

Inclusive Early Childhood Education Environment Self-Reflection Tool



EUROPEAN AGENCY
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT SELF-REFLECTION TOOL

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



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Editors: Eva Björck-Åkesson, Mary Kyriazopoulou, Climent Giné and Paul Bartolo

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Secretariat
Østre Stationsvej 33
DK-5000 Odense C Denmark
Tel: +45 64 41 00 20
secretariat@european-agency.org

Brussels Office
Rue Montoyer, 21
BE-1000 Brussels Belgium
Tel: +32 2 213 62 80
brussels.office@european-agency.org

www.european-agency.org



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INTRODUCTION

This Self-Reflection Tool was developed as part of the Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE) project, conducted by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education from 2015 to 2017 (www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/inclusive-early-childhood-education). The project's overall goal was to identify, analyse and subsequently promote the main characteristics of quality IECE for all children. To that end, a need was detected for a tool that all professionals and staff could use to reflect on their setting's inclusiveness, focusing on the social, learning and physical environment. This tool is intended to help improve settings' inclusiveness.



INCLUSION, PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Through participation in early childhood education, all children learn and develop as they experience stimulating and challenging opportunities in the social, learning and physical environment. This Self-Reflection Tool focuses on increasing IECE environments' capacity to enable all children's **participation**. Here, 'participation' means **attending** and **being actively engaged** in activities and interaction.

'Engagement' means being actively involved in the setting's¹ everyday activities, and is the core of inclusion. It is closely related to learning and to the interaction between the child and the social and physical environment. Examples of engagement are when:

- children play together with a common focus and take turns;
- the peer group is actively focused on singing with the teacher;
- a child is absorbed in looking at a picture book;
- children are immersed in play.

An example of environmental characteristics that promote engagement is providing space that is free of physical barriers for interaction, i.e. that furniture and equipment are suitable for all children. These factors apply to all children.

A characteristic of an IECE environment is that universal measures are taken to provide in-built support whenever needed. This allows all children to participate actively with their peers in the setting's regular activities.

This Self-Reflection Tool aims to improve settings' inclusiveness. It is based on an ecosystem perspective, in which the child's experiences are seen as a function of proximal processes in the environment. Within this perspective, professionals and staff significantly influence a child's engagement, learning and development. At the same time, peers in the setting, parents and family are part of the ecosystem around the child. They, as well as the physical environment, influence each child's engagement, development and learning.

¹ 'Setting' refers to facilities for the education of children from three years old to the start of primary education in the different European countries.



DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF-REFLECTION TOOL

The Self-Reflection Tool focuses on the proximal processes that children experience in the setting. It pays particular attention to environmental factors that influence each child's participation. The Self-Reflection Tool consists of eight sets of questions, which address the following aspects of inclusion:

1. Overall welcoming atmosphere
2. Inclusive social environment
3. Child-centred approach
4. Child-friendly physical environment
5. Materials for all children
6. Opportunities for communication for all
7. Inclusive teaching and learning environment
8. Family-friendly environment.

The Self-Reflection Tool was initially designed as an observation tool. It aimed to provide an overall observer-rated picture of the environment's inclusiveness in the settings visited during the IECE project, with a focus on child participation.

The inspiration for the observation tool drew on several well-established instruments on inclusion in early childhood education environments (please refer to the Bibliography). It was intended to provide a snapshot of the environment from the perspective of the IECE project's key question: 'What are the main characteristics of quality inclusive early childhood education settings for all children?' It was used during site visits to IECE settings in eight countries.

After using the observation tool during the site visits, the IECE project team concluded that it would be useful as a tool for self-reflection on inclusiveness. Development of the Self-Reflection Tool involved a three-step validation process:

1. First, an expert panel, comprising 25 European experts in the field, used and reflected on the observation tool during the final site visit. The experts were asked to rate the feasibility of each item in relation to its use as a self-reflection tool. The experts had extended discussions about how to adapt the observation tool into a self-reflection tool. Their feedback was incorporated into the final version.
2. The second step was to use focus groups to validate the Self-Reflection Tool. This was performed by researchers and graduate students in three European universities. The participants were asked to score the observation tool before the focus group interview, bearing in mind their experiences of inclusion, and also to use the template for adaptation into a self-reflection tool. After the focus group interview, a content analysis was performed that raised the most important themes.
3. The third step was to perform cognitive interviews to explore the extent to which practitioners, leaders of pre-schools, parents and academic staff in teacher



education consider the Self-Reflection Tool comprehensive. The cognitive interviews were performed individually, asking about the tool's cultural appropriateness in their country and its usefulness. Following the validation process, the Self-Reflection Tool was further revised before being published.



HOW TO USE THE QUESTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION

The questions in the Self-Reflection Tool are designed to provide a picture of the setting's inclusiveness, focusing on the environment's social, learning and physical aspects. The tool is intended to be used flexibly, according to the needs of the users, the setting or the organisation. Settings can decide to focus on all aspects or only some of them and can also add their own questions. As such, it can serve as a guide for improvement by different stakeholders, individually or in a group: by professionals and staff, by leaders, by parents and children, and in initial teacher education and continuous professional development.

The Self-Reflection Tool may be used for several purposes. These include:

- to provide a picture of the setting's state of inclusiveness;
- to serve as a basis for discussions about inclusion;
- to describe, formulate and prioritise areas for improvement in inclusive practice.

To use the Self-Reflection Tool:

- Start by formulating the purpose of the self-reflection:
 - What do you want to accomplish by using the tool?
 - What is the goal for the setting?
 - Who will participate?
- Get familiar with the areas and questions and choose the areas you want to focus on.
- Decide how to work with the questions.
- Read and reflect on each question and record your reflections in writing.
- Record comments and examples of situations or activities that illustrate and highlight your reflections.
- Based on your reflections, identify changes that you think could enhance inclusion in the setting.
- Set priorities for the changes – what will the situation be when the goals are reached?



IECE ENVIRONMENT SELF-REFLECTION

Questions	Your answers
Setting's name:	
Date:	
Participant(s):	
<i>Before using the Self-Reflection Tool in your setting ...</i> Think – what is the purpose of the self-reflection?	
<i>After using the Self-Reflection Tool ...</i> Decide what should be changed:	
Priorities:	



1. Overall welcoming atmosphere

Questions	Your answers
1.1. Do all children and their families feel welcome?	
1.2. In what ways is the setting a caring, comfortable and appealing place for children and staff? ²	
1.3. How do the setting's leaders promote a collaborative and inclusive culture?	
1.4. How does the setting reflect and value the diversity of the local community?	
1.5. How are children enabled to feel that they belong to the peer group?	
1.6. Do you think that any child may feel excluded?	

² In the tool, the term 'staff' refers to all people who work in the setting.



Questions	Your answers
1.7. What would you like to change?	



2. Inclusive social environment

Questions	Your answers
2.1. Do staff build an interpersonal relationship with every child?	
2.2. How is peer interaction and play facilitated for all children?	
2.3. How are all children enabled to be involved in group activities?	
2.4. How are children encouraged to respect differences in the peer group?	
2.5. How do you encourage children to develop positive behaviour?	
2.6. How are children enabled to resolve conflicts?	



Questions	Your answers
2.7. What would you like to change?	



3. Child-centred approach

Questions	Your answers
3.1. Do learning activities build on children's interests and choices?	
3.2. Are you responsive to all children's voices and questions?	
3.3. Are all children engaged in decisions that are important for them?	
3.4. Are transitions between activities facilitated for all children?	
3.5. Is personalised support for learning (human and other resources) available to children whenever needed?	
3.6. Do teachers access additional and/or external support whenever needed?	



Questions	Your answers
3.7. What would you like to change?	



4. Child-friendly physical environment

Questions	Your answers
4.1. Is the setting (indoor and outdoor) accessible for all children?	
4.2. Are all children enabled to participate?	
4.3. To what extent is the setting safe and healthy for the children?	
4.4. Are the furniture and equipment suitable for all children?	
4.5. How do you facilitate possibilities for all children to participate in out-of-setting activities (e.g. excursions, visits, sport events, etc.)?	



Questions	Your answers
4.6. What would you like to change?	



5. Materials for all children

Questions	Your answers
5.1. Are toys and materials interesting, easily accessible and engaging for all children?	
5.2. Are toys and materials used to challenge children's own initiation, independence, exploration and creativity?	
5.3. Are materials used to promote communication, language, literacy, mathematics and science?	
5.4. Do you use adapted material to facilitate play and learning for all children?	
5.5. Do the toys and materials reflect cultural diversity?	
5.6. Do you encourage children to play and share toys and materials with peers?	



Questions	Your answers
5.7. What would you like to change?	



6. Opportunities for communication for all

Questions	Your answers
6.1. Does the setting enable all children to communicate and use language?	
6.2. To what extent do learning activities focus on children's language and reasoning?	
6.3. Are all children enabled to share ideas, emotions and concerns in conversations with peers?	
6.4. How do you enable children with different mother tongues to express themselves and be understood by peers and staff?	
6.5. Do you use a variety of ways to facilitate communication for all children (e.g. pictures, graphic signs, sign language, Braille and different technology)?	



Questions	Your answers
6.6. What would you like to change?	



7. Inclusive teaching and learning environment

Questions	Your answers
7.1. Do all children participate in the regular learning activities?	
7.2. Does the setting have high expectations for all children?	
7.3. How do you acknowledge all children's efforts and achievements?	
7.4. How do you make use of diversity and children's individual strengths and resources in learning activities?	
7.5. How do you observe and monitor children's engagement, learning and support needs?	
7.6. Do staff have opportunities for continuous professional development in inclusive education?	



Questions	Your answers
7.7. What would you like to change?	



8. Family³-friendly environment

Questions	Your answers
8.1. Do parents feel welcome and are they invited to take part in the setting's activities?	
8.2. How is a trustful relationship with families developed?	
8.3. Are parents well-informed about everyday activities?	
8.4. How are parents involved in decision-making about their child's learning, development and support needs?	
8.5. How are parents involved in planning, implementing and monitoring their children's engagement and learning?	

³ 'Family' usually refers to parents/guardians, but can also mean other people close to the child in everyday life.



Questions	Your answers
8.6. What would you like to change?	



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Secretariat:

Østre Stationsvej 33
DK-5000
Odense C
Denmark
Tel: +45 64 41 00 20
secretariat@european-agency.org

Brussels Office:

Rue Montoyer 21
BE-1000
Brussels
Belgium
Tel: +32 2 213 62 80
brussels.office@european-agency.org

www.european-agency.org

