

A comprehensive overview of inter-agency working as a strategy to reduce educational inequalities and discrimination

Evidence from Europe and Future Directions

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The overall purpose of the ISOTIS (Inclusive Education and Social Support to Tackle Inequalities in Society) project, is to contribute to effective policy and practice development at different system levels to effectively combat early arising and persisting educational inequalities across Europe. In particular the focus is on reducing inequalities for culturally, linguistically and socioeconomically diverse children. The ISOTIS study examined in detail the experiences of families with young children in four specific disadvantaged groups: Turkish origin families, North-African (Maghreb) origin families, Romani families and low-income native-born working class families.

European policy has strongly promoted inter-agency or joined-up working as a driver to supporting children and families, especially those with multiple needs. The overall objective of this strand of the ISOTIS project was to develop a comprehensive overview of inter-agency working and its relation with the experiences of parents and professionals, developing an understanding of what contributes to the best implementation of services. The aim was to develop guidance for future policy and practice in the area of inter-agency working with young children and their families in Europe.

In this report, the political framework relevant to inter-agency working is described. The nature and extent of inter-agency working in the ten ISOTIS European countries is described, focussing on facilitators and barriers to success and potential impact. The extent to which practitioners, service provider and policy makers report inter-agency work, and perceived goals of this way of working are described. Finally each of the countries involved in the ISOTIS parent survey has been characterised on dimensions that reflect the legislation and governance climate that is most likely to support inter-agency working. Parents' reported use of services have been examined in relation to these country level characteristics.

Results

The political framework that is most supportive of inter-agency working is likely to involve a combination of both top-down state level policies promoting the strategy in combination with strong local capacity to provide bottom-up implementation and funding, fostering the involvement local communities. In conjunction with this, a move to decentralization of power in conjunction with integrated governance appears to be a prerequisite. Bottom-up support and local input will be enhanced with stronger involvement of the 'third sector', particularly voluntary and community organisations with a social mission.

Reflecting previous research, respondents in case studies of successful inter-agency working highlighted the importance of bottom-up, local support, strong leadership and the development of shared values through regular meetings as facilitators of their inter-agency working. In contrast, service providers, coordinators and policy makers interviewed in the ISOTIS parent interview areas placed most importance on top-down political support, while also acknowledging the importance of bottom-up support. In addition, they highlighted the importance of professionals being receptive to inter-agency working, which was likely to differ from their more traditional roles, and the development of clear professional goals.

Inter-agency working can be an innovation, subject to scrutiny, and all respondents - those working in successful cases and service providers, coordinators and policy makers - noted that funding uncertainty was the primary barrier to ongoing implementation of strong inter-agency work. In addition, the service providers, coordinators and policy makers highlighted staffing issues as a barrier, including problems recruiting, high staff turnover and limited time for the additional training necessary for a new way of working. The literature has only minimal evidence about the impact of increased inter-agency working but there was agreement between the successful case study professionals and the local service providers, coordinators and policy makers that services provided in an inter-agency

context were likely to be more able to deal with families with complex problems, reacting more flexibly. Service providers, coordinators and policy makers also highlighted economy of scale, that duplication of services is likely to be reduced meaning that more specialised services could be provided. It was expected that the most vulnerable families with multiple problems would be more satisfied with the services provided with this model of working, and hence would experience less stress.

There is a strong rhetoric in the literature supporting the importance of inter-agency working as the best way to support children and families experiencing disadvantage, and managers surveyed in ISOTIS study areas were able to identify some of the expected goals, such as detecting problems early, enhancing continuity of children's experiences, improving child outcomes and supporting families with multiple needs. They less often endorsed the idea that discrimination would be reduced by this way of working. Nevertheless, the actual level of collaboration reported by managers in the ISOTIS areas only ranged from moderate to low depending on the agency involved. Collaboration was greater with education, child care and health but minimal with the third sector, law enforcement or the local community.

Information from service providers, coordinators and policy makers was used to describe the ISOTIS countries on four dimensions to reflect a political climate likely to support inter-agency working (decentralization; the presence of integrated services across sectors with integrated funding; involvement of NGOs and charities in providing services for disadvantaged families and children; and power and leadership at the local level with a social mission). They represented the full range of the resulting index (-4 to 4) with a higher score indicating greater likelihood of facilitating inter-agency working. Index scores were positively associated with the frequency that parents reported using services (home visits or centre visits). In particular, when the index was higher parents reported more use of services in centres, which were likely to provide a range of support in one location.

Policy Recommendations

A range of recommendations include the following:

- More recognition is needed of local governance to promote bottom-up solutions;
- National top-down support is essential to maintain sustainability of innovative inter-agency programmes;
- A cohesive national salary and training structure will enable professionals to have better job security, allow for more flexibility in the type of role that they can take and will increase cohesion of inter-agency teams;
- Concepts about inter-agency working should be included in training for a range of different professions;
- More attention should be paid to ECEC, education and health collaborating with agencies such as law enforcement, charities and local community programmes;
- Creative solutions are needed to allow for secure data sharing between agencies. Additional barriers have emerged following the introduction of the EU General Data Protection Regulation;
- Active outreach is required so that families can be more involved in identifying need and providing feedback about the quality and impact of services.

ISOTIS

**INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SUPPORT
TO TACKLE INEQUALITIES IN SOCIETY**



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