

Parents Informal Network for Early Childhood Learning

POLICY PAPER



PINECL
Parents' Informal Network
for Early Childhood Learning



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Executive Summary

It is widely accepted that both community and family have the potential to influence developmental outcomes of a child at multiple levels. Additionally, it is also believed that family socio – economic status, including such elements as parental education, household income and family composition, are important factors that influence childhood development especially in the early, formative years.

In response to these conventions, the EU funded project “Parents Informal Network for Early Childhood Learning – PINECL” (www.pinecl.eu) brings together a number of technical and pedagogic elements that can be utilized to support the development of children. The PINECL project seeks to improve existing practices where early childhood development and learning is concerned especially in rural areas with an ultimate goal of impacting policy which governs the delivery of key early childhood development services. The PINECL project consortium considers the expansion of key childhood development services into rural areas as an essential and important prerequisite to ensure equality of opportunity for children living in rural areas. The project supports parents in rural communities providing them with a range of early childhood development resources as well as providing an online platform to help connect parents from disadvantaged rural areas with key professionals and service providers. Additionally, the PINECL project helps to build the capacity of parents through a new Lay Family Learning Advisor training course. Finally, as ICT and social media are extremely important elements of modern society the PINECL project promotes the development of key digital competences to enable parents and service providers to engage through micro social networks like the ‘Parents Academy’ online resource that the consortium have developed.

As parents and families have the most direct and lasting impact on children’s learning and on the development of their social competences by encouraging parents to network with other parents, professionals and experts, the PINECL project seeks to create stronger links between communities and key stakeholders. The PINECL project encourages the involvement of family members, social and healthcare providers, and professionals and experts in networks to support childhood development thereby enabling the effective integration of all key stakeholders to ensure sustainable rural communities.

In a time of shrinking resources the PINECL project presents a cost-effective model for early childhood development and early childhood learning service delivery and service expansion. Harnessing the latest technologies the model presented is particularly suited to service delivery in remote rural areas with low population density.

The PINECL project proposes the following policy recommendations:

- *The expansion of existing services into rural areas by harnessing the potential of social media.* Social service providers, healthcare professionals, educationalists and other stakeholders working with parents and children can expand their services to disadvantaged rural areas to meet the needs of parents through dedicated social media channels and networks. These channels and networks can be used to enhance the knowledge and understanding of parents where issues relating to early childhood development are concerned.
- *To harness the potential of parents as Lay Family Learning Advisors.* Parents themselves, if properly trained, can become significant contributors to early childhood development in their local areas. This can reduce the financial and human cost of providing services in rural areas for key service providers. The main policy recommendation of the PINECL project is that key service providers accept the key role that parents can play and utilize the new blended learning curriculum that has been developed.

Introduction

This policy paper has been developed by CARDET and FIPL with contributions from all project partners of the PINECL (Parents' Informal Network for Early Childhood Learning) project funded under the Key Activity 3 measure of the EU Lifelong Learning Programme (Grant agreement number: 543178-LLP-1-2013-IE-KA3-KA3MP). The purpose of this policy paper is to present the methodology used to develop the PINECL project and to outline its potential as a cost-effective response to early childhood development and early childhood learning in rural areas. This document highlights the potential benefits to be derived for service providers under the new delivery model proposed and outlines the implications for service providers contained within the PINECL model for the provision of alternative early childhood development services.

The PINECL policy paper is addressed to policy makers and key stakeholders who work with parents or children in the provision of early childhood development and early childhood learning. The policy paper also provides guidance for adult and community education organisations who offer parenting support programmes; formal kindergarten and childcare providers to include informal childminders; as well as social and healthcare service providers who support parents during their children's development. It is especially relevant to service providers and service users who work and live in remote rural areas where low population densities are most common. These key stakeholders play a significant role in early childhood development and education and it is from within these ranks that new bottom-up policy development is often spawned.

In our internet age policy makers and key stakeholders have the opportunity to build the capacity of parents in disadvantaged rural areas and to harness the potential of parents to contribute to service delivery by offering targeted educational opportunities. Appropriate training can potentially transform parents from consumers of early childhood development services into providers of essential family supports in their local area. Supporting the role-out and widespread uptake of initiatives like PINECL can be a cost effective response to service demands in less densely populated rural areas where the cost of full service provision by many statutory providers is prohibitive. To achieve this new service delivery model and harness the potential of parents as supplemental service providers there are a number of key training needs that have to be addressed to assist parents' transition from service users to service providers. In the course of the PINECL project the following areas were identified where parents would need specific training to acquire basic knowledge in the following topic areas:

- Counselling skills
- Early childhood development
- Early childhood language learning
- Parent – child communication skills
- Parenting skills
- Social and emotional development

These were the specific skill needs that the PINECL project addressed by developing and implementing the newly designed Lay Family Learning Advisor curriculum. This bespoke curriculum supports the accreditation of parents as lay family learning advisors allowing them to work in their local community in support of early childhood development and education.

Project Rationale

The PINECL project has been developed based on the findings of scientific research in the fields of early childhood development and early childhood learning. It responds to education policy guidelines formulated at European level which consider and address issues related to access to quality education for children in rural areas. These policy guidelines have been outline to help ensure that children's development and growth is appropriately prioritized and facilitated. Early childhood interventions support education, well-being, employability and the social integration of children (European Commission, 2015). According to research conducted in America (2011) *"increasing the availability of preschool education can be an effective strategy for reducing inequalities that exist prior to school entry and better prepare children for transitioning into kindergarten"*.

The Department of Social Development in the Republic of South Africa (UNICEF, 2006) notes that children acquire key concepts, skills and attitudes for life during their early, formative years. This period is considered to be of extreme importance as it sets the basis for a child's later development. Research also recommends that children at risk be identified by professionals at the earliest possible juncture to ensure that they can get the support they need to fulfill their potential. Early intervention is essential to break the cycle of disadvantage as without support the likelihood is that many children in disadvantaged areas will grow up facing major economic and social problems. All available evidence points to the fact that the incidence of crime, teenage pregnancy, early school-leaving and social exclusion is far greater among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds than their better off counterparts. All these problems can be easily addressed by quality early childhood development programmes and policy adaptations.

PINECL embraces the findings of the National Research Council & Institute of Medicine (2000) which suggests that children who can demonstrate skills in the regulation of emotion, behaviour and attention, in language, reasoning and problem solving as well as in relating well to others and forming friendships, are better equipped to manage difficulties and other situations when they grow up. Appropriate supports in early childhood are key to achieving these skills and personality traits. The PINECL project promotes the belief that *"if solid foundations are laid during a child's formative years, learning becomes more effective and more likely to continue throughout life, increasing the equity of educational outcomes and lowering the costs for society in terms of lost talent and public spending on welfare, health and even justice."* (Council of the European Union, 2011).

Iffat Naomee (2013) mentioned that family plays a significant role in children's development and education. Therefore, parents are usually considered as the first and most important educator for a child (The Early Years Framework, 2008). The most important measure of their development is family and family values which help the mental, moral, and intellectual development of children (David, 2009; Naomee, 2013). Civil society has also reacted in favour of enhancing the role of the parents as providers of informal learning and partners of the formal education system (Adams & Baronberg, 2005).

In this context, the PINECL project addresses a number of topics that support the appropriate and timely development of children. The PINECL project endeavors to create a positive impact in areas such as parenting supports, early childhood development services, language acquisition resources, information on educational services and access to social services. The potential of social media to deliver cost effective and efficient local community education, training and support services to rural communities is also embedded in the PINECL project.

In Europe today, a large number of citizens live in rural areas. Typically, in these areas, the number of people who have the chance to benefit from local learning opportunities and educational services is very small. The PINECL project addresses the lack of opportunities and the problem of education and social service provision in rural areas by providing new training concepts, learning resources and pedagogic induction. Additionally, it encourages the involvement of family members, social and healthcare providers, other stakeholders

and experts in supporting childhood development and the integration of new learning programmes into rural community services.

Based on these ideas the aims of the PINECL project were:

- The development of an accredited training programme that parents can use to become lay family learning advisors;
- The provision of an online hub where parents can network, share their experience and support each other;
- To link parents in rural communities with social and healthcare providers in order to support improved early childhood development and education opportunities and services.

Policy in Perspective

There is an increased interest in European countries for effective support of early childhood development. It is worth noting that UNICEF, in collaboration with international agencies, governments, civil society and NGOs, works on National Early Childhood Development policies which include guidelines on Early Childhood Development (UNICEF, 2007). Moreover, a lot of governments are now in the process of developing their national policies on Early Childhood Development while a significant number of countries – about 70 – have already developed national committees and task forces for early childhood development (UNICEF, 2007).

The European Union began developing and supporting improved policy actions for Early Childhood Development in all European Countries in the 1990s (Urban, 2009). Within this policy development process it is notable that each country sets the scope and the content of the policy according to its needs and resources (Young, 1996) even though the goals of programmes on early childhood education are globally recognised.

One policy option for achieving effective early childhood development is a family support programme which will provide skilled personnel to families at risk (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007). Needless to say that well developed childcare programmes have positive impacts on both family and children by reducing stress and increasing the opportunities in employment and education (BC Healthy Living Alliance, 2015). According to BCHLA (2015) another policy option is *“the creation of quality and affordable early childhood development, parenting, pre-natal health and family wellness services and programmes ensuring that priority is given to those neighbourhoods and communities with the highest numbers of vulnerable children”*.

New policy actions that seek to strengthen the role of parents as lay family learning advisors with sustainable parent to parent peer supports is an important response to address the current service deficits and an important local support for new parents. There are a lot of benefits deriving from peer support for parents (University of Iowa School of Social Work, 2015) the key one of these being the creation of formal or informal support networks for parents that can use technology to overcome isolation. This is an innovative idea for rural communities.

Furthermore, the dialogue and discussion between parents in rural areas is important for parents because they share common experiences and face similar difficulties and challenges. According to Powell (2013), *“focused discussion among parents allows individuals to rework their existing beliefs in order to accommodate new ideas from peers or programme staff”*. To conclude, parents can use their knowledge for supporting their children’s development but they can also share this knowledge with parents in need.

Recently, many governments have recognised that people in rural areas are marginalised and that health and social care services in rural areas are not managing to achieve the required level of provision (Community Care, 2007). The increased cost of the services; the time and transport needed to access available services; and the lack of any voluntary service alternative are the main challenges for those living and rearing a family in disadvantaged rural areas. While government policy aims to expand the existing early childhood education services to rural areas there are very few sustainable service delivery models.

Improving service provision in rural areas will support the early childhood development process giving families the potential to offer a wide range of experiences to their children. This will ensure that children from rural areas will be properly equipped to deal with the stresses and strains of everyday life and ready to confront any difficulty that arises. Parents and children will finally get the support they need through a variety of social and healthcare services.

Policy Options

There are a variety of current programmes available in Member States that are specifically addressed to parents and caregivers aimed at supporting the development of behavioural, emotional and social skills in early childhood while simultaneously improving the level of knowledge and understanding among parents and service providers about early childhood development (Baron, 2005). Baron (2005) also mentions that “accessing culturally appropriate programmes is also extremely important”. More specifically he notes that all groups of people should be able to attend Early Childhood Development programmes or services, regardless of language, religious, social and economic status. All of these factors need to be taken into consideration if new policy recommendations are to have any credence.

Where the provision of early childhood development services is concerned it is clear that there is a range of policy options to be considered. Policy makers and service providers have in the first instance the option to retain the status quo and avoid any changes where the provision of early childhood development services is concerned. This is really not a feasible solution as rural areas continue to experience a number of difficulties in accessing these essential services. Changes in the provision of early childhood development services are inevitable since scientific research is unequivocal about the importance of this phase of development and about how experiences gained during this period of life have an impact, either positive or negative, on each individual's life. This scientific research underlines the need for change in how early childhood development and early childhood learning services are delivered, especially in disadvantaged rural areas. Providing appropriate and accessible early childhood development services can provide parents and families with the knowledge and skills necessary to address the needs of their children and to ensure that they can fully participate in community life. Alternatively, there is a significantly increased chance of educational under-attainment amongst children growing up in rural areas without the necessary childhood development supports. The cost in human, financial and social terms of this continuing cycle of disadvantage is significant and must be avoided by appropriate policy actions.

In the second instance, policy makers and service providers could undertake a massive service expansion programme to ensure that parents in rural communities have access to all essential services regardless of the prevailing population density or the remoteness of the location. This is also not a feasible option. Much as key stakeholders in government administrations realise the importance of early childhood development and learning they are operating within strict budgetary parameters which prevent any large scale increase in service provision and the associated increase in cost. On a case by case basis very few areas would be able to justify a significant increase of expenditure to expand services. Policy makers are therefore charged with finding cost-effective and sustainable alternative service delivery and service engagement models. Furthermore, there are significant differences between Member States when it comes to the availability of human and financial resources. While some of the more financially secure countries may be able to provide the required services into small local communities, the distribution of wealth within the EU is not equal and many of the less well-off countries would find adhering to such service provision guidelines impossible.

A third option is the multi-faceted service design model proposed by the PINECL project. In this model, bespoke accredited training in key areas relating to early childhood development and early childhood learning is provided for parents in rural areas. Parents who complete the accredited training and who qualify as Lay Family Learning Advisors can then build individual social networks of support to help and underpin services provided centrally by the key statutory agencies. Under the PINECL model, parents in rural areas who are traditionally regarded as consumers of early childhood development and early childhood learning services become producers and providers of services to local parents thereby supporting the professionals working in the field. The fact that the training provided is accredited ensures that any concerns about quality assurance can be easily addressed.

One of the key elements of the PINECL model is the use of social media as the key communication tool and the provision of bespoke online environments like the *Parents Academy* as a networking resource but also as an information repository. Given the widespread uptake of social media harnessing the potential of these online environments must be an emerging priority for policy makers. If those responsible for service design can conceive of new delivery models these new online environments can present first time opportunities to achieve educational inclusion of parents living in disadvantaged rural areas.

As a matter of fact, if appropriate learning resources and structures can be put in place, those living in rural areas need not be discriminated against anymore as a full range of services can be designed for delivery through remote media channels. In addition to that, through social media, parents can easily share their experiences and knowledge on parenting (Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe and Ellison, 2015).

The PINECL project aims to achieve equality of opportunity and equality of access to early childhood development services and supports for parents in rural communities. Quality is achieved through the blended learning resources which are widely accessible both online and offline, and through the social networks developed within the project framework. As ICT skills are essential to the development and ongoing interaction with the new micro social networks created the PINECL project promotes the development of key digital competences to support parents and service providers. The project has assembled a suite of digital media, interactive resources and videos to support learning and these resources and tools can motivate learning and enhance critical thinking.

Conclusion

As shown above, there are a number of service development and service delivery options available to early childhood education and early childhood learning policy makers that can be implemented in order to benefit parents and children living in rural or other disadvantaged areas.

The PINECL model is presented as a robust example of how current policy options can be turned into a concrete and cost effective service for parents and children. The model can also offer significant benefits for service providers and professionals working in the field as it proposes engaging and training parents to be an additional expert resource in the whole childhood development arena.

The PINECL project focuses on building the capacity of parents so that they become competent lay family learning advisors. This will ensure that the parents trained and accredited will be able to help other parents to understand their children's development. The PINECL project promotes parenting education to support parents and families to become effective caregivers and educators. In addition, the accredited PINECL curriculum has been benchmarked against the European Qualification Framework to aid transparency and to address issues related to quality assurance within the new service model.

Parents and families have the most direct and lasting impact on children's learning and the development of their social competences. Parents are the first teachers of their children. Parents trained through the PINECL project will become the link between local parents and other professionals in rural communities or other disadvantaged areas. The model developed by the PINECL project consortium is multi-faceted and innovative providing accredited training, parenting supports, social networks and a suite of resources for early childhood development.

The PINECL project has developed a mechanism to expand existing early childhood development and early childhood learning services to rural areas which are in need of support and help. As a result, parents from disadvantaged areas now have access to early childhood development services and supports and can themselves become the link between other parents in their local areas and key service providers.

At the same time, by using an online platform like the Parents Academy, professionals will be able to expand and present their services in rural areas; to share information with parents and guardians; and to provide essential support to those most in need.

Recommendations

Residents in rural areas should be afforded equal opportunity and equal access to early childhood development and early childhood learning supports through a widespread roll-out of the PINECL model.

To achieve this:

1. Training should be provided to build the capacity of parents so that they can become competent and accredited lay family learning advisors and provide much needed additional service supports in rural areas;
2. Training should be provided to support the acquisition of key digital competences to support the engagement of parents and service providers with the online platforms and social networks;
3. Early childhood development and early childhood learning service providers should prioritize the expansion of existing services through the roll-out of the PINECL model to reach rural areas.



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