

Implementation of ICT-Facilitated Parent- and Family-Focused Interventions in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Contexts

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Abstract: A 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, UK, Germany, and Italy. Across all contexts, the focus of the interventions lay on families managing and making the best use of the cultural and language resources present in their lives 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

Entwicklung und Implementierung von IKT-unterstützter eltern- und familienzentrierter Interventionen in Kontexten der kulturellen und sprachlichen Vielfalt

Zusammenfassung: Sprachliche und kulturelle Unterschiede zwischen Elternhaus und Schule können mit Bildungsnachteilen für Kinder zusammenhängen, Spannungen in der Zusammenarbeit von Eltern und Bildungseinrichtungen erzeugen, und die Entwicklung von kultureller Identität und starken familiären Beziehungen beeinträchtigen. Eltern- und familienzentrierte Interventionen für Familien mit kleinen Kindern können eine wichtige Rolle dabei spielen, einen positiven Umgang mit kultureller Vielfalt zu unterstützen. In diesem Artikel werden vier Forschungsstudien zusammengebracht, die sich der Entwicklung und der Erprobung von IKT-gestützten Interventionen für Eltern und Fachkräften in kulturell und sprachlich vielfältigen Umfeldern in Europa widmen. Der Fokus der Interventionen in allen Kontexten war darauf gerichtet, wie Familien die in ihrem Leben vorhandenen kulturellen und sprachlichen Ressourcen einsetzen und nützen können, um die kindliche Entwicklung und kindliche Lernprozesse, sowie den Übergang in die Schule zu fördern. Eine Hauptkomponente der Interventionen war der Einsatz von Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologie, mit dem Ziel, einigen der Herausforderungen besser zu begegnen, die bei elternunterstützender Arbeit auftreten. In diesem Artikel präsentieren und diskutieren wir die Entwicklung und Implementierung, sowie Ergebnisse von IKT-gestützten Interventionen, die im Zuge der ISOTIS Studie (www.isotis.org) in vier europäischen Ländern (England, Deutschland, Italien und Tschechien) durchgeführt wurden.

Schlüsselwörter: Kulturelle und sprachliche Vielfalt, Eltern- und familienzentrierte Interventionen, frühe Kindheit, Vorschule, IKT

Linguistic and cultural discontinuity between home and school can interfere with children developing a cultural identity, their relationships and connections to family members (Guardado, 2008; Kheirkhah, 2016; Tannenbaum, 2012), and their engagement and learning in school,

creating educational disadvantages (Leseman & van Tuijl, 2006; OECD, 2016; Stanat & Christensen, 2006; UNESCO, 2011). With the 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 of how to better support learning and equality. Education toward global competence, with its aim of strengthening values of cultural diversity and promoting cultural awareness and respectful interactions, has been recognized as essential to developing more inclusive societies (OECD, 2018).

In the early years, family interactions are the main site for children's encounters with their cultural heritage 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 along their own resources to form and negotiate not only children's language choices but also their cultural and language practices together with their linguistic and social identities (De Fina, 2012; Knight et al., 1993; Ochs, 1996). As children approach school age, families increasingly assess what constitutes good conditions for their children's development concerning the educational institutions the children are enrolled in (Schwartz & Moin, 2012). Cultural practices and the language promoted in such educational institutions affect the parents' attitudes, wishes, and goals, and they shape language choices and the 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 in which the heritage language and culture of the family differs from the language of instruction and the cultural practices in the educational setting, families must re-evaluate and negotiate their beliefs, values, and practices. When children begin 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, the focus being on professionals' multicultural beliefs and multicultural skills. To incorporate unfamiliar contexts of diverse values and beliefs into their practices, professionals need to assess their existing beliefs, practices, and values with respect to the families they are working with (Gardiner & French, 2011). Professionals' cultural sensitivity is seen as essential to creating respectful interactions with culturally diverse families. Here, it seems particularly relevant that parent participation in early interventions relies on the perception that everyone is listened to and treated with respect (Lindsay et al., 2014; Mytton et al. 2013). Trusting relationships between professionals and participants of early interventions have been identified as a keystone of effective program 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).

Sufficient time and resources for face-to-face contact are essential for building relationships and are therefore highly important in the success of family support programs (Cadima et al., 2017; Cohen et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2020). However, it has also been recognized that constraints on resources as well as logistical and geographical barriers can limit program outreach and the participation of families. Virtual and digital program 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 in participants' own time and from any place. Digital tools can help to produce 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 other resources are sparse. 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 is becoming increasingly important, little is currently known about the effectiveness of different virtual and digital program 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 the greatest barriers to accessing and using information and communication technology (ICT) (Cadima et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2020).

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 the design and implementation of ICT-facilitated interventions to support parents, classroom practice, and professional development in multilingual and multicultural environments (Pastori et al., 2019a, 2019b). The main component of all ISOTIS interventions was the use of technology, namely, the ISOTIS virtual learning environment (VLE; <https://vle.isotis.org/>). The ISOTIS digital platform had a multilingual interface and included content in each country's 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, 2019b). It employed a design-based research ap-

Table 1. Participants

	Czech Republic	UK	Germany	Italy
Location	Ostrava	Leicestershire	Berlin	Milan
Organizations / services	Community services, delivered in public library branches and a community center	Community services, delivered in community centers 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 center)	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 in 4 classes ($n = 132$ for the primary school; 22 for the preschool)
Language / cultural background of families	Roma ethnic minority families with Romany language backgrounds	Families with Tamil, Polish, Japanese, Chinese, and Gujarati language backgrounds	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

proach, which 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 report on the implementation of interventions designed in the context of parental support (Ereky-Stevens et al., 2019). The focus of the intervention activities lay on families managing and making the best use of the cultural and language resources present in their lives in supporting child development and learning, particularly during the transition to school. Resources that had been co-designed addressed issues relating to the linguistic and cultural discontinuity between home and preschool as well as school, and were designed to be accessed on the ISOTIS digital platform by participating practitioners and parents. Some backup 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 of multilingual and multicultural skills¹, supported parents and children to share information about their language and cultural experiences², and helped to engage children in dialogs and storytelling at home³. During implementation, co-designed resources were used to initiate group discussions at home and in classrooms, around multilingual and multicultural practices and preferences, and – during support sessions – to discuss the strategies adults use to support learning⁴.

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

Methods

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), the UK (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 contexts and target groups. Each country was involved in the ISOTIS project through a partner institution. The data collected for the wider project supported the exploratory phase of this work to illuminate the respective needs and

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

² For example, <https://vle.isotis.org/mod/hvp/view.php?id=3000>; <https://vle.isotis.org/mod/book/view.php?id=2922>

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

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

Table 2. Data collection during implementation and evaluation

	Czech Republic	UK	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 groups 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

resources in each context. Involvement in the wider project also helped to strengthen relationships and networks that enabled the recruitment of organizations for this participatory study. Organizations involved in this research all work with families with other cultural and language backgrounds and offer interventions that focus on support for child learning, school preparation, and parent-school communication.

Following a design-based approach, we used multiple methods to monitor and evaluate implementation. The fact that studies were carried out in different countries and across different contexts required the adaptation of methods for each of the studies. However, data collection was guided by a common theoretical and methodological framework, the aim being to collect rich qualitative data on processes, focusing on the ongoing experiences of participants (Pastori et al., 2019a). Methods included participant observations documented with descriptive fieldnotes, 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 used. Observations and conversations focused on the quality of the resources provided (usefulness, attractiveness, clarity), the feasibility of suggested activities, and the levels of stakeholder engagement and enjoyment. Post-implementation focus group discussions and semistructured interviews concentrated on the 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, we developed data collection tools (interview and focus group guides, observation and fieldnote templates, templates to

provide feedback) and adjusted them to 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.

Analysis

Fieldwork notes documented the observations and participatory feedback sessions. Practitioners' feedback forms and diary entries were summarized descriptively. Focus group discussions and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The analysis was carried out thematically, following a common template, on 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, and experiences with the digital platform. The data analysis was carried out separately for each country⁵. Here, we review findings from the four countries to identify the process elements that worked across different contexts, the common challenges, and the perceived benefits.

Results

Most of the resources prepared for the interventions were employed by the participating practitioners to support implementation. During the sessions, the parents were well engaged. Many of the resources prepared enabled the parents to share their experiences and reflections with the

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

group. The resources that demonstrated the experiences of children and families in multilingual and multicultural contexts were viewed very positively, particularly in combination with the audio-visual elements of the resources.

“I thought the self-portraits were really good, and it was an excellent way to have examples to start with as is the case 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 visualize what it was and see its potential. So, it was really important that they saw some examples to be able to engage with it fully. They might have done something otherwise, but they wouldn't have understood how much you could get out of it.” (Practitioner feedback, UK)

Importantly, the digital platform also provided a space for participating families to create and share resources reflecting their personal experiences. Sometimes the parents and children (mainly in IT, to some extent in UK, CZ) got involved in creating multilingual “products,” such as recording stories in their languages, creating language self-portraits, etc. 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, and parents appreciated getting the opportunities for reflection and sharing experiences. Often, practitioners used these moments to emphasize the value of parents communicating with their children in their first language.

For the 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. The practitioners mentioned that they had learned more about the nature of their work (CZ), that their knowledge and sensibility on the themes of multilingualism in families had increased (UK), and that their communication with families had improved and contributed to more equal parent-teacher relationships (IT). One practitioner in the UK 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 that were shared with parents. The parents emphasized how being able to view activities of their children in their classrooms increased their overall awareness of the school system, strengthened how they felt about the value of multilingual practices, and increased their motivation to engage with teachers and support parent-school collaboration. Parents who got involved in their children's classes expressed how rewarding and motivating it was for

them to experience and take part in multilingual 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 [...]. But that they were relaxed using it [...] 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 proposed to be carried out at home, that is, outside the parental support sessions. Some parents expressed concerns about their children's screen time (GER) which might have discouraged their involvement with the platform at home. In addition, a general feature across contexts seemed to be that parents were unable to access the platform (and its resources) independently. Issues with internet connections, logging on, and setting up devices were common in all countries, and barriers to engagement with the platform were most noticeable in the Czech context:

“We are sitting in the room Ms. 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 that is, a password?” Ms. Lewis says. I try to clarify it to her using 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 of her using it independently is low.” (Researcher fieldnotes, CZ)

And while the practitioners recognized 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, UK)

It was observed that the digital tools were not popular with the parents or the practitioners, and that the more interactive elements of the platform were too difficult to use. Practitioners relied mainly on text messaging and WhatsApp to communicate with parents; to document and share

home activities, parents used pen and paper or took recordings on their smartphones. Parents generally expressed an interest in resources in their home languages, but the multilingual 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 for them to orientate within this system. It requires a lot of patience and clicking through. If the application were on a smartphone, it would be easier to regularly use in families.” (Practitioner feedback, CZ)

Across the participating countries, parent feedback on the perceived benefits of the interventions commonly focused on learning about multilingual issues. In the UK, parents reported gaining knowledge about bilingual development and multicultural 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 multilingual development and multilingual practices. Parents were reassured about children's ability to cope with having more than one language.

“So, I had this anxiety over how he [my son] 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 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, UK)

Importantly, however, the parents also mentioned the difficulties they had with the task of maintaining the heritage language as well as the lack of resources and support available to them. In the Czech context, the parents expressed interest in the materials that contained the 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 their children's ability to develop both well – the heritage language and the school language. Importantly, it was observed across countries that the practitioners did not teach the parents strategies they could use to support their children's heritage language learning and multilingual development.

Across countries, parents expressed concerns about their children's readiness for school and their learning in

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

Discussion

This study set out to design and explore resources to support family and parental support interventions in contexts of cultural and linguistic diversity in Europe as well as 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 the results cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, the current study does demonstrate innovative attempts to use ICT to support family interventions and educational partnerships and provides important insights into the complexities of family support and educational partnerships in the context of multicultural and multilingual diversity.

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

Even though the benefits of the digital and audio-visual resources were appreciated, a common topic of feedback discussions across countries was the 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 concerning the lack of ICT resources, 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 surrounding the presence of ICT in their young children's lives which discouraged them from engaging with the digital elements of the intervention. In their work with parents, the 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 must be clearly aligned with the ICT skills and confidence parents and practitioners have, and build on how participants are already using ICT in their day-to-day life. In the context of parental support work, more knowledge is needed on how to combine and balance parental 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: the groups were smaller than was planned, and the parental engagement with the intervention content and aims at home varied. Since outreach and active engagement are two of the most significant challenges family and parental support faces, this is a serious shortcoming of our interventions. In other words, the ICT element in our interventions did not seem to help to overcome these issues but rather added more barriers in some instances.

Finally, an important finding of this study was that practitioners were more confident in working with parents toward school preparation or supporting child learning of literacy skills in the school language than on working toward goals of bilingual development. Our work demonstrated that focusing on multilingual and multicultural beliefs, values, and knowledge can be helpful, but that questions remain on how parental support organizations 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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