

LIFELONG LEARNING: BRINGING THE FAMILY PERSPECTIVE TO THE EDUCATION FIELD

European expert meeting co-organised by COFACE and ICA
Key reflections and findings

Dublin, 16th of April 2024



Background

Lifelong learning across the lifespan of families

Learning opportunities are needed for both families and professionals supporting families, especially during key life transitions. Those transitions can be early childhood, adolescence and later in life. Depending on the life situation, those education services and needs can include parenting workshops, services of professional community-based centres as well as upskilling and peer learning.

Lifelong learning (encompassing formal, non-formal, and informal learning) plays a vital role in such education services. It empowers families by promoting continuous education and personal growth across life, while encouraging collaboration among families and communities for knowledge exchange. Lifelong learning also recognises the value of prior learning within families and bridges the gap to formal education.

Making education and lifelong learning work for social rights

Lifelong learning of families and professionals working with families can support inclusive societies and social change by increasing resilience in the face of key transitions (digital, demographic, climate). It is time to open education in order to make education and lifelong learning more age, disability, migrant, and family-friendly, aiming for education transformations and fully embedding this family skills agenda in policy and funding programmes at national and EU level.

In considering the burden of education on families, it is crucial to involve relevant organisations supporting families and relevant service providers in the further transformation of the education system. These organisations advocate for equitable access to education, highlight the consequences of relying solely on families, and promote policies that support educational equity and put them into practice. Collaborating with those organisations enables governments to develop more inclusive educational policies, considering the diverse needs of families and fostering a fair education system.

European context

[The European Pillar of Social Rights](#) puts a strong focus on education and lifelong learning, and namely on guaranteeing the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions to the labour market. [The 2023 European Year of Skills](#) agenda aims to raise awareness around skills and the need to improve and develop skills to address skills shortages, while also helping people to get the right skills for good quality jobs through reskilling and upskilling.

COFACE advocates for the implementation of family-centred education and learning systems by focusing on educational policies and initiatives that cater to the diverse needs of families and ensure educational equity, especially through the European Family Lab.

COFACE co-hosted a European expert meeting on family perspectives in lifelong learning with the [ICA](#) on the 16th of April 2024 in Dublin with 50+ participants from 15 countries. It took place in the European Commission representation in Ireland, which generously offered their meeting spaces.

The expert meeting brought together speakers from Ireland and Europe to help pave the way for family-centred education and learning systems and provided the opportunity to:

- Discuss the links between education and social rights.
- Spotlight the diversity of educational approaches by featuring professionals working with families in different EU countries.
- Share their insights on developing learning materials by-with-for families.
- Build partnerships with key education stakeholders at national and European level.

The keynote presentations on the COFACE website [here](#).

Programme

9.15-9.30 Welcome

Annemie Driescens, President of COFACE Families Europe
Hilda Roche, National President of Irish Countrywomen's Association

9.30-11.00 Setting the scene. Bringing the family perspective in education: diversity of approaches

Pedagogical differences between different educational approaches, and exploration of lifelong learning with a family focus.

Moderator: Mary O'Halloran, National Treasurer Irish Countrywomen's Association

Beybin Elvin Tunç, Education Programme Coordinator, COFACE Families Europe
Andrea Lapegna, Deputy Director, LifeLong Learning Platform
Dearbhail Lawless, CEO, National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland (AONTAS)

11.00-11.30 Stretching break

11.30-13.00 The family perspective in education – country spotlights

Implementation of family-centred education in different EU countries.

Moderator: Beybin Elvin Tunç, Education Programme Coordinator, COFACE Families Europe

Victoria Forget, Operational Assistant for lifelong education, Ligue des Familles, Belgium
Rachel Cassen, Director, LEAP Ireland
Daniel Martinovic, President, Rainbow Families Croatia

13.00-14.00 Lunch break

14.00-15.30 Opening up education to bring the perspectives of families: key recommendations and next steps

EU-level initiatives, advocacy, lobbying, partnership building, and the development of education programmes tailored to the diverse needs of different types of families.

Moderator: Elizabeth Gosme, Director, COFACE Families Europe

Dr. Justin Sinnott, Manager, Transformation Project Management Office, SOLAS-Learning works, Ireland
Dr. Antonia Torrens, General Manager, KMOP, Greece
Davide Muraro, Policy and Project Coordinator, European Association for the Education of Adults

15.30-15.45 Stretching break

15.45-16.30 Conclusion session

Facilitator: Beybin Elvin Tunç, COFACE Education Programme Coordinator

Harvesting of concluding reflections of all participants.



Welcome

Annemie Drieskens opened the conference on behalf of COFACE, welcoming the attending family experts. She expressed gratitude to the Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA), President Hilda Roch, Mary O' Halloran, and Rebecca Ryan for their hospitality and collaboration in organising the event in partnership with the COFACE team, led by Elizabeth Gosme. Highlighting the mission of COFACE Families Europe, Annemie emphasised the organisation's commitment to advocating for comprehensive social policies that provide continuous support and protection to families throughout their entire life journey.



Annemie linked the conference agenda with the ongoing initiatives of COFACE, particularly the L.I.N.K. programme launched in 2022 in collaboration with KMOP, that creates an educational centre which provides families and professionals with new skills and solutions to the challenges of today. The first L.I.N.K. resource developed is the successful free e-learning course on school bullying management.

The relevance of the conference was also highlighted within the context of the Belgian Presidency's upcoming flagship event on lifelong learning and Dublin's status as a UNESCO "Learning City", which is defined holistically as a **city that promotes lifelong learning for all**.

Acknowledging the dynamic nature of contemporary education, Annemie referenced the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Year of Skills, stressing the need for educational transformations to embrace lifelong learning.

While there was focus on labour market needs, the European Year missed the opportunity to also focus on "skills for life", essential skills for resilience and personal growth. She referred to continuous skill development beyond traditional schooling and emphasised the importance of family-centered education, as *"bringing the family perspective to education involves recognising and valuing the role families play as first educators and carers."*

COFACE members, family organisations, engage in educational initiatives with and for families, with the objective of empowering them. This is the reason why members and experts from Ireland and Europe were brought together to showcase their educational approaches and share their insights, as well as to discuss the links between education and social rights which she believes are deeply interconnected.



Hilda Roch opened on behalf of the Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA), which is the largest women's association in Ireland (with circa 6,000 members) that has been offering support, friendship, personal development, education and lifelong learning state-wide since 1910.

She started by welcoming the attending experts to Ireland and to the conference. She referred to her background in teaching and emphasising the importance of lifelong learning. ICA engages in different lifelong learning activities through its local guilds. They also run courses in many different types of Irish Heritage Crafts in An Grianán, their Adult Education Centre in Termonfeckin Co. Louth. She expressed gratitude to COFACE Families Europe for co-organising the event with ICA.

Setting the scene. Bringing the family perspective in education: diversity of approaches

The first session started with a presentation from **Beybin Elvin Tunç**, Education Programme Coordinator, COFACE Families Europe, followed by **Andrea Lapegna**, Deputy Director, LifeLong Learning Platform and finally, **Dearbhail Lawless**, CEO, National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland (AONTAS).

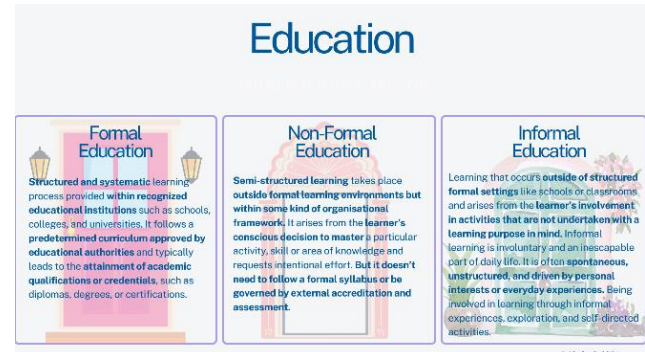
The family perspective in education consists of different approaches, namely education **by** families, education **with** families, and education **for** families. This session reflected on these three dimensions, to consider the pedagogical differences between the educational approaches, and explore diverse options to support lifelong learning with a family focus.

Different approaches to education

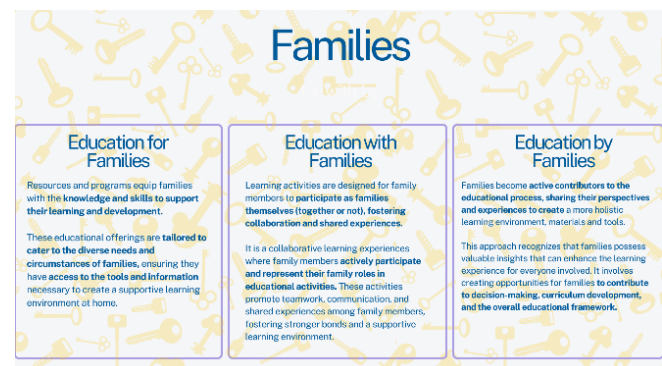
Beybin's presentation served as a comprehensive introduction to the first session of speakers, setting the stage for discussions on different educational paradigms. She highlighted that initially in childhood, the notion of education as a gateway to realising one's aspirations effectively opens doors of opportunity. However, as formal education progresses, an increasing number of individuals find themselves marginalised and left behind, revealing the underlying inequalities within the system.



Central to this discourse is the shift towards learner-centred approaches to education, as a means of addressing these systemic inequalities. This implies a re-evaluation of the traditional formal education and including alternative education pathways. By recognising different types of education, including formal, non-formal and informal, a more inclusive and adaptable educational framework can be built.



- Formal education: Structured, systematic, curriculum approved by education authorities.
- Non-formal education: Semi-structured learning, outside formal learning, conscious choice of the learner, no need for a formal curriculum.
- Informal education: Experience-based learning that develops from the learner's involvement in activities which are not with a learning purpose in mind.



Within this framework, family education emerged as an important component, encompassing three distinct dimensions: education **for** families, education **with** families, and education **by** families.

They can be explained as follows:

- Education for families: Skills to support families, responding to the different needs of families, workshops, seminars, etc.
- Education with families: Participation of families in their role within educational activities, promotion of teamwork, supportive environment.
- Education by families: Active contribution of families, practical learning in the family environment.

These different approaches can help specify educational programmes and their target groups.

Beybin concluded her presentation by highlighting the goal of the conference through COFACE's L.I.N.K. programme: An Education and Training Programme for Lifelong Learning on Social Rights from a Whole Family Perspective. This includes moving **"from equality to equity", learner-centred approaches, family support and inclusive policies.**

The crucial role of Lifelong Learning

Andrea's presentation addressed the essential role of lifelong learning across formal, non-formal and informal learning settings, beyond the limitations of formal education. By broadening the focus, Andrea emphasised how different approaches within the lifelong learning sector contribute to promoting equity, social cohesion and personal development.

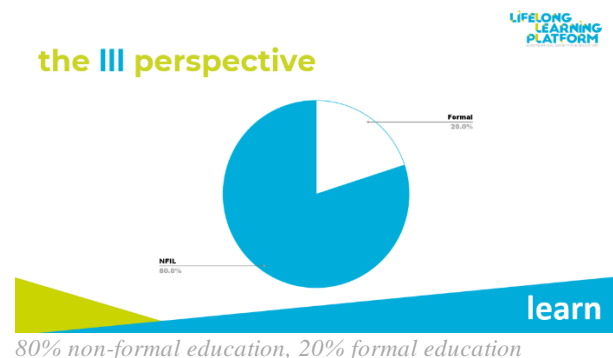


As Deputy Director, he introduced the [Lifelong Learning \(LLL\) Platform](#), which aims to create an inclusive, democratic and accessible pathway for educational engagement by facilitating European cross-sectoral cooperation between civil society organisations, trainings and empowering citizens' voices. Founded in 2005, the Platform represents 44 EU NGOs and reaches over 60,000 education and training institutions and 3 million individuals.

The term **"lifelong learning"** is defined by Andrea as **"an attitude that values learning in all moments of our lives, from birth to death. It includes non-formal and informal learning"**.

In addition, Andrea presented a key statistic: **approximately 80% of an individual's learning takes place outside formal educational settings, while only 20% takes place within formal schooling.** This statistic highlights the powerful influence of non-formal and informal learning environments, particularly within the family context.

the III perspective



Drawing on the European Pillar of Social Rights as an important EU framework, Andrea critiqued the policy oversight of the family perspective within lifelong learning initiatives. He highlighted that families serve as the primary and most influential learning environments in an individual's life. Parents and guardians play a fundamental role as the first and most important educators, shaping attitudes, values and skills from early childhood. Through daily interactions, family members provide essential knowledge, life skills and cultural values that influence a person's development.

Integrating the family perspective into education can promote greater collaboration between the home and school environments. When families are recognised as essential partners in the educational process, there is greater potential for synergies that can create a supportive learning ecosystem where families, educators and communities work together to support learners' development.

Andrea also addressed policy gaps, notably in the European Child Guarantee, which surprisingly does not have a strong family dimension.

Considering the family perspective increases equity and social justice. It recognises that not all families have equal access to resources and opportunities, and that family dynamics vary significantly across cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. By acknowledging these differences and addressing the diverse needs of families, educational initiatives can strive for greater inclusivity and equitable outcomes for all learners.

Andrea also highlighted different types of educational approaches:

Education BY families

- families are the first and most important learning environment in an individual's life;

Education FOR families

- training, education and skills for families e.g. non-formal training for new parents

Education WITH families

- holistic, whole-school approach
- takes into account all education stakeholders, including families i.e. the entire school community
- co-creation

Lastly, Andrea recommended literature such as "The Role of Education in Enabling the Sustainable Development Agenda" by Bilal Barakat, Raya Muttarak and Stephanie E.L. Bengtsson and concluded with a call for diverse learning environments that can meet diverse needs.

Adult Learning and Community Education

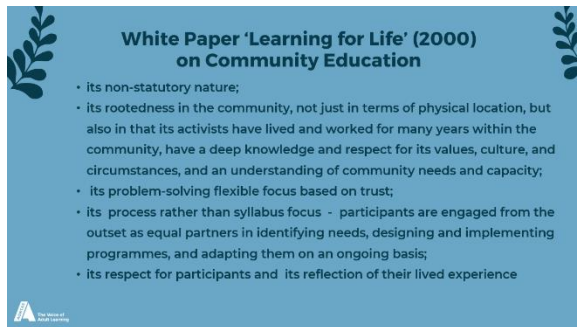
In her presentation, Dearbháil demonstrated her expertise in adult learning and community education. She argued that broadening education through assessing and linking policy and practice is crucial, and that adult learning is an important part of the education system, with the potential to bring in the family perspective.



Dearbháil is the CEO of AONTAS, a prominent learning organisation with 430 member organisations that works on advocacy, research, communications, and capacity building in Ireland and beyond. Their mission is to advocate for empowering adult learning that drives social equality, justice, and collective action across the island of Ireland. As an overarching umbrella body, the organisation has worked to promote learning opportunities, the learner voice and community education.

What are the reasons for focusing on adult and community education? The presentation drew upon the seminal work of Paulo Freire, entitled "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," in which Dearbháil emphasised the educator's responsibility to refrain from neutrality and to explain the necessity of transformative learning experiences that empower marginalised communities.

AONTAS defines community education as *“adult learning that takes place in local communities across Ireland. It is person-centred and responds to what people need. It is particularly important for people who have had negative experiences of education and who have suffered the impact of poverty, addiction, and social inequality. Its supportive environment is proven to help people come back to and stay in adult learning.”*

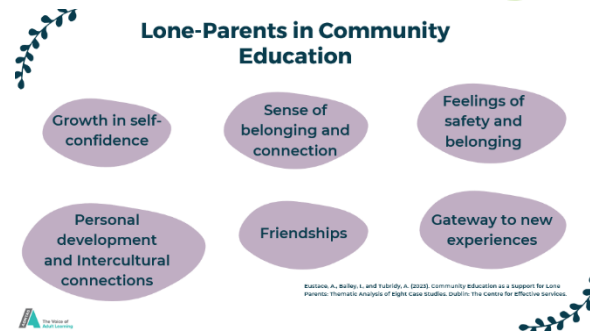


In this context, community education is a safe space for dialogue and sharing, where all participants are engaged as equal partners in the identification of needs, the design and implementation of programmes, and the ongoing adaptation of these programmes. It is respectful of the participants, reflecting their lived experience. Furthermore, Dearbháil cited Horton's (2017) definition of community education.

Community education is:

- Providing a safe place to encourage discourse and reflection.
- Assuming adults bring with them a wealth of prior knowledge and experience.
- Helping people to discover they are not alone; others share similar problems.
- Facilitating independent, critical thinking and planning.
- Helping people (especially the disempowered) to develop their voice and confidence to act.
- Solving problems and answering questions through synergy.
- Encouraging lifelong and diverse learning as means for change.
- Promoting the idea that everyone is an important member of a community and can work within it to make changes.
- Implementing continuous improvement and effective organizational principles.

How is it supported: Support services to the community are furthermore education programmes, counselling, childcare, domestic violence services, social enterprise, community employment, trauma-informed support.



In addition, Dearbháil emphasised the significance of the family perspective in community education, which includes lone parents in educational programmes and facilitates democratic decision-making processes that involve affected individuals. In this context, **families can be perceived as adult learners, as part of communities, and as learners with diverse learning goals and needs. By making adult education more inclusive, there is potential for transformative power of lifelong learning to address systemic inequalities and empower marginalised communities.**

Lastly, Dearbháil concluded that 1. Adult education has the potential to **promote a more equitable society**, 2. lone parents find a place of **belonging and friendships** in community education. It offers new opportunities and self-confidence and 3. Lifelong learning **supports families** and can help them to connect with their community.

Session 2: The family perspective in education – country spotlights

The second session started with a presentation from **Victoria Forget**, Operational Assistant for lifelong education, Ligue des Familles, Belgium, followed by **Rachel Cassen**, Director, LEAP Ireland and lastly, **Daniel Martinovic**, President, Rainbow Families Croatia.

This session provided examples of how family-centred education is implemented in different EU countries, providing examples along the lines of the three approaches: education **by, with and for** families.

Giving inputs about how to support families in learning, how they customise and deliver their education programmes with a family perspective; telling us their process and learning points about centralising families (either as a topic, or as participants, or as contributors, etc.) in their education programmes, as well as the added value and benefits of this approach.

Education FOR Families

Firstly, Madeleine Guyot, the Director of [Ligue des Familles](#) presented the organisation. It is a non-profit and works in the French-speaking part of Belgium in three offices with 26.000 families (members) and 60 local contact points run by volunteers. Ligue des Familles' mission is to foster a supportive environment for parents, guided by the principles of pluralism and solidarity. They provide benefits, services information and advocacy to achieve their mission.



After that, in her presentation, Victoria Forget, the Operational Assistant for lifelong education at Ligue des Familles, highlighted their work as an example of "education FOR families." In particular, she presented her experiences of developing lifelong learning for families, or "[éducation permanente](#)" in French, and the ways in which this empowers families to transform society.

In Belgium, lifelong learning is governed by a decree with three main lines of action: participation, education and civic training; analyses, studies, and participatory research; and awareness-raising and information. The Lifelong Learning Federation (LDF) uses the definition provided by FESEFA, emphasising a focus on rights: knowing your rights, promoting new rights, and ensuring the effectiveness of existing rights.



Victoria highlighted the transition "From I to Us," advocating for collective action. She described four complementary entry points: **describe, analyse, position, and act**. These steps often start from an individual's unsatisfactory experience and evolve into a group dynamic through empowerment and solidarity. The Ligue des Familles argues against placing the burden of "parental responsibility" solely on parents, promoting a systemic approach. For instance, thanks to the advocacy efforts and collective action of the Ligue des Familles, paternity leave in Belgium increased from one week to four weeks.

To meet the needs of families, the decree mandates a self-assessment every five years to evaluate the impact of Ligue des Familles actions. This process includes understanding why people joined the Ligue, their feelings since joining, and the group's history. Victoria illustrated this with a case study of a school project where parents were asked if they wanted to understand the education system better, leading to the launch of parenting groups and the co-creation of a manifesto with three key demands. This project significantly impacted participation and prompted concrete advocacy actions.

The « School in question » project



The Manifesto sets out 3 key demands:

1. to consider parents from underprivileged backgrounds and those involved with schools as true partners who are part of the solution, rather than part of the problem
2. put more resources into schools that concentrate children from disadvantaged families (socio-economic index 1 to 5)
3. put an end to abusive referrals to 8-3-1 special education.

The parents presented this manifesto to the political authorities at the demonstration to change the school held on April 26, 2023 in front of the Federal Ministry of Education (FWB).

Victoria emphasised the importance of blending old and new knowledge, deconstructing traditional roles and parental responsibilities, and maintaining a self-assessment approach for continuous growth.

She stressed that **organisations should not make decisions for families but include them in the discussions**, ensuring their voices are heard and valued in shaping educational initiatives. She concluded with a metaphor, stating, "Lighthouses don't run around saving people; they shine for others."

Education WITH Families

In her presentation, Rachel provided insights into the development of "education programmes WITH families." She presented her experience of developing inclusive initiatives as an example of community- and family-led education, with the objective of empowering families by creating connections.

Rachel is the Co-Founder and Director of LEAP Ireland, a family-led, non-profit organisation that works with children and young people with disabilities and their families. Since 2012, they work with families, their supporters and allies and their communities to increase expectations of what is possible in the lives of people with disabilities. They support people and families to take action on what matters to them towards the goal of a good life, an ordinary life.



Rachel's presentation focused on the concept of lifelong learning as "really useful knowledge," a term coined by Thomson in the 90s. She explored what this means in the context of families and adults, drawing from her own experiences.

Rachel highlighted the essential role of additional support both outside and within the family, noting that families themselves also require support. She founded LEAP 12 years ago after recognising that disability support systems often deprive individuals with disabilities of their rights and liberty. She questioned the notion of "special needs," asserting that everyone has needs that must be addressed holistically. LEAP's mission revolves around three principles:

1. **INSPIRE** – Sharing useful knowledge to encourage dreaming big.
2. **IMAGINE** – Assisting families in finding their community and building networks of support.
3. **INCLUDE** – Building their family members valued social roles, their relationships and belonging.

LEAP primarily works with families of individuals with disabilities, promoting **family leadership and familial capabilities**. Rachel criticised the top-down, often biased support systems in Ireland, which can undermine family autonomy and highlighted that **there is a need for programmes organised with families rather than for them** and noted that even charities can sometimes alienate families by assuming they know best.

An Inclusive Pathway

"An inclusive pathway is the primary means to a life of meaning, belonging and possibilities, requiring immersion in the valued, normative pathways of family and community life over the life-span."

~ Bruce Uditsky



Rachel described an inclusive pathway inspired by Bruce Uditsky. LEAP hosts exclusive trips for families, starting by helping parents articulate their dreams of an inclusive life for their children. They provide direct support to challenge physical barriers to inclusion, beyond merely signposting resources, and advocate for intentionality for those who need it by allocating more funding and opposing the medical model of disability.

LEAP's family leadership development programme spans a year, training families to become advocates, leaders and works, according to the remarkable success stories Rachel shared.

We need a Vision of an Inclusive Life

- To experience a **good life**
- To have the "**best**" as would be true for any of our children
- To know what a meaningful life could like, be like, to see the **normative pathway**
- **Resist** being pushed/pulled from an inclusive life pathway
- To help **create** full meaningful inclusive lives with / for a family member/ an individual:
- Move **forward** and to **stay on track**

"Without a vision, the people perish" (Old Testament)

In her conclusion, Rachel highlighted that **inclusivity is not merely a policy issue but a moral one, rooted in the fundamental value of people.** She stressed that **addressing these challenges requires valuing individuals and recognising their right to an inclusive and supported life.**

Education BY Families

In their presentation, Daniel Martinovic provided insights into the development of "education BY families" by presenting their experiences in developing the book "My rainbow family". The book serves as an informal learning material that promotes equality, inclusion, and diversity for children and families. As a parent, activist, and developer of the book, Daniel shared insights on the process of informal education and learning materials.




Daniel is the president of [Rainbow Families Croatia](#), a platform that brings together LGBTQ+ families and allies, fostering a sense of community, belonging, and empowerment. The organisation offers a range of comprehensive services, programmes, and initiatives to address the specific needs of rainbow families such as legal support, workshops, resources, and family-focused events.

Daniel began the presentation by providing more context about his country Croatia. In Croatia, there is a severe lack of sexuality education that includes LGBTQI+ topics, except in some progressive local areas. Despite many rights being recognised on paper, they are often not implemented. Croatia's conservative context is exemplified by the 2013 referendum that defined marriage in the constitution as between a man and a woman. However, civil unions for same-sex couples have been recognised since 2014, but under unclear laws. The environment is hostile, with incidents like effigy burnings at children's carnivals targeting organisations advocating for rainbow families.

In 2017, recognising the absence of materials for LGBTQI+ families, Rainbow Families Croatia created an original picture book, "My Rainbow Family" and were able to print it with the support of the French embassy. After LGBT news coverage, the book gained massive attention, resulting in 700 purchase requests for only 500 free copies. This led to significant media coverage and security threats, including bomb threats. Despite the backlash, they successfully crowdfunded \$10,000 in three weeks, with 70% of the funding coming from within Croatia, and 55% of contributors wanting nothing in return.

- Kindergartens, school libraries and teachers reached to us, to advocate for a inclusive curriculum
- Educators need support and encouragement on how to talk about LGBTQI+ topics in schools and kindergartens
- Many learning materials are available online, but educators still need help and support in understanding them



The success of "My Rainbow Family" revealed a need for such materials among progressive families. Due to this Daniel has since worked on the release of additional books in the series, covering various themes such as vacations, safety, environment, and extended families. **"Each book aims to deconstruct prejudices by portraying rainbow families dealing with everyday issues, just like any other family."** They included diverse family structures, such as grandparents living far away or children experiencing first crushes and relationships.

Daniel emphasised several lessons they learned from the project:

- **Deconstructing Prejudice:** It is important that people see that rainbow families face normal life problems just like anyone else.
- **Regional Impact:** Unexpectedly, the impact of the book extended to other ex-Yugoslav countries, showing the value of the book.
- **Active Contributions:** Families themselves contributed to the stories and asked for representation.
- **Crowdfunding Support:** Crowdfunding worked great for the picture book and demonstrated the support of the community for the creation of their content.
- **Educational Usage:** On their own initiative, teachers and educators incorporated the books into kindergarten and middle school classes on politics.

Daniel concluded by saying “If you support your child, you can become what you want to be, and they become what they want to be – we should not limit their potential. **Let them be themselves, with support – they will show you things you could not even imagine.**”

Session 3: Opening up education to bring the perspectives of families - key recommendations and next steps

The third and last session started with a presentation from **Dr. Justin Sinnott**, Manager, Transformation Project Management Office, SOLAS-Learning works, Ireland followed by **Dr. Antonia Torrens**, General Manager, KMOP, Greece and lastly **Davide Muraro**, Policy and Project Coordinator, European Association for the Education of Adults.

This session made the transition from national to EU-level initiatives, with emphasis placed on the importance of advocacy, lobbying, partnership building, and the development of education programmes tailored to the diverse needs of different families. Crucial strategies aimed at incorporating family perspectives into education policy were explored. The focus was on developing actionable steps to enhance education opportunities and lifelong learning policies by, with, and for families.

Bringing family perspectives into education on a national level

Dr. Justin Sinnott's presentation reflected on family learning and the SOLAS Future FET Transforming Learning strategy. It provided insights into the dimensions of SOLAS activities today and in the future, as well as key partnerships and resource pooling on a governmental level.



Justin is the Manager of the Transformation Project Management Office of SOLAS Learning Works, a state agency that oversees the building of the further education and training sector in Ireland. Their vision is to empower individuals, communities, and enterprises through lifelong learning initiatives. A national strategy launched in 2020 revolves around four key principles: access, simplified pathways, learner experience, and fostering a supportive environment.

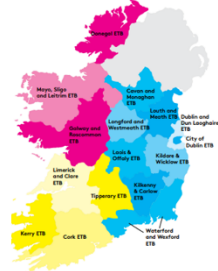
Despite Ireland's high participation rate in higher education, further education and training (FET) is increasingly recognised as a viable alternative. **SOLAS aims to provide equitable pathways for all, emphasising learner-centred approaches.**

Community education, while valuable, does not lead to formal certification, but SOLAS aims to improve the accessibility and delivery of courses.

SOLAS does so through the use Education and Training Boards across the entirety of Ireland.

Education and Training Boards

Education and Training Boards (ETBs) are statutory education authorities with responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. ETBs manage and operate Community National Schools, Post-Primary Schools, Further Education (FE) colleges, and a range of adult and further education centres delivering education and training programmes. ETBs are funded by SOLAS, the Dept of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and Dept of Education.



Furthermore, Justin presented the 2020-2024 strategy of the agency for further education and training.

Vision for Future FET – FET Strategy 2020 - 2024

- FET is available in every community in Ireland, and offers a clear pathway to learners that can take them as far as they want to go **(Simplified pathways)**
- FET is transformed in its delivery and expands the portfolio of opportunities for learners at any level to further their education **(Easier access)**
- FET is for everyone and inspires people to believe in themselves to reach their potential **(Learner experience)**
- There is a greater awareness of FET and it is valued by learners, employers, Government and communities **(Powerful identity)**
- The economic and social impact of further education and training is strongly evidenced by producing a stream of graduates with the necessary skills required for the labour market



The presentation included statistics that demonstrated the unprecedented growth and demand. **FET is becoming an increasingly attractive option for school leavers and is providing a valuable resource for individuals seeking to upskill and reskill throughout their lives.** By this it has emerged as a key player in the development of specialist skills for critical industries in Ireland.

The number of learners enrolled in FET has grown significantly over the past year, with an increase of approximately 17% from 2022 to 2023. Last year, approximately 423,000 adults in Ireland, representing one in ten of the adult population, engaged in apprenticeships, construction skills schemes, or other FET activities. Furthermore, over 219,000 unique learners participated in various FET courses, with approximately 375,000 places taken up during the year.

A number of notable trends demonstrate the growing importance of FET across communities.

There has been an 11% increase in post-Leaving Certificate course enrollments year-on-year, which demonstrates the appeal of this course to school leavers. Additionally, FET is playing a crucial role in supporting over 30,000 Ukrainians in English-language and other skills, while over 23,500 employees are upskilling through initiatives like Skills to Advance, marking a significant increase from 2022.

Furthermore, **FET is playing a pivotal role in workforce development in critical industries such as construction.** SOLAS has observed an increase in the number of apprenticeships, facilitated by expanded provisions and governmental support. It is worth noting that there is a focus on addressing workforce needs, particularly in construction, in alignment with the national strategy "housing for all". Additionally, financial literacy courses reflect SOLAS's commitment to holistic skills development.

Finally, Justin presented a new strategy for further education and training for the period 2025-2029, which is scheduled for development in 2024. Building on current objectives centred around skills, pathways and inclusion, this strategy will undergo a detailed consultation process, to ensure its effectiveness and relevance to the evolving needs of learners and industries.

The Benefit of Partnership Building

Dr. Antonia Torrens' presentation highlighted her expertise and experience in developing KMOP-COFACE's L.I.N.K. education for social rights programme and its first school bullying management course. Antonia shared insights and recommendations on partnership building, bringing together diverse stakeholders and resources, utilising different education methods, and customising the programme according to the target groups.



Antonia is the General Manager of **KMOP**, an organisation established in 1977 and is the oldest civil society organisation in Greece. It offers social support services and implements various programmes aiming at the empowerment and wellbeing of individuals and communities and is currently present in 3 countries, has worked with 125,000+ beneficiaries over the last 20 years, and implemented 400+ national and international projects.

Antonia outlined the diverse areas of work of the organisation, including health promotion & wellbeing, education, human & fundamental rights, civil society & democracy, and social inclusion & employment. She highlighted KMOP's extensive educational outputs and training initiatives, particularly through the Live Without Bullying project, which led to the establishment of the KMOP Education Hub.

The Education Hub aimed to provide a digital learning platform along with upskilling and reskilling opportunities, focusing on social skills development. The mission is to **empower individuals and organisations to tackle societal challenges through innovative vocational training and lifelong learning.**

Antonia highlighted the cooperation aspect of the lab by saying: *“thanks to our joint efforts and the useful input of member organisations, we gradually managed to build this informative and training tool which brings different stakeholders together, mobilises resources, greatly reinforces international cooperation, exchange among countries and partnership building among organisations and people.”*



Antonia concluded by stressing the importance of lifelong learning in navigating the complexities of rapidly changing societies, highlighting the benefits for families and professionals alike and the potential of cross-national cooperation.

EUROPEAN FAMILY LAB – L.I.N.K. EDUCATION PROGRAMME



L.I.N.K. reflects the joint goal of COFACE and KMOP to create an **education & life long training programme** for upskilling professionals working with families, or addressed directly to families and carers, students of psychology, education, social sciences as well as any professional working with children in learning environments on a daily basis. The thematic units of LINK are chosen according to the real needs 2 challenges that European families face, nowadays, addressing the needs of every age group.

Family and Education: What Europe can do

During his presentation Davide Muraro shared his expertise in advocating for the European agenda on adult learning and education (ALE). Highlighting EAEA's efforts to influence EU policies in recognising ALE as a distinct sector in education systems. Emphasising its role in promoting inclusion for adults with diverse learning needs and discussing the importance of policy work and every citizen's contribution, which can actively support the incorporation of family perspectives into education.

Antonia emphasised the collaboration between COFACE Families Europe and KMOP Education Hub in developing the L.I.N.K. programme, leveraging COFACE's expertise in family issues and KMOP's experience in educational planning. The European Family Lab, serving as an innovation incubator, facilitated cross-country knowledge transfer to enhance support for families and children.

Despite being relatively new, the European Family Lab received widespread approval, indicating its value in addressing societal challenges and facilitating international cooperation.



Davide is a Policy and Project Coordinator of the [European Association for Education of Adults](#) (EAEA), which is a European NGO that represents the voice of non-formal adult education in Europe. The EAEA was established in 1953 and currently has 120 member organisations in 43 countries, representing over 60 million learners across Europe. The EAEA achieves its objectives through advocacy, the provision of resources and information, the establishment of networks and communities, and the promotion of adult learning and access to and participation in non-formal adult education for all, with a particular focus on groups currently under-represented.

Davide's presentation outlined the potential roles of the European Union (EU) and its citizens in advancing family education initiatives. He identified several key areas where the EU could contribute, including the establishment of international standards and guidelines through initiatives like Erasmus+.

Davide also **addressed the issue of fragmentation and exclusion within Erasmus education programmes and proposed the development of an inclusive, multi-generational, family-centred mobility programme.** This could: 1. Enable all family members to learn together, 2. Integrate caregiving and parenting and 3. Address psychosocial barriers.

Furthermore, Davide emphasised the significance of **recognising skills acquired within the family context, which are frequently overlooked in traditional competency frameworks.**

Since 2012, there has been a recommendation for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. This has led to the creation of a European inventory, guidelines and database, a European framework for the personal, social, and learning to learn key competence (LifeComp), and finally, since 2018, a recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning. **However, the family perspective is lacking, including aspects such as consistent and impactful implementation and integration with other policies** (e.g., parental leave/caregiver leave).

While Davide referred to the potential role of EAEA in advocating for developing a more family-centred approach to education, he also emphasised the proactive role that every EU citizen can play in advocacy.



He advocated for active participation in democratic processes, including voting and engagement with candidates and Members of the European Parliament, to strengthen the voice of families in policymaking.



Finally, he shared two take home messages with the audience:

1. The EU can do a lot for family education. It can finance projects and initiatives.

It can create standards, guidelines and make recommendations.

2. You can do a lot to advocate for family education in Europe.

Make your voice heard by voting, getting people to vote, engaging with candidates/Members of the European Parliament.

In conclusion, Davide delivered a final message to the participants, which was inspired by a saying he encountered at the Berlin Wall: **"Many small people, in small places, doing small things, can change the world."** This highlighted the potential for collective action and grassroots advocacy to drive meaningful change in family education within the EU.

Conclusion session

After learning firstly about bringing the family perspective into education, country spotlights and lastly EU-initiatives and policy, this concluding activity aimed to harvest the final reflections of all participants. Groups of participants came together and reflected on three pivotal questions and highlighted key points to consider for the future.

How can we create supportive learning environments for all types of families?

By identifying and understanding various family types: Need to understand single parents, LGBT+ families, culturally and ethnically diverse families, and those from various socio-economic backgrounds.

By Work-Life-Learning Balance: Need to balance work, life, and learning.

By family involvement in learning design: Need to actively involve families in designing learning processes to ensure accessibility, particularly for individuals with disabilities.

By reducing the cost of education programmes: Need to address both the direct costs of studies and the indirect costs, such as lost revenue, advocating for flexible educational programmes.

By safe and inclusive educational spaces: Need for creation of safe, friendly, and culturally sensitive educational environments that are welcoming and non-judgmental.

By training educators and social workers: Need to continuously train educators and social workers in soft skills to effectively work with diverse families.

By focusing on vulnerable families: Need for universal access to learning opportunities and the development of education systems that recognise and address the needs of vulnerable families.

By school-based support: Need for language classes for children and parents, after-school activities, homework support, healthy and affordable meals, parent training within schools.

By funding adult education: Need for training budgets to facilitate adult education and learning opportunities for parents.

How could organisations implement education by, with, and for families?

Through inclusive and community-oriented schools: Need for schools to become more inclusive by hosting events such as night classes, literacy sessions for adults, and community gatherings. Cities such as Budapest and Slovenia are examples where schools successfully integrate community and family dimensions.

Through flexibility in school curricula: Need for flexible curricula tailored to children's needs, proposing models where students could attend school for four days and engage in skill-building activities on the fifth day. While private schools offer more flexibility, they often lack accessibility for less affluent families.

How do we encourage international cooperation and work together for a common cause?

Via Skill Recognition for Family Carers: Need to integrate the skills developed by family carers into formal skill validation systems.

Via Targeting Men in Family Education: Need to include men more effectively in family education programs.

In conclusion, the discussions during this lifelong learning conference enabled exchange on the importance of the family perspective in education. The participants collected insights reaffirming the importance of inclusive, flexible, and community-oriented educational practices, with international cooperation to drive forward these initiatives.



Co-funded by
the European Union

Co-funded by the EaSI strand of the ESF+ programme. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.