

Implementation of ICT-facilitated parent- and family focused interventions in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts

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Abstract:

Linguistic and cultural discontinuity between home and school can create tensions, affect family engagement with schools and teachers, and interfere with children's learning. Parent- and family-focused interventions for families with young children can play an important role in positively addressing diversity. This study brings together the work done to develop and test ICT-facilitated interventions for parents and professionals working with families from culturally and linguistically diverse contexts in four European countries: the Czech Republic, England, Germany, and Italy. Across all contexts, the focus of the interventions was on families managing and making best use of the cultural and language resources present in their life in supporting child development, learning, and transition to school. This paper provides a narrative account of participants' engagement with resources and digital tools, and their reflections on their experiences during implementation and their learning.

Keywords: cultural and linguistic diversity; digital learning platform; early childhood; family support; preschool

Linguistic and cultural discontinuity between home and school can interfere with children's developing cultural identity, their relationships and connections to family members (Tannenbaum, 2012; Guardado, 2008; Kheirkhah, 2016), and their engagement and learning in school, creating educational disadvantages (Leseman & van Tuijl, 2006; Stanat & Christensen, 2006; OECD, 2016; UNESCO, 2011). With cultural and linguistic diversity in European countries increasing (Akgündüz et al., 2015; Eurostat, 2020), Europe's education and family support systems are confronted with the challenge to better support learning and equality. Education towards global competence, with its aims to strengthen values for cultural diversity, and to promote cultural awareness and respectful interactions, has been recognised as essential to help develop more inclusive societies (OECD, 2018).

In the early years, family interactions are the main site for children's encounters with the heritage culture and language, and parents and other family members and caregivers have the strongest influence on first language acquisition and the development of cultural identity (Abreu, & Hale, 2011; Hughes et al., 2006; Pesco & Crago, 2008). Family members bring their own resources to form and negotiate not only their language choices but also their cultural- and language practices together with their linguistic and social identities (De Fina, 2012; Knight, Bernal, Garza, Cota, & Ocampo, 1993; Ochs, 1996). As children approach school age, families increasingly assess what constitutes good conditions for children's development in relation to educational institutions children are enrolled in (Schwartz & Moin, 2012). Cultural practices and the language promoted in educational institutions affect parents' attitudes, wishes and goals, shaping language choices and parents' attempts to promote their children's language learning and involvement in school (Caldas, 2012; Curdt-Christiansen, 2013; King & Fogle, 2006; Piller, 2001). Thus, in a context where the heritage language and culture of the family differs from the language of instruction and the cultural practices in educational settings, families re-evaluate and negotiate their beliefs, values and practices. When children start to attend preschool or school, this process can significantly affect family engagement with the school and teachers and interfere with children's learning.

In this context, the importance of professionals' attitudes and practices with culturally diverse populations has been highlighted, with a focus on professionals' multi-cultural beliefs and multi-cultural skills. In order to incorporate their practices in unfamiliar contexts of diverse values and beliefs, professionals need to assess their beliefs, practices and values in relation to those of the families they are working with (Gardiner & French, 2011).

Professionals' cultural sensitivity is seen as essential for respectful interactions with culturally diverse families. Here, it seems particularly relevant that parent participation in early interventions relies on the perception that one is listened to and treated with respect (Mytton et al. 2013, Lindsay et al., 2014). Trusted relationships between professionals and participants of early interventions have been identified as a keystone of effective programme delivery, and there is evidence that secure and supportive relationships with trusted professionals can be particularly important for more vulnerable families (Martin et al., 2020; Moore, 2017).

Time and resources for face-to-face contact are essential for the building of relationships and are therefore highly important for the success of family support programmes (Cadima, Nata, Evangelou, & Anders, 2017; Cohen et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2020). However, it has also been recognised that constraints on resources, and logistical and geographical barriers can limit programme outreach and participation of families. Virtual and digital programmes components have the potential to add to traditional interventions in several ways, for example by allowing for remote contact and more flexible engagement with intervention content at participants' own time and from any place. Digital tools can help producing resources that are more accessible than traditional materials (for example by making use of sound and pictures, or by being interactive), and facilitate communication and networking between stakeholders, particularly when resources are scarce. In the context of family support and cultural and linguistic diversity, the potential of digital tools to provide new ways of networking and community strengthening seems particularly important. While the use of digital technologies to support teaching and learning are becoming increasingly important, little is currently known about the effectiveness of different virtual and digital programme components in the field of family support interventions. Undoubtedly there are also many challenges relating to virtual and digital methods, and those families that are most disadvantaged may experience most barriers to access and use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (Cadima et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2020).

1.2 Research context and approach

This study is part of the larger international project 'Inclusive Education and Social Support to Tackle Inequalities in Society' (ISOTIS; <https://www.isotis.org>), which included design and implementation of ICT-facilitated interventions to support parents, classroom

practice, and professional development in multilingual and multicultural environments in (Pastori, Mangiatordi, Pagani, 2019a, b). A main component of all ISOTIS interventions was the use of technology, the ISOTIS virtual learning environment (VLE; <https://vle.isotis.org/>). The ISOTIS digital platform had a multi-lingual interface, and included content in countries' majority language, as well as the heritage languages of the participants. It offered information and guidelines for practice, tools for participating families and professionals to communicate, and spaces for participants to create content based on their own experiences, and their cultural and linguistic resources (Pastori et al., 2019a, b). A design-based research approach was employed. The process included an exploratory phase to assess the needs and resources in each participating community, and a co-design phase to establish specific objectives and resources for the interventions in each context (Pastori et al., 2019a).

Here, we are reporting on the implementation of interventions that were designed in the context of parent support (Ereky-Stevens, Trauernicht, Schünke, Sarcinelli, Sidiropulu-Janků, 2019). The focus of intervention activities was on families managing and making best use of the cultural and language resources present in their life in supporting child development and learning, particularly during transition to school. Resources that had been co-designed addressed issues related to linguistic and cultural discontinuity between home and pre/school, and were to be accessed on the ISOTIS digital platform by participating practitioners and parents. Some back-up options of using paper-based materials were created to respond to issues with access to digital devices and a stable internet connection, identified during the exploratory phase (Ereky-Stevens et al., 2019). Materials demonstrated the value for multi-lingual and multi-cultural skills¹, facilitated parents and children to create materials to share information about their language and cultural experiences², and helped to engage children in dialogues and storytelling at home³. During implementation, co-designed resources were used to initiate group discussions at home and in classrooms, around multi-lingual and multi-cultural practices and preferences, and to discuss – during support sessions – the strategies adults use to support learning⁴.

1 e.g. <https://vle.isotis.org/mod/page/view.php?id=3511>;
<https://vle.isotis.org/mod/page/view.php?id=3418>

2 e.g. <https://vle.isotis.org/mod/hvp/view.php?id=3000>
<https://vle.isotis.org/mod/book/view.php?id=2922>

3 e.g. <https://vle.isotis.org/mod/book/view.php?id=2942&chapterid=534>

4 <https://vle.isotis.org/mod/page/view.php?id=2995>
<https://vle.isotis.org/mod/page/view.php?id=1519>

Researchers accompanied interventions for ongoing documentation and evaluation. The research aim was to monitor the implementation of programme activities. Research questions were: (a) How did research participants engage with the intervention inputs during implementation? (b) What were participants' views on the benefits of the interventions, and the strengths and weaknesses of the digital platform? This paper aims to provide a narrative account of how resources and digital tools were used, and how participants across the four countries engaged and reflected on their experiences.

2 Methods

2.1 Participants and data collection

Four European countries participated in designing and implementing interventions in the context of parent support: the Czech Republic (Sidiropulu-Janků, 2019), England (Ereky-Stevens & Brock, 2019), Germany (Trauernicht, Schünke, Anders, 2019), and Italy (Sarcinelli & Pastori, 2019). The inclusion of the four countries allowed researchers to collect rich experiences across different context and target groups. Each country was involved in the ISOTIS project through one partner institution. Data collected for the wider project supported the exploratory phase of this work in helping to illuminate needs and resources in each context. Involvement in the wider project had also helped to strengthen relationships and networks which enabled recruitment of organisations for this participatory study. Organisations involved in this research all work with families with other cultural and language backgrounds and offer interventions which focus on support for child learning, school preparation and parent school communication.

[insert table 1 here]

Following a design-based approach, multiple methods were used to monitor and evaluate implementation. The fact that studies were carried out in different countries and across different contexts required adaptation of methods for each of the studies. However, data collection was guided by a common theoretical and methodological framework and the aim was to collect rich qualitative data on processes, with a focus on the on-going experiences of participants (Pastori et al., 2019a). Methods included participant observations which were documented with descriptive field notes, photographs, and audio-recordings. Practitioners provided feedback during informal conversations with researchers before and after sessions,

and provided written notes that reflected on the resources they had used. Observations and conversations focused on the quality of the resources provided (usefulness, attractiveness, clarity), feasibility of suggested activities, and the levels of stakeholder engagement and enjoyment. Post implementation, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews concentrated on participants' learning, and their experiences with the different components of the ISOTIS digital platform (enjoyment, usability, and suggestions for changes). To support work within the common framework, data collection tools (interview and focus group guides, observation and fieldnote templates, templates for feedback journals) were developed and adjusted in each country. Quantitative data collection methods accompanied the qualitative evaluation methods, but in this paper we focus on bringing together findings from the qualitative work.

[insert table 2 here]

2.3 Analysis

Fieldwork notes documented observations and participatory feedback sessions. Practitioners' feedback forms and diary entries were summarised descriptively. Focus group discussions and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analysis was carried out thematically, following a common template, in relation to the following topics: use of resources (goals and content, procedures, feasibility), engagement in activities (level of appreciation and enjoyment, fit with needs and resources, usefulness), participants' perceived benefits of taking part in the intervention, experiences with the digital platform. Data analysis was carried out separately for each country⁵. Here, we bring together findings from the four countries to identify across different contexts, process elements that worked, common challenges and perceived benefits.

3. Results

Most of the resources that had been prepared for the interventions were used by participating practitioners to support implementation. During sessions, parents engaged well. Many of the resources that had been prepared initiated parents to share their experiences and reflections with the group. Resources that demonstrated experiences of children and families in multi-lingual and multi-cultural contexts were viewed very positively, in particular in

⁵ Country results are presented separately in the reports submitted to the European Commission, see Ereky-Stevens et al., 2019.

combination with the audio-visual elements of the resources.

“The self-portraits I thought were really good, and it was excellent to have examples to start with as we find in a lot of our work. If you just present the task as a written task, people wouldn’t know where to start, they wouldn’t be able to visualise what it was and see the potential of it. So it was really important that they saw some examples for them to be able to engage with it fully. They might have done something but they wouldn’t have understood how much you could get out of it.” (Practitioner Feedback, EN)

Importantly, the digital platform also provided a space for participating families to create and share resources reflecting their personal experiences. Sometimes parents and children (mainly in IT, to some extent in EN, CZ) got involved in creating multi-lingual ‘products’ (e.g. recording stories in their languages, creating language self-portraits). Where such documentations of child experiences at home and in educational settings were created, these proved to be rich and meaningful. The materials that had been designed helped to initiate and enrich discussions around these issues, and parents appreciated opportunities for reflection and the sharing of experiences. Often, practitioners used these moments to emphasise the value of parents communicating with their children in their first language.

For practitioners these moments provided important insights and opportunities to increase their understanding of the complexities of language practices at home, and the challenges families face when dealing with more than one language. Practitioners mentioned that they had learned more about the nature of their work (CZ), how parents in multi-lingual families feel (EN), which had increased their knowledge and sensibility on the themes of multi-lingualism in families, and improved communication with families and contributed to more equal parent-teacher relationships (IT). One practitioner in England reported that taking part in the project had given her *‘some new tools to start thinking about their identity which I hadn’t thought about before’*.

In Italy, teachers and children in preschool and primary school classrooms created materials to document classroom practices which were shared with parents. Parents emphasised how being able to view activities their children carried out in their classrooms increased their awareness of the school system, strengthened how they felt about the value of multi-lingual practices, and increased their motivation to engage with teachers and support parent-school collaboration. Parents who got involved in their children’s classrooms expressed how rewarding and motivating it was for them to experience and take part in multi-lingual school practices.

"I really liked the fact that they used their mother tongue in class and that it relaxed them. Because it was something that was a bit taboo, and I never understood. "You don't speak Arabic at all, Tagalog" (...) But that they were relaxed using it, without violating a rule written on the stone, in my opinion is very reassuring and also enriching." (Parent feedback, IT)

Despite these positive experiences, findings from this study also showed that parents were far less involved in activities that were proposed to be carried out at home, outside the parent support sessions. Some parents expressed concerns about their children's screen time (GER) which might have discouraged involvement with the platform at home. In addition, a general feature across contexts seemed to be that parents were not able to access the platform (and its resources) independently. Issues with internet connections, logging on, and setting up devices were common in all countries, and in the Czech context barriers to engagement with the platform were most noticeable:

We are sitting in the room Mrs. Lewis inhabits with the two grandsons in her custody. After entering the VLE, I explain to Ms. Lewis that she will need to change her password so only she knows it. "I don't know what it is, a password?", says Ms. Lewis. I try to clarify it to her with the example of an email, but I do not seem to succeed. So, I suggest a password and write it down for her. Not having a smartphone or other ICT device in the household, the probability she would use it independently is low. (Researcher Fieldnotes, CZ)

And while practitioners recognised the potential of resources that were prepared on the digital platform, they also commented on the fact that parents preferred to have information on paper and that offline resources and hands-on activities were often more helpful and appropriate in their work.

"I think one key thing that the parents highlighted through the course this time was that when you're not feeling confident and you're not sure what it is that the tutor is asking you to do at home, you really need to do it yourself first so that you understand what it is that you can be doing with your child at home." (Practitioner Feedback, EN)

It was observed that the digital tools were not popular with parents or practitioners, and that the more interactive elements of the platform were too difficult to use. Practitioners mainly relied on text messaging, and WhatsApp to communicate with parents, and to document and share home activities, parents used pen and paper, or took recordings on their smart phones. Parents generally expressed interest in resources in their home languages, but the multi-lingual functions of the platform were not used by parents or practitioners, and it was noted that the translation functions needed further development.

I think that for persons from socially disadvantaged environments who are taking care of

children, it will be very demanding to orientate within this system. It requires a lot of patience and clicking through. If the application were to be on a smartphone, it would be easier to use regularly in families (...) (Practitioner feedback, CZ)

Across the participating countries, parent feedback on the perceived benefits of the interventions commonly focused on learning about multi-lingual issues. In England, parents reported that they gained knowledge about bilingual development and multi-cultural issues. They seemed ready to take on the message that communicating with their children in their first language is important, and that there are benefits to bi/multilingual development and multi-lingual practices. Parents found some reassurance about children's competencies to learn more than one language.

"So I had this anxiety over how he would understand which language to speak to whom, but I think that he is understanding which language to choose when he speaks to several people, and what I have learnt here is that children who are bilingual are more creative (...) I think that he [my son] would find a way to combine two languages, to be bilingual. So this course gave me more confidence to know that I shouldn't be speaking only English, but that I should actually be teaching him his mother tongue." (Parent feedback, EN)

Importantly however, parents also mentioned difficulties they had with the task of maintaining the heritage language, and the lack of resources and support available to them. In the Czech context, parents expressed interest in the materials which contained Romany language but commented on the fact that experiences during the intervention did not change their language practices or aims related to their children's use of language or language learning. In Germany, parents continued to raise concerns about children's ability to develop both – the heritage and school language well. Importantly, it was observed across countries that practitioners did not teach parents strategies they could use to support children's heritage language learning, and multi-lingual development.

Across countries, parents expressed concerns about their children's readiness and their learning in school. The learning of the school language was often a priority for parents. Practitioners had more expertise with strategies parents could use to support their children's learning in these areas than with issues of bilingual up-bringing. Where those topics had been addressed during interventions, parents expressed how much they valued learning about the school system, child learning in school, and classroom activities.

4 Discussion

This study set out to design and explore resources to support family- and parent support interventions in contexts of cultural and linguistic diversity in Europe, and young children's learning at home and transition to school. An essential aim was to test the ISOTIS digital platform which had been developed to facilitate interventions. The study was explorative in nature and included four case studies carried out in different European countries. Only small numbers of practitioners and parents participated in each country and results cannot be generalised. However, the current study demonstrated innovative attempts to use ICT to support family interventions and educational partnerships, and provided important insights into the complexities of family support and educational partnerships in the context of multi-cultural and multi-lingual diversity.

The participatory approach is a particular strength of this study, and processes of co-design were appreciated by participating organisations, and provided valuable learning opportunities on the side of researchers as well as participants. The bottom-up approach helped to ensure that materials that were created for the intervention were relevant and useful for participants. In fact, the most conclusive finding across contexts was, that participants appreciated intervention resources that documented experiences in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts. However, while our study showed some potential that a digital platform can have to design and share relevant and attractive content, it emphasised challenges.

Despite the fact that the benefits of the digital and audio-visual resources were appreciated, a common topic of feedback discussions across countries were challenges of working with the digital platform, and that interaction with the platform did not help the delivery of the intervention. Across countries we observed more issues with lack of ICT resources and skills and resources than we had expected. The potential of digital tools to support interventions in such low resource contexts is very limited, and more needs to be done first to ensure that the structures and tools are accessible to users, including material resources, sufficient time, and support. In addition, some parents raised concerns around the presence of ICT in young children's life, which discouraged them to engage with the digital elements of the intervention. In their work with parents, practitioners pointed out some tensions between hands-on approaches and the use of a digital platform to support learning. To facilitate interventions, the use of ICT has to be clearly aligned with the ICT-skills and confidence parents and practitioners have, and to build on how participants are already using

ICT in their day-to-day life. In the context of parent support work, more knowledge is needed on how to combine and balance parent engagement with digital spaces and tools with a pedagogy that focuses on hands-on activities and collaborative group learning.

Finding motivated parents to be involved in this project was challenging in all contexts: groups were smaller than was planned and parent engagement with intervention content and aims at home varied. Since outreach and active engagement are two of the most significant challenges family- and parent support faces, this is a serious shortcoming of our interventions – the ICT-element in our interventions did not seem to help to overcome these issues but added barriers in some instances.

Finally, an important finding of this study was that practitioners were more confident in working with parents towards school preparation or supporting child learning of literacy skills in the school language, than on working towards goals of bilingual development. Our work demonstrated that a focus on multi-lingual and multi-cultural beliefs, values, and knowledge can be helpful, but questions remain on how parent support organisations can help parents with practical strategies on how to bring their children up bilingually, and if and how digital tools can be supportive in this process.

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Table 1: Participants

	Czech Republic	England	Germany	Italy
Location	Ostrava	Leicestershire	Berlin	Milan
Organisations/services	community services, delivered in public library branches and a community centre	community services, delivered in community centres and schools	community service, delivered in a local preschool	school interventions focused on family-school communication
Practitioners	6 practitioners (staff members at a local library and community centre)	4 practitioners (family learning tutors)	1 family support practitioner	5 teachers
Parents/families	6 families with young children	11 parents with children at preschool age	9 parents with children at preschool age	parents with children attending 4 classrooms (n=132 for the primary school; 22 for the preschool)
Language/cultural background of families	Roma ethnic minority families with Romany language backgrounds	families Tamil, Polish, Japanese, Chinese, and Gujarati language background	families with Turkish language backgrounds	wide range of language and cultural backgrounds, from Egypt, Ecuador Peru, Romania, Sri Lanka, Brazil, Moldova, Kosovo, Morocco, and Pakistan

Table 2: Data collection during implementation and evaluation

	Czech Republic	England	Germany	Italy
Interviews	1 caregiver interview 2 group interviews with caregivers		1 practitioner interview	4 interviews with the two teachers of each classroom 2 one-to-one teacher interviews
Focus groups	1 focus group discussion with practitioners 1 focus group discussion with caregivers	1 focus group meeting with practitioners 3 focus group discussions with parents and practitioners		4 focus group discussions with teachers 8 focus group with parents
Observations and feedback sessions	3 participant observations with caregivers, children and practitioners 11 participatory feedback sessions	12 participant observations with parents and practitioners	4 participant observations with parents and practitioners	32 participant observations of classroom sessions and lessons
Practitioner written feedback	24 diary feedback entries from practitioners	22 written feedback forms from practitioners	2 written feedback forms from practitioners	8 diary feedback entries