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# Encouraging intercultural attitudes and practices in contemporary ECEC services. Insights from the research conducted in Italy, Spain, and Hungary

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a European survey that was part of a European funded project, entitled 'Multicultural Early Childhood Education', carried out between 2017 and 2018, in three countries: Italy, Spain, and Hungary. The goal was to explore the intercultural training needs of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) professionals, to support them to meet the needs of different children and families, with a focus on the ones with immigrant, refugee, and Roma background. It was an exploratory study about the cultural background of ECEC educators, through an analysis of their competences and training needs, with an attention to the issues of multiculturalism and interculturality. The research was focused on the 'good practices' promoted within the educational contexts of partner institutions. The survey was carried out through a semi-structured questionnaire, delivered to a sample of 477 practitioners and pedagogical coordinators/coaches working in ECEC services of Tuscany, Barcelona, and Budapest, collecting 260 completed questionnaires. Analysis of the data collected shows the importance of strengthening the relationship between ECEC services and immigrant families to promote the inclusion of children and their families. The analysis also shows that training and support are needed for ECEC practitioners to improve their practice in this field.

**Abbreviations:** CIRRF: children from immigrant, refugee, and Roma families; ECEC: Early Childhood Education and Care; MECEC+: Multicultural Early Childhood Education and Care

## KEYWORDS

Diversity; immigrant; refugee; Roma children; intercultural training needs; Early Childhood Education and Care services; disadvantage

## 1. Introduction

European Countries are increasingly marked by a plurality of social, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious differences. In the second half of the twentieth century, the historical pluralism related to the evolution of individual countries generated new forms of cultural hybridisation and contamination (Callari Galli, Cambi, and Ceruti 2003; Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Vandenbroeck 1999). While dominating the contemporary global scenario,

migration processes are transforming present-day societies, shortening the distances between continents and countries, bringing peoples and cultures together, and changing people's lifestyles, therefore reducing the distance between 'us' and 'them' (Susi 1999).

Facing the phenomena mentioned above, pedagogical and educational research has played a central role in identifying models and practices, which might help answer the challenges posed by new social conditions. In time, these models and practices have gradually turned into a field of pedagogical research and practice, under the name of *intercultural education* (Abdallah-Pretceille 1999; Damiano 1999; Davis and Elliott 2014).

To fully understand what intercultural education is, it is first necessary to define what in this article we mean by *interculturality*. By interculturality, we mean something more than multiculturalism; hence, intercultural education promotes an educational approach that aims to go beyond the perspective of simple multiculturalism. While the latter is limited to re-conscience in a society of ethnically culturally diverse groups, interculturality conceives the interaction between groups as the result of a commitment to overcome mutual distrust and to identify forms of coexistence in diversity. In this sense the prefix 'inter-' highlights the dimension of *exchange* and *reciprocity* between subjects, with different ethnic, linguistic, religious, socio-economic backgrounds (Cantle 2012; Silva 2011, 41).

Hence, in this framework, intercultural education not only emerges as a response to specific needs characterising pupils with a migrant background (e.g. maintaining their native language); more than anything else, but also intends to be an educational proposal addressing all pupils, whether they have an autochthonous or migrant background, within a 'progressive universalism' perspective (Silva 2005). Intercultural education implies a review of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)/school programmes and textbooks; moreover, it considers language in its function of communication and as a tool of, and for, cultural identification. Intercultural education is strictly linked to the assumption of a specific 'pedagogical perspective', which is the result of a reflection that originated in the 1970s, further developed in response to the many EU emanations aimed at promoting social inclusion, social equity, accessibility, and quality of education for all, from the earliest years of life, and to fight against discrimination and – also educational – poverty (European Commission 2011, 2013, 2017, 2018a; Eurostat 2013; Eurydice 2009; Guerin 2014). The need for investing in approaches and practices capable of valuing diversity is also underlined by the European Quality Framework (European Commission Thematic Group on ECEC Quality 2014).

Indeed, the increasing diversity of our societies requires a joint political commitment of all European countries, calling for a common engagement of institutions and local services (police headquarters, social and health facilities, schools, ECEC services, etc.) in implementing social cohesion strategies (European Commission – General Directorate for Justice 2013; European Commission 2016). From the early 2000s, the European Commission has devoted increasing attention to ECEC, by highlighting its function in terms of not only children's positive development but also as a sort of 'guarantor' in promoting equal educational opportunities for all children, and a full social and cultural inclusion for children and their families (European Commission 2006; European Commission, Eacea, Eurydice, Eurostat 2014). Indeed, preschool services have been increasingly playing a determining role in socialisation and integration processes of children and their parents, and – more broadly – of local community as well (European Commission

2013; European Commission, Eurydice, and Eacea 2009). Nowadays, ECEC services are more and more reflecting our heterogeneous social reality, as much as they welcome an increasing number of children and families with a migration background (Eurostat 2018; ISTAT 2018). Barriers and thresholds still exist anyhow concerning the accessibility of ECEC services towards children/families with vulnerable backgrounds (Vandenbroeck and Lazzari 2013; European Commission 2018b).

For ECEC services to become the contexts of social inclusion – especially for children having a migration background and their families – it is necessary that Early Childhood professionals receive both initial and ongoing training focused on diversity (Harte, Facundo, and Stepanek 2017; Silva 2004; Goodman and Gregg 2010). Indeed, educational staff need specific competences and skills, which would enable them to read the pluralism characterising – through social, economic, religious, linguistic aspects, and so on – today's ECEC services. Despite the efforts of some EU countries in including a focus on diversity in their initial training for ECEC practitioners, a large number of educators are actually precluded from the possibility of acquiring accurate skills and competences regarding the reception of immigrant children and their families (European Commission 2014; Fiorucci 2011; Pirard et al. 2015; Silva 2011). This oversight is also because in many European countries, educators are not required to have an initial qualification at bachelor level or similar, and, in many cases, continuous professional development (CPD) paths are also not sufficient (SEEPRO 2017). Finally, the situation is underpinned throughout European countries by the shortage of empirical research on educators' needs, focused on their intercultural skills and competences; without this kind of knowledge, it is not possible to contribute to identifying effective educational strategies in this regard (Silva 2004, 2008, 2016).

The analysis of the intercultural training needs of professionals working in ECEC services addressed to the age group 0–3 is of primary importance (Peeters and Sharmahd 2014; Silva 2018). This is precisely the perspective the EU Project entitled 'Multicultural Early Childhood Education+' (MECEC+) was based on.<sup>1</sup> The goal of the project was to realise an explorative study in three countries: Italy (Tuscany); Hungary (Budapest); Spain (Catalonia), analysing the skills and competences. ECEC practitioners perceive to have and need today to deal with the diversity of children and families. On the basis of this, the study aimed at reflecting on the needed training (initial and in-service) for ECEC staff. The MECEC+ Project was inspired by the idea that intercultural training is an essential requirement for educators and other childcare professionals; it is actually a priority for them to acquire the theoretical and practical vision and tools to enable them to read today's sociocultural reality (Allemann-Ghionda 2009; Portera 2014).

## 2. Aims and method

The aims of the research were understanding (a) the level of knowledge and awareness of ECEC professionals working with 0–6 years old children, in relation to interculturality; (b) the needs of ECEC professionals in dealing with diversity;

The latter were explored through a semi-structured questionnaire, with multiple-choice and open-ended questions, drafted jointly by the partners of the three Universities involved (Florence, Budapest, Vic).

Once we had defined the research goals, we identified the areas and the constructs to be investigated, dividing the questionnaire into six main topics, which have been divided into

specific items and questions. Their order of presentation was based on a funnel succession, therefore passing from general questions to more specific ones, to give the respondent the opportunity to focus more and more on the subject of diversity and interculturality (Bove 2009; Moran et al. 2017).

A semi-structured questionnaire was created from here, consisting of 31 close-ended questions (multiple-choice and filter questions), and 3 open-ended questions. Here we report a summary of areas and items (Table 1).

The questionnaire was delivered to all 477 educators and pedagogical coordinators working in the ECEC services of *ARCA Cooperativa Sociale* in Florence, *ENCÍS Serveis a les persones* in Barcelona, and *Józsefvárosi Egyesített Bölcsődék* in Budapest, collecting 260 completed questionnaires: 97 in Hungary (Budapest), 101 in Italy (Tuscany), and 62 in Spain (Catalonia).

It needs to be noted that this is a first exploratory study, which would need more in-depth qualitative instruments to better explore the meanings of the given answers, considering the limits a questionnaire can have in this area. On the other hand, using this kind of closed instrument has the strength of reaching a high number of respondents and allowing a certain degree of generalisation.

Previous research highlighted how crucial it is to focus initial and in-service training of ECEC staff on how to value diversity and improve accessibility, by investing on reflective and relational competences of ECEC practitioners (Peeters and Sharmahd 2014; Peeters and Vandenbroeck 2011). These pieces of evidence were included in the questionnaire developed in our study on interculturality. The questionnaire jointly elaborated by the three partners (University of Florence, University of Budapest, University of Vic) was then shared with all project partners, who adapted it to their own contexts. Each partner then proceeded to carry out the empirical survey in the selected ECEC centres. The latter were represented by the services managed by the Organisations partners in the project (besides the three Universities involved): Social Cooperative ARCA (Italy), ENCIS Cooperative (Spain), and JEB nursery (Hungary).

**Table 1.** The area and summary of themes of the semi-structured questionnaire.

Area	Summary of themes
(1) Knowledge of the phenomenon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge on the condition of the immigrant, refugee, asylum seekers and/or Roma families present in the territory</li> <li>• Awareness of the needs of these families</li> <li>• Awareness of prejudices</li> </ul>
(2) Intercultural training needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need for support in dealing with diversity</li> <li>• Need for specific competences/skills</li> <li>• Support received at the moment</li> </ul>
(3) Initial training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge, skills, competences acquired through initial training</li> </ul>
(4) Ongoing training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge, skills, competences acquired through ongoing training</li> </ul>
(5) Relationship with families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perception of the expectations parents have with the ECEC centre</li> <li>• Strengths and challenges in the relationship with families</li> <li>• Perspectives and actions on promoting the relationship among families</li> </ul>
(6) Approach to diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ideas and practice concerning valuing diversity</li> <li>• Multilingual practice</li> <li>• Attention to different needs concerning food, routine rituals, etc.</li> </ul>

### **2.1. The instrument used: strengths**

We chose to use an online questionnaire because, if compared to traditional methods, it has many advantages, ensuring: (1) speedier survey management: the timing of the survey is shorter than a survey carried out employing traditional methods; (2) quick data monitoring and data analysis; execution times are reduced; (3) reduction in costs; (4) non-intrusive data-detection: a questionnaire completed online is a questionnaire the user decides to respond to. Therefore, this improves not only the spontaneity of the questionnaire replies but also their fidelity (Caselli 2005; Sharmahd 2012). Furthermore, anonymity allows respondents to give their opinions even when inconvenient or ‘unpopular’; (5) achievement of different targets: thanks to the online administration, it is possible to cover a wide geographical territory.

### **2.2. The instrument used: limits**

Besides these strengths, an online questionnaire used to explore this subject has, of course, also some limits, considering that the questions cannot be deepened, and that complex concepts have to be necessarily simplified. As we said, this is a first exploratory study, which gives indications to be eventually further explored through other instruments, for example, qualitative ones, such as focus groups, interviews etc (Denzin and Lincoln 1994; Mantovani and Gattico 1998). Besides, in a further development of this study, it would be interesting to include also the voices of families.

The outcomes of the analysis of the data collected in the three partner countries are synthetically illustrated here below, and indications are given on how to support ECEC staff, to improve the reception and involvement of children and their families, with a focus on the ones with a vulnerable background.

## **3. Results**

In the following paragraphs, we have a look at the results carried out in each of the three countries involved, before giving a general overview of the outcomes.

### **3.1. The Italian context**

In Italy, the survey was conducted in Tuscany. In this context, the respondents encompassed by the research are 280. They are all members of educational services staff employed by ARCA Social Cooperative (*Arca Cooperativa Sociale*), one of the most important institutions involved in ECEC at the Italian level and a partner of MECEC+ Project. Most of those interviewed operate in Florence and its surroundings as well as in other Tuscan municipalities.

Concerning the sample of 280 professionals (practitioners and pedagogical coordinators), 101 were those who actually answered the questionnaire.

Educators and coordinators involved offered sufficient data to draw a number of research findings, also formulating some relevant conclusions and recommendations.

The answers allowed us to outline the professional profile of professionals working in ECEC services. In Tuscany, most of the educators are women, aged between 18 and 40

years. They are usually full-time employees, with a stable contract. In addition, most of the interviewees have a bachelor in a pedagogical field (Pedagogy, Education, Early Childhood, or similar).

The research was specifically aimed at exploring the involvement of ECEC professionals with children from immigrant, refugee, and Roma background, and their families (CIRRF), as categories usually perceived as 'diverse'. More than half of those interviewed (57.4%) answered that they were not very familiar with the condition of CIRRF present in the territory they were working in. Nevertheless, faced with such a situation, it is interesting to observe that half of the staff interviewed (49.5%) believe that they are aware of the immigrant parents' needs, though not sufficiently.

It is also interesting to know that, regarding the necessary intercultural and educational skills for receiving CIRRF and their families, only a few educators (4%) believe they have this kind of skills, and 68.3% feel they have them, but not sufficiently. Considering this, 58.4% of respondents say they need intercultural training, open to diversity, which could help them to better meet the needs of immigrant children and their families. The areas in which they feel a particular lack of intercultural skills are daily routines (hygiene/toilet, sleeping, eating, etc.) (39.6%), followed by structured activities (24.8%) and free play (6.9%). It is interesting to notice that support seems to be needed most of all in dealing with the 'caring' moments, which underlines the importance of investing in an 'educare' approach in which education and care are interconnected (Hayes 2008; Van Laere, Peeters, and Vandenbroeck 2012). The caring aspects are often the 'worry' of parents too, which means that families and professionals can meet on this common field and build further their relationship starting from there.

Several educators said that they really 'feel the need for intercultural training' (17%) in their relationship with families. These educators said that the actions that could improve their relationship between the educational services they work in and immigrant families should be preferably aimed at arranging (group and individual) meetings: meetings on the most significant educational issues (42%); among parents (37%); aimed at facing specific problems of each class (9%); including systematic individual parent-teacher talks (25%). Aside from the questionnaire answers, 10% of respondents added: meetings aimed at combating judgements and prejudices; improving communication; organising intercultural events with the participation of everyone (children, parents, grandparents, and educators); cultural mediation; and translating documents and information. There is a need for a linguistic-cultural mediation service according to 75% of educators; moreover, they think that it would be important to translate the documentation and information sent by educational services to families also into the languages of parents with a migrant background.

Regarding communication and dialogue between families and educators, 21% of respondents answered that they think families perceive ECEC services as important ones both for their children and for them. They think parents see ECEC services as safe and welcoming places, in which their children can be looked after; as contexts offering useful time to children, to be spent with people taking care of them; as spaces offering the possibility of sharing and exchanging experiences with other children, in the process of common growth. Accordingly, professionals themselves see ECEC services as an opportunity for inclusion, of their children and themselves; a 'first step' towards inclusion into the host society; a community, based on aggregation, hospitality and



involvement, offering the possibility of establishing and enjoying new friendships; a place where children can reciprocally socialise, while learning other language(s); a possibility for promoting integration of CIRRF (both children and families) while helping all of them to valorise their own cultural background; last but not least, a resource helping children to improve the potential of their inclusion into mainstream society.

In conclusion, the presence of CIRRF and their parents in ECEC services puts all professionals in front of new duties and unseen challenges, which go well beyond the welcoming practices in educational services (Urban et al. 2012). What is required of educators and pedagogical coordinators – and in general of all educational staff – is to start a renovation process that invests in the educational planning and the relationships with families. To do so, investment in reflecting on daily practice and in relational competences is needed.

### **3.2. The Spanish context**

Specifically about the Spanish context, the questionnaire was sent online to 100 educators working in ECEC centres addressed to the age group 0–3, in the following areas of Catalonia: Bages, Solsonès, Anoia, Barcelonès, Segarra, Vallès Occidental, Baix Llobregat, Segrià, Berguedà, and Moianès. Sixty two of them responded.

The first aspect that emerged, regarding CIRRF families and intercultural education initiatives, is educators' awareness of the fact that they feel they do not know enough about how to effectively deal with cultural diversity, intercultural education, and/or how to meet families' needs. Thus, for example, when responding to whether they have or not 'educative and intercultural tools necessary to receive and interact in an effective way with CIRRF and their families', 61% responds 'yes, but not enough', while 26% 'no', and 8% thinks they do.

A positive response can be detected in their willingness to learn more about the intercultural approach. In fact, 39% responds they are 'very much' willing to learn, and 48% 'quite', against 11% responding 'not much'.

Moreover, the great majority of educators are aware that CIRRF and their families suffer from prejudices. Over 50% of educators consider that the current pluralism does not represent a 'problem' in the daily life of services, and it is actually seen as a resource. Instead, the other half seems to be aware that it does (47% 'not much'; 11% replies 'no'; 37%, 'quite', and 5%, 'yes'). Anyway, concerning these educators, we must also consider that, at least some of them, could be already addressing intercultural education well: so, for them, due to this reason, it could be not a 'problem'. In other words, we need to be careful with the interpretations given to the answers, considering the limits of a closed questionnaire.

Besides, there still seem to be some unresolved aspects between the (CIRRF and non-CIRRF) families, and between CIRRF families and educators. As regards the question: 'In your opinion, which type of relations do you establish between local children and those children born in other countries?', most educators reply 'excellent' (37%), or 'very good' (32%); and 19% replied 'quite good'. However, when asking the same concerning the relations between autochthonous and non-autochthonous families, the answers are slightly different: 48% claim they are 'quite good', 19% responds 'very good', and 11% were 'indifferent'. Although with a small difference, it seems that practitioners consider it is 'easier' for children with a different background to have positive relationships, then



for their parents. But further research would be needed to fully grasp the meaning of these answers. The answers to the question: 'Do you consider that there are relational difficulties between educators and CIRRF families?' reinforces the impression that there are still some unresolved issues concerning this matter: although 50% replies 'no'; 35% reply 'yes, on both sides'; 8% 'felt by the educators', and 6% 'felt by families'. When asking what type of actions could improve the relations between the service and families, educators respond that more meetings and different types of activities addressed to parents ought to be planned. Furthermore, most of them reply that a linguistic and cultural mediation with families is sometimes necessary (73%; 24% reply 'always').

Besides that, most educators are aware that CIRRF families typically attend meetings (60%); if not, they reply that perhaps this is due to work-related reasons (24%); a lack of understanding of the language (23%); the fact that families do not consider their participation important (22%). When asking if the service organises lifelong learning sessions on interculturality/diversity (including reflecting on daily practice), 69% answered 'no'; 24% replied 'yes, from time to time'. This lack of training on intercultural topics may lead educators to ignore some relevant aspects concerning their role and impact (for example, by accidentally promoting, as 'cultural agents', values conflicting with those of CIRRF). They would also probably have insufficient awareness of more interculturally respectful (and useful) strategies to communicate with CIRRF and their families.

Specifically, regarding the difficulties that might arise within the relationships between educators and families, a majority of educators (45%) believe that they are linguistic; 21% that they are due to cultural obstacles; and 14%, socio-economic. In any case, we must point out that, to correctly read these data, we have to consider that, in Catalonia, the number of Spanish-speaking CIRRF can vary greatly (Benito and Gonzalez 2007). However, concerning the fact that most educators show they are aware of not having sufficient knowledge about intercultural education and relationships, their interpretation that the possible difficulties are linguistic might sometimes be a misinterpretation of what actually occurs, which might be also related to other relational/communicative aspects involving competences of practitioners.

### **3.3. The Hungarian context**

In Hungary, the questionnaire was submitted online to 97 professionals working in ECEC services run by Józsefvárosi Egyesített Bölcsdék (JEB: ECEC services (0–3) in Józsefváros, Budapest – partner of the project), collecting a total of 97 responses. Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest and JEB adapted some questions on the basis of the particular local context in which the questionnaire was distributed. The questionnaire was sent to the ECEC services located in the eighth district in Budapest.

The educational services involved welcome many CIRRF. It, therefore, seems appropriate to reflect on the ideas that educators may have regarding these children and their families, which in Hungary at the moment are at high risk of social exclusion. Concerning the knowledge of cultural diversity, Hungarian educators feel quite confident about their educational approaches and the ability to promote the inclusion of children with a diverse cultural background. Most of them also claim to have enough working methods focused on intercultural education. However, considering the Hungarian context, one can wonder

whether this feeling of being competent hides a possible ‘rigid’ way of dealing with diversity itself, in which not much space is left for being ‘unsure’, questioning, having (constructive) doubts (Urban 2008).

On the other hand, most educators feel the need to expand their knowledge, especially in structured activities and routines. More specifically, 38% of them answered ‘yes’, while 50% answered ‘yes, but not sufficiently’.

They also suggest that, in carrying out structured activities, it would be necessary to ‘incorporate’ the tools provided by art education to value differences, mitigating disadvantage. Besides, they mention that it would be useful to learn about different contexts; to present visual techniques from different contexts; to propose storytelling, poems, fairy tales, and folktales of different contexts; and to sing in different languages. Although deeper research would be needed to correctly understand the data, these answers seem to suggest on the one hand the need of practitioners of improving their competences when it comes to dealing with diversity; on the other hand, they also underline the risk of falling in a ‘folklorisation’ of intercultural education, in which valuing diversity might be reduced to getting to know habits of other ‘cultures’. This ‘reduced/simplified’ vision on what intercultural education should be is confirmed by the fact that many practitioners answered that they think they do not need intercultural training since there are no children with a migration background in their educational services.

Regarding CIRRF families, this survey stressed the need for strengthening cooperation between parents and educators. ECEC professionals seem to need support to work towards inclusion of all. A lack of ‘vision’ from educational teams to deal with intercultural issues and with diverse families and children also emerges.

The results of the questionnaire show the need to invest in supporting ECEC practitioners in how to deal with diversity, underlying the fact that intercultural education ought to be applied independently of whether there are ‘problems’ or not, and independently of whether there are families/children with a migrant background or not.

We can, therefore, conclude that there are no areas that could be considered satisfactory (more than 75%): the results stress the presence of significant training needs across all areas, with specific attention on how to create constructive relationships between ECEC staff and diverse families. The way these relationships are conceptualised and put into practice varies depending on the contexts, and it is ‘shaped’ by the history and the traditions of ECEC in particular contexts, which are underpinned by a different concept of ‘childhood’, the ‘child’, families, and of ECEC professionals (Kang, Horn, and Palmer 2017). That is why reflection moments for practitioners are needed, to deconstruct assumptions and negotiate meanings, taking into account the points of view of families.

### ***3.4. Some common trends considering the Italian, Spanish, and Hungarian findings***

In this paragraph, we highlight some common trends concerning the results of the survey in the three involved countries.

The first data trend concerns the research population participating in the survey. All 260 respondents were educators/teachers and pedagogical coordinators. Data show that the distribution of staff according to the criterion of the matured experience was

different and uneven across the three contexts. In addition, the results show a significant number of new staff members due to retirements. It is not clear if there is a connection between age and experience, and the results concerning professionals' training needs.

Secondly, from the data analysis, it emerges that many respondents, from all three countries, indicate that they feel the need for a specific training/support on 'diversity'. Moreover, the data show that educators perceive to have different levels of intercultural knowledge and competencies.

Considering the 'format' of the training itself, ECEC professionals consider different, useful learning-organisation methods. Approaches, such as fighting prejudices, training on communication, planning intercultural events, translating information, and cultural mediation, were suggested. Most of these approaches are aimed at dealing in a constructive way with ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious diversity present in ECEC services, establishing and promoting a positive relationship with parents as well.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

Research on the topics of 'diversity' and intercultural needs shows that ECEC services are privileged contexts where putting into practice social inclusion praxis, not only addressed to children but also to their parents (Picchio and Mayer 2019). However, it is necessary for ECEC staff to have a solid knowledge of the social and cultural reality of children's families, and intercultural educational skills and competences, useful to work with all children and families, with specific attention to the ones with a migrant and/or vulnerable background, within a progressive universalism perspective. Although ECEC services find themselves heterogeneous for both linguistic and ethnic-cultural reasons, their educational staff often lack those skills necessary to identify and understand the specific needs of such users, therefore proposing effective actions to meet them. Our research confirmed this lack in partner countries, also showing ECEC staff are mostly aware of this and clearly expressed their needs for additional intercultural training. When practitioners consider they already have the necessary competences to positively deal with diversity, researchers problematise the answers by wondering whether it is exactly this way of thinking that might show a lack of capability of allowing doubts, questioning, being 'unsure' (Urban 2008). The latter open the door to the dialogue, contextualisation, and negotiation needed to value diversity.

Within this framework, reflecting on practice in teams becomes crucial today: it is needed to question the link between theory and practice, between practitioners' beliefs, and the ones of families, to encourage the capacity to 'change' perspectives when required, negotiate meaning and promote cultural understanding of the multiple *faces of diversity*. It is then urgent to invest in the time allocated to reflection and in pedagogical coaches that can support this CPD approach (Peeters et al. 2015).

The issue of the inclusion of immigrant children and their families cannot be seen as an emergency, to be answered on an occasional basis; on the contrary, it must be addressed acting upon stable models and educational practices, founded on the awareness that social reality is physiologically ever-changing (Suarez-Orozco and Qin-Hilliard 2004). The work of ECEC educators thus becomes more challenging, since it requires a knowledge of the reality of the families that inhabit the territory they operate in; the ability to revise one own interpretative patterns of cultural differences, sometimes modifying their

organisational modalities and educational practices. On this matter, it is interesting to notice the need of educational staff to receive support especially concerning the ‘caring’ aspects of education (*educare* approach), which is often a worry of parents too. This is especially important when taking into account newcomers, families with migrant or refugee background, who have to often meet other ways of ‘taking care’ than the ones they were used to (Hayes 2008; Van Laere, Peeters, and Vandenbroeck 2012). There are no standard answers on how to deal with these ‘issues’. What is needed is a constant support for staff to reflect on their daily practice, on their assumptions, on their ideas, to put them in dialogue with the ones of families and find contextualised answers. This is the meaning of the so-called ‘intercultural training’ or support, which aims at improving the relational and reflective competences of ECEC staff.

To conclude, our study underlines that, across country borders, the long-term aim is to improve the inclusion of children and families with vulnerable backgrounds, through the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes of ECEC practitioners. Of course, inclusion and accessibility cannot be considered the sole responsibility of professionals. Competent systems are needed (Urban et al. 2011), capable of investing in teams, individuals, inter-institutional collaboration, and governance. This study confirms the importance of investing in this direction, also by reducing the gap by initial training and CPD.

## Note

1. The MECEC+ project is an Erasmus+ project involving seven partners: University of Florence, University of Budapest, University of Manresa, ARCA Cooperativa Sociale, ENCfS Serveis a les persones, Józsefvárosi Egyesített Bölcsődék (JEB) and Galileo Progetti Nonprofit Kft. We point out that the project carries in its title the expression ‘multicultural education’ even if it is centred on the intercultural education approach. This is because the aim is an intercultural approach, but the reality studied is still ‘multicultural’.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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