likely to negatively affect child development (OECD 2012, 222)'*. Consequently, parents in a societal disadvantaged position are more targeted from a deficit perspective to work actively on the development and learning of their children to achieve later academic success and school completion.

Several of the studies that show the positive impact of parental involvement on children's outcomes base themselves upon the Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and the Overlapping Spheres of Influence model of Epstein (1995, 1987, 2004). These theoretical models emphasize that schools, families and communities have shared responsibilities in educating and socializing children (Fischer, Dowrick, and Maynard 2007). In Epstein's model several types of parental involvement are put forward in terms of what parents can do at home and in the school environment to help their children perform well at school and in later life (Epstein 1995, Epstein et al. 1987, Epstein and Salinas 2004).

At the same time, scholars in the field of sociology of education like Lareau (1987, 1996, 1999) have criticized this line of thought for several reasons. A first problem is that Epstein promotes a model of consensus by using terms as for example partnership and common goals. By assuming a consensus, this theoretical model fails to acknowledge **patterns of unequal power** between diverse parents and schools (Lareau and Shumar 1996, Todd and Higgins 1998). Secondly, when this theoretical model of Epstein is translated into educational policies, the focus is on increasing individual parent's participation in education starting from the premise that all parents are equal. According to Lareau (1987, 1999, 1996) and other sociologists who base themselves on the Bourdieusian concept of cultural capital, the **equity of parents is a problematic assumption** since parents have to deal with unequal financial, social and cultural resources and parents have different skills to activate their cultural and social capital in order to create an educational advantage for their child within the school system. By overlooking these differences, it is argued that it is hard for parents from working or lower class to comply with the staff requests for parental involvement which are permeated by social and cultural experiences of intellectual and economic elites (Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003, Lareau 1987, Lareau and Shumar 1996, Lareau and Horvat 1999). Consequently, several scholars alert that schools' efforts to involve parents can paradoxically create greater inequities in children's learning, creating disadvantages for children in low-income positions (Gillanders, McKinney, and Ritchie 2012, Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003, Lee and Bowen 2006). By decontextualising the encounters between parents and schools and responsabilising parents individually to involve themselves, parental involvement risks to be a means to confirm and increase social inequality rather than challenging it (Clarke 2006).

An overview of similar critique can be found in the work of Janssen (2017 and references there, forthcoming) where he recognises that the discourse on the socio-economic benefits of ECEC

mainly focuses on reducing inequalities among young children at school entry, preventing early school leaving and closing the educational gap. What is then problematic, is how proposed solutions (educational interventions with a focus on children's outcomes) are set in a 'seemingly self-evident, objective, and incontestable way' and by doing so neglect the democratic politics of education policies and reducing it to a technical practice. Which brings us again to the critique on instrumentalising parental involvement. In addition, it goes against the advocacy for a social constructivist approach in dealing with the reality of diversity and complexity in ECEC (Urban et al, 2011, Peeters, 2008, Peeters and Vandebroek, 2011).

1.4 Questioning the instrumentalisation of parents

Several scholars contested the instrumentalisation of parents within the debates on parental involvement. In the last OECD reports for example, the two-way dialogical process of knowledge exchange between parents and staff was left out (OECD, 2012). By predefining the purpose and modalities of parental involvement, the government and ECEC staff manages to think *for* parents, yet not *with* parents (Rayna and Rubio 2010). Parents can help their children to achieve the learning outcomes that the school or government has set. Hence, they are less involved in discussions on the kind of preschool education or society they want for their child and themselves (Garnier 2010b, Vandebroek, De Stercke, and Gobeyn 2013, Brougère 2010, Doucet 2011a, Hughes and Mac Naughton 2000, Lawson 2003). Based on a.o. Foucault, Dahlstedt (2009) introduced the concept of 'parental governmentality' in which parents are indirectly recruited into the teacher's project to foster pupils learning in line with the convention of the schools (Dahlstedt, 2009). In this instrumentalisation discourse, participation has an inherent preventive value in terms of avoiding school failure. Parents need to be activated to adopt a more present role in the learning of their children.

One of the side effects of this discourse is that non-participation of parents is considered a problem. (Bouverne-De Bie et al. 2013; Bouverne-De Bie et al., 2012; Brougère 2010).

In one of the last OECD reports (2012) for example OECD countries repeatedly reported that especially poor and migrant parents do not engage themselves enough in preschools because of a lack of interest and care which according to other scholars is considered a pervasive myth (Crozier and Davies 2007, Tobin, Arzubiaga, and Adair 2013, Lawson 2003, Doucet 2011a, OECD 2012). On the contrary, few qualitative studies demonstrated that parents are absolutely interested in their child's education but face many problems like unclear expectations on behalf of the preschool, experience of institutional racism, feelings of intimidation by the staff, and the daily struggle to survive (Tobin, Arzubiaga, and Adair 2013, Garnier 2010a, Crozier 2005, Jeunejean et al. 2014, Doucet 2011b, Vandebroek, De Stercke, and Gobeyn 2013). Another essential feature of this instrumentalisation discourse is that parents who do not 'participate' need to learn to participate. Doucet (2011a) and Dahlstedt (2009) problematised that ways to

increase parental involvement are actually codes or implicit strategies to socialize parents to the mainstream white middleclass norms but still within a inequitable educational project (Doucet 2011a, Dahlstedt 2009).

Bouverne-De Bie (2013, 2012) and Brougère (2010) contested the popular discourse on the instrumentalisation of parents by underlining that participation is an ontological fact: people live in a participatory world and real participation concerns creating societal possibilities and spaces for dialogue and negotiation, not necessarily in a consensus way but also with space for dissensus as society consists out of multiple, often contradictory interests, values and definitions of wellbeing (Bouverne-De Bie et al. 2013, Bouverne-De Bie et al. 2012, Brougère 2010, Doucet 2011a). Some scholars accentuated that more dialogue will not improve the relationship unless the politics of knowledge from the parents and the staff, underpinning the communication, are thoroughly analysed: In what ways can the parental knowledge of children equally be as acknowledged as the practitioner's knowledge of children? (Hughes and Mac Naughton 2000, Brougère 2010, Cardona, Jain, and Canfield-Davis 2012). One of the main issues according to Lightfoot (2004) en Hughes and Mac Naughton (2000) for example is that many preschool programs start from the assumption that only one normative path for child development and learning exists, which ought to be mastered by preschool staff. Consequently the knowledge of parents is considered subordinate to the 'expertise' knowledge of preschool staff even in cases where preschools genuinely want to respect parents' wishes and home cultures (Lightfoot 2004, Hughes and Mac Naughton 2000). The scholarly work of Freire (1996) on the 'culture of silence' clarified how in these dominant school systems parents experience an internalized oppression which often translates itself into a conformity with the dominant norms of the preschool (Freire 1996).

In line with this instrumentalisation critique, children as well tend to be made passive in practices on parental involvement.

The challenge is how ECEC centres value the actual participation and interest of parents and develop positive democratic approaches of creating quality together. A similar approach is found in literature focusing on working 'with' families instead of 'on behalf' of them (see Guarra and Luciano and references there, 2014; Rayna, Rubio, & Scheu, H. 2010), which creates way more opportunities for exchange and powerful reciprocity and thus avoiding the risk of power imbalance.

Parent participation in ECEC practice: why and how?

2.1 The need for reciprocity

Although Bronfenbrenner is often used in research to instrumentalise parents, Bronfenbrenner's original readings weren't meant in an instrumental way! Taking a step back and looking at the issue in a broader perspective, we can see how Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological approach, highlights the many interactions between humans and the (actors within) their surrounding environment. Environment has a great influence on human's developmental process. In education, practitioners, parents and children are all considered as part of the school system, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach has favored increased attention for the position and role of parents. According to that approach, participation is a reciprocal process where practitioners, parents and children act together and influence each other in order to build true cooperative relationships. The child also, is considered as a dynamic entity that develops within the environment he/she lives in, with both family and school being the two major contributors.

2.2 Parents as assets

Henderson and Mapp have stressed that "programs that successfully connect with families and community invite involvement, are welcoming and address specific parent and community needs." They explain that "relationships matter." How parents and community members are viewed and treated by school staff—as assets to the process of raising achievement rather than as liabilities" and the "level of social trust can predict the quality of the school." One of the best ways to see parents as assets is to involve them in shared decision making around children's learning, development, and social life in the classroom and school. Henderson et al. (2007) identify four core beliefs that should serve as the foundation for the work of educators/schools/early years' programs in engaging families:

- 1) Educators must believe that all parents have dreams for their children and want the best for them.
- 2) Educators must believe that all parents have the capacity to support their children's learning.
- 3) Parents and school staff should be equal partners.

- 4) The primary responsibility for building partnerships between school and home rests primarily with the school staff.

Practitioners are also positively affected from their co-operation with parents, and through that co-operation they can positively affect their work with the children. It is important for practitioners to be aware of children's needs and background in order to provide the appropriate support for each child. Parents are the experts on their children and can therefore be the most valuable advisors for practitioners, and when a relationship of trust is developed between them, the benefits for children will be even more, affecting their whole personality (Smith, et al, 2013). In a case study of a northern Italian ECEC service, Guerra and Luciano (2014) describe how improving the cooperation and deepening the relation between staff and parents helped the professionals to work towards more satisfying responses to certain, very concrete, critical issues regarding parents and their (lack of) involvement in the service.

2.3 Not serving just one predefined goal

Luciano & Guerra (2013) consider parent participation as a mutual process between adults and children, serving multiple goals:

- Parent participation is a responsibility of community services, which shall embody participation not only as a democratic value, but also as a means to avoid social exclusion. Every parent should feel welcomed and free to express his opinion.
- Parent participation is a responsibility of educational institutions, which need to be organized with care and pedagogical work. Practitioners and communities must be very well informed about the factors affecting parent participation.
- Parent participation is a responsibility of the entire community, which is part of the process. Children, parents, practitioners, professionals, people working in services and other citizens are part of the participation process.
- These people have common goals and share the opportunity to contribute to the improvement of the educational institutions in many ways, such as by helping the development of a common project, or involving in management decisions

Note that the CARE research as well defines constructive dialogue as a quality indicator but also points out that there may not always be agreement on e.g. goals and values (p. 21). In fact it adds that different views can come up on issues like quality and wellbeing, in beliefs and preferences regarding child rearing and socialization in general. These differences may have to do with differences in social and cultural background (or not?). Even then, according to the CARE researches, the mutual trust and ongoing dialogue between parents and practitioners remains vital. This process of searching for agreement and possibly adapting ECEC practice to

parents' views, beliefs and preferences, does contribute to the cultural accessibility and inclusiveness of ECEC. At the same time, this does not mean that certain elements of quality of ECEC, as developed by professional knowledge and scientific evidence should be deleted. A professional system is characterized by striving for consensus in views, beliefs and preferences through dialogue, and informed by professional standards based on experience and scientific evidence.

Based on the concept of educational co-responsibility, partnership and educational alliance, Guerra and Luciano (2014) state that this element of mutual accountability of parents and professionals to be involved and committed towards the children first and foremost, does shift the focus and makes parent participation go beyond merely informing parents, or educating parents in 'how to be good and competent parents' towards creating close relationships, cooperation and co-education.

2.4 A right based approach of equity and respect for diversity

The ethical framework of the **DECET**⁴ principles may also serve as an inspiration for the development of an alternative ways of thinking and speaking about parent participation in preschool education (DECET, 2007). This framework is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and is applied to preschool education, as outlined below:

"All children and adults have the right to evolve and to develop in a context where there is equity and respect for diversity. Children, parents and educators have the right to good quality in early childhood education services, free from any form of - overt and covert, individual and structural - discrimination due to their race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status" (in reference to Article 2, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). DECET consistently advocates that all children, parents, practitioners and local communities:

- feel that they belong
- are empowered to develop the diverse aspects of their identity
- can learn from each other across cultural and other boundaries
- can participate as active citizens in ECEC
- actively address bias through open communication and a willingness to grow
- work together to challenge institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination.

⁴DECET (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training) brings together different European organisations and projects with common goals about the value of diversity in early childhood education and training. DECET aims at promoting and studying democratic ECEC, and acknowledging the multiple (cultural and other) identities of children and families. See all on www.decet.org

ECEC should indeed be a place where children, parents, staff, and local communities can participate in democratic educational practices (Jésu, 2010; Rayna & Rubio, 2010; Doucet, Lawson). This is not an easy mission due to the fact that ECEC are still often strictly predefined and organised in a fairly hierarchical way. Considering the existing diversity and societal power differences amongst families, practitioners and local communities, democratic practice is a constant search for a way to create conditions where everyone has the right to be heard and experience respect, recognition, solidarity, care and a sense of belonging. Quality in this approach is the inventing and reinventing of ways in which ECEC can function for all children and families by negotiating meanings among all stakeholders.

2.5 Suggestions

Both, the OECD report (2012) and the European Quality framework for ECEC (2014) give some suggestions on how to install and sustain parent participation in ECEC both on policy or institutional level, inspired by examples from countries all over the world. Some examples:

- Parent participation should be embedded in ECEC policy. This way, it is an obligation for ECEC to work on that and a right for parents to engage (or not). Every ECEC service should find appropriate ways for families to participate⁵.
- Financial resources, preferably public funds, should be provided to parent's associations. This can improve the quality level of the services and can strengthen the role of parent associations in the community.
- Parents should be engaged in a management body of the ECEC services⁶. At the same time, however, the European Included study and a study of Van Avermaet et al (2013) have demonstrated that e.g. formal ways of parent participation such as school boards are not always as effective at involving all parents in school life.
- Parents could be also engaged in setting the curriculum⁷.
- Practitioners and other staff should be trained to involve parents. The CoRe study demonstrated clearly that involving parents is an inherent part of ECEC professionalism. The curricula of many European countries do not sufficiently prepare ECEC practitioners for this (Urban et al., 2011; Van Laere, 2012)
- Parents should be provided with support materials. Example activities, websites, toys, written information, counseling etc. could be provided to parents.

⁵ E.g. Have parents in the school board (Manitoba, Canada).

⁶ E.g. Norway has established a national advisory board of parents for ECEC. The board makes parents' voices to be heard in ECEC policies and also provides the Ministry with advice on the cooperation between schools and families. Each ECEC is required to have a parent council.

⁷ E.g. In Korea, Japan, Spain and other countries parents are members of the curriculum review committee. In Norway, parents are actively involved by establishing the annual plan for pedagogical activities in ECEC units. Every unit draws up its annual plan and includes parents as its members.

- Organized meetings and activities with parents or 'contact books' between practitioners and parents should be provided.
- Free services for vulnerable families should also be provided. (At the same time, offering free services for some groups can also increase the barrier of feeling stigmatized.)
- Parents should participate in evaluating the ECEC provisions. In many countries, parents have the right to evaluate provisions or curricular activities mainly by visits and observations in ECEC units.
- Parent participation should be evaluated in order to proceed in any necessary changes.

These examples show that many different ways of participation can be meaningful if ECEC provision can create the appropriate environment for parents to feel welcomed and free to express themselves.

The EQF (p. 25) further adds that: "in order to be responsive, educational practices need to be co-constructed with children and their families. Parental involvement needs to be based on an equal partnership with ECEC providers and include: democratic decision-making structures (e.g. parental committee) for the management of ECEC services; staff with an open-minded disposition towards challenging traditional practices. Parents may have differing needs to taken into account - ECEC services should be committed to negotiating their practice and values in a context where contrasting values and beliefs emerge."

Rome wasn't built in a day....

Parent participation is an ongoing process, which is continuing, gradual, complex and has several stages. Practitioners need to keep in mind that building true relationships and cooperate with parents is a process that takes time. Relationships with parents are about sharing and mutual exchange, not about the dispute of power. Parents should participate in education in order to meet the needs of their children, increase the wellbeing of their children and then to improve their school performance. This partnership shall aim at the establishment of a true relationship, with practitioners and parents learning with and from each other (Bouchard, 2002; Bouchard, Kalubi & Sorel, 2011; Wright, Block, & Unger, 2008). Again, it is important to acknowledge the power-balance in this relationship. While it shouldn't be a power play, it sometimes is because of the different types of knowledge at stake. Practices on informing, instructing and motivating parents are rather top-down practices (see Jansen, forthcoming) and these inequalities in knowledge-power can be a barrier for participation.

To build relations of trust, it is important to invest facilitating the transition from the home environment to childcare. Practitioners have to know and be truly interested in parent's view and culture. Parents will be the ones to give important information about child's temperament

and habits. All this information exchange will enhance the quality of the educational process, and will help practitioners to create true relationships with children. The construction of this relationship does not come naturally or automatically, it needs active investment of the professionals' work. In return, gaining this kind of knowledge about the child, will enable the practitioners to improve their work. It is also important for practitioners to realize that parents would like to remain the first owners of their parenting project and do not need someone to give them advice about what good parenting is. Parents need support, in a form of creating social support between the parents themselves and the practitioners (Geens & Vandebroek, 2013).

3.1 The many variations in participation

Different models and levels of parent participation are described in literature. Although participation needs to be developed in the given context, with the given partners, some ideas or models can serve as inspiration.

Wright, et al (2008), notices four developmental stages in the process of parent participation:

- a. Non-participation: Practitioners give commands and instructions.
- b. Pre-participation: Practitioners inform and listen to parents.
- c. Participation: Practitioners and parents decide together.
- d. Meta-participation: Practitioners and parents work together as a system.

Quite often, practitioners believe that participation means simply informing parents about issues that come up, but in fact that is only the pre-participation stage. Every single stage is built on one another and is one of the preconditions to ensure effective participation and build positive relationships between practitioners and parents (Duncan, et al, 2010).

According to Milani (2012) there are five developmental stages in the process of parent participation and several practices following these stages. The stages are summarized as follows:

- a. Inform: talks & meetings,
- b. Listen: several kinds of communication in order to get to the child and the family better,
- c. Facilitate the participation: open class, excursions, joint activities,
- d. Include: workshops, discussion groups, use of child's journal,
- e. Support: support the role of parents, meetings with experts, seminars.

According to Duncan, One, Royce, TePunga-Jurgens, Shaw, Eaton, & Thomas (2010), the relationship between parents and practitioners should be characterized by:

- Authenticity, where partners respect each other and make efforts in building trusting relationships.
- Sustainability, when parents focus on enriching their knowledge about children and make relationships with other families.
- Intentionality, when practitioners support parents with specific, caring activities.
- Embedding, that means being exemplar and affect the life of the wider community.

In order to ensure effective participation, there are some principles that have to be taken into account such as:

- Parents and practitioners work together to support children;
- Participation creates a two-way collaboration and communication. Children parents and practitioners are equal. Parents and practitioners aren't authoritarian or strict and children are not restricted in their feelings, senses, and attitude;
- All decisions must lead to results which are acceptable by both sides;
- Participation is a goal related to real life (Andrist, 2007; Duncan, et al., 2010).

The most important factors affecting parent participation are on one hand that parents realize they can contribute to their children's development, and on the other hand that practitioners make parents feel welcomed at school (Smith et al., 2013). The primary motivation for parents to become involved appears to be a belief that their actions will improve their children's learning and wellbeing. In addition parents are involved more if they perceive that school staff and students both want and expect their involvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In order to build a strong relationship and not just any relationship with parents, practitioners should have a clear plan about it, and assign roles to adults and children (Guerra & Luciano, 2009). Practitioners should also make positive connections with parents and provide a variety of activities and opportunities to fully engage parents. Schools must also sustain parent engagement by keeping parents engaged (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

3.2 Roundup considerations

All in all, it is apparent that authentic, meaningful and respectful parent participation does not shape itself. It requires continued attention and it appeals strongly upon professionals who need to invest in this. It requires work, pedagogical support and instruments (like documentation), initial and on-the-job training, competence development and supportive policies (Guerra and Luciano, 2014).

Conclusively, with all its different goals, models and underlying values and meanings, it should be clear that there is no real and valid definition to be found for 'parent participation'. What we do know is that it is about as a reciprocal process where practitioners, parents, children and the community work together, engage in respectful dialogue and defining certain goals in common. These commonly agreed goals may refer to several different issues at stake and may be less or more ambitious, e.g. getting to know and understand each other better, improving exchange of information both ways, guaranteeing and improving children's well-being, improving quality in ECEC, etc. The essential point of democratic and meaningful participation, remaining that all parties can freely contribute into how this process will take shape and how, if any, the goals will be defined.

Parent participation in ECEC in Europe

In the field practice, there is a significant variety among the parent participation activities implemented in different territories or countries, based on different approaches and differences in culture, curricula or laws. The EQUAP project aims at demonstrating parent participation practices across Europe. The seven European country-partners of the EQUAP project have provided basic information about parent participation in their countries, as it stands now in policy and practice⁸. A short review of these policies and practices is given here.

4.1 Greece

It was already reported that the Greek ECEC is a split system with a clear distinction between nurseries (0-2.5 years) or preschools (2.5-5 years) and kindergartens (4-6 years). Kindergartens are considered as integral part of Greek Primary Education (up to 12 years). ECEC in Greece is offered: a) in public & private kindergartens under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, b) In public and private nurseries and preschools under the supervision of municipalities. Children may attend kindergartens at the age of four, attendance however, is compulsory only for children at the age of five years. An all-day preschool program operates in parallel to the ordinary kindergarten program with a broadened daily schedule. According to the Law 2525/199, the aim of all-day kindergarten is to support working parents and reinforce the role of state care in order to eliminate any educational or social discrimination (Eurydice, 1/3/16).

Parent participation in Greece ECEC was not established for a long time. Only in 2006, the Greek Ministry of Education published official policy papers regarding the value of parent participation. The policies related to parent participation along with the forms of teacher-parent cooperation are described in three official documents: The Kindergarten Teacher's Guide (Dafermou, Koulouri, & Basagianni, 2006), the Parent's Guide (Vrinioti, Kiridis, Sivropoulou-Theodoriadou, & Hrisafidis, 2008) and the All-day Kindergarten Guide (Aleuriadou, Vrinioti, Kiridis, Sivropoulou-Theododiadou, & Hrisafidis, 2008). These three documents apart of providing instructions about the implementation of the curriculum, they also provide to practitioners generic guidelines about engaging parents in their children's education. All three documents acknowledge parents as major contributors to their children's development and progress.

Based on the above three official documents practitioners should make sure that they follow some of the recommended practices in order to involve parents. Recommendations for enhancing parent participation are based on practices such as: a) scheduled group meetings with parents of an entire class, b) scheduled individual meetings with parents in order to discuss specific problems, c) seminars by experts in order to inform parents about several

⁸ See also the equap website

scientific topics regarding their children's development, d) parents' groups (workshops) discussing educational issues e) a few-minute communication when parents during arrival and departure times, f) use of noticeboards located at the school entrance with written advices and notes concerning child development, guidelines for practices that can be implemented at home, or even information about practices taking place in school, g) phone communication, h) communication diary carried in students' school bag, i) participation in procedures related with school projects, innovative programs, visits, excursions, j) parents' council, in order to contribute to the school function, k) voluntary parental work in schools or for school. Although, there are many ways that parents can participate in their children's education, there is no official state program regarding the modes and methods of family-school communication and participation.

Research findings show that parent participation in Greek ECEC is not very well established and provide low quality of communication (Manolitsis, 2004; Papandreou, 2009; Papandreou, Birbili, & Martidou, 2009; Rekalidou & Penderi, 2010; Rentzou, 2011). Manolitsis (2004) examined the frequency and structure of parent participation in Greece and concluded that the most common types of parent participation were activities taking place outside schools, for example at home. Communication between parents and practitioners did not appear to be very frequent. Studies showed that the most frequent way of communication between practitioners and parents occurs during arrival and departure times (Sakellariou & Rentzou, 2007; Rekalidou & Penderi, 2010). Sakellariou and Rentzou (2007) argued that practitioners did not usually motivate parents for a closer collaboration. Though parents are unlikely to be involved in their children's education, studies revealed that when practitioners motivate them they are eager to get involved actively (Papandreou, 2009; Sakellariou, 2008). Practitioners seem to initiate communication with parents mainly to inform them about the curriculum or scheduled events, or when learning disabilities and behavioral problems are detected. Usually they are reluctant to collaborate with parents, probably because they think that parents may involve in their pedagogical work in an appropriate manner (Papandreou, Birbili, & Martidou, 2009; Rentzou, 2011).

The quality indicators of parent participation in Greece were extracted by limited research findings and based mainly on some official reports. They can be categorized at a three-level frame. At the lower level, parents are able to participate mainly by being informed. Practitioners provide notes, encourage parents to be involved in the program of preschool or attend a class, while the program is running, communicate informally when the child arrives or leaves preschool. At the good level, parents are more actively involved. They are very well informed about the educational procedures, they are usually invited to participate in school activities, and have the opportunity to observe the group in which their child will be enrolled. Practitioners also make sure that there is a specific space for parents in school, and prepare scheduled individual meetings with parents throughout the academic year. At the excellent level, parents are part of the school system. They participate in the evaluation of the school

program (interviews, questionnaire for parents etc.) or/and they can be members of the school board. They are also informed by written notes about their children's academic achievements, have access in their portfolios, and participate in workshops offered by experts or the practitioners in the school.

4.2 Portugal

The Framework Law of Pre-school education (Law no. 5/97, 10th February), defines ECEC as the first step in the educational system. It also recognizes it as a complement of parents' role in their children's education. Preschool education is an optional cycle for children from 3-5 year-olds, but from the school year of 2016/17 on, the universality of preschool education is recognized for children from 4-6 year olds (Law no. 65/2015, 3rd July). There is a public and a private network of early childhood education institutions, which are complementary. The Public network is composed of education institutions under the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labor, Solidarity and Social Security. The private network is composed of for-profit and non-profit education institutions. Those are private and cooperative education institutions, in the first case, and private institutions for social solidarity (IPSS), in the second case. All these organizations providing educational services in Portuguese ECEC from 3-5 years old remain under the tutelage of the Ministry of Education; Educational "services" to children under 3 years old is due by the Ministry of Labor, Solidarity and Social Security.

In Portugal, parent participation was legalized in 1986, almost a decade after the end of the dictatorship period. The most common way of (collective) participation was 'parents' associations,' which were incorporated in school management. It has been seen over the past decades

the emergence and growth of various forms of participation of families in preschool education. The individual or collective partnership with families, have shown the importance for educators to meet the different social and cultural backgrounds of the children and their contexts, when planning their educational action.

Until now parent participation in Portugal could be characterized as legalized, but lacking of a clear national implementation strategy and official guidelines. In 2016 the 'pre-school curriculum orientations' (Ministry of Education, 2016)—REFERENCE: Dispatch n^o 9180/2016 of 19 July might be considered as the legal regulations for parent participation in Portugal ECEC. These norms and regulations for the intervention of early childhood educators emphasize the importance of professionals to potentiate the family involvement in ECEC, also present some considerations on how to do so. Focus the importance of the relationship that the educator establishes with each family, considering that both are co-educators of the same child; the communication is vital and it has to take place through informal exchanges (oral or written) or at planned times (meetings with each family).

These “Preschool curriculum orientations” present some strategies that potentiate all parents/families participation in educational dynamics (for example, inviting parents to take part in preschool activities or informing them about the achievements of their children) and in collective organizational relationship of the educational establishment (for example, the creation of parents associations and their participation in the educational project).

The relevance of the partnership, individual and collective, with families, is also given in the sense of facilitating the transition of children from family environment to crèche, to start preschool education, for other educational contexts and also for primary education.

Recently, scientific research along with ‘good practices’ and parent participation projects has contributed in establishing effective strategies towards an active parent participation. Several research practices and studies developed in Portugal have addressed quite successfully different dimensions of the parent participation in school life. New research topics have emerged around the relation between family and school; some of them focusing in the importance of putting the child's point of view as the central perspective in an effective participation of the child and not reducing participation to the action of childhood educators and families.

4.3 Belgium - Flemish community

The Flemish system of ECEC is a split system with a clear distinction between childcare⁹ (0-2.5/3 y) and kindergarten or pre-school (2.5/3y - 6y). There are many differences between these two sectors¹⁰, but worth mentioning here is that in the childcare sector, parent participation has begun to be a more important part of the work than in the pre-school sector.

Child care

Parent participation is considered to be quite important in Flemish Community childcare provision. It is most often viewed as ‘a process of building trust, dialogue, reciprocity and action’. Parent participation has been developed in practice and has been legally embedded since 2014 (decree of 20/04/2012 into force as of 01/04/2014, art. 3 and 6). In order to get their license all childcare provisions are legally obligated to involve parents. The decree gives some minimal conditions that childcare services need to implement towards parents: An obligation to evaluate the satisfaction and the work in the childcare, regular concertation and communication on the pedagogical approach, the work with the child and in case of problems with the child, any decision of the licensing authority and access for parents to all the places where the child is being cared for. Parents also have the right to complain, ask and learn about the pedagogical process.

⁹ Childcare is provided in group settings (crèches) or with accredited childminders at home.

¹⁰ Different ministries, different qualifications, different working conditions, different adult/child ratio, different safety, hygiene and other regulations, different image....

In Flemish childcare, there is also a pedagogical framework, according to which parents are considered as 'partners by excellence'. Parent participation is considered a high-quality indicator here, and practitioners invest on building strong relationships with parents. The idea is to meet regularly with parents exchanging information about the children, discussing pedagogical issues, and ideas in order to collaborate and shape their children's care and education together. Childcare is not replacing or compensating the education at home, it is adding another educational context to it.

The basic principles are:

- The belief in the family's competence and strength: parents all want the best for their children. ECEC practitioners need to recognize this, be sensitive and consider parents as the first educator.
- Reciprocal relationships: education at home differs from the one in ECEC. That is no problem if practitioners invest in a reciprocal relationship with parents on this education. This means engaging in an ongoing process of being attentive and having consideration for each other's feelings, experiences and meaning-making. Only when parents feel respected, safe and recognised as parent, only when open and honest communication is possible, childcare can be meaningful for all (child, practitioner, parent).
- Childcare is a meeting place: meeting parents of other children can be very valuable and supportive. Parents can exchange views, ideas and experiences on raising young children within an informal setting. This way they can offer each other information but also emotional and social support in parenting, outside the professional context of family support.

Professionals do not only work with and for the children, but the framework also appeals to their responsibilities towards parents:

- Shape children's education together: ECEC respects the education at home and continues this in within a continuous dialogue with the parents, both mothers and fathers. In this way they can learn and understand the social, economic, cultural and pedagogical context of the home environment of the children and use this in the childcare work. Childcare professionals need to relate to them with consideration and respect for their values and beliefs. The parent's feelings and ideas on education can be 'translated' in childcare, but this does not mean that every parent's ideas should be followed blindly. The ECEC providers also have a vision on how to relate to children and the issue is to keep communicating about that.
- Broaden the educational scope of home/family: in ECEC settings children can expand their horizon and meet the outside world, other adults and peers, living in

a larger group, experiencing other ways of play, other languages...This way the learn about the other, and so do their parents.

- Facilitate participation in society: thanks to ECEC, parents can engage in other things as well, such as work, training, higher education and they can better combine their family life and their work or other activities they want to engage in. ECEC should be flexible enough to support this participation in society.
- Recognize and support connectedness: parents to not only meet professionals in ECEC, they also meet other parents and families. These contacts can offer information, support and a sense of being connected. ECEC can facilitate this meeting aspect, by which they also foster integration, exchange of ideas on education and mutual recognition.

However, we should also mention that these policy documents are rather recent (decree and pedagogical framework both 2014), and is not yet completely or regularly implemented in all childcare centers. Additional efforts, such as pedagogical coaching and support and self-evaluation instruments, are in place to improve the practice on the field.

Pre-school

In Kindergarten practice (pre-primary education, ages 2,5-6y) less attention is paid to the many different forms of parent participation. However, since 2004, all schools have the obligation to involve parents and create a participatory environment. The most common way of participation is through school boards. Every school has to have a council consisting of parents and staff. The members of the council have the right to be informed about issues related to school and the right to be heard as well. A specific parents' council is optional and is being created only when at least 10% of the parents request it. There is also a parent delegation in the Flemish Education Council (VLOR), which is an overall advisory council for the Flemish government.

In many pre-schools, parental involvement is not a mainstream practice yet. A recent study by Van Laere (Van Laere et al., 2017, forthcoming) describes e.g. what parents had to say in focus groups on how they experience pre-school and what pre-school education means to them. Some of the results show that they are quite interested in what happens in pre-school classes but that they have little knowledge of that. There is also quite some uncertainty about how their children are being cared for and supported in their education (and the differences with the home environment), about the lack of information and communication, about attitudes of the practitioners etc. All in all, they seem to be in a rather subordinate position in their relation to both staff and the school as an institution, which makes it hard for them to really be partners in their children's education.

Inspiring practices

In the document on the Flemish Community two 'good practice examples' were introduced. The first concerns the city policy of childcare in Ghent, where parent participation is present throughout the educational process. According to that policy, four groups are for the main actors in developing a high-quality childcare setting: children, parents, staff and community. Every parent is welcomed and treated with respect for diversity. There is special attention for families living in more vulnerable conditions (poverty, migration, single parents, low educational level etc.). Practically, parents take part in the activities, join scheduled meetings, volunteer at school, organize festivities together etc. Practice has shown that, when efforts are made by the childcare centers, all parents can be involved, including those who are considered 'not to be interested'.

The second example concerns an EQuaP partner, Elmer, a community-based childcare with four centers in different areas of the capital. As in Ghent, also Elmer's childcare policy acknowledges the four key players for a successful educational process: children, parents, staff and community. Elmer's childcare is based on principles of respect for diversity and the belief that everyone should feel a sense of belonging. Every family is welcomed, included vulnerable families, and all are treated with care and respect. Parent participation is evident in daily practice and parents get actively involved, not only in different activities but also in policy development of Elmer. Elmer's childcare approach for parent participation is considered to have also inspired other Flemish childcare services.

As it regards quality indicators in ECEC for parent participation in the Flemish community in Belgium, the document offers some general points of attention and questions to ask rather than a list of criteria to be checked. Indicatively, at the beginning of the school year or at the start of attending childcare, practitioners need to make all parents feeling welcomed, and create a climate of trust. During the school year or childcare years, parent participation shall go beyond a set of participation activities. Conditions shall be created allowing everyone to take part in their own way. Through ongoing dialogue, professionals and parents need to find their role in the pedagogical process and discover what ways work for them. Not all parents are willing or able to participate in the same way. Thus, in order all parents to be able to join in, a variety of activities shall be provided. Pedagogical documentation is mentioned in childcare as a positive tool for parent participation, to get the dialogue going, and by which parents and practitioners can discuss childcare issues as equals and actually parents give very important information to practitioners, so that practitioners can get to know and understand the children better.

4.4 Latvia

In Latvia, ECEC lasts one-year more compared to other European countries as children first attend primary education at the age of seven. The attendance is compulsory for children 5-7 years and can also be provided by families (homeschooling). Families educating their children at home may receive support at consultative centers. ECEC for children with special needs is

implemented in special early childhood educational establishments and groups. Due to the small number of places in public ECEC institutions, play centers can be either private, or public, and function as alternatives to pre-school education institutions. The main purpose of these centers is to provide child services for working parents, but they are obliged also to provide education activities for children.

In Latvia, the Education Law (Izglītībaslikums, 1999) recognizes that in order to promote quality in education, parents and society shall be parts of the educational process. The Ministry of Education and Science is in charge of developing state guidelines for ECEC and also patterns of appropriate educational programs based on play as a leading activity (Noteikumi par valstspirmsskolasizglītības vadlīnijām, 2012). Programs are developed based on a holistic approach, where children, staff, parents and community are considered as parts of a successful educational process. There are several programs elaborated in the Republic of Latvia, such as the program of preschool education till the age of 6, the special education program for preschools, the programs for minorities till the age of 6, where the Russian and Polish language are taught, the integrated preschool program for 6-year olds, and the integrated preschool program for minorities.

Parent participation in Latvia is defined as the collaboration between practitioners and parents for example through meetings, participation in activities, or donations to ECEC units. Although Latvia could be considered at an early stage of parent participation practices there are 'good practices' examples, which demonstrate that parents can actively participate in ECEC, some of these practices are following:

- "Parent Association of Latvia" was founded in 2011 and its mission is to provide parents opportunities to involve for the improvement of the ECEC environment. The association implements a project on parent education and helps organizing the European Parent Association (EPA) conference.
- "Parent Forum of Latvia" took place in Riga on May 2012 with representatives from 130 parent organizations, school board members and parents from all over Latvia. The main goal of the Forum was to give voice to parents, exchange ideas, and put forward proposals to several Ministries about strengthening the role of parents and develop a model of collaboration.
- "Open parents" is an organization that unites three Baltic parent associations (Parent association of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania) in order to educate parents and enhance their collaboration with educational institutes.
- "Friendly school" is a movement initiated by children's rights protection institution in order to build honest and mutual relationships among parents, practitioners, children and school administrators. Another goal is to find ways to prevent violence in ECEC units.

- “Program for children development” is a program implemented in the primary school of Zakumuizaa inspiring to help children becoming useful member of the society. Parents and practitioners work together having agreed on five vital characteristics that their children shall develop.

In general, the most frequent parent participation activities in Latvia ECEC are parents’ boards, meetings with practitioners& administrators, and participation in joint activities for children & parents such as workshops, excursions, celebrations etc. Parent participation in Latvia is at a developmental level and for this reason quality indicators cannot be presented. Though, based on the criteria for practitioners’ evaluation, preschool practitioners are considered that cooperate effectively with parents when she/he:

- Inform parents about the everyday achievements of their children.
- Inform parents about fees on time.
- Inform parents about the activities that take place in school.
- Provide opportunities to children and parents to develop educational materials.
- Organize individual meetings with parents in order to discuss issues that come up with their children.
- Invite parents to take part in preschool activities.
- Organize events and involve families in them.
- Allow parents to join the educational process and share valuable information with children.
- Organize workshops and share their experience with parents.

4.5 Slovenia

In Slovenia, ECEC is the same for all children from the age of one to six, and is an integral part of the education system. Since 1993, it has been under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, which ensures continuity from pre-school to basic school education. The state is responsible for the national policy, the legislative framework and the general program of ECEC. Municipalities establish kindergartens and are responsible for the implementation of the ECEC programs. They must provide places for all children or make call for a concession. ECEC education is provided separately for two age groups, 1-3 years and 3-6years. Also, in response to parents’ and children’s needs and upon agreement with the local municipality, ECEC units can offer different programs, such as full-day, half-day or even shorter ones.

In Slovenia parent participation was in place in the ECEC program but is officially mentioned in 1999 (Bahovec et al., 1999) in Preschool Curriculum, a document that refers to several objectives of ECEC. One of them is: the cooperation with parents, and the improvement of information for parents. Cooperation is defined as the obligation of the ECEC units to follow several practices such as: provide parents with written and oral information, prepare individual meetings between practitioners and parents, prepare meetings with other scientists, give parents the right to participate in planning the function of a preschool (Lepičnik &

Vodopivec, 2010). Cooperation is considered as an important aspect of the provided quality in Slovenian ECEC. According to Preschool Institutions Act (Zakon o vrtcih, uradnoprečiščeno besedilo (ZVrt-UPB2), Ur. l. RS, št. 100/2005), ECEC units have to list forms and programs of cooperation with families, when they make their year plan. It is also worth pointing out that parents have the right to participate in the planning of the ECEC units' operation, or of the actual educational work while respecting preschool practitioners' and preschool's autonomy.

In Slovenia there are three levels of quality in ECEC. Taking into account systemic and conceptual solutions in Slovenian preschools, based on research findings on individual quality indicators and on the basis of already designed models and approaches for determining quality in other countries, Slovenian authors have developed three basic levels of quality in preschools, and within each level additional domains and indicators of quality in preschools (Marjanovič Umek et al., 2002). The first level is the structural/contextual level, the second is the process level and the third is the indirect level. Indirect level refers to all those informal opportunities and relationships in which ECEC education takes place. In this case a child is not directly involved, but is indirectly affected. Cooperation between parents and practitioners is such a relationship. There are three quality indicators on cooperation with parents: formal forms of cooperation (meetings with parents, lectures for parents, written information for parents, participation in several events, parents' council), informal forms of cooperation (unplanned conversation between parents and practitioners when the child arrives or leaves school, excursions, workshops) and active involvement of parents (parent participation in the school operation, problem solving) (Marjanovič, et al., 2002).

In order to get an insight of some examples for the three above forms, 35 schools from Slovenia were invited to present their 'good practices' about parent participation. The following forms of practices were presented:

- I. Formal forms of cooperation: a) individual meetings with parents about their children development, b) parental meetings where parents are informed about the program, c) written materials and messages for parents about several issues, d) parents' council and e) working meetings of representatives of preschool's council
- II. Informal forms of cooperation: a) creative activities with children and parents, b) workshops for parents in order to discuss several issues, c) picnics, d) sport events with children and parents, e) trips and excursions, f) various final meetings-presentations from children to their parents
- III. Active involvement: a) parents spend a day with their children in preschool in order to present their profession, present games from the past, cook etc., b) parents cooperate with practitioners in order to plan activities for the whole year or evaluate activities at the end of the year.

Examples of good practice, addressing migrant families, families with a minority background, socio-economically (SE) disadvantaged families etc. in its objectives, content, or diversities of modes of implementation of activities are not very common, but they could be detected among examples, that we have received. In most cases, preschool practitioners have pointed out that they do not have children from families with a migrant/minority background or from a SE disadvantaged family in their group of children. Those practitioners who have those children/families included in their group, and recognize the need to adapt forms of cooperation according to families' needs, first try to achieve that these families attend events that are planned and (at first, as passive participants). When they achieve this, preschool practitioners provide all necessary material for a certain activity (in order not to make family's financial burden even greater) or choose such an activity in which families can use waste/natural material. When organizing different events, practitioners offer different ways for parent/parent participation: investment of their time (preparation/cleaning) rather than providing financial, material resources. Or, for example, arrange meetings/events, which primary purpose is to help families in need (donations, rent or exchange).

Quality indicators of parent participation in Slovenia were presented in an extended article and it is beyond the purposes of the present review to present all of them. Quality indicators are presented according to ISSA (International Step by Step Association), which serves as learning community and a champion for quality and equity for all children and their families, and of which Slovenian partner is a member. Quality indicators about parent participation, as developed by ISSA, and endorsed and implemented by Slovenian partner in (pre-) schools with which the partners cooperate, are the following:

- Knowledge and appreciation of families and communities strengthen relationships with and among them.
- Sensitive, respectful and reciprocal communication with families supports children's development and learning.
- Services are best provided in partnerships with families.
- Inclusion provides equal opportunities for every child and family to participate.
- Inclusion is promoted through partnerships with families.

(Source: <http://issa.nl/content/quality-framework-birth-three-services>)

- The educator invites and welcomes family members into the classroom and finds ways for all families to participate in the educational process and life of the learning community.
- The educator involves family members in shared decision-making about their children's learning, development, and social life in the classroom.
- The educator involves family members in decision-making concerning children's learning environments.

- The educator regularly communicates with families about their children, their learning and development, curriculum requirements, and the events in the classroom.
- The educator regularly communicates with families to learn about a child's background in order to gain insights on the child's strengths, interests, and needs.
- The educator promotes opportunities for families to learn from one another and to support each other.
- The educator uses knowledge of children's communities and families as an integral part of the curriculum and their learning experiences.
- The educator offers information and ideas for parents and family members on how to create a stimulating home learning environment and helps to strengthen parent competences.
- The educator treats every family with respect, dignity, and consideration and finds ways to involve them in their child's education.
- The educator and family members share information regarding children's progress and interests and together create short-term and long-term individual goals.

(Source: <http://www.issa.nl/sites/default/files/Quality-Principles-final-WEB.pdf>)

4.6 Italy

In Italy the existing system of ECEC is characterized as a "split" system providing services for preschool (0-3 years) and kindergarten (3-6 years). It is worth mentioning that in the recent years the continuity of the learning process from 3 to 14 years is widely discussed.

Municipalities or private initiatives supervise the services provided for children between 0-3 years. According to the latest report of the European Commission, Italy has a low percentage of children's attendance in preschool services (26%). It is also remarkable that in fact, there is not a formal curriculum, but only some general guidelines and targets. Parent participation was initially mentioned in the National Law in 1971, where nurseries were officially established with the aim of providing a temporary safekeeping of children and assist families. Nurseries are the first institutions that care and protect children after the family. According to the above Law, families, representatives of social groups and practitioners operate the nurseries together. Nowadays, nursery schools are recognized as places of education and learning for young children. There is an explicit reference to the participation of families, where nurseries shall provide many opportunities to parents to engage in their schedule.

On the other hand, children attending kindergartens (3-6 years) have reached the percentage of 95%. Kindergartens are supervised by the Ministry of Education, University and Research. In some municipalities of Italy, there are 0-6 years services, characterized by a pedagogical consistency and continuity. A formal curriculum is provided for the segment 3-6 that formalizes the aims of ECEC. Moreover, and suggests specific educational methods. Parent participation has been legally introduced in 1973, but had been limited at the concept of representation,

failing to provide sufficient results. Since the 90s new laws have been implemented and parent participation is encouraged in many ways and is also considered necessary for the educational process.

In 2014, the bill n. 1260/2014 mentioned that there is a need for educational continuity between nursery and preschool and also there is a need for parents to actively participate. On March 2015, the above law was reorganized in order to regulate the autonomy of educational institutions and provide schools the necessary resources and tools to achieve their educational and organizational choices.

The evolution of research in Italy regarding ECEC led gradually to consider preschool institutions as very important places of education and welfare and not as places providing only care. In Italy, the ecological approach of Bronfenbrenner (1979) has deeply influenced the way of seeing parent participation in education. The child is considered as an entity that is influenced by the interconnections between multiple environmental situations. ECEC and family are two very important environments for the child and they have to cooperate to help child development. The emphasis of the relation between practitioners and children has been transferred to practitioners and parents, so adults share the care for the child (Bonomi, 1998; Guerra, Luciano, 2009). Today, in the Italian scientific literature, parent participation is considered as an indicator of quality in education (Bondioli, Mantovani, 1997; Cagliari, 2014; CNEL, 2010; Milani, 2008; New & Bove, 2009). Milani (2008) showed that in Italy, there is a model of parent participation that offers information, content, and respect to each individual. Parents are given the opportunity to educate themselves and use these skills thoughtfully.

Nowadays, in Italy there are some ECEC practices, which are considered as successful in giving opportunities to parents to collaborate, discuss and share with practitioners. Such practices are:

- a) A conversation between parents and practitioners mostly at the beginning of the year, where very important information are exchanged from parents to practitioners
- b) Settling in. It is the time and space of transition from family to the educational institution. This is a fragile period for both parents and children and has to be handled with care. Settling in, includes all that time, moments, space, piece of advice given from practitioners to parents, to help their children adjust as good as possible,
- c) Arrival & Departure. All those moments and short discussions taking place during the arrival and departure time between parents and practitioners. Although short conversations, they are very important in exchanging information about children's daily routines. Practitioners accompany whoever comes and leaves the school with particular attention.
- d) Individual conversations throughout the academic year. Conversations between parents and teacher about several issues concerning the child. Parents and practitioners exchange information in order to solve problems and follow together a common strategy.

e) Parents-educators get together. Meetings with experts, classroom meetings, parties, excursions, workshops etc. enhance parent participation in ECEC and help parents feel welcomed and part of educational process. One should also add the “pedagogical documentation” as a strategy supporting parent participation. Practitioners have the authority and families cooperate with them as partners in a dialogue. Children and families can express their opinion, propose ideas and solutions, ask questions and provide feedback.

4.7 Sweden

In Sweden ECEC begins at the first year of a child’s age and lasts until the 7th year. The Swedish Parliament and the Government set out the goals and guidelines for ECEC and primary school through the Education Act and the Curricula. ECEC is regulated in [the Education Act](#) but have two different curricula. ECEC has had its own curriculum since 1998 (revised in 2010), and the preprimary class is incorporated in the school system. The compulsory school and the preprimary class, as well as the leisure-time centers share a common curriculum (Läroplanförgrundskolan, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet, 2011). The preprimary class is a voluntary type of school within the public school system. The activities in preprimary classes should be considered as teaching in the same sense as in other types of school. Leisure time centers are educational group facilities, operating during the times of the day when schools are closed for enrolled children, for children whose parents are working or studying or for children who have their own needs of the facilities. Generally leisure time centers are integrated within schools. Leisure-time centers are aimed at children up to 12 years old who attend school.

Conclusions of the EQUAP partner review

After the above presented research findings, guidelines given by national and official organizations and good practices provided by the 7 European country-members of the EQUAP project, some valuable conclusions could be drawn. These conclusions may offer a fertile ground for further discussion and development of new strategies towards increasing parent participation in ECEC at a European level.

- Most important, parent participation is officially recognized as a quality indicator in ECEC both by the Equap partners and in relevant documents (Epstein, 1995; European Commission-Directorate-General for education and culture, May, 2001; European Parliament and the council to member states, 2001/166/EC; OECD, 2012; Sayed, 2015). Education programs that include parents are the most effective ones, and research findings indicate that parent participation even at a minimum level can positively influence children’s academic achievements (Smith, et al, 2012; Westemoreland et al, 2009). Parent participation also shapes the ways in which professionals and parents together establish co-educating partnerships; an alliance that benefits all involved parties. Educational laws and curriculums in all 7 countries participating in the EQUAP project identify parent participation as a significant factor that practitioners and the community have to take into account.

- Most of the 7 countries participating in the EQUAP project (Greece, Portugal, Flemish community of Belgium, Italy, and Sweden) have a split ECEC system with a clear division between the ages of 1y-3/4 y and 3/4-6 y. Latvia and Slovenia have an integrated ECEC-systems for all children ages 1 to 6. In the countries with split ECEC, different parent participation practices are implemented for these two groups. In Greece, Portugal, and Italy there is an increasing interest for parent participation mostly in kindergartens, concerning the ages 3/4-6. On the contrary, in the Flemish community of Belgium there is more attention paid in parent participation in the childcare sectors (ages 0 – 2,5/3y), while parents are far less involved in pre-school practice (2,5/3 - 6y). In Latvia and Slovenia parent participation practices are implemented for all ages from 0 to 6. The forms of inviting parents to participate are general, but implementation depends on each teacher and the group of parents.
- Although curricula and educational laws in all 7 countries promote parent participation in ECEC, it seems that in practice most of the countries admit that parent participation is not equally well established throughout the whole ECEC sector. The Flemish community of Belgium, Latvia and Slovenia seem to be more confident about their parent participation practices. Even though formal and informal ways of participation are implemented in all seven countries, further attempts are needed in order to enhance and deepen actions and strategies parent participation. Also, the debate on the importance and meaning of parent participation needs to be upgraded.
- The most frequent formal way of participation is the participation of family members in school boards or councils, where parents can take part in decisions concerning school management or can give their advice. It seems that all seven countries give parents this opportunity. Latvia also demonstrated many organizations for Latvian parents, so that parents are not only informed about several pedagogical issues, but also have the right to make decisions. Italy also mentioned a way of parent participation, albeit not all that formal. Practitioners and parents discuss several issues, parents express their opinion, they have a voice and they decide together with practitioners. They discuss managerial or pedagogical issues at an equal level. Latvia and Italy usually follow parent participation practices that are consistent with national organizations' guidelines for parent participation.
- Overall, it does seem that the more informal ways of participation are most frequently implemented in ECEC. Greece, the Flemish community, Latvia, Slovenia and Italy demonstrated activities with parents such as: scheduled or circumstantial meetings with parents, communication with parents during arrival and departure time, meetings with professionals about several issues, voluntary work of parents, parent's participation in several activities taking place in preschool, excursions, parties etc. All these informal ways are very important in order to make parents feel comfortable and welcomed at school (Van Avermaet et al, 2013). Especially the Flemish community of Belgium has demonstrated two "good practice" examples of parent participation in ECEC in the city of Ghent and Elmer.

According to their educational policies, parents are involved in many informal ways and become part of the educational process. These practices described by the Flemish community of Belgium are consistent with either current legislation or the pedagogical framework for childcare on parent participation.

- Having said this, it is not the formal or informal character of participation models that will define its meaningfulness or democratic value. This distinction may not be so relevant as formal participation models can still be quite powerless or not involving all groups of parents, while informal models can really influence and change the practice in an ECEC setting.
- Greece and Slovenia have demonstrated quality indicators for parent participation and both concluded that they are organized at 3 levels. Slovenia, as mentioned before, has presented quality indicators according to ISSA (International Step by Step Association), and Greece provided quality indicators based partially on the limited research findings and mainly on international scientific findings and/or policies. A general conclusion of this distinction could be that: At a minimum/informal level, parents are being informed about the school program, join informal conversations etc. At a good/formal level, parents take part in school activities, attend school meetings and workshops etc., and in an excellent/active involvement level, parents are members of the school boards, they have a voice and decide together with practitioners about managerial issues.

Implications and further debate

According to the research findings presented in this review and the data provided by the seven country-members of the EQuaP project, meaningful parent participation in ECEC should be promoted and further developed. Not only because of the long-term effects that it has for children's academic, social and emotional development (Barbour et al., 2012; Lindeboom & Buiskool, 2013) but also because it shapes the educational partnerships between professionals and parents, the latter being the first educators. Processes of reciprocal and respectful dialogue and working on co-educating together can come in many different shapes and forms. The challenge lies in the continuous search for the most appropriate ways, for every child's parents to be able and willing to participate in their children's education in a meaningful way. It is also important to give opportunities for participation to all families, according to their needs and regardless their different backgrounds or needs. As societies and families are changing and becoming more and more diverse, because of social, economic and political changes around the world, ECEC practitioners have to be ready, by training and sufficient support throughout, to meet all these challenges and continue to provide equal opportunities for children and their families (OECD, 2012). Different participative actions and strategies need to be designed in a dialogue setting, in which parents are considered to be partners of ECEC practitioners.