

## Promoting and Supporting Language Development in Multilingual and Multicultural Early Childhood Settings: Findings of the TODDLER Project



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### ABSTRACT

Cet article est basé sur le travail développé par l'équipe "Early Language" du projet TODDLER (Towards Opportunities for Disadvantaged and Diverse Learners on the Early-childhood Road), lequel a mis un focus sur l'apprentissage de la langue et le développement du multilinguisme et du multiculturalisme parmi les enfants de moins de trois ans. Les données ont été collectées dans des lieux dédiés à la petite enfance dans huit pays européens qui participaient au projet. Le principal but de recherche de cette partie du projet était d'identifier les attitudes des familles et des praticiens vis-à-vis des différentes langues et cultures, sous-tendant les approches pédagogiques pour gérer la diversité (culture et langue spécifique), autant que des exemples de bonnes pratiques qui améliorent l'apprentissage de la langue et la conscience multiculturelle dans le cadre préscolaire. Deux instruments de collecte des données ont été choisis pour investiguer ces aspects: 1) des questionnaires et 2) des checklists pour l'observation. Les résultats de la recherche ont ensuite été utilisés pour élaborer les modules de cours de formation continue et de formation initiale. La première partie de cet article décrit un exemple de "bonne pratique" qui démontre une stratégie effective pour soutenir le développement de la conscience multiculturelle et multilingue dans les lieux dédiés à la petite enfance. La seconde partie présente certains critères, lesquels ont été retirés de nos données, pour l'évaluation de l'éducation multiculturelle et multilingue dans ce contexte.

### Introduction

Over the past years early childhood settings have become increasingly multilingual and multicultural in many parts of the world, including Europe. Early Years Practitioners (EYPs) are aware of this fact and deal with different nationalities during their everyday work. The EYPs are mostly not bilingual themselves. In order to face this challenge, EYPs need to learn about different activities and interaction strategies to support and promote the development of the L1 as well as additional languages in early childhood settings. This way, children from various social and cultural backgrounds will have similar chances for successful linguistic and cognitive development (Siraj-Blatchford

& Clarke, 2011; Maagerø & Simonsen, 2012).

The TODDLER (Towards Opportunities for Disadvantaged and Diverse Learners on the Early-Childhood Road) aspires to make a contribution to the field. The project brings together experienced teacher trainers from nine European countries to share, develop and examine different approaches of supporting toddlers' learning in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. The overall goal of the project is to reduce the number of drop outs from school by offering toddlers from disadvantaged backgrounds an enriched learning environment and better support to parents. The team aims at improving existing methods and developing

material for increased awareness of toddlers' educational needs amongst student teachers/staff and policy makers.

The "Early Language Learning" unit of the project aims at developing professional development resources for EYPs who face the situations described above, and who wish to develop new competencies to stimulate language acquisition and create an effective language learning environment in multilingual and multicultural early childhood settings.

The development of professional development materials is based on research that has been conducted in early childhood settings in nine European countries. Project partners employed ethnographic

research instruments, such as questionnaires and observation checklists, to investigate underlying pedagogical approaches in terms of diversity (culture and language specific), families' attitudes towards different languages and cultures, as well as best practices that enhance language learning and multiculturalism in various early childhood settings. In order to be able to obtain a larger amount of qualitative data, all project partners were also requested to submit a short report of what they consider a "best practice" example from their own countries.

This document describes one of these reports: it is a project entitled "Fairy Tale-Treasure - A Multicultural Project", which was implemented in a crèche in Germany. The focus of the project was on the use of fairy tales to promote multicultural awareness. One of the main aims of the project was to raise children's awareness to the fact that different cultures share similar wishes and dreams, values and beliefs, which are then reflected in the fairy tales they create.

In the following section we first describe the different steps in implementing the project. In the second part we show a storyboard that illustrates those different steps. The article concludes with a summary of criteria for the evaluation of multilingual and multicultural education in early childhood settings, which have been drawn from our research findings.

**Fairy Tale-Treasure - A Multicultural Project**

The first step taken by the EYPs was to identify the nationalities/cultures represented in the (crèche) group. The second step was to find fairy tales in the ambient culture which share similarities with fairy tales from other cultures represented in the group. This task was accomplished with the help of the parents. One example is "Das tapfere Schneiderlein" in German and "Prinzessin Goldhaar" in French, which share several features, including the same archetypes of characters. For this specific project, the fairy tales "Der Fischer und Seine Frau".(German) and

"The Lucky Fish" (Thai) were chosen because some children in the crèche group had a Thai background.

The project was implemented in two consecutive days. On the first day, the EYPs worked with the German fairy tale. The children were taken into an imaginary journey into the land of the fairy tales and listened to the story. After the first storytelling phase, the EYPs encouraged the children to reflect on the fairy tale together by asking comprehension questions. A special focus was given to the main characters and their names. The children were shown pictures of the main characters and asked to repeat their names. These pictures were then hung on the classroom wall.

On the second day the children were told the Thai fairy tale in the ambient language. The EYPs employed the same storytelling techniques used in the previous day. In the follow-up phase the children were encouraged to reflect on the similarities between the two fairy tales in terms

**Storyboard - example**

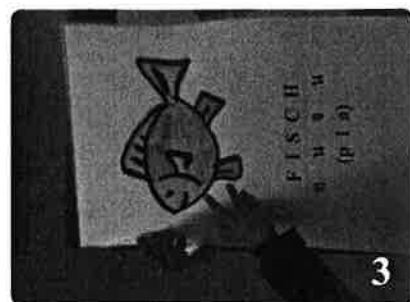
**DAY ONE**



1- Children 'travel' to the land of fairy tales together with the EYP



2- Children listen to the German fairy tale 'Der Fischer und seine Frau' (The Fisherman and his wife)



3,4- Children see the pictures and repeat the names in German  
Fisch & Armer (Fish & Pauper)



5- EYP and children hang the pictures on the wall together

## Storyboard - example

## DAY TWO



6- Children 'travel' to the land of fairy tales together with the EYP again – using the same method as on day 1.

Remembering the fairy tale 'Der Fischer und seine Frau'



7- Children whose culture hosts the original fairy tale (Thai) receive a special hint.



8- Children listen to the Thai fairy tale 'Der Glücksfisch' (The lucky fish)



9- Repeating the names of the archetypes in German and Thai by looking at the pictures again

Fisch & Armer  
Pla & khon djion  
(Fish & Pauper)



10- The Thai toddler is invited to look at the words in Thai.



11- The pictures are put back onto the wall.

of plot, characters, general message and so on. Since both stories used the same archetypes of characters, the EYPs worked with the same pictures of characters, which had been hung on the wall on the previous day. This time, however, the children were introduced to their names in Thai. After repeating the new words orally, the children were shown the written versions, which were then added to the pictures on the wall.

In this storytelling project, the EYPs acknowledged the multicultural character of the crèche group and used the children's diverse backgrounds to enrich the learning environment. While engaged in fun storytelling activities, the children were encouraged to think about similarities between different cultures and their legends. This represents a change of perspective away from a difference-oriented way to look at Others, which is unfortunately often adopted in many educational settings.

The analysis of the various case studies and "best practice" examples developed in the framework of the project allowed the TODDLER team to develop a set of criteria for the evaluation of multicultural and multilingual education in early childhood settings. In the following section we outline some of these criteria, which are divided into four categories: institution, EYPS, children and parents. As it will be seen, the project described above fulfills at least some of them.

**Criteria for the Evaluation of Multilingual and Multicultural Education**

**The institution:**

- acknowledges , celebrates and reflects the different cultures present in the community (e.g. classrooms have displays e.g. flags, toys, etc...).
- adopts a multicultural curriculum.
- recruits EYPs and support staff who are multilingual
- develops projects focusing on multilingual (ML) and multicultural (ML) issues.
- develops multicultural and multilingual projects that have a long term perspective.

**The EYPS:**

- have a good degree of awareness about their own language, the language of the children and about language development in general.
- are equipped with resources (time/ staff/material/in-service training/money) to support the language development of children from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
- use effective scaffolding techniques to support the development of the home language and of additional languages.
- take into account children's previous experiences in the design and implementation of different activities.
- use objects or artefacts that reflect the cultures of the children.
- work closely with parents (e.g. staff members support the parents in choosing appropriate language learning resources to be used at home).

**The children:**

- are encouraged to use their home languages at school in interaction with other children or even teachers.
- are encouraged to engage with bi- or multilingual materials (e.g. bilingual books).
- are encouraged to use objects and educational resources that reflect their culture.

**The parents:**

- are allowed to become part of the school community.
- visit the institution regularly to try to understand the children's learning processes, the educational system, the structure of the institution and the expectations of EYPS.
- support the EYP's work at home. (e.g. they use bilingual resources to support their children's language learning )

While this list is not comprehensive, it is intended to highlight important elements that have been identified in our data. It is also important to bear in mind that these evaluation criteria may vary according to the social, political and educational contexts in which EYPs work.

**References**

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