



Social Inclusion, Education and Urban Policy for Young Children

The results of the Erasmus+ project *Social Inclusion, Education and Urban Policy for Young Children* have been presented and discussed during the closing conference on 23 and 24 May in the Kohnstammhuis in Amsterdam. It was an inspiring two-day meeting with international keynote speakers reflecting on social inclusion with regard to practice, policy and organisation, interactive workshops about social inclusion in daily practice, a dinner in the Hortus Botanicus and field visits to childcare centres and primary schools.



Pictures: Ruud van der Graaf & Wanda de Wit

The conference is hosted by the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE) of the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS). The first day of the conference starts with a word of welcome by Ramon Puras, Dean of the Faculty of Education at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS). According to him, the subject of the Erasmus+ project perfectly suits the main theme of the faculty: using education as the driving force behind an inclusive society. The project has succeeded in bringing together the expertise of European universities, policy makers and professionals. The results reflect this strong connection between policy, research and practice and will not only lead to the development of education for young children in an urban society, but also to new (inter)national initiatives.

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Social inclusion is a journey

The host of the conference is Ruben Fukkink, professor Pedagogical Dimension in Child Development and Education at CARE of the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS). He reminds us of the journey that has been made in the past three years, which has taken the participants from Amsterdam via inclusive staff in Berlin, inclusive groups in Ghent, inclusive outdoor life in Copenhagen and inclusive rituals in Ljubljana back to Amsterdam.

The diversity of the social inclusion projects for young children in these cities is reflected in the intellectual outputs, which range from literature review and competency profile for professionals to films on the work of inclusive pedagogues, designs for a curricular framework and guidelines for national governments and local municipalities. There also has been a close cooperation with the local municipalities in Amsterdam, Berlin, Ghent, Copenhagen and Ljubljana.

A video message from Marjolein Moorman, the deputy mayor and alderperson of Education, Poverty and Civic Integration at the City of Amsterdam, underlines this cooperation. In the message, Moorman stresses the importance of early childhood education for creating equal opportunities for all children in Amsterdam, which could be named as one of the most diverse cities in the world.

From diversity to inclusion

Halleh Ghorashi, professor of Diversity and Integration at VU University Amsterdam, starts her keynote with a quote by philosopher Hannah Arendt, that addresses the core aspect of diversity:

‘If people were not the same we would neither be able to understand others and the ones who came before them nor would we be able to make plans for the future and anticipate the needs of the ones coming after us. If we were not different we would neither need the speech nor the interaction to communicate with each other.’ According to professor Ghorashi, common ground is necessary for communicating with others. On the other hand, differences make us feel the need to interact with others. Because if everyone is the same, there would be no need to communicate. In our current society, diversity often focuses on groups that differ from the norm. We help these groups, such as non-natives, out of a moral obligation. But by focusing on shortcomings and trying to fix them, the other group is always regarded as weak. As a result, prevailing norms will never get challenged.

The subtle images that are created by the written and spoken words around us shape the way we look at each other. By only focusing on shortcomings, diversity often assimilates differences. Instead, we need to embrace the reason we want diversity: because we want to be challenged in our views and perspectives that are often historically formed. We therefore need to create time and space to have meaningful interactions with each other so we can connect different worlds and bring perspectives together. In short: inclusion means accepting that we need both similarities and differences, embracing the tensions that come with diversity, creating time and space for meaningful interactions, challenging the dominant images of ourselves and others and changing the status quo.

The inclusive practice

Kirsten Nøhr, senior lecturer in pedagogics at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS), is one of the initiators of the Erasmus+ project. Today, she gives the audience a sneak preview of the

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films that were made about the inclusive practice in day care: in what way are the people who work with young children on a day-to-day basis helping them to become inclusive citizens? In four different documentaries, the film makers interviewed pedagogues, parents, managers and policy makers in Amsterdam, Berlin, Copenhagen and Ljubljana. The key issues the professionals talk about in the interviews are visions and values (being robust and resilient, being accepted and being able to participate), individuality and community (being self-confident while also being part of a group and/or community and learning to respect each other to be able to cope in a group), creating a flexible and reflective environment, being able to see what children need and figuring out what challenges to offer them next.

For example, the children in an ECEC in Copenhagen get to participate in all kinds of different activities which teaches them about the concept of community. The pedagogues help them realise they can be part of a group, but still be themselves. In Ljubljana, the pedagogues want to let the children see that diversity is something good, for example by singing and counting in different languages. Another important issue that emerges from the interviews is that strong management - that has confidence of the professionalism of the pedagogues and supports them in developing themselves further - is important for creating a good inclusive practice.

Everyone can watch all the interviews on socinc.eu (this site is protected, so you will have to send an email to obtain a password). Everyone is free to use the material in training, teaching and research. You can also find several educational questions on the website, which you can use to discuss social inclusion with co-workers.

Who do we need?

The next keynote speaker is Ankie Vandekerckhove, who works on social inclusion and access to childcare with the focus on vulnerable groups at the VBJK Centre for Innovation in the Early Years in Ghent. According to her, the Early Childhood Education Centre (ECEC) has proven to be an important first extension of the life circle of young children in an urban environment. The quality of the ECEC not only depends on the competence of the system, but also on the competences of the people who are working with the children, their families and the community as a whole. But what competences do individual practitioners in ECEC's need? A reflective attitude, a willingness to accept diversity in society and respect other ways of being, sensitivity of and responsivity to children's and parents' needs, an openness to new working methods and reciprocal relations with parents, who are important partners in children's education. On a team level, support from and coaching by the leadership is a necessity.

Practitioners should also be provided with opportunities to learn from and with each other, through team meetings, professional learning networks, learning on the job, professional reflection, a professional learning community (PLC) and job shadowing. Results of research in the Netherlands show that being supported and coached by the leadership and being able to learn from colleagues made practitioners feel valued. As a result, less children were referred to additional services. Vandekerckhove's keynote concludes with a plea to consider the ECEC as a basic provision for children in an urban environment. Also, the importance of competent ECEC staff cannot be underrated in providing high quality support and guidance to the children who go to ECEC's. As competent individuals cannot do this on their own, it is high time to really support practitioners and provide them with the working conditions they need to do their job.

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Inspiration and discussion

The day continues with two rounds of inspirational workshops about inclusive education, concrete ways to enhance inclusion, interprofessional cooperation, concrete examples from the Dutch childcare practice and many other subjects. At the end of the first day, the participants enjoy a dinner in the beautiful Hortus Botanicus in Amsterdam.

On the second day of the Closing Conference, the participants go on field visits in and around Amsterdam. The locations of the field visits vary from a newly designed building where the broad development of children with a diverse family background is supported by a multi-professional team, to a smaller setup where a specifically designed programme supports the development of children with a non-Dutch background.

Afterwards, the participants return to the Kohnstammhuis for a keynote about inclusive education by Claes Nilholm, professor of Education at the Uppsala University. Claes Nilholm discusses the concept of social inclusion from the perspective of special educational needs. He stresses that social inclusion means that a child needs to fit in with the educational program and with the social system of the class. Interestingly, students are able to reflect on their inclusion and position in the class with poems.

Martina Junius, director of the Kita Kleine Weltentdecker in Berlin, addresses in her keynote the democratic participation of young children. Her presentation shows various ways of how to include young children in the policy and daily activities of the early childhood education and care centre.

The conference ends with a wrap-up by speaker Ruben Fukkink. He highlights that social inclusion is a broad and sometime fuzzy concept. Social inclusion may relate to different dimensions of one's identity (e.g., culture, language background, special educational needs). The meaning of social inclusion is also dependent on the diversity of a population in a local context: inclusion may sometimes mean assimilation of a minority in the larger society, but it may also mean that children with various backgrounds grow up together in a context of superdiversity. Other dimensions are important as well (e.g., social inclusion can be negotiated between stakeholders; it can be explicit in the political debate but implicit in practice; etc.). The broad scope of the concept may explain in part a common experience among various partners in our Erasmus+ project: social inclusion is not easy to accomplish. 'Social inclusion is a journey but not a destination' (quote from Topping) and current practice in early childhood education and care often shows that practitioners, policy makers and researchers seek ways to move from integration to inclusion. Our Erasmus+ project has made clear social inclusion can be taught and discussed with (future) professionals in a blended learning format, including theoretical frameworks, storytelling and movies, and student and staff exchange with field visits and guided exploration.

