



Executive Agency, Education, Audiovisual and Culture



Strengthening Activity-Oriented Interaction and Growth in the Early Years and in Transitions

Progress Report

Public Part

Project information

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Executive Summary

Target Audience

This interim report is intended for a potential wide readership. For representatives of the EACEA and the wider European Union organisations, for members of the project partnership and project participants, and for the wider policy and research communities in education and training across the different partner countries and the other EU member states. As such it is hoped that the information presented here is accessible and clear.

Partners

The SIGNALS Multi-beneficiaries Project commenced in January 2014. The Project includes key organizations centrally engaged in activities around early years' education, academic research, learning design, family support, advocacy and facilitating transitions. Based in seven Member States (Germany, University of Cologne, Denmark, Aarhus University, Greece, University of Western Macedonia, Hungary, General Directorate for Social Policy and Child Protection, Romania, HoltIS, Sweden, University of Gothenburg, and Iceland University of Iceland) these partners represent voluntary organizations, universities, schools, teacher training organizations, and research institutes that advocate high-level education.

Approach

The overarching goal was to enable parents and professionals to find a joint approach to child development and learning, and to improve the quality of the pedagogical relationship between educational staff and children (aged 1-8), the quality of interaction between children themselves, and the quality of relationships between the staff team and parents. The project aims at involving the three target groups: educational staff, children and parents, to participate in situations that include democratic participation and activity-oriented Exemplary Co-operative Educational Practices (ECEPs) for all actors. This shall lead to more flexible, open, sensitive and effective communication and better interaction competencies based on mutual understandings. The project will support both democratic participation and the issue of taking the perspectives of children.

SIGNALS Objectives

The acronym SIGNALS was chosen as it illustrates the various steps that participating countries will undertake in this collaborative learning journey, namely, to:

Strengthen mutual understanding between children, parents and early education staff

Improve interaction between these groups for the good of children

Generate through common projects a shared learning experience

Nominate in the different countries Exemplary Co-operative Education Practice teams

Acknowledge children as competent agents of their own development and learning, worthy to be involved in the project

Link SIGNALS outcomes with further professional development for staff and for the ongoing education of parents

Shape a European model based on reciprocal consultation

In sum, the project is on its way to enable parents, early education staff and children to build together positive relationships that will enhance the development and education of young children; improve the interactive and pedagogical competences of education staff and parents.

Principal Outcome so far

Each group of researchers from the participating institutions has conceived initial training and/or professional development courses and Exemplary Co-operative Educational Practices for staff parents and children.

Plans for the Future

- Document good practices in the countries concerned
- Publish a compendium of research papers on the projects undertaken
- Enhanced dissemination activities.

Sustainability – Short-term target groups and long-term target groups

The providers of the partners' institutions collect the project results into a quality development profile containing example of evidence-based participation experiences which will be disseminated during the eligibility of the project and beyond. The partner network is well connected to local representatives and local politicians who are aware of the extra value this European research project represents to their community and the educational institutions. Stakeholders are very interested in the SIGNALS results which will be subject to further mainstreaming activities in future.

The project Web-sites

There are two principal websites, the freely accessible for the general public www.SIGNALS-EU.com and the password protected site for internal project activities: <http://intern.signals-eu.com>.

All appropriate content will be made available on the freely accessible site at the end of the project.

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1. Project Objectives

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes that it is a fundamental right and obligation for parents to be involved in their children's development and education. Research also shows that parent engagement is important for enhancing children's wellbeing and learning. It is also strongly associated with children's later academic success and high school completion rates (Starting Strong III, 2012).

The project aims therefore are:

- to enable parents and educational staff to build progressive and developmental adult-child relationships
 - to improve activity-oriented interaction competences of educational staff, parents, and children (aged 1-8)
 - to initiate Exemplary Co-operative Educational Practices (ECEPs) for all actors
- This shall lead to more flexible, open and effective communication and better competencies based on mutual understandings.

Methodology

The project partners have conceptualized initial and continuing education courses for staff and parents that provide a dynamic learning environment for participants through their involvement in a process of co-creation. This approach will encourage them to take responsibility for their individual and mutual process of personal and professional development.

The **objectives** related to **children** are:

- To adopt a child-centered approach that views children as competent, active agents and as protagonists of their own learning
- To create a learning environment which encourages children's inter-actions with teachers, parents and other children
- To observe children in order to identify their strengths needs, and possibilities and support their holistic development
- To adopt a democratic and inclusive approach that values diversity
- To give extra support to children in the process of transition and to children with special learning needs, including those at a socio-economic disadvantage
- To encourage project work to match the children's interests related to the above mentioned content area or subject and provide them with the experience of working in teams in a democratic and open way.

The **objectives** related to **parents and staff members** are:

- To build strong pedagogical relationships with children, based on sensitive responsiveness
- To establish relationships between parents and staff members based on mutual understanding, trust and cooperation that enable open communication and reciprocal dialogue
- To co-construct pedagogical knowledge together with parents/professionals and support their parental/professional role
- To co-construct pedagogical knowledge through documentation and the collective evaluation of educational practices (inter-professional/parental reflection)
- To develop educational practices together with colleagues through joint work – inter-professional cooperation in times of transition.

2. Project Approach

On the occasion of the project's preparatory meeting, the project partners have agreed to follow an ex-ante valorization plan, in order to reach all long-term target groups and address all project related issues onward.

All partners maintained close contact to the project's coordinator who was always informed of the status of the work of all individual national teams. This procedure ensured that the objectives of the project are carried out on national and international levels in order to meet national needs. The concrete work results of the project serve as indicators for the assessment of the Project's progress.

General ECEP Approach

The trans-national partners work in national teams, either with EC settings and/or primary schools.

As the basis for the SIGNALS Exemplary Co-operative Educational Practices (ECEPs) each partner together with his/her national team undertook a local need analysis in regard to participation practices in their countries with the aim of identifying the competences teachers need and the existing structures and knowledge at teacher education level. The results have been evaluated in workshops consisting of international teams during the two trans-national meetings.

Furthermore the consortium agreed to carry out internal evaluation. A questionnaire was administered to parents, children and teachers. The aim is to clarify the perceptions of the target groups regarding participation experiences. The questions are open-ended allowing the target groups to express their ideas freely. The in-questionnaire has already been administered. The out-questionnaire will be administered within the second year.

Each SIGNALS project partner initiated at least one national team (ECEP) that involves the three target groups (staff, children and parents) to participate in situations that include democratic communication and learning experiences for all actors.

The national team is taking a goal-directed approach building on a neuroscience and social-constructivist understanding of learning and the respect of children as competent and resourceful social individuals.

It is the partner's own decision to choose the subject area of his/her national SIGNALS project. The SIGNALS ECEPs address the **issue of adult child co-construction** in ways of democratic learning, participative actions and by taking the perspective of the child.

National Approaches

Here are concise summaries of the ECEPs being carried out in the partner countries:

Partner I Germany:

More space for movement and activity oriented learning

The spatial conditions and the way of using room and equipment/materials as part of the pedagogical concept are highly important for children's learning and development in kindergarten-settings. The project addresses to facilities in early childhood that are interested in examining, changing and redesigning their spatial and pedagogical concepts. The whole indoor and outdoor premises of a medium size kindergarten are being redesigned. In that process of evaluation and implementation all groups concerned (children, parents and professionals) **do participate equally**. The project team assists the

different parties involved to express their views and needs and chairs discussions between children, parents and professionals (kindergarten staff, architects and landscape architects) to find a common agreement on the development plan. The German project team supports and accompanies the common processes of planning, realizing and implementing the project.

Partner II Denmark:

Aarhus University co-operates with one daycare for children ages 3-6 on the SIGNALS research project "Health and Parent Participation in Daycare". During the first phase of the project several staff and parent meetings have been held on issues related to the health promoting daycare and children's learning on health through participation and interaction. The daycare will focus on developing their practices related to children participation in health promoting pedagogical activities as well as co-operation with parents on improving the nutrition and quality of the food served during the day, including the content of lunch boxes brought from home.

Partner III Greece:

After a record and analysis of 45 first grade children's perceptions and preferences to classroom interaction and cooperation and communicative strategies employed, while participating in games, we designed a topic-based intervention module following five main principles: Participation-Communication-Cooperation- Interaction- Creation. The module consists of ten thematic units related to "School and Social Life". At the moment, the intervention is implemented in a classroom of the second grade in the 6th primary school in Florina city (Northern Greece). It is carried out in a "task-based" framework, with the cooperative activities being the core of the project, where the children are provided with opportunities for active participation and cooperation while making decisions and solving problems. Two categories of activities are included: outdoor physical activities such as races, chases and hopscotch, role play games, and classroom activities, such as constructions, sorting, ordering, or arranging puzzles, pantomime etc. The interventions are mainly delivered by the two classroom teachers, who were trained and familiarized with programme's aims, procedures and innovative methods with the ultimate aim to provide optimal conditions for children's participation, cooperation and interaction.

Partner IV Hungary:

According to the national guidelines for work in childcare centers, an adaptation/settling in period with the participation of parents is to be ensured for children newly admitted to the center, and the process is to be designed so as to meet the child's and the parents' needs. However, there is a huge variety of implementation across the centers in the country. Children's adaptation in the participating childcare center is planned and carried out as part of a complex system of working with parents throughout the year. The adaptation process is analyzed within this framework, especially to assess cooperation, participation and competency of the children, parents and staff.

The theme of the kindergarten-project is emerging literacy: first of all the role of fairy tales, books and story-telling in development of children (in the families and in the kindergarten). The research question is how kindergarten-pedagogues can support parents in storytelling. The aims are: to identify the weaknesses and strengths of current kindergarten practice in field of emergent literacy and to develop a matrix to inform training module development.

Partner V Romania:

32 schools are involved in the national SIGNALS project among them some schools with the highest dropout rate and with a predominantly Roma school population. They have all conceived a parental training programme. For the next five months to come, two Exemplary Co-operative Educational Practices will be organized each month, jointly attended by

children parents and education staff which include themes like 'positive parenting' and 'child and parent participation' and out-door activities.

Partner VI Sweden:

Collaboration between home and preschool in multilingual early childhood education context in Sweden

The Swedish case is regarded as a practice-development study. The overall aim is to gain knowledge of how preschool professionals and parents with different cultural backgrounds talk, reflect about and develop their own and the children's participation during the transition from home to preschool. The implementation of the study is carried out in close participation between the researchers and the professionals.

The implementation is carried out in four steps:

1. Initial mapping is to get an idea of the issue in current practice.
 - Professionals that participated in an in-service course about multilingualism and interculturalism in preschool reflect on participation during transition period through questionnaire.
2. A case study based on the mapping.
 - Observations of communication during
 - a transition period in two multilingual preschools.
 - parent-teacher meetings.
 - Two focus group conversations at three occasions consisting of the (3-6) professionals.
3. Developing an in-service course
 - Tasks carried out within the course.
4. Developing practice.

Partner VII Iceland:

In the Icelandic project, an action research is being carried out in one preschool, in cooperation with a compulsory school in the neighbourhood. The focus is on transition between the school levels and cooperation of staff, children and parents. The aim is to make the transition phase in children's lives as positive and educating as possible and create continuity between the two school levels. The emphasis will be on well-being, participation and learning. Usually, the cooperation has been characterised by visits from the preschool to the compulsory school in order for the children to get to know the school. In this project the aim is to develop new methods of cooperation that embraces also dialogues of relevant actors in the process.

The project has three parts:

1. Interviews are conducted with parents, educators, and children in one preschool. Findings from the interviews will be discussed in 3 focus groups of stakeholders. (parents, preschool teachers, representatives from the municipalities)
2. Action research will be carried out in the preschool. Educators, children, and parents cooperate during the action research project. Evaluation will take place during the process.
3. Guidelines for courses based on the experience from the action research, the interview with children, parents, and educators, as well as policy analysis, and literature review on cooperation of parents, children and preschool teachers will be designed.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

Significant achievements and out-puts to date have included:

- **Strong motivation and commitment from all partners**
- **Evidence of very positive engagement with the SIGNALS concept from all short-term and long-term target groups**

- **Initial and in-service training education courses, for staff and parents** that provide a dynamic learning environment through their involvement in a process of co-creation.
- **Initiation of Exemplary Co-operative Educational Practices (ECEPs)** involving all target groups, according to national needs
- **Embedded evaluation** from the outset in order to analyze and raise awareness of the impact of the approach.

The evidence for satisfactory progress can be found both on the web-site of the project and its internal area which have been online since February 2014. Both have been permanently updated and expanded as the products and outcomes of the project have progressed.

The **Internal SIGNALS area** <http://intern.signals-eu.com/> contains the following documents:

- valorization sheets giving information on the work of the national teams
- information on transnational meetings, as well as
- drafts on internal evaluation outcomes.

The **SIGNALS** homepage www.SIGNALS-EU.com consists of five sections: *Project Description, Partners, Project News, and Documentation and Compendium*

The *Project News* section provides information on

- Transnational meetings and Dissemination Congress

The *Documentation* section presents documents (downloads)

- on the project's valorization strategy,
- the guideline for national needs analysis, as well as
- the analysis of the national curricula guideline regarding participation
- the national approaches, and
- national implementation activities in the seven countries.

The *Compendium* section will be the final outcome of the project. It will be developed during the course of the project, and published in late 2015.

A General SIGNALS Flyer for self-printing in all the partners' languages plus in English.



Impact on target groups

The Project's result will safeguard effective democratic adult child co-creation and transition processes through collaborative working.

The quest for quality is built, inter alia, on good research, on the ongoing exchange of knowledge and practice across countries, and on a co-operative approach toward the key stakeholders.

Responding to the holistic needs of children, providing them with a wide variety of learning opportunities and motivating parents to support their children's learning are key conditions to beginning successfully the lifelong learning cycle. The project has brought together the strengths and experience of the seven institutions involved and enabled an interdisciplinary, multi-perspective exchange of knowledge and the transfer of good practice to take place. The resulting synergy are going to clarify quality standards for ECEC in Europe but also shape a model of European quality building based on democratic consultation that is sensitive to country traditions and local needs.

All the partners have taken advantage of all possible channels to disseminate the project via a variety of direct and indirect means and the project has been valorized in meetings, seminars, school/university journals, internet sources and newspapers.

It is notable that - although the project is only half completed, it has widely been disseminated.

4. Partnerships

Trans-national partnership

All partners are familiar with the European priorities and have agreed responsibilities and working methodologies. They have worked together previously in various initiatives, projects and networks. This is the second attempt at securing EU funding to set up this Project – all partners were involved in the previous application. Many partners have also worked together on specific EU funded projects in the past. A strong track record in project participation, shared research or management was key to the success of the consortium.

The consortium is well positioned and has a strong representative position with regard to education providers, and social service providers, Universities, voluntary organizations, schools, teacher training organizations and advocates for high quality education. From a research perspective most organizations have strong profiles.

The research areas cover the following fields: Early Childhood Education and Care, Children Under 3, Didactics in the Education System, Development and Learning in Pre-School/School Education, Child Perspectives and Children's Perspectives, Child Protection, Parent Education Comparative Education, Concepts of Parent Participation, Social Family-Policy, Child Protection, Competence Development, Movement Education Early Literacy and Inclusion, Multi-lingual Teaching, Integration of Roma Children and their Parents...the list is non exhaustive.

The members of the Consortium belong to various networks, national, Nordic and international ones, inter alia EECRA (European Early Childhood Education Research Association) and Comparative Education Society in Europe (CESE). One of the members holds a UNESCO professorship and is the World President of OMEP (Organisation Mondiale Pour l'Éducation Préscolaire), which is a global organisation for preschool education with representatives from 65 different countries. Some Consortium members are in contact with UNICEF organisations. The applicant institution is in close bilateral cooperation with the Ministère de la Famille et de l'intégration in Luxemburg, responsible for ECEC programme for children from birth to age 3.

National Partnerships

The process of creating national Partnerships is useful. It helps partners identify key players in the field and is in fact a first step towards creating synergies between individual actions performed by the players. The SIGNALS Partners involve their national partners in every step of the project through written or face to face consultation. In addition, the national Partners also mentioned that the project's approach of creating new structures to deal with new contents helps them to overcome existing barriers and to work together with new contents helped them to overcome existing barriers and to work together with institutions and people with whom there was only reduced cooperation until the SIGNALS Project. The constant dialogue between the national and the European level and the fact that the project is based on reciprocal consultation is being identified by all people involved as the most significant added value of Project.

5. Plans for the Future

The key priority for the remainder of the project will naturally be the satisfactory completion of all core aims, objectives and associated work packages. However there will be a growing emphasis on exploring emerging possibilities for further dissemination, exploitation and sustainability that could not have been foreseen in the preliminary stages of the project planning. Thus the second year will see an emphasis on flexible, innovative and opportunistic approaches alongside the established strategic priorities and enhanced mainstreaming activities.

On occasion of the third trans-national meeting in Budapest **3rd-4th** February 2015 Provisions will be made for the SIGNALS Compendium and the platform will be provided to present evaluate discuss and finalize the tasks to achieve within the second year.

Within the near future the project will be presented at the two congresses:

International Early Childhood Education Conference
Conference motto: "The child belongs to us; me, you and all of us

Kaposvár, Hungary 05 - 06 February, 2015

Education Conference „Bewegte Kindheit“
(Childhood in Motion)

Osnabrück, Germany, 19. - 21. March 2015

The Consortium will furthermore work towards the aim of promoting awareness for a shared understanding of the child's learning in order to create a strong and equal partnership between children and adults.

The project members will continue to exploit and promote the results in a way to safeguard coherence and continuity in pedagogical approaches and promote effective transition and greater equity and efficiency in learning in the pre-and primary sector.

The development of innovative responses to issues around **Participation** and **Transition** depends upon both the rich historic debate and evidence-based experience in the countries involved in the research.

The resulting synergy will not only clarify quality standards for ECEC in Europe but also shape a model of European quality building based on democratic consultation that is sensitive to country traditions and local needs.

6. Contribution to EU policies

ECEC has an important role to play in reducing early school leaving, and so key challenges as well as possible solutions in this field should be highlighted in Member States' National Reform Programmes to address the Europe 2020 priorities. The need to learn from good practice and experience across the EU, and so improve the quality of policy in ECEC, is pressing. The EU 2020 strategy has acknowledged that 'yesterday's solutions will not suffice to resolve the crisis. Knowledge base and innovation, sustainability and social cohesion cannot be developed in isolation. The priorities are mutually dependent. Against this background, coherent approaches to education, training and lifelong learning are seen as of particular importance for 'improving citizens' employability, social inclusion and personal fulfilment' (Council of the European Union, 2010a)

From an educational perspective the expansion of good-quality early childhood institutions is seen as indispensable for the educational attainment of the children and for the foundation of lifelong learning:

'ECEC has a crucial role to play in laying the foundations for improved competences of future EU citizens, enabling us to create a more skilled workforce capable of contributing and adjusting to change. There is clear evidence that participation in high-quality ECEC leads to significantly better attainment in international tests on basic skills, such as PISA and PIRLS.' (European Commission, 2011b, p. 1)

Member States have in recent years stated their wish to cooperate more closely at EU level on issues relating to increasing the quality of ECEC.

The Consortium will contribute to this by facilitating the exchange of views with and presentation of results to the appropriate decision-makers on ongoing European policies. Latest research findings in the field from across the world demonstrate that the definition of quality in ECEC services and the way to improve it in practice is not a static. The quest for quality is built inter alia on lively exchange of knowledge, experience and a participatory approach of the key actors.

In order to contribute to this the SIGNALS approach, therefore strives

- To strengthen interactive competences of the triangle - child, parent, staff, and to find the appropriate balance between cognitive and non-cognitive elements
- To facilitate the transition of young children between family and education/care, and between levels of education
- To promote the professionalisation of ECEC staff that foster initiative, creativity, and innovation.

Good practice and experience of four educational staff training institutions and three ECEC research institutions will be taken into account to enable: interdisciplinary, multi-perspective exchange of knowledge and transfer of experiences to occur. The resulting synergy effects will help to develop a European definition of quality communication and interaction practices in early childhood services.

The SIGNALS project hereby represents a source of inspiration of shaping a body of knowledge, practice and values related to a holistic vision of children's learning and acquisition of key competences. Reinforced motivation to learn and a variety of learning opportunities, embedded in cooperative interactions, are the ultimate keys to implementing lifelong learning successfully for all target groups, children, parents professionals and students.

This project is conceived as a contribution to the development of a sustainable society and the excellence of the consortium will ensure European added value to the benefit of all participating countries and beyond.

