

Early Childhood Education

The presentations drew a brief outline of the history of early childhood education in Malta and Austria whereby a few similarities and differences could be noticed:

- Both countries said that they value a nurturing approach to caring for very young children.
- Children enter school education at the age of five in both countries, whereas this phase has been compulsory in Malta for some time, while in Austria compulsory education from the age of five is a recent requirement as well as the responsibility to attend the kindergarden.
- Both countries have developed curricula for early childhood education. The Ministry of Education has implemented Malta's curriculum.
- In Malta as well as in Croatia, kindergarden teachers have to study at higher education institutions and finish with an accredited bachelor degree. This is not the case in Austria.
- There is a strong zeal to develop one unified system that will make transition easier.
- The learning environment of very young learners is different from other academic environments.

According to the two presentations and the follow-up discussion, the following future challenges, points for further discussion and aspects to elaborate on are:

- How can the 'learning experiences' of pre-primary children be assessed? What aspects of learning should be assessed?
- What does "education" imply when dealing with very young children? (Young children's 'education' is experienced through play, social interaction, language, etc., as well as pedagogical activities designed by the educator. Very young children's 'education' is developmental in nature.)
- Which qualities do educators need so that they do not mistake developmental "education" for "schoolification"?
- What can be done to secure the cultural nurturing aspect of early education, while also preparing children for the system of education?
- How can the profession of an early childhood educator be promoted in society? Will a university level education help to promote job esteem and equal pay?

Based on the discussion, these recommendations were agreed upon:

- There is a need to compare pre-primary education systems in all European countries to find out how the concepts of early childhood education vary.
- Establishing boards responsible for early childhood education at university level is a process that has already started, but further efforts must be made to establish a higher level of appreciation for educators of the youngest children in the educational system.
- Future research should include the perspective of parents and their conceptualization of what the pre-primary education landscape should be. (Right to a childhood and right to an early start to focused skill development.)
- On a European level, countries should agree on general principles of early childhood education, but also allow space for national diversity according to each country's cultural and historical background.