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POLICY DEPARTMENT **B**
STRUCTURAL AND COHESION POLICIES

Agriculture and Rural Development

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**QUALITY IN EARLY
CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION AND CARE**

STUDY

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DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR INTERNAL POLICIES
POLICY DEPARTMENT B: STRUCTURAL AND COHESION POLICIES

CULTURE AND EDUCATION

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STUDY

This document was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education.

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Abstract:

This study examines policy developments throughout Europe on the issue of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Recent EU policy developments are developed to offer a structure and context for policy developments on the national level. Bundling together existing data from diverse sources and conducting additional in-depth country studies, this study proposes constitutive pillars for quality ECEC. In addition, based on an in-depth investigation of good-practices throughout the EU, this document provides suggestions and recommendations for developing quality ECEC throughout the EU.

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	5
LIST OF TABLES	7
LIST OF FIGURES	7
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	9
1. INTRODUCTION	17
1.1. Background of the study	17
1.2. Framework of analysis and research questions	18
1.3. Methodology of the study and structure of the study	19
1.4. Definition of key terms	20
2. ECEC IN EUROPE: PARTICIPATION	23
2.1. Introduction	23
2.2. Access to ECEC for children aged 4 and older	24
2.3. Access to ECEC for younger children (0-3 years old)	27
2.4. General conclusions regarding access/participation to ECEC	32
3. ECEC IN EUROPE: POLITICAL, LEGAL, FINANCIAL STRUCTURES	35
3.1. Introduction	35
3.2. Perception of ECEC in member states: political priorities	36
3.3. Legal structure: integrated versus split systems	37
3.4. Accreditation / Certification	40
3.5. ECEC Expenditure and funding systems	42
3.6. General conclusions	47
4. ECEC IN EUROPE: STAFF	49
4.1. Introduction	49
4.2. Staff qualifications	50
4.3. Professionalisation of ECEC staff	53
4.4. ECEC staff and children at risk	57
4.5. Working conditions	58
4.6. General conclusions	61

5. ECEC IN EUROPE: CURRICULUM	63
5.1. Introduction	63
5.2. Goals for Curricular guidelines	63
5.3. Content of curricular guidelines	66
5.4. Additional guidelines for 'children at risk'	68
5.5. General conclusions	70
6. ECEC IN EUROPE: PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT	73
6.1. Introduction	73
6.2. Parental involvement in the EU	74
6.3. General conclusions	80
7. TOWARDS A QUALITY FRAMEWORK FOR ECEC	81
7.1. Concrete European developments: the OMC process	81
7.2. General conclusions regarding EU developments	84
8. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	87
8.1. Introduction	87
8.2. State-of-play of ECEC in Europe	87
8.3. Challenges in providing quality ECEC	88
8.4. Policy recommendations for providing quality ECEC	89
REFERENCES	93

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AT	Austria
BE	Belgium
BG	Bulgaria
CY	Cyprus
CZ	Czech Republic
DK	Denmark
EE	Estonia
FI	Finland
FR	France
DE	Germany
EL	Greece
HU	Hungary
IE	Ireland
IT	Italy
LV	Latvia
LT	Lithuania
LU	Luxembourg
MT	Malta
NL	Netherlands
PL	Poland
PT	Portugal
RO	Romania
SK	Slovakia
SI	Slovenia
ES	Spain

SE	Sweden
UK	United Kingdom
CCS	Community Childcare Subvention (used in Ireland)
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CDI	Childhood Development Initiative
DG EAC	Directorate-General Education and Culture
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EP	European Parliament
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
EU-SILC	European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HE	Higher Education
MS	Member state
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NRW	North Rhine-Westphalia
OMC	Open Method of Coordination
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
QAP	Quality Assurance Programme
SCHE	Short Cycle Higher Education

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Constitutive elements of quality in ECEC	18
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LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Participation in ECEC 2010	25
Figure 2 Participation childcare under-3-year-olds	28
Figure 3 National expenditure levels on ECEC	43
Figure 4 Type of public funding, per age-group	45
Figure 5 Qualification requirements for ECEC Staff	51
Figure 6 Continuing Professional Development Guidelines	55
Figure 7 Training for children at risk in teacher qualification	57
Figure 8 Average minimum salaries in ECEC as % GDP per capita	59
Figure 9 Actual staff-child ratios for children over 3	60
Figure 10 Nationally defined curriculum guidelines	64

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Every single EU member state, without exception, offers some form of early childhood education and care (ECEC) to children under the compulsory schooling age. These provisions were traditionally developed as incentives for women to enter the labour market. Increasingly, EU member states are not only concerned with providing sufficient capacity for all children, but are also concerned about the level of quality of ECEC providers. ECEC is more and more considered as an important first step in a child's future educational development. Essentially, the quality of children's lives before starting compulsory education influences the kind of learners that they will be. The quality of education in EU member states is crucial for developing EU economic competitiveness, and schools work with the children that come to them. The European Commission also considers early childhood education and care as an essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability¹. This study serves to provide perspectives on the status of the provision of quality ECEC throughout the EU, also in the light of the on-going OMC (Open Method of Coordination) process at the European level, and identify recent policy developments in member states that may serve as exemplary measures aimed at improving the provision of quality ECEC.

The major priorities identified by the European Commission and Parliament serve as the basis of the analytical framework of this study. These priorities confirm the components of quality as identified by the international research literature and may be divided in (1) access/participation, (2) political, legal, and financial structures, (3) staff, (4) curriculum, and (5) involvement of parents. This study identifies ongoing themes and developments in these constitutive elements of quality. Finally, this study proposes some guidelines that should be taken into account for a successful OMC process, which at this moment is the focal point of the policy developments at the EU-level.

Participation

In a European context, common targets have been set for participation rates of young children in ECEC. For children aged between four years old and the national compulsory school age, member states aim to reach at least 95% of the entire target group with ECEC provision. For younger children (under 3 years old), a participation of 33% should be reached. When considering these targets, the concepts of 'access' and 'participation' must be distinguished; even though policies may ensure universal access by raising the number of day-care places, universal participation is in fact dependent on the actual demand for ECEC. 'Simply' adding day-care places will not necessarily raise the participation rates of children in every member state.

At this moment, practically all member states are developing policies towards reaching the Europe 2020 goal of 95% participation in ECEC of children aged four and older; a clear upwards trend in participation rates, now closing in on 95%, is observed. Also for the youngest children, a positive trend is clearly discernible. This study more specifically describes the efforts of increasing ECEC capacity by Germany's most populous state North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW), where a specific taskforce was founded to assist in overcoming the more practical hurdles of cooperation between different levels of government.

¹ European Commission, Early Childhood and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow, COM (2011)66.

However, the current economic and financial crisis is likely to have a considerable suppressing effect on participation rates in the future years. Especially in view of the effects of the crisis, it is crucial that member states not only focus on *increasing* participation of young children, but also focus on *widening* participation. Groups that are hardest to reach are often the children with disadvantaged backgrounds or from specific (disadvantaged) regions. These children need additional support through the early intervention of quality ECEC provision to prevent developmental problems later in life. As a best-practice, this study refers to Finland, which is currently mapping the population that is not reached with its pre-school programme. Widening participation also means that member states pay additional attention to regional differences in participation in ECEC; equal opportunities should also be ensured for children in more rural parts of EU countries.

Political / Legal / Financial systems

Increasingly, member states are working towards integrating governance structures for ECEC provision of all age groups. This is a positive development in light of the international consensus that integrated systems for ECEC provision deliver better results than split or separated systems. A holistic approach to children's development within policies and by providers is found to lead to better educational outcomes. It is therefore recommended that policymakers responsible for the youngest children work together closely with their colleagues developing policies for older children.

Systems are also often divided between different levels of government, with varying levels of autonomy for local authorities. National or local quality requirements for ECEC centres generally only set lower limits for quality. As such, ECEC are not given any incentives to further develop quality. Especially under tighter budgets, providers are likely to stick to the minimal quality requirements instead of further developing quality. An interesting quality framework has been introduced in Ireland (Síolta), which aims to continuously create incentives for staff to reflect on their work and thereby develop the levels of quality of ECEC provision. However, for this initiative, sufficient funding also remains the crucial requirement in order to reach its beneficial effects.

Even though the competence for ECEC policies may be divided between different levels of government, the national level often has at least some competence to decide on spending in the field of ECEC. When investigating the spending levels on ECEC as percentage of the GDP, the data show large differences between member states. Even though spending money on ECEC by itself will not automatically improve quality, there is a clear positive relation between member states that spend significantly more on ECEC and their educational results in international tests, like PISA. The current global economic and the financial crisis are therefore enormous challenges to take into consideration as they have a significant impact on budgets. However, a strong financial commitment is crucial for developing quality in all quality elements.

Staff

Competent staff is a crucial factor in delivering quality ECEC. However, practically no common standard exists in the EU in terms of policies regarding staff quality. A large variety of different minimal qualification requirements for ECEC staff exists across the EU, ranging from no requirements at all, to the requirement of university-level degrees. Generally, it is concluded that an entire ECEC workforce with higher education qualifications is not necessary, since supporting work can be executed by staff with vocational

qualifications. Some minimal qualification guidelines for ECEC practitioners are however necessary in order to be able to ensure a basic quality level.

Most member states attempt to professionalise the ECEC workforce. Considerable differences exist in the extent to which these goals are designed or backed up financially. This is particularly relevant for the more informal types of family day-care, who care for children in their own home and are therefore exempted from most regulations. However, continuing professional development is also important for quality of the 'regular' ECEC workforce. As a best-practice of such professionalisation efforts, this study points to the role of Family Centres in Germany's North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW), where childminders are offered a platform to exchange experiences or follow additional courses.

Working conditions, such as work environment, salary and work benefits are also of crucial importance for the system relating to the quality of staff. These serve as ways to attract higher educated staff and thereby influence quality. These broader working conditions influence job satisfaction, which also impacts the quality of provided ECEC. This study for instance, identifies large differences in salary expenditures and modest differences in staff-child ratios between member states.

Curriculum

Generally, researchers and policymakers agree that it is important for young children to not only develop the necessary cognitive aspects that are important for entering primary education, but to also develop non-cognitive elements. Both elements are considered equally important in laying the foundation for lifelong learning. Even though this balance is generally kept, there is large variation across the EU in terms of how detailed national curricular guidelines are formulated. Several member states recently introduced pre-school programmes for children near the compulsory schooling age as preparation for entering primary education for children. Across the EU, ECEC programmes are increasingly concentrating on enhancing more educational aspects, such as numeracy and literacy. As an example of such newly introduced programmes this study takes a closer look at Romania, where a pre-school year was introduced in 2012.

In all member states, policy initiatives are developed to reach children at risk and include them in the existing curricular activities for young children. Nevertheless, the aim and consequently the results of such outreach activities are often very different among individual providers, and between different regions. More evidence is required to make sensible and informed policy choices about the success of these attempts in the future. This study shows that the role of highly trained ECEC professionals is crucial in successfully reaching out to children at risk.

Parental involvement

Involving the parents is an absolute necessity for high quality ECEC provision; they are the key stakeholders in the development of children. Though always important, involvement of parents is even more crucial for minority groups or children with disadvantaged backgrounds. This helps reducing the differences between the home and the school environments and may thereby enhance children's educational achievements and reduce drop-out rates later in school. Even though parental involvement may receive some attention in laws, rules and regulation, generally parental involvement is left to individual providers across the EU.

This study distinguishes between child-focused and centre-focused parental involvement, since both have different underlying goals. Child-focused involvement of parents serves to contribute to the development of the child, whereas centre-focused involvement focuses more on the possibility for parents to discuss activities with ECEC providers. Even though the extent to which parents are involved may depend highly on the cultural context, several child-focused good-practices are identified in Finland, Ireland and the Netherlands, where very concrete outreach strategies were developed to engage parents and children of disadvantaged groups. In combination with existing quality standards set by the government, centre-focused parental involvement can be an effective quality assurance tool. When critical parents behave like constructive consumers, they have a possibility of influencing the quality of ECEC providers. Well-trained ECEC professionals therefore have an important role in effectively interacting with parents, both with a focus on the child and a focus on the ECEC center.

Challenges in providing quality ECEC

Some challenges and recommendations for quality in ECEC are broader than these specific elements of quality, and are relevant for policymakers at the national and European level. These broader challenges for the EU in the development of quality in ECEC are identified and this study subsequently proposes a recommendation to overcome the challenge. First of all, the lack of empirical evidence to support new developments and policy initiatives is a problem for policymakers. At this moment, policy initiatives are taken, generally without the backing of empirical evidence that these actually contribute to positive outcomes, such as lower early school leaving rates, or better educational performances on international comparative assessments, such as PISA. The OECD has consistently called for the **need for evidence-based policy making** in all its ECEC studies, and that priority is repeated in this study, both for the EU and for individual member states.

Secondly, a constant dilemma for national (or local) governments is finding ways to ensure quality on each of the constitutive elements for quality ECEC. Minimal requirements generally do not give ECEC providers any incentives to develop the level of quality. Still, most member states set such minimal requirements, on which inspections subsequently monitor compliance. A main challenge when improving quality is therefore to **design effective evaluative systems that provide clear incentives** for providers not just to do the absolute minimum, but to try to excel in their provision of quality ECEC.

Thirdly, it is essential that **policymakers follow a consistent line in policy**, backed up by the required funding, but also supported by other relevant authorities. All member states have numerous policy documents and proposals on raising participation, integrating services, raising staff qualifications, balancing curricula or involving parents. Besides such plans, however, it is important to **draw in all key stakeholders** involved and ensure that the proposed policies can actually be executed.

Finally, the economic and financial crisis exerts a significant impact on ECEC policies throughout the EU. Various examples in the study show how ambitious national quality targets or national quality frameworks were established and introduced for participation, staff, curriculum or parental involvement, only to be side-tracked by the first round of budget-cuts. Even though the ambitions usually remain, national governments simply do not assign sufficient funds to execute their ambitions. At the same time, citizens can contribute less to day-care services, due to more unemployment. Those citizens without jobs have neither the direct need to send their children to day-care, nor the often required financial means to do so. As such, these children risk being left behind and not receiving

the essential developmental basis that they specifically may need. In these times, it is important for national governments not just to maintain spending levels on ECEC in order to ensure quality ECEC provision on all different elements of quality. It is even more important that initiatives are developed to **ensure that the groups that need ECEC the most are reached** by ECEC initiatives so as to offer equal chances for all children. ECEC should be included on the wider educational agenda; quality ECEC provides the firm foundation for education later in life, and is an important tool to reduce present and future social inequalities between children with different backgrounds.

Recommendations

EU level recommendations: supporting the OMC process

This study identified the developments on the European level and in individual member states. At this moment, the development of a quality framework for ECEC at the EU-level of the EU is still in a premature stage; it is therefore much too early for a full evaluation. Currently, the process of defining a quality framework for ECEC has been initiated by the Commission, through the Thematic Working Group that started its work in 2012, as part of the ongoing process of Open Method of Coordination (OMC).

Because it is still too early for an evaluation of the process, this study identified some recommendations for the European Parliament, the European Commission and individual member states that can support the ongoing work towards developing a European quality framework in early childhood education and care.

- **Preparatory political involvement should be stimulated** to ensure that sufficient awareness is given to the policy area, now and in the near future; if quality ECEC is of no concern to citizens or national stakeholders, the OMC process is not likely to succeed. The development of a quality framework in ECEC should be more than developing a technical checking box. The process also has a clear political component, which requires sufficient political involvement to be successful.
- Secondly, a **common concern should be raised among member states** about the importance of developing quality in ECEC. If member states do not see the added value of working together towards common goals, the OMC is very unlikely to be successful. In order to make sure that the quality framework for ECEC will be fully supported, member states should depart together from common goals.
- Thirdly, it is important that **institutional structures** are used to support the OMC process, as the Commission has now done with the founding of the thematic working group and the stakeholder group.
- **Availability of objectives, benchmarks and indicators** is also an important component for a successful OMC process. These are currently being developed by the thematic working group and are essential to compare progress on the quality framework for ECEC. Clear and comparable objectives, benchmarks and indicators are needed on all the individual elements that are identified in this study: (1) participation / access, (2) political, legal, and financial structures, (3) staff, (4) curriculum, and (5) involvement of parents. Such comparable data is essential to create incentives for member states to work towards the common goal. New, EU-wide empirical studies are required for further developing such evidence-based objectives or benchmarks and must therefore also be supported.
- European policymakers should **make sure to involve stakeholders** and build meaningful cooperation with them. This is crucial for the success of the OMC process, as it is a bottom-up process. Development of a quality framework for ECEC should be more

than a high-level policy project, but must instead be clearly rooted in actual ECEC practices. This is especially important for a quality framework in ECEC, since ECEC policies are often delegated to the lower levels of government and smaller providers.

- Finally, **conflicting positions** (in terms of policy directions or ideology) between member states generally help the OMC process forward, and should therefore not necessarily be prevented by European policymakers. When this is the case, member states with a clear agenda will try to persuade reluctant member states to work towards the common goal; since the initiative has to come from member states, this condition is very relevant for the success of the OMC process.

Member state recommendations: developing quality in ECEC

In addition to policy coordination in the OMC process, member states are primarily responsible for raising quality. This study underlines the importance the issue of quality ECEC is put on the wider educational agenda, as quality ECEC provides the firm basis for future education and life long learning. As such, it is an integral part of broader policies on equal chances and citizenship and should also be treated as such. This study described and analysed good practices in different institutional contexts across the EU, and its observations serve to inform policymakers on issues of quality ECEC, which were defined as participation, governance systems, staff, curriculum, and parental involvement. Here, the main lessons learnt from these good practices are summarised for national policymakers.

- **Evidence-based policymaking:** It is absolutely vital that policymakers base new policy initiatives on substantial empirical foundations. Too often, policy developments are initiated and defended without any justification of empirical evidence. **Therefore, more attention is needed for the empirics of “what works” in ECEC**, for instance through supporting longitudinal cohort studies in an EU context.
- **Participation:** Instead of only *increasing* participation, more focus is required on **widening participation**. Member states should pay additional attention to participation of specific groups and regional differences in participation in ECEC, which can signify problems of access. It should be made a priority to widen the participation in ECEC also beyond metropolitan areas, and also provide **equal opportunities** for parents and their children in **more rural parts** of the country.
- **Integrating systems:** It is recommended that policymakers responsible for the youngest children **work closely together** with their colleagues developing policies for older children; integrating ECEC into the wider education systems helps creating a fertile ground for ECEC providers on the ground to also have unified approach to children’s development.
- **Staff:** Member states should have at least some **minimal qualification guidelines for all ECEC staff** on the national level to be able to ensure a basic quality level.
- **Curriculum:** Given the empirical evidence that calls for balanced curricula, it is relevant to make sure the **balance between cognitive and non-cognitive aspects** is kept in approaching children under the compulsory schooling age, even if educational goals, such as numeracy and literacy, are put more central in the content of curricula.
- **Parental involvement:** Even though relatively little regulation exists for involving parents in ECEC this study further underlines its importance. It is recommended that member states further **assist ECEC providers in encouraging meaningful involvement of parents**, while paying respect to cultural differences that may exist in different regions or for different groups.

- **ECEC expenditure level:** The current global economic and financial crisis is therefore an enormous challenge to take into consideration as it has a significant impact on budgets. However, a **strong financial commitment is crucial** for developing quality on the aforementioned elements. In order to ensure this financial commitment, it is recommended that **member states work together to make national expenditure on ECEC policies more comparable** across different member states so that performance may be compared across the EU.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the study

Every single member state of the European Union (EU), without exceptions, offers some subsidised form of early childhood education or care (ECEC) to children under the compulsory schooling age. At the 2002 Barcelona European Council, member states agreed to provide full-day places in formal childcare arrangements to at least 90% of children aged between three and compulsory school age, and to at least 33% of children under three². In the Europe 2020 strategy, the 'follow-up' target was formulated to further raise the share of children between 4 years old and the compulsory schooling age participating in pre-primary education to an average of at least 95% across the EU³.

The European Commission considers early childhood education and care an essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability⁴. In education, numerous studies demonstrate how early childhood education and care (ECEC) can help improve scores in international tests on basic skills, such as the international scores by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) through the internationally comparative PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) tests. Also, there is a general consensus in these studies that measures taken at a later age can no longer achieve a similar impact⁵. Most famously, Heckman argued that investments in early childhood bring greater returns than investments in any other stage of education⁶. It is widely believed that an important relation exists between the quality of ECEC and early school leaving; the European Commission has recently commissioned a study to further investigate this link⁷. It is also considered particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged groups, for instance as a tool to lift these children out of poverty and / or family dysfunction. Against this background, ECEC has been designated as a European priority area.

This study will serve as policy input for the European Parliament Committee on Culture and Education to provide perspectives on the provision of quality ECEC throughout the EU, also in the light of the ongoing OMC process, and identify recent policy developments in member states that may serve as exemplary measures aimed at improving the provision of quality ECEC.

"The objective of this study is to examine and give evidence of the developments so far (state of play, [member state] adherence, possible shortcomings, room for improvement, etc.) at EU level in the field of early childhood education and care, on the basis of which suggestions and recommendations should be made."⁸

² European Council (2007), Presidency conclusions, Barcelona (OJ C 311 21-12-2007, p13-15).

³ European Council (2009), *Council conclusions on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training* (ET 2020), (OJ C 119, 28-5-2009).

⁴ European Commission, Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow, COM (2011)66.

⁵ OECD (2010), PISA 2009 results: Overcoming social background, page 97-98.

⁶ Heckman, J., and D. V. Masterov (2004), 'The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children' In *Working Paper 5. Chicago: Invest in Kids Working Group*, Committee for Economic Development.

⁷ EU COM (2012), Call for tender EAC/17/2012, http://ec.europa.eu/education/calls/1712_en.htm

⁸ Terms of Reference.

1.2. Framework of analysis and research questions

Although quality is a broad and multi-facet concept, which will be further explored below, the purposes of this study necessitate the limitation of its scope to characteristics suitable for policy making. This study will do so, based on the insights in the existing literature on the topic, and further informed by policy priorities as set in the European context. The European Commission, the Council and the European Parliament have all defined certain policy priorities and targets, in which they deviate from a single quantitative focus on participation scores of children in ECEC and defined several crucial elements for quality ECEC across the EU. This study will start by identifying and evaluating recent policy developments at the European level and investigate the ongoing 'open method of coordination' (OMC) process in the field of ECEC initiated by the European Commission.

Subsequently, the study will identify constitutive elements that can be drawn from the European policy framework. Following the European Commission's Communication, the European Parliament also adopted a resolution in May 2011, expressing its approval of both the policy developments undertaken by the European Commission in its Communication and the policy targets that were set by the European Council in the Europe 2020 framework. The major priorities identified by the Commission and the Parliament serve as the basis of the analytical framework of this study. These confirm the broad quality components as identified by the international research literature and may be divided in (1) access/participation, (2) political, legal, and financial frameworks, (3) staff requirements, (4) curriculum, and (5) interaction with parents.

Table 1: Constitutive elements of quality in ECEC

Priority defined by Commission ⁹	Priority defined by Parliament ¹⁰	Priority defined by this study
"Ensure sufficient (universal) access of ECEC services"	"Universal provision of ECEC"	Access / participation
"Integrate systems of Care & Education"	"Better integration of services"	Political, legal, financial frameworks
"Professionalisation of ECEC staff"	"Staff and Quality service provision"	Staff
"Attract, educate and retain qualified staff"		
"Improve gender balance of staff"		
"Appropriate balance between cognitive / non-cognitive elements of curriculum"	"Child centred approach"	Curriculum
"Design coherent, well-coordinated pedagogical frameworks"		
"Transition children between family and ECEC"	"Engagement of Parents"	Interaction with parents

⁹ European Commission, Early Childhood and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow, COM (2011)66.

¹⁰ European Parliament (2011), Resolution of 12 May 2011 on Early Years Learning in the European Union, 2010/2159/INI.

Table 1 reflects all these components of quality, in which the policy priorities adopted by the Commission in its 2011 Communication are related to the policy priorities as defined by the European Parliament in its 2011 resolution. These components formed the input for the research questions. Concrete questions were raised on the context in which ECEC policies are developed, the objectives of ECEC policies, the policy, legal and financial framework in place, quality assurance systems in place, actors involved, how they cooperate, the provision of ECEC, and finally the outcomes of ECEC policies.

For the more specific elements of quality as identified above, more specific questions were formulated to provide a full picture of the state-of-play on the issue of staff, curricular guidelines or parental involvement in the member state under study. For these particular elements of quality, additional attention was paid to how these separate elements aim to act as a force of inclusion for *all* children. A detailed overview of the research questions is provided in the annex to this study.

1.3. Methodology of the study and structure of the study

1.3.1. Research activities

The following research activities have been conducted to answer the research questions:

- **Research activity 1 - Gathering data in all MS by means of desk research:** The aim of this research activity was to have a clear idea on the broad state-of-play of ECEC policies throughout the EU. Numerous studies have been conducted by different organisations, such as the European Commission (DG EAC, but also the Eurydice network), OECD, UNESCO and other organisations. Such studies provide crucial insights in the comparative development of ECEC policies across the EU. The framework of five main elements of quality served as the analytical backbone of the desk research.
- **Research activity 2 - Conducting in-depth country studies:** The aim of this research activity was to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of recent and foreseen developments ECEC policies at MS level. Departing from the same analytical framework, the focus was on how the MS deal with particular national difficulties, and what quality measures are successful in what contexts. The selection of six countries for in-depth analysis represents the diversity of ECEC provision across the EU. These were selected on the basis of varying participation levels of children in ECEC services, different structures for departmental responsibilities, low versus high staff requirements, national or local curricular guidelines and geographical variety in Europe (Finland, Ireland, Romania, the Netherlands, Spain, and Germany were selected). In each selected country, an additional case study was conducted of one particular good practice in that country. These cases serve to describe the rationale of setting up the initiative, the context, actors involved, how it is implemented, the results, and main lessons learned. Thereby, the case studies form the basis of the final recommendations and are complemented by the detailed country studies. For the country studies at least three interviews have been conducted with relevant stakeholders and relevant literature has been studied. For the additional case study desk research was complemented with additional 1-2 interviews with relevant stakeholders, preferably on provision level, to further identify drivers for quality ECEC provision. **Annex I** includes a list of the persons interviewed.

- **Research activity 3 - Interviewing European stakeholders in ECEC policies:** The aim of this activity was to review the actual progress made on the European level since the ECEC has been made a policy priority. Here, the focus was more on the OMC process itself, expected results and challenges, and possible future actions (see also **Annex I** for a list of interviewees).

1.3.2. Structure of the study

This study is structured around the elements of quality as identified in table 1. These elements are all reflected both in policy documents on the EU level as on the national level. Separate chapters are focused on each of the identified 'pillars' of quality ECEC, describing the state of play for all 27 European member states based on the wide variety of existing data sources (chapters 2-6). This general overview is complemented with more in-depth information gathered in the six member states and interesting cases to illustrate developments taking place. Following the developments in member states, this study describes the developments at the European level in chapter 7. This study concludes with chapter 8 describing the main conclusions and outcomes of the study, and providing relevant recommendations, both to individual member states as to policymakers at the level of the EU.

1.4. Definition of key terms

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) can be defined as publicly subsidised institutions for children under the compulsory school age, following the more widely used definition for early childhood education and care in the European policy context¹¹. This study does not deliberately restrict itself to *strictly* public ECEC provision; ECEC providers that are run privately, but receive some funding (direct or indirect, for instance through tax compensations for parents) are included in this study. Education and care are generally considered as separate yet complementary concepts¹². In the literature, however, these are generally used together, even in national contexts where we find an institutional distinction between providers of care for the youngest children, and educational providers for older children. For pragmatic reasons we will therefore also use the term 'early childhood education and care' to refer to the entirety of education and care institutions for children under the compulsory school age.

Due to the differences of education and care provision across different member states it will often be necessary to distinguish between services for the youngest children and older children. When reference is made to ECEC provision for the youngest children this study refers to children that are 0-3 years old unless stated otherwise. By ECEC provision for older children is meant children over 3 until they reach the compulsory school age. Please note that this compulsory school age may also be different in different national contexts, which is the reason that no exact age as upper limit is used.

¹¹ European Commission (2009), *Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities*, page 7.

¹² European Commission (2011), *Competence Requirements of Staff in Early Childhood Education and Care in the European Union*.

Defining Quality

When defining quality in ECEC, it is important to understand the differences in political, social and cultural background of individual member states or even local regions. The concept of quality is heavily influenced by such local backgrounds; what works in one country may at the same time prove counterproductive in another. This must be taken into account when formulating recommendations for quality based on our findings in the countries and case studies.

With the explicit goal of defining a quality framework, the OECD defined several key 'policy levers' in an authoritative study on ECEC, through which policy makers may develop quality measures for ECEC services¹³. These policy levers are consciously defined very broadly to allow for a different focus in different countries, while at the same time providing guidance as to what factors influence quality of ECEC. These policy levers include 'setting out quality goals and regulations', 'designing and implementing curriculum and standards', improve workforce conditions, qualifications and training', 'engaging families and communities' and 'advancing research and monitoring'. This may serve as input for developing policies that impact the quality of ECEC provision, for different countries in different stages of policy implementation.

¹³ OECD (2012), *Starting Strong III: A quality toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*.

2. ECEC IN EUROPE: PARTICIPATION

KEY FINDINGS

- In a European context, common targets are established for participation in ECEC. For children between the age of four and the national compulsory school age, member states should reach at least 95% of the entire target group with ECEC services by 2020. For younger children (under 3 years old), a participation of 33% should be reached.
- This chapter distinguishes between 'access' and 'participation'; even though universal access to ECEC can be ensured by policies raising the number of day-care places, universal participation is in fact dependent on the actual demand for ECEC. 'Simply' adding day-care places will not necessarily raise the participation rates of children in every member state.
- Practically all member states are developing policies towards reaching the Europe 2020 goal of 95% participation in ECEC of children aged four and older; there is a clear upwards trend in participation rates closing in on 95. Also for younger children, a positive trend is clearly discernible. However, this chapter also shows that the current economic and financial crisis is likely to have a considerable suppressing effect on participation rates.
- Instead of only focusing on participation, policymakers should also focus on non-participation. Not only *increasing* participation in ECEC towards the 95% participation target should be a goal; *widening* participation to all different target groups is very important. Especially groups that are hardest to reach are often the children with disadvantaged backgrounds or from specific (disadvantaged) regions. These children need quality ECEC the most to prevent developmental problems later in life; increasing participation of these groups is much more important than increasing participation of groups that are easier to reach.
- Raising participation or combating non-participation of specific groups however by itself will not have beneficial effects. The focus should be on providing *quality* ECEC, which consists of the constitutive elements of quality that are explored in the other chapters of this study.

2.1. Introduction

This study starts with exploring the current state-of-play of ECEC provision in the EU, before consequently identifying more specific elements of quality in all 27 EU member states. Although the *quality* of ECEC provision in member states is the main issue of the remainder of the study, this chapter will pay attention to the capacity and demand of ECEC services. In its Communication, the European Commission reiterates the need for universally available inclusive ECEC services, primarily based on the existing research findings that show the beneficial effects of ECEC¹⁴.

¹⁴ European Commission, Early Childhood and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow, COM (2011)66.

The European Parliament underlines this goal of universal provision in its 2011 resolution and highlights the risk of stigmatisation when specifically targeting poor families¹⁵. At the same time, the value of pluralist approaches with regard to ECEC provision are underlined, while the benefits of additional help for socially disadvantaged groups in accessing to ECEC services are reiterated. This chapter maps the current state-of-play of universal provision of ECEC across the EU. In order to do so effectively, this chapter approaches the participation in ECEC for different age categories, since children in these age categories – and their parents – have different demands with regard to ECEC.

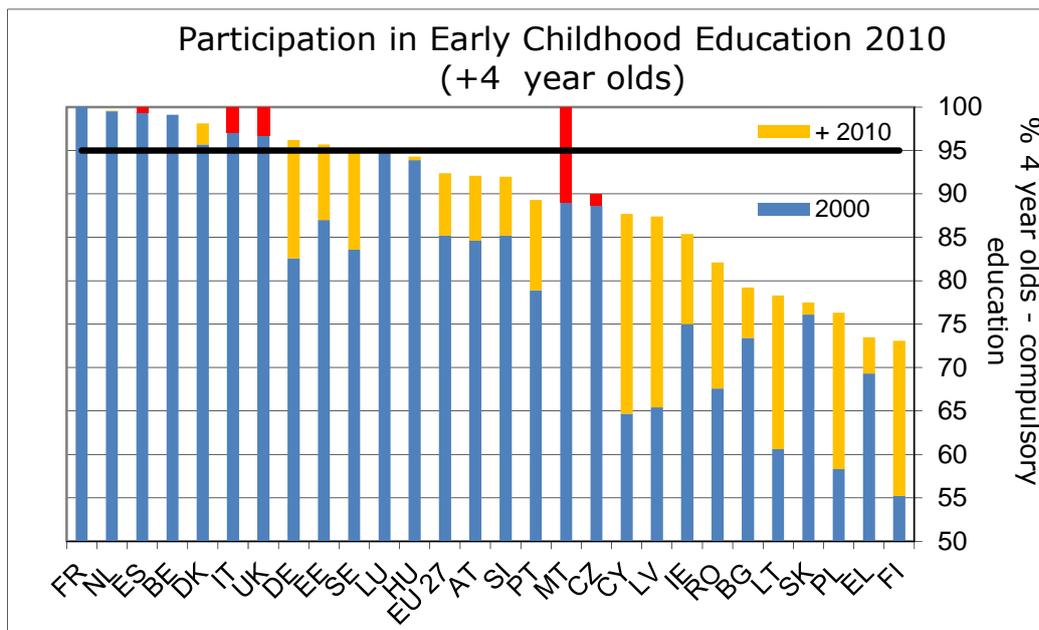
Before turning to the data, it is important to distinguish between universal *access* and universal *participation* of ECEC. Even though universal access to ECEC can be ensured by policies raising the number of day-care places, universal participation is in fact dependent on the actual demand for ECEC. ‘Simply’ adding day-care places will not necessarily raise the participation rates of children in every member state. Instead, demand for ECEC may fluctuate considerably per member state, but also for instance per time period. Actual demand for ECEC services may depend for instance on cultural factors, historical legacies, labour market participation of women, unemployment levels throughout the country, the national provisions of parental leave, opening hours of day-care facilities, or availability of informal types of childcare.

2.2. Access to ECEC for children aged 4 and older

In the Europe 2020 strategy, the target was formulated to increase participation of children between 4 years old and the compulsory school age within pre-primary education to at least 95%¹⁶. Although the Commission is moving its focus from labour market participation to the educative and formative effects for young children in their development, considerable differences exist between member states in terms of participation in ECEC, as displayed below. As already indicated above, these differences can be related to a large number of factors, sometimes unrelated to the existing provision of *access* to ECEC services. The level of parental contributions to the cost of ECEC, for instance, is an important factor influencing access and participation rates for ECEC. The figure below shows the actual participation rates of children between the age of 4 and the national compulsory education age. The blue bars show the participation levels in 2000, on top of which the developments of the last 10 years are displayed.

¹⁵ European Parliament (2011), Resolution of 12 May 2011 on Early Years Learning in the European Union, 2010/2159/INI.

¹⁶ Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020), OJC 119, 28-5-2009.

Figure 1: Participation in ECEC 2010

Source: Panteia (author), based on Eurostat 2010¹⁷

Even though many member states are already close to reaching the target of 95% (the bold black horizontal line) of children of the target age, some interesting differences are visible. France, the Netherlands and Spain show almost universal coverage for children over four years old. In the Netherlands, parents have the choice to enrol their children in the infant classes of primary education when they turn four. These infant classes are free of charge and thus provide an accessible option for parents to prepare their children for primary education. In Spain, children do not yet go to primary school, even though some institutions may offer both pre-primary and primary education. Children over three years old can attend pre-primary education free-of-charge since 2006, and these programmes have become a very popular means of preparation for primary education. Germany scores slightly lower, but also exceeds the 95% target set by the Europe 2020 agenda; a considerable improvement in participation rates has been achieved over the last ten years. These pre-primary day-care services are not offered universally free-of-charge across Germany; local municipalities generally set the level of parental contributions. While some municipalities offer childcare free-of-charge to parents, other municipalities can charge up to €500 euro per year for it. Generally however, the individual states offer financial support for parents with lower incomes.

Several countries however are not yet reaching the Europe 2020 goal of 95% participation for children over four years old, though substantive positive developments have been taking place. Ireland, for instance, scores under the 90% at the moment. In Ireland, provisions for publicly funded childcare are in a developmental stage, but coverage is expected to rise significantly in the next few years. In 2010, Ireland introduced a pre-school year for children aged between 3 years and two months and 4 years and 7 months. These pre-school programmes are provided fully free-of-charge, and the predominantly private ECEC sector is directly

¹⁷ Please note that the graph is based on the definition as set by the EU 2020 agenda, and is different from the definition used in the Barcelona goals. In EU 2020 agenda, goals are set for the population aged 4 to the age of compulsory education in that country. Please note that for Estonia the 2009 value was used due to a different conceptualisation.

compensated by the Irish Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Before the free pre-school year was introduced however, even though children had the possibility to start primary school at the age of 4, most parents only enrolled their child at the age of 5, one year before the compulsory schooling age. It is expected that children that leave the pre-school year will continue directly into primary school, which is also provided free-of-charge to parents.

In Romania, recent developments may cause a further rise in participation of ECEC services in the next few years, in addition to the considerable developments as displayed in figure 1. As in Ireland, the Romanian government has also attempted to raise the participation level of children over 4 years old by introducing a mandatory pre-school year for 6 year olds (compulsory schooling age is 7)¹⁸. Moreover, the Romanian government is planning to introduce a 'social coupon'. This should provide income-based governmental support for early childhood education and thereby provide additional support for parents.

The lowest score on participation of this agegroup is found in Finland. This is remarkable, considering its consistent high scores on PISA tests¹⁹. In Finland, it is widely conceived that 'not-school' is the best preparation for educational performance at a later age. Even though day-care is widely available and affordable, parents are given a budget for their children to decide what they want for them. They can choose to keep their children at home, enrol them in day-care services or send them to informal family day-care, all supported by the state. Another factor is that Finland has a relatively high compulsory schooling age at 7 and attaches much value to free time for small children. The figure does however show a significant rise in participation levels since 2000. This can be mainly attributed to the introduction of the free pre-school year to children aged 6 years in 2001. This now has a practically universal participation rate of 6-year-olds; therefore, a further increase in participation is, given the national structure of ECEC, not to be expected in the near future. Providers, parents and policymakers at the local and national level all agree that access to day-care is sufficiently available in Finland; we may therefore conclude that demand is met.

Overall, figure 1 shows a positive trend towards the 95% target across the EU. Cyprus, Latvia, and Poland have been raising participation levels the most over the last 10 years. Only a few member states report a (small) negative trend. The factors that underlie these broader trends will be further analysed in this study. Generally, policies on the system level, such as finance, have significant impacts on the participation levels.

Despite the importance of such general participation figures in the light of European targets, it is even more important to assess non-participation. Measures that are successful in increasing participation in ECEC may still leave key target groups behind. Therefore, it is essential that member states know which children participate in ECEC and which groups are not reached by ECEC. Generally, the children that are hardest to reach with ECEC provision need it the most; migrant children with language deficiencies, or children from disadvantaged backgrounds can benefit greatly when

¹⁸ Romanian Ministry of Education and Research, *The Preparatory Class – Presentation*, available at: <http://administrasite.edu.ro/index.php/articles/16626> (last accessed 30 March 2013).

¹⁹ See for 2009 for instance: http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisa2009keyfindings.htm#Executive_summary (visited on March 29)

identified early to participate in ECEC services. This early identification of target groups can be organised through targeted ECEC provision, targeted subsidies, or different outreach strategies to the parents (which will further be identified in chapter 6). Below, a particular good practice is discussed of assessing non-participation of 6-year-olds in the Finnish pre-school programme.

Evaluation of outreach strategies – Finland

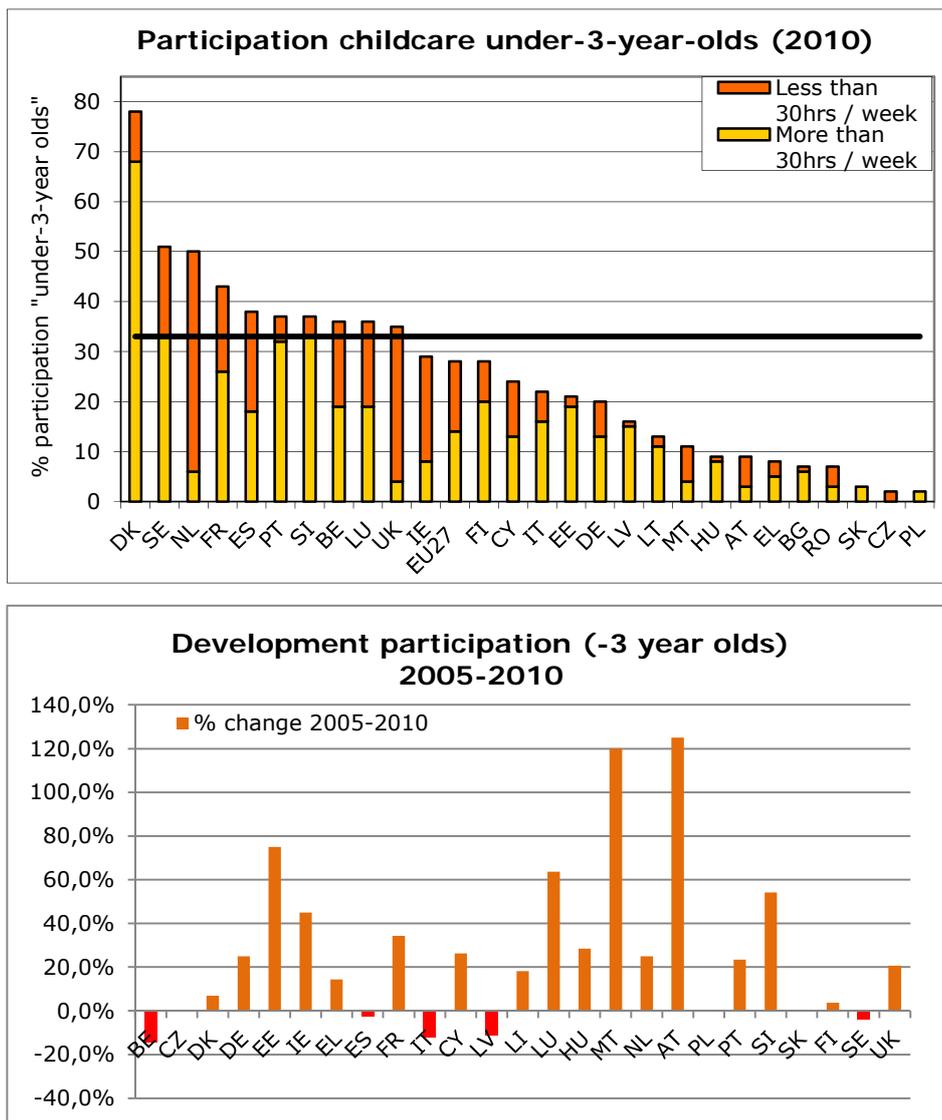
In Finland the take-up rate of its voluntary preschool year that was introduced in 2001 for six-year olds is currently approximately 99% of the targeted age group. In 2013, Finland started an evaluation of how the pre-school year was perceived by parents, educators and children. Specific part of this evaluation was however also to identify the group that would not attend the pre-school year; the remaining '1 per cent'. It attempted to map whether a higher population of children with disadvantaged backgrounds or from more rural areas was present in this group, while also seeking to identify ways to reach these children. At this moment, Finland is for instance considering making pre-primary education compulsory, but awaits the results of this evaluation before making a decision.

The practice described above illustrates a good-practice of 'evidence-based' policymaking, which is emphasised in all OECD Starting Strong studies. Even in the situation of *almost* universal provision, it remains important to know whether particular groups are left behind, and thus require additional attention from policymakers at the national level and/or of the staff of local institutions. Generally, however, member states do not know what groups are reached with ECEC provision and are often even less aware of the groups that are *not* reached. In Romania, for instance, no differentiated data exists for attendance of ECEC services for rural and more urban regions. In Ireland, after the recent introduction of the free pre-school year in 2010 an evaluation of the take-up rate still has to be conducted, and this may also be a good example.

2.3. Access to ECEC for younger children (0-3 years old)

Next to the data on participation of over-4-year-olds, we also present data for ECEC coverage compared to the number of under-3 year olds. The Barcelona 2002 summit agreed to aim for a 33% participation rate by 2010 in ECEC services of all children under the age of 3. This European target is displayed in figure 2 by the bold black horizontal line. This figure shows considerably larger differences between the member states as for those aged 4 years and older in figure 1. Note that the figure only includes 'formal day-care', where we make a distinction between day-care of more than 30 hours per week, or formal day-care of less than this amount of hours. Also note that the existing statistics and European targets exclude 3-year-olds from the analysis. This is important to realise, and policymakers should carefully consider how to also set certain participation targets for this group. The current lack of specified statistics and targets risks exclusion of this group.

Figure 2: Participation childcare under-3-year-olds



Source: Panteia (author), based on EU-SILC 2010

First of all, the difference between Denmark and the other countries is impressive, with also high participation rates in Sweden and in the Netherlands. For the Netherlands, it is remarkable to see the relative high percentage of 'limited' (less than 30 hours) formal childcare, compared to the more intensive form of daycare. The funding system provides some clarification here; this is a shared responsibility of the government, employers and parents. Parents pay childcare providers an hourly rate, but are eligible for childcare subsidy (*kinderopvangtoeslag*), which is paid by the central government to the parents and is income related. Mainly the fact that parental contributions are paid hourly, even after government subsidy, makes Dutch parents very aware of the number of hours of formal childcare they request. In addition, it is an accepted practice in the Netherlands to start working part-time after parental leave expires. As such, the demand for more intensive day-care is not particularly high. Recently, a drastic cut-back in government subsidies, in combination with the higher unemployment rates, is likely to put pressure on the total participation percentage for under-3-year-olds in the next few years.

Spain also scores relatively high with approximately 38% of the youngest children using day-care services. The first cycle of ECEC is also partly subsidised by the national and regional governments while also including a financial contribution from the parents. In its National Reform Programme of 2008, Spain launched the policy programme "Educa 3" with the goal to further institutionalise the first cycle of early childhood education. Among other things, a large financial commitment was made between 2008 and 2012, partly by the national government, and partly by the communities. Despite the relatively high participation score in EU context, and the recent public investments in day-care provision for children under 3, the current economic and financial crisis has had a significant impact, causing the participation rate to drop, which is already captured in the figure by a marginal drop since 2005. The subsidised provision cannot escape the impact of recent austerity measures put into place as response to the current economic and financial crisis. In addition, the unemployment rate has gone up, which may result in more parents keeping their children at home. This dual effect is likely to impact all partly subsidised day-care for the youngest children.

Several member states show an impressive positive development in participation rates since 2005. Malta, Austria, Estonia, and Ireland have significantly increased the level of participation of children under 3. In Malta and Austria the sector was very small, and although the difference in percentages is relatively large, the total participation rate is still comparatively low. In Ireland however, day-care has become more common (also for younger children) since the economic upturn of the Celtic Tiger years, as evidenced by figure 2. Note that, like the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, Ireland also has a relatively large share of 'limited' childcare and overall scores just above the EU average of under-3 participation. In Ireland, the ECEC sector is dominated by private childcare providers (over 70% of all providers are private), and only limited subsidies exist for parents with low incomes. As such, full childcare provision may simply be too expensive, so that parents decide to work part-time next to part-time childcare. In addition, representatives of the ECEC sector also pointed out that, historically, Ireland has a tradition of raising children at home. For these reasons, it is likely that the current crisis contributes to a stopped or even negative trend in participation of under 3 year olds in the near future.

Remarkable, again, is the case of Finland, which achieves only a very low participation rate for children between 4-6 year olds, but scores just under the European average and, in doing so, above many member states when it comes to younger children. The Finnish day-care system is designed in a way that parents choose to make use of day-care *regardless of the costs*, since they are compensated in any scenario. Where in many member states the day-care services for the youngest children receive only modest subsidies and support for parents with low incomes, in Finland, in addition to a paid parental leave of several months, a home care allowance is paid if parents want to take care of the child themselves. However, when they prefer to enrol their child with day-care, either private or public, this is also supported with additional allowances paid for by the government.

Romania scores very low on participation rates for under 3-year-olds, compared to other member states. In Romania, children under the age of 3 are brought to ante-preschools, which are dependent on a State budget, but also require additional funding to remain operational such as parental contributions, donations or through

sponsors.²⁰ The use of day-care services for the youngest children is currently low and decreasing due to increasing fees for care services. Unfortunately, no comparative data are available for Romania over time, as the participation of young children in ECEC was not entered into European statistics before accession. Combined with an increasing number of family members who spend their time at home (unemployment, medical leave, or presence of grandparents), these factors all contribute to lower use of day-care services for children between 0 and 3 years-old. Interestingly, this phenomenon is particularly true for the rural parts of the country, whereas in the urban areas the reverse phenomenon seems to be the case. However, good comparative data on this are currently lacking.

Day-care provision for children under three is a very political issue in 2013 in Germany, which, with a 20% participation rate in 2010, scored relatively low. This low score however masks current developments in the country, already evidenced by the 20% rise compared to 2005 in Figure 2. Especially on the provision of day-care for younger children, the federal government made significant additional funding available to support implementation of the federal Child support Act (*Kinderförderungsgesetz*) which was approved in December 2008. In the law, the federal government formulates a legal entitlement to day-care to all children above the age of 1 starting in August 2013. Projections indicate that in practice this would require a capacity of day-care places of at least 35% of all children under three, across all different states. Given the relatively low coverage rates thus far, very significant efforts are required by the federal government, individual states, and local authorities. In Nordrhein Westfalen (NRW) alone, the federal and state governments together have spent over a billion euros in addition to the regular expenses for investments in new places and supporting the training of additional staff in just a few years. Particularly in NRW a large effort was required, since in 2010 participation levels for the youngest children were only approximately 14% of all children under 3²¹. Next to the financial commitment required for this effort, significant practical challenges also needed to be overcome. In Germany, childcare is the competence of the individual states, while the local municipal authorities are in charge of inspecting and enabling the actual provision of day-care services. Therefore, an important part of the effort was to smoothen the interaction between different stakeholders, as described in the case study below. As of March 2013, the NRW Family Ministry reported that it has achieved its target goal of 32% participation. Given that most German states had to raise the number of day-care places, German performance on this figure is likely to be much higher from 2012 onwards.

²⁰ Article 69 of Government Decree 1252/2012 on the approval of the methodology of the organisation and functioning of cresses and other ante-preschool early childhood education units (published in Official Gazette I, nr. 8 of 7 January 2013), available at: http://www.dreptonline.ro/legislatie/hq_1252_2013_metodologie_functionare_crese_unitati_educatie_timpurie_anteprescolara.php (last accessed 28 March 2013).

²¹ Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, *Zweiter Zwischenbericht zur Evaluation des Kinderförderungsgesetzes*, page 9.

Organisational pressures: Under-3 development in NRW

In order to reach a participation rate of 32% of all children under three, NRW committed itself to increase the number of day-care places from under 60.000 places in 2008 to 144.000 in 2013. The NRW government directly supported municipal youth offices to expand the provision of day-care services. In addition to these financial means, the NRW Ministry of Youth Affairs founded a 'U3-Taskforce' in December 2011. This Taskforce had the goal to support local communities and municipalities in the practical problems that arose from the drastic expansion of the day-care coverage in NRW. Consider here for instance issues with local bureaucracies, or zoning plans that may come in the way of developing new day-care services. It offers a very practical approach to potential bottlenecks in the development of new day-care places for the youngest children. The idea behind the taskforce was to have a specific agency, close to the ministry (it resided at the ministry) to be able to coordinate quickly and effectively between local stakeholders and policymakers at the state level.

Through a dedicated hotline and e-mail address, it handled numerous questions of day-care services, municipal youth offices, childminders, parents and potential investors. It also took on a mediation role in potential conflicts between different agencies. It happened for instance that a local planning office of a municipality would deny plans to further expand a particular day-care institution for zoning reasons. In fact, after intervention of the taskforce in this city, the youth office decided to organise regular coordination meetings with the other municipal agency that was responsible for building permits. It is important to realise that the taskforce itself did not create day-care places, but that it merely facilitated local providers and municipalities in the process, to work as much together as possible in achieving the common goal of ECEC.

Because the Taskforce took up such a central position, it was able to oversee the entire project of capacity growth, from the level of parents, to the provider, the local youth offices and finally the institutionalised decision makers at the ministry. It notes that on the whole the quality of new ECEC places was assured; new institutions still had to meet the same quality criteria. Contrary to what would be expected, given the increasing demand for ECEC staff, it also reports that finding sufficiently qualified staff was not a major bottleneck. The primary issue that did have some modestly negative impact on the quality of ECEC institutions was the housing of the institutions.

2.4. General conclusions regarding access/participation to ECEC

In European targets and policy documents, the access to ECEC services is central. Therefore before turning to constitutive elements of quality in ECEC, it is important to assess developments in ECEC participation. In this chapter a distinction is made between access and participation; even though universal access to ECEC can be ensured by policies raising the number of day-care places, universal participation is in fact dependent on the actual demand for ECEC. 'Simply' adding day-care places will not necessarily raise the participation rates of children in every member state. This has to be taken into account by policymakers, at the national and European level, when evaluating progress towards the goals of 95% participation of all over-four-year-olds, or equally when working towards 33% participation of all under-3-year-olds.

This chapter shows that between 2000 and 2010 practically all member states are moving towards the Europe 2020 goal of 95% of children aged over four participating in ECEC. Also for younger children, a positive trend is clearly discernible. However, as shown in this chapter, the current economic and financial crisis is likely to have a considerable suppressing effect on participation rates. Unemployed parents no longer have the financial means to support ECEC services for their children, while at the same time parents without full-time work now have more time to take care of their children themselves. On top of that, the current demographic developments of an ageing society also provide new challenges for policymakers when it comes to increasing participation in ECEC. The increasing availability of pensioners that may take care of their family's children, may further contribute to a lower demand for formal childcare. These factors together will prove to make it more difficult to reach the set EU-targets by 2020.

At the same time, this chapter showed how the value of such the quantitative EU targets must not be exaggerated. Though a noble goal, increasing ECEC participation for young children by itself may not have a clear effect on future educational performance. To have a positive effect, *quality* ECEC is required. Finland is mentioned as a striking example of a country with low participation rates in ECEC, while still among the best scoring countries on PISA scores. This suggests that policymakers should not only be concerned about creating more day-care places, but indeed to create high quality ECEC places.

Rather than only focusing on participation, member states should concentrate more on non-participation. Instead of only *increasing* participation in ECEC towards the 95% participation target, member states should try *widening* participation to specifically identified target groups, that do not yet participate in ECEC services. For this, member states should invest in a structural mapping of participation by different groups. This way, evidence-based policies can be developed for specifically targeting groups of children, such as families in disadvantaged regions or with other disadvantaged backgrounds. This is a key issue because the children that are hardest to reach with ECEC provision are generally also the ones that need it the most; these are often socio-economically disadvantaged, and may benefit the most from quality ECEC services. Therefore, increasing participation in this group is much more important than increasing participation of groups that are easiest to reach.

Related to widening participation is the regional diversity with regard to participation in ECEC that was found in this chapter. In a comparative context, an apparent lack is the availability of more regional data. Through a qualitative analysis of some member states, it has been made clear that considerable differences exist between different parts of a country. Germany is good example, where the states in former East-Germany score remarkably higher in participation rates than the Western states. Still, for Germany, such regionalised data exist. In Romania, significant differences with regard to participation in ECEC are known to exist, even though no clear statistical data are available that distinguish between cities and more rural areas of the country. In order to be able to target specific policies to specific regions, it is necessary to have a sufficiently grounded empirical evidence base for policies.

Finally, this chapter identified a variety of developments in ECEC across the EU, though generally a positive trend of participation in ECEC, both for older as for younger children. Many different policies and developments however underlie this seemingly common trend. These explanatory factors for participation are an important variable for quality ECEC, but are at the same time only a first step. Raising participation in ECEC by itself should not be the ultimate goal. A logical next step is to move towards a focus on providing *quality* ECEC, which will be discovered in the next chapters. System-level characteristics are generally the first aspects that influence not only participation but also quality of ECEC and will be discussed in the next chapter. After, this study turns to the other constitutive elements of quality in ECEC, as identified in chapter 1.

3. ECEC IN EUROPE: POLITICAL, LEGAL, FINANCIAL STRUCTURES

KEY FINDINGS

- This chapter identifies the political goals, governance structure, and funding systems of ECEC in member states across the EU. This study points to a general development towards more integrated or even unitary systems, at the level of the provider and at the policy level. Here, throughout the EU, the ECEC competence is increasingly moved towards national Education ministries.
- National or local mechanisms to ensure quality in ECEC centres generally only set lower limits, and do not provide incentives for ECEC providers to further develop quality. Especially with tighter budgets, such closed systems are not likely to contribute to quality improvements in ECEC. This chapter discusses an interesting practice of a quality framework in Ireland (Síolta), which has the goal to continually create incentives for staff to reflect on activities and sustainably increase the quality level of ECEC provision. As is shown in this chapter however as well, sufficient funding remains an absolute requirement for such developments to succeed.
- When investigating the spending levels on ECEC as percentage of the GDP, this study points to large differences. Even though higher spending itself – without proper policy – does not guarantee higher quality ECEC, cutbacks on ECEC budgets do often immediately lead to lower quality provision of ECEC. The current economic and financial crisis therefore poses an enormous challenge for developing and maintaining quality ECEC provision.
- Therefore, the different funding systems for ECEC across the EU are also assessed. The picture of diversified ECEC provision across the EU is confirmed once more, with some countries operating locally, and other with a more centralistic focus of funding. More general, across the EU is the supply-side funding of ECEC services, especially for older children; only a few member states have demand-side funding of ECEC.

3.1. Introduction

After discussing the participation side of ECEC, this chapter focus more on the system characteristics of ECEC provision in different member states. Most importantly, quality ECEC is only meaningful if it is embedded in a broader governance structure of the education system, because only then continuity between the different stages in a child's development can be achieved. The European Commission considers it crucial that different policy sectors work together closely; education, employment, healthcare and social policy are all connected in making efficient use of the benefits of quality ECEC. In its Communication, the Commission calls for a "common policy framework with consistent goals across the system" and for "clearly defined roles and responsibilities at central and local levels". This chapter investigates the wide diversity of such broader national frameworks for ECEC across the EU. The remaining chapters of this study, zoom in to more specific issues, which are crucial components to quality ECEC, such as staff, curriculum standards or parental involvement.

When focusing on national structures, this chapter briefly explores the political goals that are defined by EU member states for ECEC. These goals have cultural and historical roots, but are also undergoing continuous changes through the political process. The Commission has argued in its Communication that above all a 'coherent vision is required that is shared by all stakeholders, including parents'. Based on such political goals, decisions are taken about the legal governance structure for ECEC. Secondly, attention will be paid on legal aspects of how ECEC is organised in national governance systems. In addition, this chapter investigates how member states aim to assure quality in ECEC services, through systems of accreditation or certification. Finally, this chapter looks at the funding regimes under which ECEC services across Europe have to operate. This is a third aspect, which has an important impact on the quality of provided ECEC, and becomes even more relevant in times of economic crisis and decreasing budgets.

3.2. Perception of ECEC in member states: political priorities

In all member states, the political structure in which ECEC services are organised, determines to a large extent the policies and design of individual systems, for instance when it comes to access standards, staff requirements, curriculum guidelines or parental involvement. It is, therefore, important to be aware of the goals set at the national level that underlie specific policies.

According to the OECD in a recent study, most member states assigned ECEC the explicit policy goal to promote equality between children. It serves to offer chances in education, and thereby level the playing field for all children²². Generally, across the EU, the policy focus for ECEC is moving away from the traditional goal of increasing female participation on the labour market. Member states increasingly consider ECEC a public good, that should contribute to improving educational outcomes of children from disadvantaged groups, but also for instance may help tackling demographic challenges, such as decreasing fertility rates. Interestingly enough, although 'equal chances for all' are a central concern in developing ECEC policies, not all countries know exactly the exact scope and success of their strategies to reach out to specific target groups. As will also be shown in the remainder of this study, it is crucial that policymakers use empirical evidence so as to be able to evaluate whether certain policies indeed help advancing their political goals.

Member states increasingly see ECEC as a way to stimulate children's broader development, while departing from narrow educational outcomes, which generally inform curricula in primary school schools. In Germany for instance, ECEC policies serve primarily a social role. In most Länder, the Ministry of Youth and Family affairs is responsible for ECEC policies, which is a good indication for this particular societal focus, rather than a focus on preparation for primary school. Even though education is considered part of the responsibility of ECEC services, the general idea is that children learn through playing and interacting with other children. A similar tendency exists in Ireland, where ECEC is actually rephrased into Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) to indicate the issue of primary importance. In this context, care is understood as overall care for the development of the child, rather than care in the strict health and hygiene sense. In the Netherlands, the trend also diverges from a focus on mere health and hygiene standards towards children's development. In Finland, Educare is the explicit guiding principle of the ECEC sector, which combines care and education, by not focusing on educational outcomes, but instead on a broader child's

²² OECD (2012), *Starting Strong III: A quality toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*.

development through play. On the legal level too, Finland is now in the process of reformulating its Childcare law (which dates from 1973) from a labour market perspective towards a new childcare law that will match the existing reality of Finnish ECEC provision, and hence focuses on children's rights to ECEC.

These significant policy developments, however, are all primarily the results of white papers, policy papers, strategies or other documents. It is relevant to map such policy developments, and that is exactly what this study aims to do. However, more important, this study also aims to explore the reality 'on the ground', to see whether all the policies are indeed transferred to the level of individual ECEC providers, and more importantly, whether these advance the policy goals that were formulated by policymakers, or rather lead to different effects.

3.3. Legal structure: integrated versus split systems

The European Commission pays particular attention to the transition from one ECEC institution to another; this may be either from pre-primary school to primary education, but also for instance from the childcare for the youngest children to another group with older children. The Parliament also draws attention to the need to integrate ECEC services and calls for better cooperation and coordination between different institutions and ministries; it is argued that a split system risks having a lack of focus on the child's actual development.

The previous section showed that, despite some similarities, important differences between member states on their perception of early childhood education and care, which has effects on how it is organised by different national policy departments. The most used rough distinction between member states is between systems that integrate education and care for young children (integrated systems) and member states that have different types and separate institutions for providing education or care for different age groups. This section starts by defining these two rough characterisations, and subsequently trying to plot all EU member states, with more detailed illustration of the six countries studied more in-depth.

In an integrated model, ECEC is provided through a unitary system, organised in a single phase for all children of pre-school age. Often, children go to one institution, governed by one specific ministry, led by one management team for children of all age groups, and the ECEC practitioners generally have similar qualifications and pay-level in all groups of children. In a split model, ECEC provision is structured according to the age of children; often one system is set up for children around the age 0-3, primarily focusing on care provision. The other system focuses at older children, often aged 3 - compulsory school age. For this group the emphasis lies primarily on education and pre-school preparation. In such a split system, often different regulatory regimes, split over two (or more) ministries, exist on the national level, with also different staff requirements for both stages. Split systems for early childhood education and care are still most common in Europe, although a number of member states have recently initiated reforms. Split systems can be found in Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greece, Ireland, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Hungary, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Slovakia. Unitary systems are found in Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the UK²³.

²³ See for instance Eurypedia (2013) <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/>.

The OECD has already indicated in its Starting Strong studies how the separation of 'education' and 'care' in some cases may undermine the delivery of quality ECEC. In such split systems, little attention is often paid to the cognitive development of children between the ages 0-3, whereas the health and social-emotional development of children aged 3 and above may no longer receive sufficient attention²⁴. Unitary systems on the other hand are not built on 'artificial' age categories and integrate goals for child-care with early education²⁵. Indeed, if a country considers childhood as an important and formative stage of life, childcare and early education are more often integrated in one system, which contributes to clearer objectives for ECEC providers, parents and other stakeholders.

At the same time, the crude distinction must be interpreted with some caution. For, often this distinction is merely used to assess whether the political responsibility for early childhood education and care lies with one ministry, or more ministries. Clearly, countries with a split system may also have ECEC providers that integrate education and care. In fact, both in Romania as in the Netherlands local providers and communities are developing initiatives to integrate the provision of education and care. Similarly, other countries like for instance Germany that are on paper unitary systems, also have ECEC providers that offer education and care in separate settings for different ages. Also Finland, which is famous across Europe for its concept of 'Educare', an integrated approach to education and care, only completed transferring all ECEC responsibilities to one ministry as recently as January 2013. And even though this integration has been finalised very recently, the Health Board and Education Board that have a shared responsibility with regard to inspection of ECEC providers are still separate institutions. Also in Finland, many individual ECEC providers chose to offer education and care only to children older than three, albeit in an integrated and child centred approach.

Ireland is even more a peculiar case; in the broader characterisation of the European network of educational systems "Eurydice", it is a split system; childcare policies are the competence of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, whereas the Education ministry is involved when it concerns curriculum guidelines. Such a split system however, does not automatically refer to strict departmental boundaries. Currently, for instance, Irish childcare policies are at this moment coordinated by a policy unit that officially resides at the Ministry of Education and Skills, but is staffed with people from the Ministry of Children and Youth Affairs. That way, Ireland tries to coordinate the potential gap between departments. National stakeholders even voiced concerns for the possibility that the Ministry of Education may take over full responsibility for ECEC policies. According to these stakeholders, an educational focus should be secondary to more developmental concerns about children.

Moreover, a system may be split in many other ways than the age limit. Different services may exist for different target groups, often regulated by different competent authorities. In the Netherlands for instance, ECEC is provided through general childcare (*Kinderdagverblijven*), family day-care hosts (*Gastouders*), but children from disadvantaged backgrounds are targeted to participate in special pre-school playgroups (*peuterspeelzalen*). These playgroups then may employ one of the different pre-school programmes that exist, and sometimes also host children that are not specifically targeted due to a disadvantaged background.

²⁴ OECD (2006), *Starting Strong II*.

²⁵ Bennett (2011),

In general, however, in line with the policy recommendations of the numerous OECD studies and the Commission's Communication, a trend is identified of increasing cooperation – and even integration – of policymakers on ECEC issues. Clear examples of this trend are for instance Finland, which recently completed its full integration, and Ireland, where a special policy unit was founded to bridge the gap between two ministries. Also consider the Netherlands, where a new law has synchronised the quality framework for day care systems and pre-school programmes, a distinction that could be considered as a split system within a split system (see below). However, the sector is still governed by both the ministry of Education and the ministry of Social Affairs and Work.

Integrating systems, Amersfoort – the Netherlands

In 2010, a new law formalised a partial integration between childcare and pre-school programmes, with the goal to improve the developmental chances of all young children, especially those with cognitive and linguistic deficits. The law synchronised quality frameworks for childcare and playgroups and the oversight on this framework by local municipalities. Second, the national Inspectorate of Education was given oversight on the quality of pre-school education in both sectors, which was previously not the case. Last, municipalities were made responsible for sufficient local supply of pre-school programmes for all young children with developmental problems. Before, municipalities would usually subsidise a limited number of institutions that offer playgroups working with pre-school programmes for children that need additional attention. Other child care services are paid for by parents, though subsidised by the national government.

Amersfoort, a middle-large city in the centre of the Netherlands, realised that through this funding model, it was not able to target sufficient children at risk, whereas at the same time many children used the pre-school programmes that were not the target group. In fact, more and more target group children attended regular child care as well and did not receive the additional educational support that they needed. Therefore, based on individual assessment at 18 months, Amersfoort started a different funding method, only focused at the children that actually needed additional attention. Instead of subsidising the entire day-care centre, it would merely buy a personalised place for children that need it.

The main difference with pre-school programs in other municipalities is that because of this funding mechanism, all children are now going to both types of providers. In the pre-school institutions, there are also additional non-subsidised places for non-target group children, whereas regular day-care may also receive funding for pre-school programmes for children that need it. As of 2013, there are no more traditional municipality-funded playgroups in Amersfoort²⁶. Other municipalities with different approaches are now experimenting with the combination of pre-school programmes and groups with primary education (*startgroepen*), under the coordination of primary schools.

²⁶ Case description is based on Panteia (2011) *Opbrengsten Jeugdbeleid 2006-2011, evaluation of local education and youth agenda Amersfoort*, and on <http://amersfoort.nl/smartsite.shtml?id=239756> and www.vversterk.nl.

3.4. Accreditation / Certification

Across the EU, quality of ECEC providers is generally assured by minimal requirements set by the competent authorities. Very large differences also exist in the extent to which member states, or often the local authorities within these member states, monitor these minimal requirements. In Germany NRW for instance, an ECEC provider is required to deliver all evidence that it complies with the rules to municipalities before opening the centre, while in Ireland new day-care centres are only required to merely 'notify' the local authorities, who then may come and inspect for compliance in the following year. Even though the minimal requirements may differ across contexts, there are not many member states with differentiated quality levels or certification labels aimed at improvement of quality, instead of assuring basic quality levels. Below, however, some interesting examples are described.

An interesting quality label that does exist is the "Familienzentrum" (family centre) label which exists in Nordrhein Westfalen – Germany (see for more details about Family Centres page 47). This label does not extend to the quality of ECEC *per se*; providers with this label have to fulfil a number of additional activities in terms of curriculum and parental involvement in order to qualify, but the label itself does not say anything about the quality of the services rendered. In Ireland, providers can choose to implement all the requirements of the national curriculum guidelines "Síolta". At this moment, however, this is not mandatory, and due to its relatively recent introduction and the large amounts of administrative work that are involved in the process, it is far from being taken up universally by Irish ECEC providers.

Towards an Irish Quality Framework: "Síolta"– Ireland

Starting as a very ambitious policy target to raise overall quality in ECEC services across Ireland, "Síolta" (which is Irish for "seeds") was published in 2006 at the request of the Ministry of Education and Skills as the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. Strongly based in pedagogical empirical research, it consists of 12 broad principles that are the benchmark for all quality practice by ECEC services, 16 standards covering the areas of practice and based on these standards 75 individual quality indicators. Based on these principles, standards and components of quality, ECEC providers can apply for a certification, which is built around self-reflection. Through such self-reflection, staff are familiarised with a continuous process of quality improvement in his/her work with children. At this moment, it is still possible to apply for this quality label, but due to difficult financial situation of the Irish government, and individual ECEC services, its implementation has almost come to a halt in early 2013.

Despite these implementation issues, the introduction of Síolta principles has put quality in ECEC provision on the national agenda. Síolta principles and standards have for instance informed the newly introduced qualification requirements for staff working in the free pre-school programme, but also for instance put the early childhood education and care sector on the agenda for the national "literacy and numeracy strategy".

The Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP), for which ECEC providers can sign up, is developed as a reflective framework for ECEC services, stimulating staff to continuously evaluate their own practices and interaction with children through self-reflection; the idea is that through higher self-awareness of one's activities, the standards of quality are raised. This self-evaluation should take place along the

proposed principles, standards and components of quality. If the ECEC provider applies for Síolta certification, it should conduct an internal baseline assessment after the necessary preparation with an individual Síolta coordinator. Based on this assessment, the provider should draw up an action plan, keep track of the developments, and have its portfolio validated by an external validator²⁷.

Even though the process of self-evaluation is laudable, the process itself should be more streamlined. At this moment it is considered very bureaucratic, slow, and time-consuming by services. One day-care services indicated that on average it would take 2,5 years of hard work for the ECEC manager to reach the certification stage. She did however see a clear added value of the Síolta QAP for overall levels of quality, as long as the implementation procedures were improved. The most important benefit of the certification process is that it makes ECEC managers and staff alike very aware of their activities.

The major drawback of Síolta is however caused by its primary asset; in order to effectively reflect on one's activities, a certain level of staff qualification would be required. Even though a minimum staff qualification exists for ECEC practitioners in the free pre-school year since 2010, no regulations (only recommendations) exist for the manager, which are the main actors involved in the process. Sector representatives report that in order to be truly reflective on one's activities at least a (short cycle) Higher Education degree would be required. In addition, to be able to reflect on activities, it is important for ECEC to have non-contact time to conduct this process. Under the current strict budgets for ECEC services, unfortunately, this cannot be paid for.

However, instead of accreditation or additional voluntary quality standards, the minimal requirements for ECEC providers are relatively comparable in different EU member states. Practically everywhere, general regulations exist with regard to the architecture, staff qualifications, pedagogical issues, hygiene, safety and health, and fire regulations. Often, different levels of government take the responsibility for inspection when comparing member states. Due to these differences, many different requirements are set, often specific to local communities. In Finland for instance, more rural municipalities would attribute transportation to ECEC the primary policy goal, whereas municipalities of large cities set more specific guidelines with regard to outdoor playgrounds. This regional diversity within one country makes national comparison already quite complicated. It is therefore essential to understand the complexity of the wider diversity of different systems across all 27 different EU member states.

In Ireland, the formulation of minimal health care and environmental requirements is highly centralised. Also the inspection (Health Service Executive), in Ireland often composed of inspectors with a healthcare background, is organised at the central level. Irish providers indicate that it is necessary for the inspection services to be more consistent in the areas that they focus on. At this moment, due to the fact that they operate on the national level, inspections tend to focus on different issues each round.

²⁷ Consult for instance <http://www.siolta.ie> (visited on March 27).

In Romania, basic guidelines with regard to health, safety and welfare, but also the more substantive indicators for quality ECEC are formulated at the national level, but are inspected by local inspectorates. The same goes for the Netherlands, though supplemented by a secondary oversight on the local inspectorates by the national Inspectorate of Education. More generally, across the EU, we find that the regulations for ECEC providers are often formulated at the regional level. This often leads to regional differences with respect to such requirements, which are formulated at the level of the municipalities. In Finland, for instance its 320 municipalities have the autonomy – within the national boundaries – to design regulation on ECEC services. In Germany – NRW as well, the local youth offices, that are part of the municipal authority formulate their own minimal guidelines for ECEC provision.

3.5. ECEC Expenditure and funding systems

Another important aspect on quality of national structures is how ECEC services are financed. All European countries have financial provisions in place to help cover the costs of ECEC services for over-3-year-olds and often funding is also available to support the costs of ECEC services for the youngest.

Despite the variety in systems, when funding is concerned, it is often argued that the returns on investment in early childhood education and care are the highest from the entire education sector. Because of this emphasis on potential gains, numerous organisations underline the importance of sufficient (public) funding to ECEC. The European Parliament for instance noted that even under the current economic climate “we must not neglect to invest substantially in ECEC services”²⁸. This section first assesses the general spending level on ECEC across the EU, but will later also focus on how the funding for the sector is organised and what type of funding models are deployed. In some contexts ECEC providers are public institutions that are directly funded by the government (supply side funding), whereas sometimes private providers exist in combination with subsidies (cost sharing models), or parents receive targeted subsidies to support in buying childcare (demand side funding). These differences in funding models have significant impacts on the behavior of parents and ECEC services, as has already been identified in the chapter on participation.

3.5.1. National expenditure levels

UNICEF education experts recommend national spending levels on ECEC to be at least 1% of the gross domestic product (GDP)²⁹. This recommendation is based on the minimal requirements for quality ECEC while taking into account the potential societal benefits of quality ECEC. Significant differences exist when assessing national spending as percentage of the GDP across the EU. Some member states spend well over the recommended 1%, whereas a large number also spends less than half of the prescribed benchmark. The figure below displays basic funding levels of member states in the area of ECEC as percentage of the total GDP³⁰. The Nordic countries, UK, France and the Netherlands score relatively high and above or around UNICEF’s 1%.

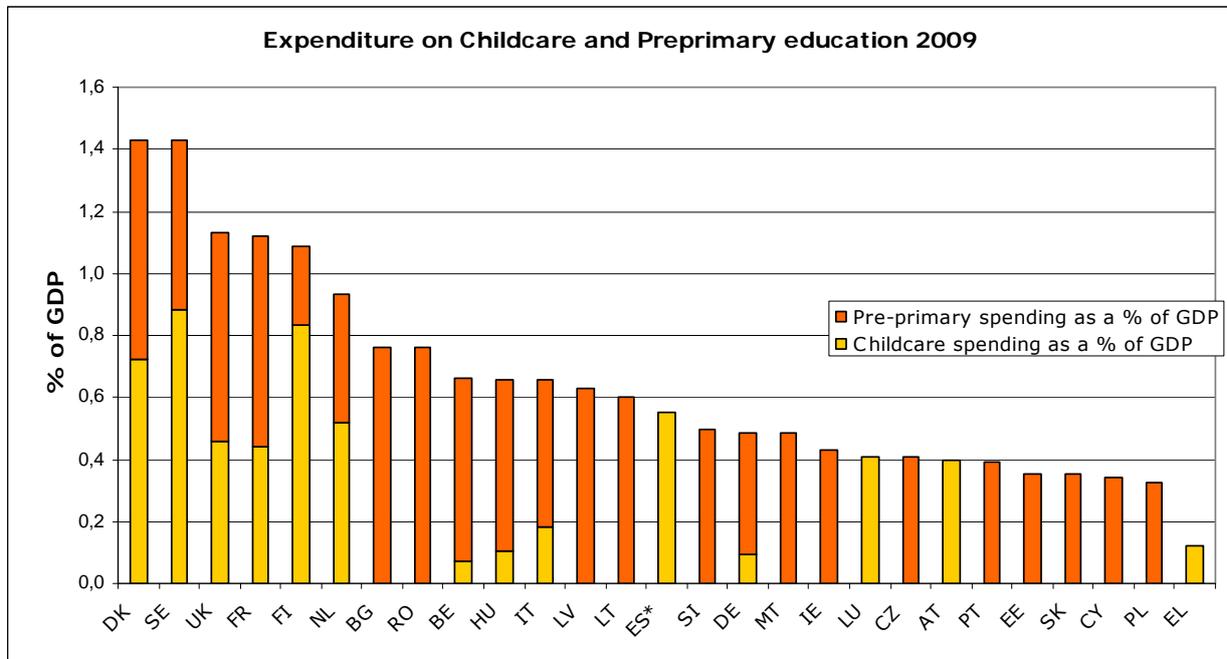
²⁸ European Parliament (2011), Resolution of 12 May 2011 on Early Years Learning in the European Union, 2010/2159/INI.

²⁹ Adamson, P. (2008), The Child Care Transition: A league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries, UNICEF – Innocenti Research Centre.

³⁰ The figure is based on data from the OECD social expenditure data and UNESCO/OECD/Eurostat data collection on education for 2009. The OECD assembled this data, and adjusted the indicators to allow a better comparison of the diversity of systems in terms of compulsory age of entry into primary school. For countries with provisions for children to start school early, these expenditures were included, whereas other countries with relatively high compulsory age (such as the Nordic countries), spending on the last years were not included.

Future developments are relevant to monitor, since the additional country studies and case studies show that since 2009, after the deepening of the economic and financial crisis, budgets for childcare and parental subsidies have become under severe pressure in practically all member states.

Figure 3: National expenditure levels on ECEC



Source: Panteia (author), based on social Expenditure database 2012; OECD Education database; Eurostat for Non-OECD countries. Compiled by OECD Family database³¹

* The expenditure in Spain could not be disaggregated by type of ECEC provision

Even though figure 3 gives some insight in the commitment of member states to quality ECEC in general, this type of figures must be interpreted with caution. Statistics on this level are not always comparable, for instance because sometimes expenditure by local governments are not included. Especially, in countries with a federal structure, expenditures by lower governments are not always translated into the national statistics. Some local governments may for instance decide to use non-specified block-grants for supporting local ECEC services; such spending may then be missed by aggregated data on the national level. To further illustrate the potential problem of such statistics, consider for instance the possibility that local governments spend allocated money to support labour market integration by financing support for early childhood education and care.

Another important limitation of these statistics is the exclusion of other forms of support for ECEC. In the Netherlands and Germany, for instance, employers also play an important role in the financing of childcare. Such private sector support may reduce the need for public support by governments and thereby also impact the importance of such statistics on public spending on the national level. Still, we may identify some broader trends based on this figure.

³¹ www.oecd.org/social/family/database

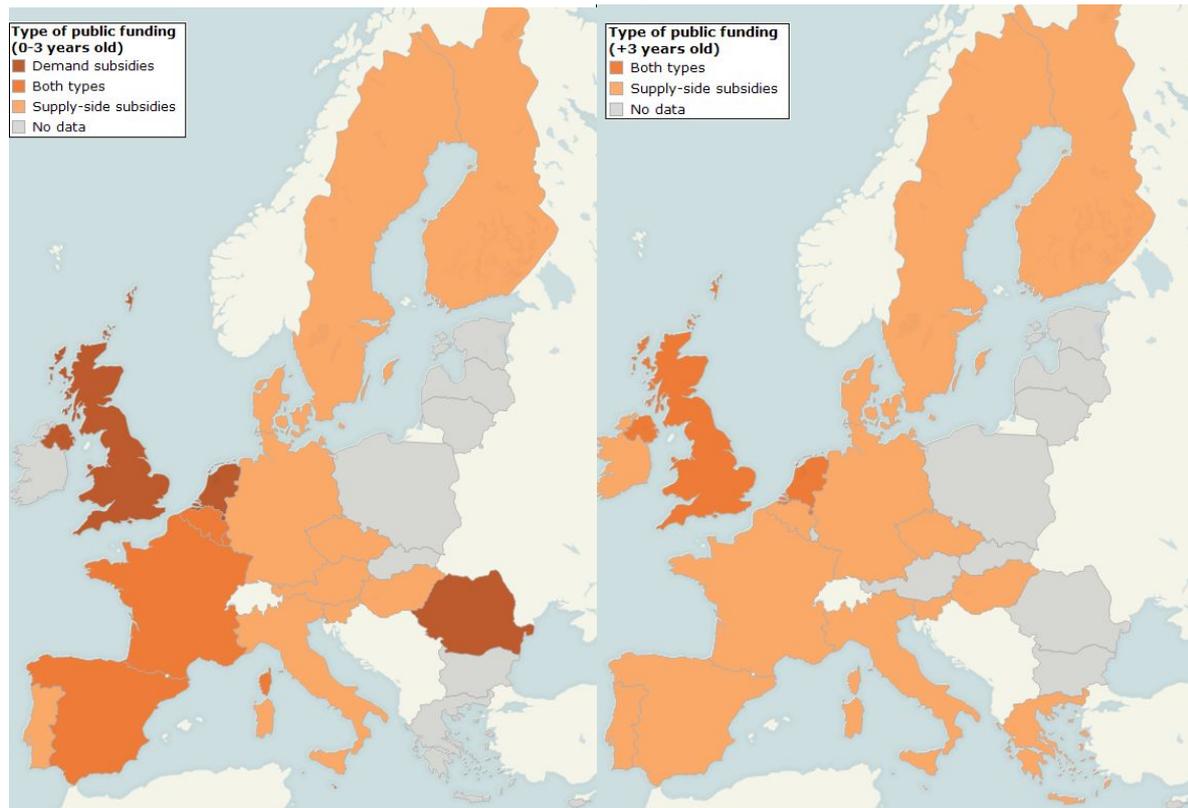
Ireland scores relatively low compared to other EU member states in terms of funding. This must be understood in view of its historical position towards the role of childcare; the use of childcare was traditionally not very common in Ireland, until the economy took off during the “Celtic Tiger” years, which led to shortages on the labour market. In these times of economic prosperity, the government started investing in broadening the capacity of ECEC services. However, since the provision was not fully institutionalised, the budget for ECEC came under pressure after the economic and financial crisis in 2008. The figure above also shows another problem in Ireland; the way the current ECEC system is designed, the (mostly private) services are heavily incentivised by government funding only for pre-school children (aged above 3). Even though some subsidies exist for parents with younger children and a low income, providers receive compensation for all children that enrol in the pre-school year (which has to be offered free-of-charge). Therefore, a considerable risk exists that particular groups of children younger than three may not have access to ECEC services.

Germany also scores low in the figure, which can be – at least partly – attributed to the fact that the figures cannot fully capture spending at the federal level. This is particularly problematic, since ECEC policies are almost all regulated and funded by this country's individual states. However, in recent years, especially after 2009, Germany has invested significantly in the sector. As such, more recent data on Germany would show higher spending than currently displayed in the graph.

3.5.2. Organisation of funding

Another relevant mechanism on the quality of ECEC is how the public authorities organise financial support for ECEC provision. Market-based ECEC provision has the potential to limit public expenditure, but at the same time risks restricting the availability of high quality services for all³². Governments may choose to support ECEC institutions directly, by contributing to the budgets of individual (private or public) providers. In fact this particular type of ‘supply-side funding’ allows the paying body the most direct control over certain quality measures at ECEC services. At the same time however, some governments specifically opt for demand-side funding. By providing parents with subsidies or other forms of directed funding for ECEC services, governments try to introduce some market-oriented behaviour by day-care services. Sometimes however, such demand-side funding is merely used as a redistributive tool to specifically enable low-income parents to use ECEC services. The pictures below show the funding types employed by different member states. Below, we distinguish between the under-3-year-olds and the older children. This is a relevant distinction, because often different financing models are in place for the different types, especially the case for split systems with a strict distinction between young and older age groups.

³² European Commission, Early Childhood and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow, COM (2011)66.

Figure 4: Type of public funding, per age-group

Source: Panteia (author), based on Unesco (2010), *Early Childhood Care and Education: Regional Report, Europe and North-America*.

The figure above points to several differences when it comes to comparing funding systems between younger and older children. Whereas generally across the EU most systems provide supply-side funding to services for older children, some demand-side funding exists for parents with younger children (under 3).

The fact that supply-side subsidies exist, does not exclude the possibility that day-care centres can still charge a fee. In Ireland for instance, day-care centres are not allowed to ask for additional contributions from parents for the pre-school year. In other systems with supply-side subsidies, sometimes parental contributions are still required; in Finland these contributions are for instance dependent on the family income. In Germany (NRW), on the other hand, the parental contributions to childcare are set by the municipalities, who are practically in charge of the entire funding stream for childcare in their jurisdiction. This leads to considerable differences between municipalities in terms of contributions of parents. In some municipalities, the parental contributions can be non-existent, whereas in another municipality this may be well up to 500 euro per year.

Supply-side funding by itself is also not a static common feature across all member states. In NRW, the funding regime for ECEC institutions was significantly reformed in 2008. Before, day-care services used to receive their funding based on the number of staff they had on the payroll. Now, the system was reformed towards a 'funding package' per child. This different supply-side type of funding has the goal to create incentives for day-care services to work more efficiently. However, a risk of this system is that it creates incentives for providers to put pressure on the staff-child ratios and the staff qualifications, since these cost extra money at the expense of the provider.

A similar structure exists in Romania, where, even though funding is legally a national competence, the local administrative bodies are responsible for the distribution of the State budget accorded for the educational institutions. For the older children (3-6) however, the government outlines the methodology and the structure in which the financing is conducted, as well as the budget accorded to the local administrative bodies. The accordance of budget is made on the basis of a standard cost per pre-school pupil. Parents with young children (0-3) can receive subsidies for childcare if they apply, whereas for older children the funding is more supply-side directed.

In Finland, the major part of ECEC services are paid for by the individual municipalities, who as a result also have the most influence in designing 'their' ECEC services in the region. Day-care institutions are provided free-of-charge for low income families. For others, day care costs depend on the size of a family and the respective level of income. The parental contributions for day-care however cover only about 15% of the total costs. The remainder of the costs, which is the largest burden of costs for providing ECEC lies with (local) governments; in 2007, the entire system cost 1,655 million euro, of which municipalities covered 1 billion, the central government 400 million, and parent fees could cover the remaining 250 million euro. Even though parents are indeed compensated as well (some demand-side funding), the largest share of funding is targeted directly at services.

In the Netherlands, general child care is a demand-side funded system, with joint responsibility of the central government, employers and parents. Parents pay the private childcare providers an hourly rate, but are eligible for childcare subsidy (*kinderopvangtoeslag*). The Tax Office pays this subsidy to parents, dependent on family income and number of children, as in Finland. At the same time, playgroups (which offer pre-school programmes to specific target groups) in the Netherlands belong to the public sector, receiving supply-side subsidies by the municipal authorities. Municipal authorities derive this funding from different sources. In 2012, they received structural funding from the Ministry of the Interior for general playgroups, namely 193 million euro per year. Also, municipalities receive funding from the Ministry of Education, through a specific subsidy for the pre-school programmes aimed at disadvantaged groups, estimated at 187 million euro per year. Additionally, since 2010, municipalities receive 35 million euro per year from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Work, to improve the quality of playgroups³³.

In Spain, education has been free of charge for all children of the older age group since 2005. The national government assigns part of its childhood education budget to the autonomous communities for education, which then distribute it to centres³⁴. For the first cycle for the youngest children however parental contributions are required. Some income-based grants are available for families to meet the costs of first-cycle childhood education, by the national Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture and the Autonomous communities.

In its National Reform Programme of 2008, the Spanish government allocated 428 million euro of its budget to the second cycle of pre-primary education. In order to enhance the availability of first cycle education places, the government introduced the policy "Educa 3", which amongst other things, was to include a total investment of 1,087 million euro between 2008 and 2012; funding was to be split 50/50 amongst

³³ Brancheorganisatie Kinderopvang (2012) *Factsheet Kinderopvang 2012*.

³⁴ WFI report, 2010

the national government and the autonomous communities. The sustainability of these policies have recently come under significant pressure. Especially given the current economic climate, the long term potential of such a system may not be guaranteed. In the autonomous community of Madrid, for instance, 26 million euro was cut from the grants going towards pre-primary education in 2012. The effects of this are being felt on the provider level as the resources accessible to centres decline; less teachers, facilities and activities can be utilised in the centres. Prices of the centres increase and parents face larger obstacles in sending their children to ECEC providers.

Ireland faces similar funding problems as Spain. For the youngest children only very limited subsidies are available for parents with a low-income. These subsidies are administered by the local City Council Committees, but the regulations for these Community Childcare Community Subvention (CCS) schemes are set nationally by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Parents are only eligible for this support scheme if they send their children to community day-care services. Funding for older children on the other hand (between 3 years and two months and 4 years and 7 months), is organised in a different way. Here, the providers receive a capitation fee for each eligible child enrolled, based on the qualifications of the pre-school leader. This is a clear case of supply-side funding, organised centrally by the ministry of Children and Youth Affairs.

3.6. General conclusions

This chapter identified the political goals, governance structure, and funding systems of ECEC in member states across the EU. A general trend from a focus on providing incentives to women to participate on the labour market, towards more educational-oriented policies can be found in the different EU member states. In this respect, there is also a general development towards more integrated systems, where often the competence over ECEC is moved towards the Ministry of Education. However, as this study shows, even in integrated systems with the political responsibility at one ministry, a large number of different stakeholders are involved in ECEC policies, most importantly local governments. Because ECEC policies are often decentralised and touch upon multiple issue areas, it is important to investigate the cooperation of all these different stakeholders.

Funding of ECEC services is a central issue of concern. UNICEF recommends a minimal spending directed at ECEC provision of 1% of the GDP in all countries. When comparing the current spending on ECEC, the percentage is only reached by a few member states, namely the Nordic states, UK and France. Even though this percentage remains an arbitrary goal, it should inspire all member states to provide sufficient support to parents, by providing low-cost, high-quality ECEC to *all* children. Both access to and quality of ECEC services is at stake when ECEC budgets are cut. Even though a focus on access and quality is more important than a focus on spending levels *per se*, raising the level of quality is inextricably linked to spending levels, and these must therefore not be ignored. Given the current economic and financial crisis, national budgets have come under pressure, and ECEC is often found on the list of severe budget cuts since 2009, for which this study presented data. Unfortunately, no reliable comparative data on ECEC is available for more recent years to monitor these developments. In order to move ahead in developing access and quality in ECEC throughout the EU, it is crucial that comparable spending data are made available, so that national efforts may be better compared.

This chapter also identified different funding systems for ECEC provision across the EU. The picture of diversified ECEC provision across the EU is confirmed once more, with some countries operating locally, and other with a more centralistic focus of funding. More general across the EU is supply-side funding of ECEC services, especially for older children. Often rooted in recent policy developments to significantly boost participation of children over 3 in ECEC, pre-school programmes are increasingly offered free-of-charge, meaning that public funding flows directly to individual ECEC providers. This way, national governments have a powerful tool to control at least the minimal levels of quality of the services that they pay for. Some member states have a system of demand side funding, which means that the government subsidises parents directly. In this system, the idea is that parents may influence the quality of ECEC by only selecting the ECEC services for their children that are good enough. Some experts have doubts whether parents are the right stakeholders to determine quality and promote the use of scientific environmental scales measuring quality in settings.

The broader system-level characteristics explored in this chapter all access to ECEC, an issue that has already been discussed in the previous chapter. However, as shown in the remainder of the study it also has an important impact on the constitutive elements of quality in ECEC.

4. ECEC IN EUROPE: STAFF

KEY FINDINGS

- Competent staff is a crucial factor in delivering quality ECEC. This chapter points to a large variety of different qualification requirements, ranging from no requirements at all, to a minimal requirement of University-level degrees. Although not the entire ECEC workforce is required to have such high qualifications, this study confirms earlier findings that staff with higher education qualifications in ECEC have a crucial effect on quality of ECEC, for instance through reflecting on their own and their colleagues' activities and thereby contribute to quality development in ECEC settings.
- Next to starting qualifications, different policy initiatives have been developed across the EU to professionalise the existing ECEC workforce, and thereby contribute to higher levels of quality. This is particularly important for the more informal type of family day-care, but is equally beneficial for the 'regular' ECEC workforce through continuing professional development. This chapter shows how the recently introduced Family Centres in Germany NRW serve as best-practice for staff professionalization.
- When working with 'children from disadvantaged backgrounds', often additional guidelines and competence requirements are formulated. Though generally such competences are often trained at the regular education for ECEC staff, some member states do not pay particular attention to certain target groups. However, especially to reach out effectively to communities with disadvantaged backgrounds a specialised approach can have beneficial effects.
- Finally, working conditions, such as work environment, salary and work benefits are also of crucial importance for the system relating to the quality of staff. Equally, these serve as ways to attract higher educated staff. These broader working conditions may influence job satisfaction, which is another crucial element for positive interaction with children. This study identified large differences in salary expenditures and modest differences in staff-child ratios between member states.

4.1. Introduction

Research shows that the quality of staff is one of the most important factors influencing the quality of ECEC³⁵. The best way to guarantee educational quality for children in ECEC centres is to ensure that all staff have sufficient qualifications and receive high quality training throughout their working career. The education and training of ECEC staff is what equips them with the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to support child development, including cognitive and social-emotional development and – increasingly – to work closely with families and the wider community³⁶. The European Commission also considers competent staff as the key to

³⁵ Bowman, B, Donovan, M.S. and Burns, M.S. (Eds.) (2000). *Eager to Learn: Educating our Preschoolers*. National Academy Press: Washington, DC.

³⁶ Fukkink, R. G., & Lont, A. (2007). Does training matter? A meta-analysis and review of caregiver training studies. [Review]. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 22(3), 294-311.

high quality ECEC³⁷. Whereas ECEC practitioners are a very diverse workforce across the EU, with equally different staff profiles, the EU supports the trend towards professionalisation. Important challenges as identified by the European Commission lie in attracting and retaining competent women and men for working in the ECEC sector.

Professionalisation of staff starts with entry requirements for ECEC practitioners, but it also extends to the provision of continued professional development (CDP) for professionals in order to stay up to date with the most recent pedagogical developments and exchange experiences with other professionals. Moreover, in order to deliver equally high quality ECEC to children with special needs, it is important to offer relevant additional courses to staff.

Highly qualified, competent staff alone does not however guarantee quality ECEC; other factors, such as salary and working conditions (the group sizes compared to number of staff) also play a significant role, and will be assessed in this chapter. These aspects are, clearly interrelated, as the OECD's recent 'Starting Strong III' publication indicates. OECD researchers stated that governments are often hesitant to raise staff qualifications, due to the associated increase in funding that may consequently ensue. There is strong evidence suggesting that improved training and qualification levels raise the quality of interaction and pedagogy in ECEC. Yet, for financial reasons governments often choose not to invest in raising qualification levels or more favourable staff-child ratios.

4.2. Staff qualifications

The diversity in titles of the ECEC workforce across the EU is a good indication of the wide variety in types of staff, their education and their competences. Compare for instance early childhood teachers, pedagogues, nursery workers, child minders, day care staff, auxiliary nurses, volunteer helpers. Mainly for reasons of comparability and the scope of this study, we chose to look primarily at the requirements of the particular staff that is *responsible* for the group toddlers / children; this person generally has the most impact on the quality of ECEC provision. Another recent study, conducted for the European Commission assessed staff competences across the EU in more detail and included support and management staff involved in ECEC provision³⁸.

This chapter serves mainly to briefly touch upon the diversity of different qualification requirements across the EU, even now within the narrowed scope of only one type of ECEC practitioner. Given the wide variety of historical, social and political contexts and associated differences in qualifications and requirements, comparison across the entire EU is difficult. Each European country has its own laws and regulations regarding the quality of ECEC staff and their competences.³⁹ Here we attempt to give a rough characterisation of EU-wide qualification requirements, but will look at six selected countries in more detail.

³⁷ European Commission, Early Childhood and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow, COM (2011)66.

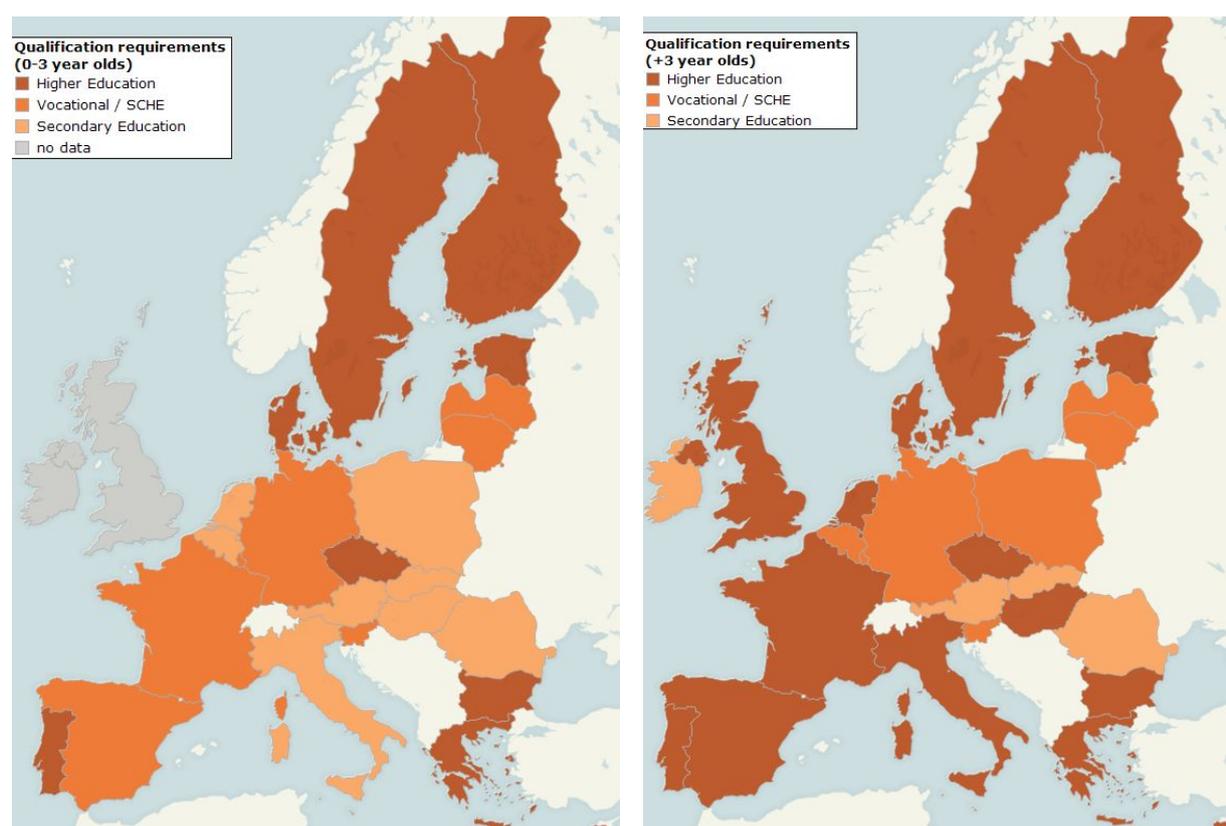
³⁸ Urban, M. et al. (2011), Competence Requirements of Staff in Early Childhood Education and Care in the European Union, European Commission - DG EAC.

³⁹ OECD (2001). *Starting Strong I: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. OECD (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development.

The educational programmes that future ECEC practitioners follow to obtain their qualification vary significantly⁴⁰. The general goals of these programmes are often articulated at a national level, but the training curricula are developed by individual training institutions. Most countries (e.g. Belgium, Netherlands, Poland, Romania) have two distinct training paths – one for staff dealing with the youngest children (generally under 3 years) and another for the children aged over 3-4 years. Other countries have a single training and professional profile for all educational staff across the whole of the ECEC phase. Member states with unitary systems for ECEC provision generally also provide an integrated staff training. Spain is an exception to this observation, as it has separate requirements (though both require higher education qualifications). At the same time, some countries with a split system have single professional requirements for both age groups.

Below we present a rough categorisation of qualification requirements for ECEC staff throughout the EU, split out by age group. The figures below are based on the Eurydice categorisation of minimal staff requirements, which is represented in ISCED 97 qualifications. The middle category includes both higher vocational degrees and short cycle higher education, as ISCED does not distinguish between the two⁴¹.

Figure 5: Qualification requirements for ECEC Staff



Source: Panteia (author), based on Eurydice 2009, author's data collection for Ireland

⁴⁰ Eurydice/EACEA (2009). *Early Childhood Education and care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities*. Brussels: Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency.

⁴¹ Even though the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) distinguishes between different levels of tertiary education, a wide diversity of different qualifications are also located at level 5, as a currently running CEDEFOP study shows. Moreover, we refer here to the ISCED 97 levels since the EQF is currently still being implemented, and ISCED 2011 will be applied to education report starting in 2014.

Even though figure 5 gives some insight in the minimal requirements, it is important to look into more specific qualification requirements to see more meaningful patterns than simply the data on the European surface. A wide variety of different qualifications are behind the broad labels of the figure above, as we indicate below, based on data collection in the six selected countries. In Romania, relatively low qualification requirements are set for ECEC practitioners. Compared to other member states Romania is unique with its centralised state-exams for ECEC staff. In these exams, the required minimum competences of the educators are tested, and therefore aim to guarantee the readiness and preparedness of educators⁴². These examinations encompass a written exam and an on-sight inspection of the capacities of the educator, and therefore hold a large practical component.

Ireland stands out by not having explicit general qualification requirements for childcare workers. In the 2006 Child Care regulation, the inspection guidelines specify that 'at least 50% of the staff' should have a qualification appropriate to care and development, without specifying a level. The introduction of the pre-school year in 2010 however gave the Irish government an effective tool to raise the qualification level of ECEC staff by making it an explicit requirement for funding. Under this new requirement, pre-school teachers are required to hold a national degree in childcare / education, which can be characterised as a specialised vocational degree⁴³. Introducing this minimum qualification requirement in practice forced many practitioners to follow additional courses to qualify for the funding, which the government did not compensate. In 2012, 76% of the workforce schooled itself passed the required qualification⁴⁴. In order to further encourage ECEC providers to attract staff with higher education qualification, the government pays an additional fee to institutions with pre-school teacher with Bachelor degrees. This additional fee however does not fully offset the costs that providers claim to make in order to attract higher educated staff, and thus does not seem very effective.

The Netherlands has explicitly formulated minimal qualification requirements. Playgroup workers and workers in child care centers need a degree in secondary vocational educational (EQF level 3 or 4). Students are trained in a broad field of social work, including care for children, people with disabilities, and elderly people. Child care is a specialisation in this field, during which the student becomes a pedagogical worker. There are no qualification requirements for managers or providers. In primary schools, teachers need a degree in higher vocational education (universities of applied science). There is no specialised degree required for primary school teachers working with the youngest children (toddlers age 4 to 6), though some higher educational institutions are considering the introduction of ECEC specialisations in their curriculum.

In Germany, qualification requirements are the competence of the individual Länder. The NRW Child Education Act (*Kinderbildungsgesetz*) of 2008 stipulates that staff working in day-care facilities should have completed at least a vocational training

⁴² See particularly Chapter V of the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth, *Ordinance 5560 of 7 October 2011 on the Framework Methodology on the Pre-University Education Staff for the Academic Year 2012-2013* (published 27 October 2011), available at: (last accessed 28 March 2013).

http://www.cmbrae.ro/upload/OMECTS_5560_metod_misc_%20pers_did_2012_2013.pdf.

⁴³ Pre-school teachers should have at least a level 5 qualification on the Irish National Framework of Qualification, which is roughly equivalent to EQF level 4, and would be classified as ISCED 97 level 4.

⁴⁴ Pobal Childcare survey 2011, p30.

<https://www.pobal.ie/Publications/Documents/Pobal%20Annual%20Survey%20of%20the%20Early%20Years%20Sector%202011.pdf>.

(*Fachschulabschluss*), which is thus on the lower end of the middle category in picture 5. Contrary to for instance Ireland, where managers in ECEC do not have to meet qualification criteria, stricter regulations apply to them in Germany, where next to a completed vocational degree several years of working experience are mandatory for managers.

In some member states, such as Finland and Spain, ECEC staff is required to have a higher education qualification in ECEC. For the youngest groups, regulations are a bit looser. Both in Spain and Finland, staff may also have vocational degrees for childcare, as long as a certain percentage of staff still holds a higher education qualification. In these two countries, the higher educated professionals are also expected to design, implement and monitor the educational curricula for pre-primary education. In Finland, the staff with (at least) a pedagogical Bachelor qualification is expected to pay more attention to the implicit role of education in addition to more care-oriented tasks⁴⁵. This should serve the link between childcare to primary school; since Finland has similar education requirements for teachers in ECEC as for primary education, a better integration between the two is made possible.

4.3. Professionalisation of ECEC staff

All these qualification requirements apply to the practitioners in formal childcare centres. In many member states however, the government also subsidises more informal arrangements, often referred to as family day-care, generally provided in the childminders's home. Often these childminders are not required to have similar qualifications. Due to their more flexible character, compared to the more formal types of ECEC, these childminders are an important tool in raising national targets of for instance participation. Especially in Germany – NRW, particular emphasis was put on this type of provision to reach the ambitious participation targets for August 2013. In Germany – NRW, informal childminders are required to complete a 160 hours training course, before they start running their 'family day-care'. No additional tests or requirements exist, and it is therefore hard to assure the quality of these institutions.

Family Centres and the quality of informal day-care – Germany NRW

In 2006, NRW started developing so-called Family Centres in its region. With the help of academic experts, the NRW government developed a quality label for particular day-care centres⁴⁶. Centres that successfully implemented the necessary policies in their transition and met all the criteria were awarded with the "Familienzentrum" (Family Centre) quality-label. After introduction, the label became a success, many other German states looked at the initiative with interest and are now in the process of introducing a similar system; indeed the initiative is a good-practice that deserves attention on the European level.

The Family Centre label is awarded when a certain number of activities associated with the family centre label are offered. These centres should offer a tailor-made local package of services, catered to the needs of its direct community. These include various activities, such as trainings, community activities and for instance parent consulting. Here we focus on the role of Family Centres in raising the quality of informal day-care. The idea of a Family Centre is that it brings together all partners that are involved with

⁴⁵ Karila et al (2008), 'A Finnish viewpoint on professionalism in early childhood education', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 16 (2): 210-223.

⁴⁶ Ministerium für Familie, Kinder, Jugend, Kultur und Sport des Landes NRW (2011), *Gütesiegel Familienzentrum Nordrhein-Westfalen*.

the development of the children. Day-care institutions are encouraged to work together in networks and thereby provide a more integrated approach to a child's development. As such, the Family centre brings together the children, their parents, and the pedagogical expertise of the practitioners. Through this central position in this network, the NRW government has also assigned Family Centres to focus on quality improvement of more informal types of day-care, such as the childminders with children at their home (family day-care).

The Family centres serve as the point where parents can go to ask about childminding services, but also specifically offers possibilities for childminders that reside in the same community to go to the centre, with or without the children. This allows more interaction for the children, but even more importantly, allows childminders to exchange experiences and learn from each other, while also gaining the in-house expertise of the centre itself. In this sense, the Family centres take on a practical and organisational role that the informal types of childcare lack, while ensuring the informal character that may be appreciated by parents when they choose family day-care for their children. At this moment approximately 2000 day-care services have transformed their service provision into the requirements of Family Centre.

Next to the potential of Family Centres for practical day-to-day family day-care, these often offer courses targeted at childminders to further raise their competences and qualifications. These are voluntary, but often appreciated by the childminders, who generally have the desire but not the means to pursue additional training. The government offers additional financial support for Family Centres to conduct their activities. Next to such courses for childminders, the Family Centres also offer courses that are to engage parents from the local community with their child's development. Depending on the local needs of the community, Family Centres offer many other low-threshold services to families with young children; the goal remains to offer support at a place where parents can find it, which is at the kindergarten where they come to drop off their child anyway.

An important part of professionalisation of ECEC staff is continuing professional development (CPD). Continuing professional development has the potential to fill in the knowledge and skills that staff may be lacking or require updating due to changes in particular knowledge fields. This is especially important in the contemporary field of ECEC, in which new programmes and pedagogical approaches are continuously being developed. Indeed, a beneficial effect of such structural training programmes has been observed for the overall performance of staff in many studies.

Given its importance for the quality of staff, this study presents to what extent ECEC staff is required to be engaged in CPD. On the European level, we find that the legal guidelines for provision of additional training and continuous professional development for ECEC professionals vary greatly among member states, as showed by the figure below. CPD is optional in slightly more than a half of the countries, and compulsory in the rest. As with much EU-level data, this figure does not show the more important details which underlie these differences. The time actually spent on such CPD programmes varies considerably in European countries: from a few hours per year to 12 obligatory days per year.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Eurydice/EACEA (2009). *Early Childhood Education and care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities*. Brussels: Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency.

Figure 6: Continuing Professional Development Guidelines

Source: Panteia (author), based on Eurydice 2009, author's data collection for Ireland

In the different countries, we find that a small portion of the European Social Fund (ESF) is allocated to such CPD programmes for ECEC staff. There is however not a clear, accessible overview or trend data across different member states as to how ESF is spent on additional training for the ECEC workforce in member states. In Germany, more particularly, a programme is sponsored by ESF to attract more men in day-care staff. In the framework of the Comenius programme, some exchange programmes exist with the goal of CPD for ECEC staff. These exchanges serve to broaden experiences and as such provide additional training. Groups of ECEC practitioners are then welcomed in another member state to learn about good practices there; these exchanges are generally considered very valuable and insightful by the staff, but its actual value is hard to measure.

In Finland, ECEC practitioners are obliged to spend between 3 and 10 days (depending on the basic education, and the particular job) on continuous training. These additional 'training days' are generally provided by municipalities (who are also the primary employer of ECEC staff), but also open for staff from the private providers. Some interesting partnerships exist when it comes to the professional development of ECEC; the Finnish American Kindergarten in Helsinki for instance instructed its staff to prepare courses for students that are learning to become ECEC teachers. This allowed a very fruitful exchange of ideas between theory and practice.

Under a recently published new regulation, Spanish ECEC practitioners with a higher education degree are now obliged to take trainings amounting to 30 hours a year, offered by the National Institute for Education Technologies and Teachers Training. For staff with lower qualifications no obligation applies, even though they are

stimulated to enrol; the law mentions CPD as 'right and duty' of all teachers⁴⁸. In practice, however, such trainings do not seem to take place frequently. One reason for this is the highly flexible and long hours which ECEC staff must work; finding times for training at a government institution proves difficult. The provision of such trainings is therefore in practice not as universal as the legislation demands.

Romania offers a very interesting system of CPD, by providing a stepwise programme for ECEC career development. After passing the state examination, educators can gain higher 'grades'. These grades serve as a certification of an increasing level of competence of the educators and afford an ascending challenge to the educators. Starting with the state exam, the first step is "Grade II", for which at least 4 years of experience is required in addition to specific learning goals. Grade I may be obtained after the accumulation of an additional 4 years of experience, and is granted after successfully passing a more complex set of examinations (both practical and theoretical). The completion of a level entitles the educator to a higher title and salary, which acts as a stimulus for competence development.

In Ireland, no national regulations exist for continued professional development. On the policy level, a commitment was published to encourage and support the sector in engaging in CPD. It is not mandatory, and generally providers organise training sessions, though in varying degrees. Some local "city and county childcare committees" also organise training days with the (limited) funding they have available. This is however not centrally organised and stimulated and is thus dependent on local political decisions. Notable is that the additional requirements for the recently introduced free pre-school encouraged many ECEC practitioners to undertake CPD on their own initiative, sometimes paid for by service providers, but more often paid for by the individuals themselves.

CPD is not mandatory in Nordrhein-Westfalen (Germany). However, ECEC staff is explicitly required to be aware of relevant developments, and are expected to enrol in in-service trainings and to be aware of developments in professional literature⁴⁹. As such, the NRW curriculum guidelines see the combination of continued professional development and properly qualified ECEC staff as an essential component of quality ECEC, but places responsibility with the providers. Note that in Germany, these providers are generally nationally operating 'independent providers', which often have the means to offer these additional trainings.

As in Ireland, no formal requirements exist in the Netherlands, though recently several policies are formulated to stimulate continuing professional development in the sector. In response to the 2008 research findings showing falling pedagogical quality in childcare, employers, trade unions and parent organisations founded the *Bureau Kwaliteit Kinderopvang* (Bureau Quality in Childcare) in 2009 to improve pedagogical quality in the sector. In addition, the government made funding available between 2009-2012 for these initiatives. ECEC practitioners that work in pre-school programmes targeted at children at risk, receive additional training in the specifics of the pre-school curriculum. Whether this training is mandatory and how much time is to be spent on the training is determined by the municipal authorities and school boards.

⁴⁸ Eurydice 2009.

⁴⁹ Ministerium für Familie, Kinder, Jugend, Kultur und Sport des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen (2012), *Grundsätze zur Bildungsförderung für Kinder von 0 bis 10 Jahren in Kindertageseinrichtungen und Schulen im Primarbereich in Nordrhein-Westfalen*, p. 74.

4.4. ECEC staff and children at risk

When it comes to attention to children from disadvantaged groups in staff requirements, or 'children at risk', considerable differences exist across member states. In many member states specific requirements exist for staff working with 'children from disadvantaged backgrounds'; these are usually already part of the initial training to become an ECEC teacher. As the figure below shows however, in Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom such specific attention is not part of the initial training. Different reasons for this exist; generally however it is argued that all qualified teaching staff is also able to provide personalised provision for all children, while taking account of needs of special groups⁵⁰.

Next to such attention in 'initial training' for ECEC staff, additional guidance may be ensured through providing additional in-service training in reaching out and successfully dealing with children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Romania, Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Finland for instance special training initiatives exist for staff to reach out to Roma children⁵¹. In the Netherlands, the targeted pre-school programmes for children at risk generally require staff to follow additional training. Compliance with these requirements is generally checked by school boards, and only rarely by municipalities.

Figure 7: Training for children at risk in teacher qualification



Source: Panteia (author), based on Eurydice 2009, author's data collection for Ireland

⁵⁰ Eurydice, 2009, p118.

⁵¹ Eurydice, 2009, p118

As the figure above shows, in Finland specific requirements exist for dealing with children from disadvantaged groups. It is detailed that 'The educator' knows how to support the development of a child's healthy self-esteem and a positive self-image. He/she is able to approach families who are in a challenging life situation and work with them. He/she participates in the operations of multi-professional teams and is able to work as a member of a team⁵². Similarly, specific optional courses can be taken by students to prepare them for their future ECEC position to function in a multicultural working environment.

4.5. Working conditions

4.5.1. Staff pay

Working conditions, such as salary, work benefits and work environment, are important for the quality of staff; such broader working conditions may influence job satisfaction, which is important for positive interaction with children⁵³. These working conditions are influenced by a number of issues, but we will focus here on of the wage level and staff-child ratios. Low wages reduce the material attractiveness for potential qualified staff to work in the sector. Equally important, low wages in general lend support to the perception that work in the ECEC sector maintains a relatively low socio-economic status and thereby risks failing to attract committed staff⁵⁴. Low wages are also linked to increased staff turnover rates, which are found to have detrimental effects on the quality of ECEC provision⁵⁵. Therefore, the European Parliament encourages member states to pay ECEC staff ideally at the level of primary teachers.

Below, for the entire EU, comparisons are made of the expenditure on teacher salaries at ISCED level 0 (pre-primary level). This is the level that generally attracts higher educated and better qualified staff than the groups with the youngest children. Unfortunately no EU-wide data are available for the salaries of staff for these youngest age groups. We draw upon the rich dataset compiled in the Eurydice network, and therefore also follow its definitions; we look at the 'minimum basic gross annual statutory pay'⁵⁶. To compare the financial expenditure of member states for teaching staff, the most commonly used indicator is the relation of the salary to the GDP per capita in a country⁵⁷.

In the graph below, we compare the nationally defined pay for fulltime pre-primary teachers in 2011 (school year 2011/2012) as percentage of the national GDP per capita, defined in current prices in Euro in the reference year 2011. The graph shows considerable expenditure differences, from 1.3 times the GDP per capita in Portugal and Cyprus, to around 0,4 in Slovakia and Czech Republic.

⁵² Finnish National board of Education (2012), *Vocational qualifications in child care and education and family welfare, children's instructor*, page 9.

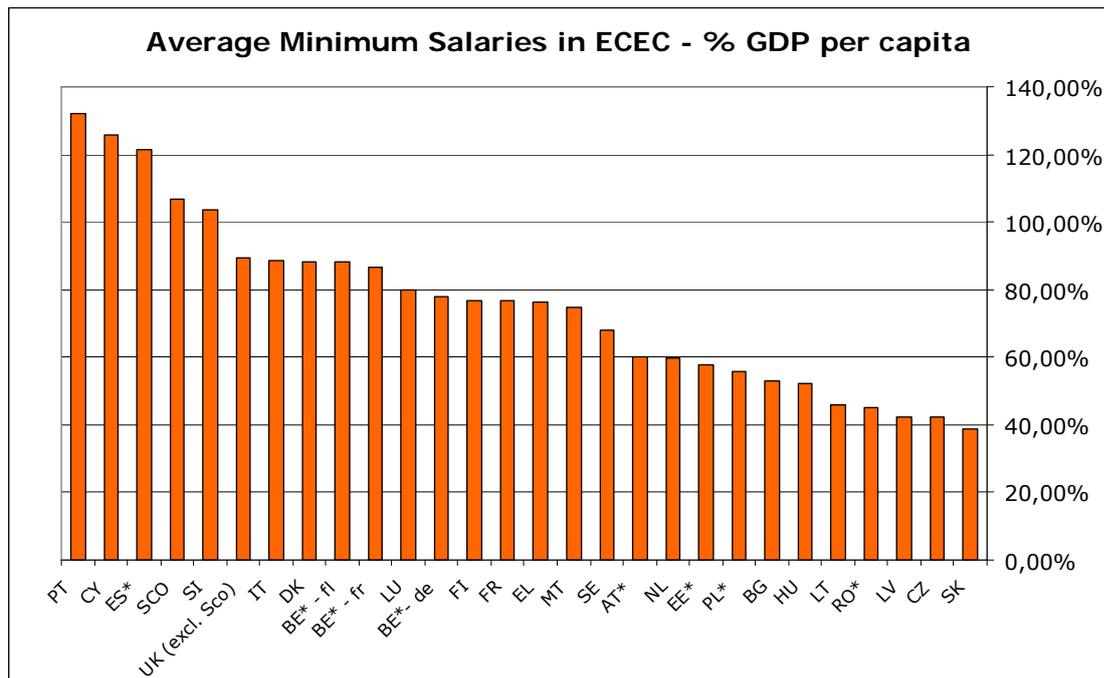
⁵³ OECD (2011), *Starting Strong III: a quality toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD Publishing.

⁵⁴ Ackerman, D. (2006), "The costs of being a child care teacher: Revisiting the problem of low wages". *Educational Policy*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 85-112.

⁵⁵ Smith, P.R. (2004), 'Caring for Paid Caregivers: Linking Quality Child Care with Improved Working Conditions', *University of Cincinnati Law review*, 73 (2), 399-431.

⁵⁶ This is defined as the gross amount paid by the employer in a year, including a 13th month and holiday-pay (when applicable), excluding the employers' social security and pension contributions. By minimum, we look at the salaries that staff receives at the start of their career. European Commission – DG EAC Eurydice (2012), *Teachers and schoolheads' salaries and allowance in Europe 2011/12*.

⁵⁷ Idem, page 8.

Figure 8: Average minimum salaries in ECEC as % GDP per capita

Source: Panteia (author), GDP data from Eurostat, salary data from Eurydice 2010⁵⁸.

In many member states the profession of ECEC practitioner is not considered a popular or prestigious position. In Ireland, for instance, ECEC practitioners are generally regarded 'lower' than primary school teachers; which is felt both in terms of professional practice and remuneration. There is general agreement that ECEC practitioners are underpaid for the amount of work they do. Still, this does not make it particularly hard for services to recruit staff, due to the current economic situation in Ireland. Even though the Spanish expenditure on staff wages is comparatively high, practitioners themselves also report a lack of appreciation⁵⁹. There are changes in legislation every few years, with increasing staff-child ratios, a lack of continuity between the two cycles of pre-primary education, and insufficient human and material resources. Such factors contribute to lower job satisfaction and a generally lower status of the ECEC sector.

In Germany, on the other hand, the federal government funds a programme "Profis für die Kita", as an attempt to attract highly qualified staff, while also trying to raise the societal evaluation of the profession of childminder⁶⁰. The programme portrays the profession of childminders as a good and secure job. Practitioners on the ground however report a higher workload, and parent organisations for instance note how staff would require more non-contact time for preparing pedagogical plans or involve and engage parents more. Finland stands out even more from the general negative evaluation of ECEC practitioners; compared to other countries, the (ECEC) teacher

⁵⁸ *AT: based on "platform Educare.*BE: The three communities have different pay levels, the GDP for the entire country has been used as reference.*EE: No minimal / maximal levels are set nationally: displayed is the average pay. *ES: The pay levels are calculated as a weighted mean of different salaries across autonomous communities.*NL: based on collective labour agreement ECEC sector 2011.*PL: The minimum pay level is based on the level of qualification; since 90% of teaching staff is overqualified, the actual pay is also higher than this figure suggests. *RO: no GDP data for 2011 available, 2010 used.

⁵⁹ www.waece.org/AMEIestudio_opinion2011.pdf.

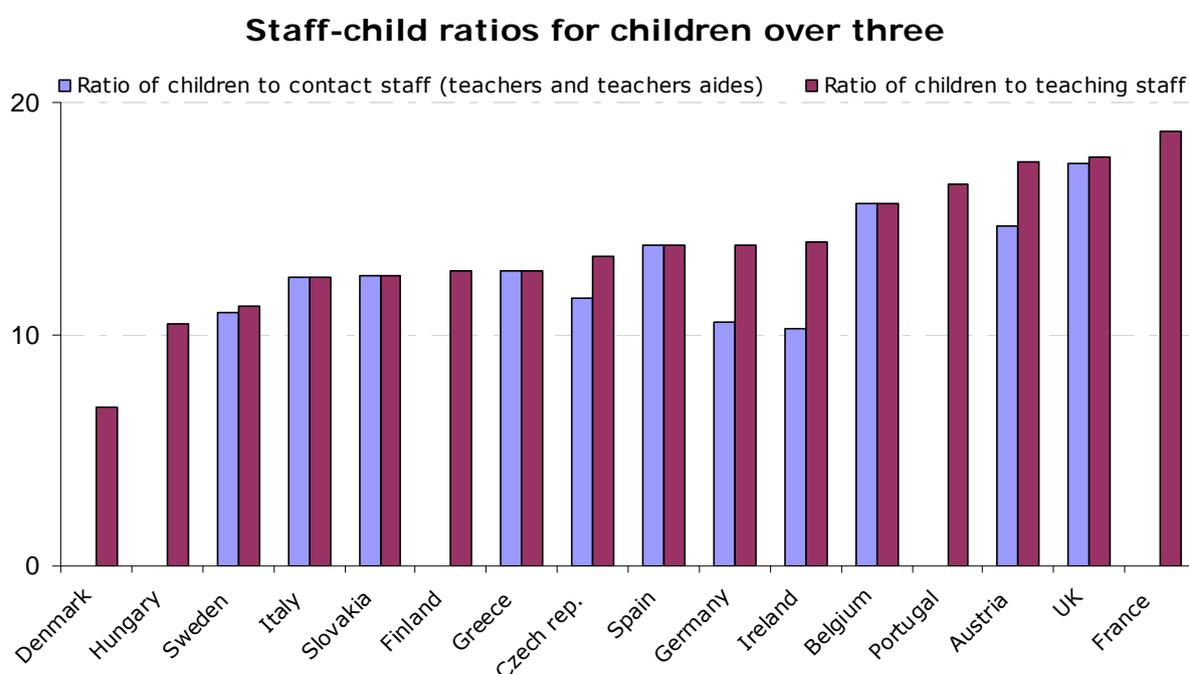
⁶⁰ <http://www.runder-tisch.eu/> (visited on March 6).

profession is highly valued. The profession of teacher is an attractive career path for students, due to this high status and good working conditions, and Finland is able to select a very restricted number of highly trained university-level young teachers (only 10% of the applicants is admitted). Generally, these positive conditions are argued to contribute to higher quality education and care, and are further linked to Finland's consistently high scores in the international PISA scores.

4.5.2. Staff-Child ratios

Another specific factor impacting the systemic conditions of staff quality is how many children are put under the supervision of an ECEC teacher. Through the impact of staff-child ratios on the work of ECEC practitioners, the broader quality of ECEC is also affected. In fact, academic research found an important effect of the so-called staff-child ratio in ECEC institutions on the quality of ECEC. Here, childcare services for the youngest children were excluded from analysis, because less data are available for this category. Instead of looking at the national (legal) provisions for staff-child ratio, it is more meaningful to assess the *actual* staff-child ratios, as established by the OECD⁶¹. The OECD Family Data base, divide the full-time equivalent children enrolled in pre-school programmes by the total number of full-time equivalent relevant staff per country. The figure distinguishes between contact with teaching staff or the ratio with all types of staff. In some settings less qualified staff assists teaching staff in the classroom, and thereby reduces the burden for teaching staff. Unlike the other categories that we compared on the EU-level, differences across the EU are actually within reasonable bounds. Only between the 'extreme cases', best and worst performing member states, that is Denmark versus France, a considerable difference in ratio can be detected. Most member states however have relatively equal staff-child ratios.

Figure 9: Actual staff-child ratios for children over 3



Source: OECD Family database 2010⁶²

⁶¹ OECD Family Database, www.oecd.org/social/family/database.

⁶² <http://www.oecd.org/social/soc/oecdfamilydatabase.htm>.

Note that the figure above presents data for the 'actual' average staff-child ratios, and thus do not inform whether national standards for staff-child ratios exist. Such ratios are however often defined and formulated as national (or regional) quality standards, and are often part of the criteria required for accreditation. In Ireland, for instance, which has very strict guidelines for providers to receive funding for the free pre-school year, a staff-child ratio is set of 1:11. The capitation fee that is provided per child is only handed out if these ratios are met. In this way, Ireland has a very strict system of central financing and can ensure the staff-child ratio at the same time. Note that by September 2012, Ireland lowered the capitation fee that providers receive by 3%, and subsequently raised the maximum staff-child ratio from 1:10 to 1:11, so that the providers also had less expenses. In the Netherlands, strict national regulations on staff-child ratios are in place for general child-care and playgroups in the pre-school period. The ratio ranges from 1:4 for 0 year olds to 1:8 for 3 to 4 year olds. Maximum group sizes range from 12 to 16 children per group. In primary school, there are no staff-child ratios; an average class size is currently 22 to 23 in primary education⁶³.

Finland prescribes the staff-child ratio nationally for day-care services, but since the municipalities control most policies on ECEC, they may not always adhere to these prescriptions in practice⁶⁴; municipal contexts vary significantly throughout Finland. For pre-school (the programme for 6 year olds), no staff-child ratios are set, but a class-size of 20 is recommended by the ministry; generally this recommendation is followed, though it is not monitored very strictly. Quality in this respect is assured through the possibility that parents can complain at the local administrative agency. In Spain, the 2006 Education law assigns the Education administrations of the autonomous communities the authority for setting the requirements for ECEC providers in terms of teacher-pupil ratios, installations and number of school places. The official ratio upheld by the regions differs for different ages of pre-school children. However, given the current economic climate and the funding decreases, in practice Spanish ECEC providers are forced to stay away from the set teacher to children ratios by expanding the classes.

4.6. General conclusions

Competent staff is considered a crucial factor in delivering quality ECEC. Although we may consider staff competence in many ways, the starting qualifications required for ECEC staff were compared. Many differences exist throughout the EU, ranging from qualifications that can be considered secondary education or lower vocational to university degrees. Even though the qualification level is generally considered a relevant quality indicator, it is only a crude measure to compare the diversity of minimal qualification requirements across the EU. In general, however, staff with higher education qualifications in ECEC are better able to interact with the children in a meaningful way, contribute to language development and reflect on their own and their colleagues' activities. As such, higher educated staff may continuously contribute to quality development.

Next to starting qualifications, different policy initiatives have been developed across the EU to professionalise the existing ECEC workforce, and thereby contribute to higher levels of quality. This is particularly important for the more informal type of family day-care, but is equally beneficial for the 'regular' ECEC workforce through continuing professional development. Such additional trainings encourage existing staff to reflect on their activities

⁶³ Dutch Minister of Education (2012) Letter to parliament, November 15, 2012, nr 44785.

⁶⁴ Karila, K. (2008): 'A Finnish viewpoint on professionalism in early childhood education', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 16:2, 210-223.

and thereby work on quality development. Like with starting qualifications, it is absolutely vital for ECEC providers to reflect on their work critically in order to raise quality levels effectively. Continuing professional development should therefore be a crucial element of staff requirements when aiming for developing quality.

When working with 'children from disadvantaged backgrounds', often additional guidelines and competence requirements are formulated. Though generally such competences are often trained at the regular education for ECEC staff, in some countries no particular attention is paid. However, especially to reach out effectively to communities with disadvantaged backgrounds a specialised approach can have significant effects.

This chapter has shown the diversity of qualification requirements across the EU, and at the same time shows the necessity of a sufficiently qualified ECEC workforce. The current economic and financial crisis and the limited availability of funding, a critical choice must be made by member states. Based on the findings of this chapter, it is however recommendable that sufficient staff requirements are maintained or further developed. If no financial resources are made available, member states should aim at supporting at least one higher educated staff member per ECEC service, who has the education to critically reflect on the daily activities in the day-care, the activities by colleagues, and the implementation of national curriculum guidelines. These critical reflections can then be taken over by other staff, and thereby raise the quality of interactions with children. In short, it is crucial to have the structures enabling and facilitating the work and initiatives of ECEC professionals. Only through these structures can ECEC professionals attempt to raise quality standards.

Finally, working conditions, such as work environment, salary and work benefits are also of crucial importance for the system relating to the quality of staff. Equally, these serve as ways to attract higher educated staff. These broader working conditions may influence job satisfaction, which is another crucial element for positive interaction with children. This study identified large differences in salary expenditures and modest differences in staff-child ratios between member states.

5. ECEC IN EUROPE: CURRICULUM

KEY FINDINGS

- Generally, researchers and policymakers agree that it is important for young children to not just develop the necessary cognitive aspects that are important for entering primary education, but also to develop the non-cognitive elements as well, as these are equally important in laying a foundation for lifelong learning. Even though this balance is generally kept, there is large variation across the EU in terms of how detailed national curricular guidelines are formulated.
- Next to the 'official texts' in national curriculums, however, this study finds a trend towards more educationally oriented goals, such as numeracy and literacy. This manifests itself primarily through the introduction of pre-school years across Europe. As an example of such newly introduced programmes this chapter looks closer at Romania, where a pre-school year was introduced in 2012.
- In all countries, policy initiatives are developed to reach children at risk and include them in the existing curricular activities for young children. This chapter however also shows that the aim and consequently the results of such outreach activities are often very different among individual providers, and between different regions. More evidence is required to make sensible and informed policy choices about the success of these attempts in the future. This study shows that the role of highly trained ECEC professionals is crucial in successfully reaching out to children at risk.

5.1. Introduction

Even though competent staff is a crucial aspect of ECEC, the role of curriculum on the overall quality of ECEC must not be underestimated. By curriculum, we mean the "contents and methods that substantiate children's learning and development"⁶⁵; it gives teaching staff guidance as to what to teach and how to do this effectively. As such, there is clear link with quality staff, but still deserve individual attention here. The European Commission and Parliament both underline the necessity for balanced curricular guidelines, which contribute both to more cognitive aspects as to foundations for lifelong learning. This chapter assesses the goals, content and practice comparatively across EU member states. In addition, it includes several good practices found in Europe.

5.2. Goals for Curricular guidelines

Before assessing the contents of different curricular frameworks, this section first assesses the goals formulated regarding ECEC provision. Such goals inform, either implicitly or explicitly, the content and practice of curricular guidelines, and should therefore be assessed first; differences in policy goals lead to differences in how ECEC is provided. If for instance ECEC is considered the tool to increase labour market participation of women, it may get a different focus than when ECEC is explicitly considered as the primary tool to support a child's development later in life. Another goal associated with ECEC is the socialising of children into society by promoting interaction with other children. ECEC may also be a policy tool to protect vulnerable children, for instance by being able to detect neglect and abuse at an early stage, or it

⁶⁵ OECD (2011), *Starting Strong III*, p. 82

may contribute to fighting poverty. More generally, however, we identify an increasing attention to educational goals in the programmes for children older than three throughout the EU; an increasing focus lies on preparing children for entry into primary school.

While appreciating the European diversity in goals and approaches in ECEC, the OECD agrees with the Commission's Communication that curricula should be well implemented and well thought-out. To this end, most EU member states have curricula with a nationally defined educational focus for older children. For younger children, however, there are quite a number of member states that do not define curricular guidelines at the national level; instead, these are formulated at the level of the provider or the local authority. Large differences also exist across the EU when it comes to the starting age for ECEC programmes or the extent to which national guidelines are binding. An overview is presented below depicting whether national guidelines or curricular prescriptions for the youngest children (age 0-3) have been defined by the member states, illustrating the diversity throughout the EU. Some member states leave it to individual providers to define learning standards for the youngest children, whereas others have defined such programmes from birth until primary schools. Such integrated ECEC curricular guidelines, with a structured, yet loosely defined, programme even for the youngest children are found primarily in the Nordic countries, but also in the UK and Ireland.

Figure 10: Nationally defined curriculum guidelines



Source: Panteia (author), based on Eurydice 2009, author's data collection for Ireland

It must be noted in this regard that the existence of national curriculum frameworks or guidelines does not necessarily impede the possibility of local providers to offer a specific curriculum, which may also be well-thought out and comprehensive. Often,

the national curriculum only outlines goals, directions or learning outcomes, and leaves further elaboration up to individual institutions. Indeed, much variation exists across member states when it comes to the level of detail of such national frameworks, which is not captured by the picture presented above. However, common curriculum standards can have several benefits. By setting clear national standards for instance, even quality levels across different institutions and age groups can be ensured, and may thereby lead to a more equitable education provision, which is a policy goal shared by all member states⁶⁶. At the same time however, the OECD recognises the risk of nationally set standards in that these may limit the freedom and creativity of ECEC staff. It is therefore considered crucial that all stakeholders are involved in the process of establishing curricular guidelines.

In Germany and the Netherlands, no specific guidelines exist for the youngest children. Here, individual providers have the freedom to determine the pedagogical programmes for these children themselves. In Germany, this fits in particularly well with the way ECEC provision is organised. Many nationally operating charitable organisations (churches, labour organisations, the Red Cross) offer day-care service, and depending on their background can set their curricular activities. Recently in the Netherlands, pedagogical frameworks have been developed by the ECEC sector itself, in an attempt to improve the pedagogical quality in ECEC. Providers are free to use or not use elements of this framework.

In Finland, the guidelines for education and care for the youngest children are formulated by the National Institute for Health and Welfare. On a national level some core curriculum guidelines are defined, as discussed below. However, on the local level these guidelines are further operationalised in a more specific outline of ECEC standards. These local guidelines allow fitting local practices in line with the broader nationally set guidelines. Quite similarly, in Spain the main curriculum goals of Spanish ECEC services are in principle set out in national and autonomous community legislation. The General Law on Education in Spain states that autonomous communities should develop such curriculum guidelines, but the extent to which this is done in practice varies across regions. In fact, in early 2013, only 6 out of the 17 autonomous communities have in fact further developed such curricular provisions⁶⁷. In any case, the individual providers have the autonomy to determine their programmes, building on these national level objectives. In Romania, specific guidelines exist for each age-group, to provide children with suitable and appropriate challenges. Ireland, on the other hand, recently introduced a national curricular framework (Aistear) that applies to children from 0-6, thereby integrating the entire development of children in a comprehensive set of guidelines. In comparison with other member states, Aistear proposes a more detailed set of guidelines. The more detailed the prescribed curricular guidelines, however, the easier these can come into conflict with other national regulations. For instance, the Aistear curriculum is play-centred and aims to let children 'learn through discovery'. This may however conflict with existing health and safety requirements that require a certain playground to be safe and without potential hazards.

⁶⁶ OECD (2012), *Starting strong III*.

⁶⁷ Personal interview

5.3. Content of curricular guidelines

An on-going discussion in the research literature on ECEC curricula concerns the balance between the cognitive elements (such as literacy, mathematics) of curricular guidelines and the non-cognitive elements (competences such as perseverance and motivation). Both the OECD and the European Commission emphasise the importance that attention be paid to the balance between these two aspects⁶⁸. This section analyses both elements, and then attempts to map the existing approaches to curriculum content throughout the EU in a comparative manner. It is difficult to make clear-cut distinctions in curriculum requirements as some member states do not have centrally formulated demands for curriculum standards, or for instance, do not have an integrated ECEC system, and therefore have different demands for different age groups. Though far from exhaustive, the major differences will be mapped between curricular guidelines across the EU for different age-groups.

Generally, curricular guidelines in principle underline a balanced and 'comprehensive' approach to children's development. For all types of ECEC provision the curricula include principles of learning through playing, and learning by discovery. Sometimes these principles are mentioned explicitly, like in Ireland, Finland, or more implicitly, like in Romania or Spain. In these more implicit cases, the balanced principles can be drawn from the philosophy behind the curricular guidelines, but are not explicitly mentioned as a goal or principle underlying the guidelines.

The fact that national guidelines exist does not automatically mean that all providers offer similar programmes or approaches *per se*. In Spain for instance, centres may prioritise language development and dedicate time to interacting in a secondary language to develop children's linguistic skills. Other providers on the other hand, focus on music and devote more time to musically based activities. In Ireland, a wide variety of different day-care services based on different pedagogical principles exist, from a comparatively large share of services based on Montessori principles, to day-care services with specific focus on developing the Irish language ('Naionra').

Romania, on the other hand, defined its curriculum in more detail at the national level. In 2008, the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth embarked on a project to refresh the curriculum and identified a number of domains (also labelled as experience domains) along the lines of which the national curriculum is structured. These include the aesthetic and creative domain; the man and society domain; language and communication; science; and psycho-motor domains. Along these domains, the promotion of cognitive abilities is accorded high importance. Whereas in most member states only a few areas for attention are mentioned, the Romanian national curriculum outlines a proposed division of hours allocated to each activity. These provisions also offer concrete examples and materials that may be used by ECEC practitioners, which are often applied. In order to make the transition from day-care to primary education easier for children, Romania introduced a mandatory pre-school year for 6-year old children in 2012, based on a specifically designed curriculum. This initiative is discussed in more detail below.

⁶⁸ OECD Starting Strong I (2001), II (2006), III (2012) , (COM 2011: 66).

Curriculum and the newly introduced preparatory year - Romania

The concept of the 'preparatory class' (in Romanian: *clasa pregătitoare*) is a novel addition to the Romanian educational framework through the newly adopted Law 1 of 2011 on National Education. The preparatory class for 6-year-olds is a one year programme which aims to bridge the gaps between kindergarten and primary education by offering the child a transitional year in which he/she will gradually be accustomed to the rules and principles of the primary education. As such, its curriculum is targeted towards educational goals, while still keeping elements of play. The introduction of the preparatory class was officially launched in September 2012.

Formally, the preparatory class is the first step of the primary education.⁶⁹ Structurally however, the class acts as a hybrid programme that encompasses elements from both kindergarten and school. Games and tales remain the epicentre of education, which are now structured in accordance with a school-like schedule. The educators in the preparatory class received a specialised training in order to prepare them for this task. Furthermore, the educator coaching the preparatory class will remain the educator also for the following four years of primary education. This gives the educators the possibility to learn more about each child, their needs and capacities, and build on these throughout the coming years.

The curriculum is more structured than in kindergartens.⁷⁰ It outlines the targeted aims which must be achieved, but the educator is left with a considerable discretion with respect to the path through which the targeted aims will be reached. In order to assist the educator, the Government outlined a methodology that can be implemented.⁷¹ In the context of the country study drawn up for this report a kindergarten in Bors was further studied, situated in the county of Bihor, north-western Romania, which was among the first to introduce the preparatory class. Here, various subject matters are taught, among others, Romanian language, minority language (Hungarian), mathematics, visual arts and music. Each day an average of 4 subjects are taught. The length of one class is 35 minutes with a 15 minutes break. The educator emphasised that this division is rather flexible and, depending on the interests of the children, the length of the class can be extended; even though the programmes seems rather strict, teachers are relatively lenient towards the prescribed curriculum.

⁶⁹ Article 29 of Law 1 of 2011 on Romanian National Education, Official Gazette I, nr. 18 (10 January 2011), available at: http://www.dreptonline.ro/legislatie/legea_educatiei_nationale_lege_1_2011.php (last accessed 30 March 2013).

⁷⁰ Romanian Ministry of Education, Research and Youth, *Ordinance 3654 of 29 March 2012 relating to the Approval of the Educational Framework Plan for the Preparatory Class* (29 March 2012), available at: <http://administrasite.edu.ro/index.php/articles/16945> (last accessed 30 March 2013). See also, Romanian Ministry of Education, Research and Youth, *Ordinance 3656 of 29 March 2012 relating to the Approval of Programmes for the Preparatory Class* (29 March 2012), available at: <http://administrasite.edu.ro/index.php/articles/16947> (last accessed 30 March 2013).

⁷¹ Romanian Ordinance 3064 of 19 January 2012 on Approving the Methodology for Children in the Preparatory Class and Class I for the Academic Year 2012-2013, available at: <http://administrasite.edu.ro/index.php/articles/16428> (last accessed 30 March 2013).

The involvement of parents is crucial in the formulation of the contours of the preparatory class.⁷² The perception of parents about the class is also interesting to mention. At Bors, parents were highly satisfied with the initiative of the preparatory class. The general perception was that children are given an opportunity to integrate into the atmosphere of a school, while lessening also the burden of parents in the integration process.

Since this preparatory school year was so recently introduced, there are still several practical challenges that need to be overcome. Local authorities have for instance to decide whether to keep the programmes at the kindergartens, or start offering them at primary school. Moreover, the availability of equipment among the services is still an important challenge as well. The government provided each institute with a certain amount of equipment; however these are often found insufficient by ECEC practitioners to cover the curriculum guidelines.

5.4. Additional guidelines for 'children at risk'

Clearly defined curricula help create a better preparation for school in the early years. At the same time however, specific groups may require specific attention to issues, such as for instance additional attention to language. In fact, children with slow language development or children from disadvantaged backgrounds often benefit from targeted intervention. At the same time, however, research shows that targeted intervention contains risk of stigmatisation, which undermines the beneficial effects. Therefore, even though ECEC services are generally offered universally, national curricular standards also take children with specific needs into account.

In Germany (NRW), the state-level curriculum guidelines assign priority to the family as the first place to start learning. For this reason, children with disadvantaged backgrounds deserve additional attention, to prevent problems at a later stage in life. For language development, the NRW curriculum therefore requires children to participate in language assessments two years before compulsory education starts⁷³. Responsibility to conduct these language assessments lies with the teachers in day-care services, because these cannot be enforced. However, because approximately 90% of the children over 4 years old are enrolled in such services, it is very common. The Family Centres that have been developed throughout NRW offer a suitable infrastructure to further facilitate implementation of these demands that often go beyond the mere responsibility of the day-care institutions and require an integrated approach to children's development, in close collaboration with the parents. Children that are not reached through these 'conventional' channels may be reached through mandatory health check-ups during the early years, in which attention is also paid to language development.

⁷² By way of example, see Ministry of National Education, *Agreement on a Common Position between the Ministry of National Education, Teaching Unions, and the National Union for the Association of Parents in Pre-University Education with respect to the Organisation of the Preparatory Class for the Academic Year 2013/2014* (30 January 2013), available at: <http://administrasite.edu.ro/index.php/articles/18696> (last accessed 30 March 2013).

⁷³ Ministerium für Familie, Kinder, Jugend, Kultur und Sport des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen (2012), *Grundsätze zur Bildungsförderung für Kinder von 0 bis 10 Jahren in Kindertageseinrichtungen und Schulen im Primarbereich in Nordrhein-Westfalen*.

In the Netherlands, specific programmes are available for local initiatives and pre-schools to target educational deficits of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, mostly migrant groups in specific areas of the larger cities. The aim is to decrease the educational deficits of children at risk between the age of 2 and 6, through targeted pre-school programmes. These programmes are specifically aimed at improving the position of the individual child with language deficits by offering language stimulation programmes. Municipalities are responsible for organising sufficient supply of pre-school “places” and for defining, identifying and reaching children at risk (so-called ‘target groups’) so they attend the pre-school playgroups.

In Romania, the law requires local ECEC providers to put in place a special curriculum for children with special needs⁷⁴. The curriculum also sets out the methodology to be applied with respect to this group of children, which takes into consideration their needs and capabilities. Special attention is accorded to integration of Roma children in the educational system. For instance, activities of kindergartens are conducted both in Romanian and in Romani language in areas where the population consists mostly of Roma people. There are also examples of projects that aim to reach out and integrate Roma children into early childhood education in order to confer equal opportunities for those children.⁷⁵ The Roma Education Fund was established in 2009 with the purpose of reducing the educational barriers for Roma children⁷⁶. In June 2012, this NGO launched the project entitled “A Good Start”. Through this initiative, kindergartens in areas with high Romani population were completely renovated and equipped for Roma Children. Moreover, the project entitled “Roma Children are Preparing for Kindergarten” was a project financed by the European Union, and implemented by Save the Children Romania and the Ministry of Education between 2009-2011. The aim of the project was to improve the early childhood education of Roma children in Romania.

The Finnish curricular guidelines specify that each child in need of special support is to have an individualised ‘special support plan’ which is focused on enabling children to participate in group activities as fully as possible. Children with special needs may for instance start 1 year earlier with pre-school programmes; the key objective of such pre-primary programmes is to reduce individual differences in children’s readiness to start school. In order to encourage language development, the Finnish system specifically allows for speaking the mother tongue language in ECEC providers. This can be one of the three officially recognised languages in Finland (Finnish, Swedish and Sami), but could also extend to other language. The core-curriculum even specifically refers to Roma children, and emphasises the need to provide instruction in Romani as much as possible. Therefore, use of this language in day-care centres with Romani children is actually encouraged. Using this language in schools as the language of instruction is made possible through the Constitutional amendment of 1995⁷⁷. In fact, in 1999 legislation on Education was further reformed, and increases state funding to allow two hours a week of mother tongue instruction to be provided if there are at least four children in the group⁷⁸.

⁷⁴ Ministry of Education, Research and Youth, *Curriculum for Groups/Kindergartens for Children with Deficiencies* (2008), available at: http://www.cnae.ro/documents/curriculum_pedagogie_curativa_prescolar.pdf (last accessed 28 March 2013).

⁷⁵ By way of an example, see *Educational Project for the Integration of Roma Children in Kindergarten*, Kindergarten no. 18 in the city of Alba Iulia (January 2006), available at: http://staticlb.didactic.ro/uploads/assets/82/49/0/proiect_educational.doc (last accessed 8 April 2013).

⁷⁶ For the website of the Roma Education Fund, see www.romaeducationfund.ro.

⁷⁷ Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2004), *Finland’s Romani People*. P21.

⁷⁸ Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2004), *Finland’s Romani People*. p 22

Next to its provisions for universal free access to the pre-school year, Ireland offers additional ECEC services supported the government in cooperation with charity organisations in some disadvantaged areas throughout the country. The focus of such programmes is primarily on early intervention and has a strong community component to reach out to children that would otherwise not be reached by these initiatives. Spain also adopts a method which relies on collaboration with other social and health care actors in dealing with its children at risk. In Spain the general principle in ECEC is an individualised approach, catering to the needs of each child. When pre-primary school teachers identify a learning disadvantage, an Early Intervention Team is called in to assess the situation and organise the required care and support. These teams consist of psychologists and paediatricians which then collaborate with other social organisations to provide the needed care. Each autonomous region has several of these teams and each team serves a number of schools.

5.5. General conclusions

European policy documents call for the need for balanced curricular guidelines. It is important for young children to not just develop the necessary cognitive aspects that are important for entering primary education, but also to develop the non-cognitive elements as well, as these are equally important in laying a foundation for lifelong learning. In principle, this assertion seems uncontested among member states. In all countries, national curricular guidelines underline the need for both cognitive as non-cognitive elements of a child's development, thus following the goal of balanced curriculums. The actual differences that exist lie in the extent to which these principles are subsequently translated into actual guidelines.

The underlying goals that inform curricular guidelines are crucial elements in determining the contents of the curriculum. Whereas most member states have set national curriculum guidelines for older children, only about half set national guidelines for children from 0 to 3 years old. Moreover, these guidelines vary in how binding they are to ECEC providers. Sometimes, though very structured, these guidelines are defined broadly, such as in Finland and Ireland, and are specifically designed, interpreted and implemented by local governments or individual providers. The guidelines can however also be more detailed and allow less space for local interpretation, such as in Romania or Spain.

Regardless of the national guidelines, approaching children with balanced curricula, a general trend towards more educationally oriented goals may be identified. This does not exclude the possibility that such goals are not achieved through playing and exploring, but does point towards an increasing focus on numeracy and literacy. This manifests itself through the introduction of pre-school years across Europe. Note that the target groups of these pre-schools differ per member states; whereas in Romania and Finland the pre-school year is focused at 6 year olds before they go to school, in Ireland the year is targeted at children aged 3-4 and in the Netherlands children aged 4 go to the infant classes of primary education.

These educational goals are often set to reduce inequalities between children, often specifically for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. By offering more specifically targeted programmes to improve literacy and numeracy with young children, governments try to reduce these inequalities. More evidence is required to make sensible and informed policy choices about the success of these attempts in the

future. What this study does show is that the role of highly trained ECEC professionals is crucial in this particular respect.

In all countries, attempts are formulated on the policy level to reach children at risk and include them in the existing curricular activities for young children. It is necessary that the success of these attempts are mapped, as the aims and results of such outreach activities in curricular guidelines are often very different among individual providers, and between different regions. In the next chapter the final focus will be put on how parents are involved in ECEC provision, and how this can lead to successful outreach strategies.

6. ECEC IN EUROPE: PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

KEY FINDINGS

- High quality ECEC provision cannot go without involving the parents; these are the key stakeholders in the development of children. Involvement of parents is even more important for minority groups or children with disadvantaged backgrounds. This helps reducing the differences between the home and the school environments and as such is found to enhance children's achievements and reduce drop-out rates later in school. This chapter shows that throughout the EU, parental involvement is generally left to individual providers, even though it receives some attention in laws, rules and regulation,
- This chapter distinguishes between child-focused and centre-focused parental involvement. This study found differences in the extent to which both types were employed by policies at the national level, or by individual providers. Even though the extent to which parents are involved may depend highly on the cultural context, this chapter identifies some good-practices in Finland, Ireland and the Netherlands, where very concrete outreach strategies were developed to engage parents and children of disadvantaged groups.
- Furthermore, this chapter also argues that centre-focused parental involvement in combination with minimal quality standards as defined by the competent authority may serve as a very effective quality assurance tool for policymakers, who are often struggling to raise quality through tighter regulation or oversight. If well-trained ECEC professionals can effectively reach out to parents, parental involvement in ECEC can play an important role in upholding quality standards.

6.1. Introduction

Despite the European Commission's calls for cooperation between ECEC services and parents so as to make the transition from the home situation towards education as natural as possible, the 2011 Communication pays remarkably little attention to the role of parents, the 'primary educators' of young children. The European Parliament underlines the central role of parents more clearly and the need for services to take the wishes and demands of parents into account. In fact, the European Parliament also specifically considers a sufficiently long parental leave as an essential component in an effective ECEC policy⁷⁹.

This chapter will therefore investigate how member states have defined their policies regarding parental involvement with ECEC in their country, and how this works in ECEC practice. Parental involvement does not stop at listening to the opinions and demands of parents, but may equally refer to parental education programmes or other forms of assistance in raising their children. This chapter aims especially to map several good-practices in the field of parental involvement across the EU.

⁷⁹ European Parliament (2011), Resolution of 12 May 2011 on Early Years Learning in the European Union, 2010/2159/INI, and associated discussions of draft report.

6.2. Parental involvement in the EU

All the academic research on positive effects of high quality ECEC on children's developmental outcomes notwithstanding, children still spend the larger, part of their life in their home environment, interacting with parents, siblings, family members, and for instance neighbours. Therefore, besides high quality ECEC provision, the behaviour of parents remains central in the development of their children. Some studies even suggest that parent's knowledge about their children is more likely to foster cognitive development than the more distant relation with the ECEC professional can ever achieve. As such, it is important for ECEC services to cooperate closely with parents⁸⁰.

Especially, in the context of minority groups, international research points to a link between later success at school and matching school (ECEC) and home environments⁸¹. A parental component in ECEC services is therefore very important, since it enhances children's achievements and may reduce drop-out rates later in school⁸². Others studies show that it is not the involvement of parents alone which increases children's developmental achievements. Instead, the higher aspirations and expectations of parents for their children following from involvement with ECEC cause better achievements by children later on⁸³. Rather than the actual content of involvement initiatives, the involvement of parents in itself should be central in quality ECEC provision. No matter how the causal mechanism works, it is clear that parents should be involved in the day-to-day activities of ECEC services. At the same time, it must be borne in mind that the appropriate level of parental involvement is also highly dependent on cultural context, and can therefore not be covered in an exhaustive checklist for comparative reasons⁸⁴. In this sense, the OECD has identified six main types of constructive parental involvement programmes in ECEC services that may be used for more comparative purposes.

Child-focused

- Design of communication forms of centre-to-home and home-to-centre about programmes and progress.
- Help families create home environments to support children as learners.
- Provide information / ideas about ways to help further stimulate children's development

Centre-focused

- Recruit and organise parent / communities help and support (consider for instance helping to plan centre events and fundraising, trips, improving facilities, assisting in the centre, sharing skills and expertise)
- Include parents in centre decisions, through parent councils / organisations
- Identify / integrate resources and services in community to strengthen programmes, family practices, children's learning and development.

Source: OECD (2012), *Starting Strong III: A quality toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*.

⁸⁰ Tizard and Hughes 2003; NESSE 2009.

⁸¹ Dee, T. (2004), 'Teachers, race, and student achievement in a randomized experiment, *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 86, pp. 195-210.

⁸² Harris, A. and J. Goodall (2006), *Parental Involvement in Education: An overview of the Literature*, University of Warwick, Coventry.

⁸³ Fan, X. and M. Chen (2001), "Parental Involvement and Student's Academic Achievement: A Meta-Analysis", *Educational Psychology Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 1-22.

⁸⁴ Huntsinger, C. S. and P. E. Jose (2009), "Parental involvement in children's schooling: Different meanings in different countries", *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 4, pp. 398-410.

In Finland, practically all these types of 'constructive parental involvement' are present. Next to the 'fiscal freedom' to choose whether or not to use the services of a day-care centre, national guidelines on ECEC curricula stress the importance of partnerships with parents. At the national level, for instance, it is prescribed that ECEC teachers write down individual development plans in close collaboration with parents for their children. This way, parents are involved not only in the education programme, but can also turn to the 'pedagogues' (the ECEC practitioners) for questions and particular issues they encounter in raising their child. Furthermore, this also allows the ECEC staff to spot potential areas that require additional attention.

Parental involvement – Helsinki city guidelines

In Finland, next to the national core-curriculum set by the education and health boards local municipalities have the freedom and deliberate authority to set additional guidelines about ECEC provision in their territory. Consider for instance additional services such as transportation of children in remote areas, which may not be as elaborate in bigger cities. Regarding parental involvement, the Helsinki Core curriculum concentrates specifically on how parents' involvement should take place.

In addition, to the national requirement of developing a personal plan, it is specified that this personal plan should be a two-way process. In practice, development of this personal plan is envisaged by local authorities to consist of the following steps. First, the parents of the child have a chance to visit the day-care place and meet its personnel. This also allows exchanging knowledge about the habits, customs and personality of the child that can be important in providing quality and individualised day-care. In the first two months, the ECEC practitioner has the task to actually get to know the child. Based on these initial observations, the ECEC pedagogue may formulate core concerns or specific areas of attention. These are discussed with the parents and formalised in an individual development plan. After this ECEC development plan is formalised, the ECEC is responsible to continuously (re)assess the means and effectiveness of the ECEC support.

Regardless of such local guidelines, there is still considerable variation in the extent to which institutions further involve parents in daily curricular activities. One particular good example is the 'open-door policy' of a private day-care provider that was interviewed in the context of this study. Here, parents are invited to visit the centre at any time they like. This is different from most other municipal day-care centres where the staff set visiting hours, so that they are not 'disturbed' when working with the children. As parents come in, they have the opportunity to observe the activities of the staff and their children from the 'parents corner', where facilities are offered to drink coffee, or even work. Next to this *passive* 'open door policy', parents are also invited to actively participate, when they enter the playground. In fact, when parents enter the playground, the staff actually expects the parent to participate in the games and other ongoing activities. These options are highly valued by parents, especially when they first start bringing their children to the day-care and still need to build up a trusting relation with the ECEC practitioners.

Most member states underline the central role of the parents in quality ECEC through national legislation. In reality, however, the influence of parents on the provision of day-care can vary enormously across different regions or even between day-care

providers. The national provisions often allow significant room for interpretation and different applications of parental application in practice. In Spain, but also in Germany for instance, the local states (or communities) each have specific mechanisms for facilitating parental involvement. In Romania, the guidelines are set centrally but their application may in practice also differ widely across different parts of the country.

6.2.1. Child-focused parental involvement

In the Netherlands, the general day-care sector has no strong tradition in child-focused parental involvement. Contacts between pedagogical workers and parents are informal and mostly limited to 'dropdown and pickup' moments. Some providers work with written daily reports, or keep info on the child on whiteboards. Most centres organise a few additional contact moments between parents and pedagogical workers to discuss the development of the child. Most centres have yearly '10-minute talks', in which a child's development is discussed and one or two evenings for all parents to discuss or present a topic⁸⁵. An exception is formed by the few (about ten) parental participation day-care centers (*ouderparticipatiecreches*), which are cooperative day-care centres run by the parents themselves, not by professional staff. In the playgroup sector in the Netherlands (*peuterspeelzalen*), it is more common for centres to involve parents with their work, or try to stimulate contact among parents themselves (see box below).

Engaging parents in playgroups – The Netherlands

In playgroups, and especially those that work with targeted pre-school programmes, there is a stronger tradition to involve parents in a child-focused way. Traditionally, the playgroups were founded by parents and parents were in the boards, though nowadays, playgroups are almost all run by either private companies or semi-public foundations. Most pre-school playgroups combine the centre-oriented program with outreach programs for parents. Several elements of parental involvement are used to introduce individual parents in the centre's programme, primarily to get to know the parents and encourage contact among parents. Some groups organise for example monthly meetings with parents, in which they can play with their children on the group, while staff members discuss with parents the theme and materials the group will be working on the upcoming period. Others supply parents regularly with a number of games and tasks to use at home with their child, to increase effective learning time also at home. Other groups have weekly coffee mornings for parents to freely discuss any issues that might arise. Other means are cooperation with local social organisations, for example supporting local women group meetings by taking care of the children⁸⁶.

In Spain, though parental involvement in their child's education is established by law, the actual level and nature of parental involvement depends largely on the ECEC provider in question. In some centres it is customary to use personal diaries for keeping track of children's development; the ECEC practitioner can daily record issues like what food a child has eaten and how much, whether a nap was taken, and hygiene. Parents are sometimes invited to keep such logs at home, so they can be compared with the practitioners' experiences. Some providers also make use of ICT

⁸⁵ [www.nji.nl: http://nji.nl/eCache/DEF/1/25/227.html](http://nji.nl/eCache/DEF/1/25/227.html).

⁸⁶ Panteia/Research voor beleid (2009) *Viva la Village, The role of schools and ECEC-providers in supporting parenting*.

applications to engage parents; consider the use of internet forums where parents log in and can chat with teachers and other parents, or where the ECEC staff can post relevant (general) documentation, so as to remain involved with the centre. With regard to further providing information and support, some providers offer organised trainings or courses for the parents. A programme called “responsible parent course” for instance, is designed to encourage parental involvement in the activities of the provider. Clearly, through educational talks, trainings and field trips parents identify more with the day-care / schools, but it is mainly left to the provider to engage in these activities.

In Germany - NRW, even though some institutions also engage in the Finnish good-practice as described above of drawing up individual development plans with parents, currently, the number of available staff is often a practical limit to individually plan and monitor a child’s development. The child-focused involvement of parents does receive attention in the earlier described NRW Family Centres. These often offer courses to help parents create a stimulating home learning environment for their children. Moreover, these family centres develop particular initiatives to reach out to children (and their parents) that are not yet enrolled in ECEC.

NRW Family Centres specifically aim to involve parents with the programme of their children. These have the particular position of engaging entire families, rather than simply a parent; a programme for engaging the entire family should be developed in order to obtain the NRW quality label. It is also the task of the Family Centres to be aware of the situation of the family, and act on it. Through this wider focus, family centres can offer more and better services that can contribute to better child development that are focused on what is needed, in particular neighbourhoods and specific families. For example, a Family Centre in an area with a lot of Roma women, launched a particular initiative specifically focused on Roma women. The Centre hired a midwife, to assist pregnant (Roma) women on practical and healthcare issues; otherwise it would have been much harder to reach these women. By playing a more active role in the local community, the centres are able to significantly lower the threshold and provide tailor-made services to the local demands.

In Ireland, parental involvement is enshrined in the national quality framework “Síolta”. It recognises the importance of parents as the primary educators, and their pre-eminent role in promoting the child’s wellbeing, learning and development. Though no binding legislation exists regarding parental involvement in ECEC services, the practices associated with “Síolta” are becoming increasingly known and referred to in Irish day-care and pre-school settings. Below we discuss a particular good-practice of how parental involvement in a child’s development was encouraged in a scenario of generous funding.

Engaging Parents in the “Early Years programme” Tallaght-West, Ireland

With generous funding from the Atlantic Philanthropies and the Irish government, the Childhood Development Initiative (CDI), an action group engaged in local child well-being issues in Tallaght-West, Dublin set up an initiative towards a quality “Early Years” programme⁸⁷. The project was developed in 2007 and put into place between 2008 and 2011 by 9 day-care centres in Tallaght-West, a neighbourhood with comparatively more children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The focus of the project lies on ‘early intervention’, based on the philosophy that when children with disadvantaged backgrounds are approached early, this will greatly enhance their chances later in life and reduce inequalities.

The funding allowed raising the overall quality in the 9 participating centres considerably; through higher staff requirements, more favourable staff-child ratios, more time to plan activities, and using a particular research-based curriculum. This example focuses on one specific element of the “Early Years” programme, which specifically provided funding for the day-care services to hire a so-called “Parent-Care Facilitator”. This professional has the sole task to be in close contact with the parents, and facilitate smooth cooperation between practitioners and the parents of the child at that institution. In the programme, specific courses were organised to train, give advice, or help parents with issues related to raising their child. The appointment of a dedicated “parent-care facilitator” allowed quality childcare provision based on the specific needs of each family. This was further ensured by the regular home visits by the ‘parent-care facilitator’, with and without the child’s ECEC practitioner. The idea of these home visits was twofold: to develop a relationship with the parents and to get to know the child from another perspective.

The ECEC practitioners in the project were particularly enthusiastic about the possibilities to engage much closer with the parents of the children. In cooperation with the parent care facilitator, practitioners were able to visit the homes of the children to discuss the child’s developments with the parents. Conducting these appointments in the home of the parents instead of at the institution, allowed the practitioners a unique insight into the home learning environment of the child. Only when the parents indicated that they would not appreciate a home visit, was the meeting conducted at the day-care service. This did not happen frequently however; most parents were very receptive to the project idea and were also enthusiastic about the home visits, where the child would for instance show their room, or the toys to the staff.

ECEC practitioners indicated that such home visits were especially valuable to get a better picture of the child’s development; one practitioner for instance indicated that the home-visit immediately gave some explanations for the slow language development of one child, on which she could respond with more targeted instruction⁸⁸. She also indicated that knowing the combination of a child’s behaviour at home and at the day-care, is crucial for early intervention with children with disabilities, such as autistic disorders. Often, practitioners are not able to relate to different behaviour of the child when seeing him/her a few hours, and therefore will not detect the disorder; this

⁸⁷ Hayes, N. Siraj-Blatchford, I. Keegan, S. and Goudling, E. (2013), *Evaluation of the Early Years Programme of the Childhood Development Initiative*, Dublin: Childhood Development Initiative (CDI).

⁸⁸ Personal interview.

further exacerbates the costs in later life. Even though this particular type of parent engagement may be considered too intrusive in some contexts, parents were very enthusiastic about the practice; it affirmed their idea that their children were in good hands. At the same time, the 'parent-care facilitators' were also open to meet at the day-care service, in case parents were indeed unwilling to receive them at home. Although sub-optimal in terms of potential benefits, it would still allow taking the necessary time for the parents, and thus be able to offer a personalised approach to day-care.

The CDI organisation also offered parent training courses, as part of the "Early Years programme", in which parents were trained to enhance children's early learning and development. Parents could join in voluntarily, but were very enthusiastic to participate. Finally, the participating services were encouraged to organise (free) 'family trips', in which not just the children, but the entire families would go on a trip, organised by the providers. These family trips were for instance visits to the zoo, a visit to a library, and for instance a picnic in a park. Such family visits served not just for providing activities for the children, but also allowed the staff to observe the children in their home environment and thus in complementing the image of the child.

The study that was conducted in the 9 participating day-care services concluded that especially the role of such parent training, in combination with a well-trained and accessible mentor (the 'parent-care facilitator'), contributes greatly to an effective home learning environment and, thus, greatly enhances the effects of quality ECEC.

6.2.2. Centre-focused parental involvement

Regarding more centre-focused parental involvement, in NRW, day-care services have organised parent councils. These also elect parent councils for the municipal Youth Offices, which conducts the inspections. These regional bodies then elect the state-level representatives for the organisation the state-wide parental organisation that advocates the interests of parents with children in ECEC services.

In the Netherlands, the childcare law (Wet Kinderopvang 2005) introduced a similar obligation for all child care centres to constitute an advisory committee of parents. In 2010, obligatory councils were also introduced in the playgroup sector. These councils have the right to discuss all matters relevant to parents with the (private) provider. Providers are obliged to ask the council's advice on several key policies, such as the pedagogical plan, educational activities, safety, health, prices and opening hours⁸⁹. Not all experts agree on the merit of this particular type of centre-focused parental involvement, where parents are put in the position of 'quality guardians'; in practice they often lack specific knowledge of daily pedagogical practice in the centres. In Spain, most institutions also have parental associations through which parents can collaborate with the provider and with fellow parents. Additionally, parents can attend parent-teacher conferences, attend meetings by school-sponsored Parent Education Centre, attend school events and organise extra-curricular activities, which can be done both at home and at school.

⁸⁹ Law on Childcare (2005) "*Wet kinderopvang en kwaliteitseisen peuterspeelzalen*", articles 58 to 60.

6.3. General conclusions

A clear finding in the international research literature is the importance of parental involvement in ECEC. Without parental involvement, the value of quality ECEC remains questionable. If a child's home environment, as created by the parents is not conducive to positive development, quality ECEC does not reach its potential. Therefore, ECEC practitioners should reach out to parents and involve them actively in daycare activities. As such, the European Parliament reiterates that parents should have a central role in ECEC policies. All other factors that have been discussed in this study have a clear link with parental involvement. National (funding) structures should be conducive to give parents a real choice in what kind of ECEC they want for their child. At the same time, it is crucial that ECEC practitioners approach parents as the key actors, while being open to collaboration in adjusting existing curriculum plannings to individualised demands. Again, the value of highly educated ECEC professionals is central. A well trained professional is much better able to interact with parents in a meaningful way, as for instance shown by the Irish example in Tallaght.

This study found a large diversity of initiatives to engage and involve parents in the process of raising their children and contributing to their development. In some contexts parents and ECEC practitioners sit together and write personalised developmental plans. This is set in national guidelines in Finland, but also sometimes happens in Germany, where it is not prescribed. In other contexts parental involvement may be limited to the 'delivery and pick-up' of their children. Regardless of national legislation however, individual providers in different EU member states develop their policies and individualised relations with parents. It is hard to show a 'national' way of parental involvement, as this simply does not exist. Take for instance Spain where parental involvement is legally enshrined but still takes many forms. For child-focused parent involvement, the local initiative in Tallaght (Ireland) serves only as practical example of how more intensive parent participation may be organised. At the same time, the state-wide German NRW Family Centre label draws attention to parental involvement, and may also serve as a clearer policy example of how centres can involve parents. It remains important for governments to bear in mind that especially on this issue, narrow regulations may limit the creativity of local providers in their attempts to reach parents.

Instead, it is more recommendable that public authorities focus more on enabling parents to be able to be involved while ensuring the quality of ECEC provision by setting minimal quality standards. Some excellent examples have been discussed in which consulting with parent councils are in fact made a legal obligation for ECEC centres. If parents are able to cooperate and discuss the policies of individual centres, they will advocate more child-focused involvement once there is a clear need. These, after all, remain the primary stakeholders in the process.

7. TOWARDS A QUALITY FRAMEWORK FOR ECEC

KEY FINDINGS

- In the Commission's Communication, targets are set with measures to improve access and to ensure the quality of ECEC, as confirmed by the Council and Parliament. Also, it proposes an agenda for work among Member States on key issues related to access and to quality, supported by actions by the Commission, and to be organised under the Open Method of Coordination (OMC)
- the Commission has initiated a broader process of defining quality in ECEC throughout the EU, through the Thematic Working Group that started its work in 2012, as part of the OMC. Ideally, the OMC development proceeds from common objectives establishing a field of common concern. Given the enormous variety of different educational systems and cultures across the EU, it will be very difficult to come to clear common objectives.
- Currently, the Thematic Working Group is working on a glossary of different ECEC systems, and has also started developing a quality framework for early childhood education and care in Europe. Through peer learning activities, such as the working seminars, site visits and short studies member states work together and have the possibility to learn from different practices across Europe.

7.1. Concrete European developments: the OMC process

Although the benefits of quality ECEC appear relatively clear in educational terms, they also extend to social and economic advantages. In this light, the European Commission has identified ECEC as a crucial area for laying the foundations for improved competences of future EU citizens⁹⁰. The Commission sees a role for quality improvement of ECEC as part of its broader agenda of creating a more skilled workforce capable of contributing and adjusting to technological change as published in its flagship 'Agenda for new skills and jobs'⁹¹. Moreover, high quality ECEC enables parents better to reconcile family and work responsibilities; as such, it may also contribute to a more equitable distribution of family responsibilities between men and women and have a positive impact on employability. Lastly, developing quality ECEC across the EU is also considered part of the EU agenda on rights of the child; extending access to quality ECEC to children from disadvantaged backgrounds is an important tool to counter segregation and provide the children equal chances later in life⁹².

In the Commission's Communication, targets are set with measures to improve access and to ensure the quality of ECEC, as confirmed by the Council and Parliament. Also, it proposes an agenda for work among Member States on key issues related to access and to quality, supported by actions by the Commission, and to be organised under the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). The OMC was introduced as a new method in order to achieve the Lisbon goals in 2010 and "aims to spread best practices and

⁹⁰ European Commission, Early Childhood and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow, COM (2011)66.

⁹¹ European Commission, An Agenda for new skills and jobs: A European contribution towards full employment, COM (2010)682.

⁹² European Commission (2011), An EU Agenda for the rights of the child, COM (2011) 60.

achieve greater convergence towards the main EU goals⁹³. Ideally, as has been stated by Shaw and Laffan “the OMC development proceeds from common objectives establishing a field of common concern. Progress towards objectives can be measured once common indicators are established. Indicators allow comparison of performance of MS that is, in turn, used to set targets. Once targets are set MS or the EU draw up action plans to meet the objectives. Peer reviewing allows badly performing MS to draw lessons from best practice⁹⁴.”

With the OMC process recently starting up, a Thematic Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care has been established to aid the OMC process.

The Thematic Working Group on ECEC

In order to develop a quality framework, based on such common goals and indicators, it is crucial that the wide variety of different educational systems and cultures is properly understood, and subsequently taken into account. As a first step, the Commission established a Thematic Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care in 2012. Here, representatives of Member States are brought together to identify and analyse good-practices through peer learning activities⁹⁵. These activities include for instance working seminars, visits of the working group to different Member States and short studies. Supported by these activities, the Thematic Working Group is now developing a European-wide glossary for the different terminologies used for early childhood education and care across the EU. This is required in order to gain a similar understanding of the definitions, the instruments available and may contribute to a European discourse on quality in ECEC across the EU. As such it becomes a crucial first step to facilitate the process of comparing systems; only then it becomes possible to fully appreciate good practices in other member states.

At the same time, the Thematic Working Group has also started developing a quality framework for early childhood education and care in Europe. Through peer learning activities, such as the working seminars, site visits and short studies member states work together and have the possibility to learn from different practices across Europe. These activities are also undertaken in close collaboration with existing initiatives such as Eurydice and the OECD. At this stage, it is not clear whether the end-product of these efforts, a quality framework for ECEC, will be used in the future as benchmarking tool.

In spring 2012, the Commission also set up a combined stakeholder group on early childhood education and care and early school leaving. Here, 55 stakeholders related to these two fields were brought together to be included in the OMC process. Officially, the stakeholder group serves to ‘complement the discussion among Member States and to channel the contribution of relevant stakeholder groups into the work of the [...] Thematic Working Group’. At this point, however, the stakeholder group is kept separate from the thematic working group activities. The stakeholder group is now expected to be incorporated in the thematic working activities once its final products – the glossary of terms and the proposed quality framework – are finalised.

⁹³ Lisbon European Council (2000). ‘Presidency Conclusions’: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/00100-r1.en0.htm.

⁹⁴ Laffan, B., Shaw, C., (2005) *Classifying and Mapping OMC in Different Policy Areas* : www.eu-newgov.org/database/DELIV/D02D09_Classifying_and_Mapping_OMC.pdf.

⁹⁵ Thematic working Group on ECEC, see http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/exchange/ecec_en.pdf.

It is however at this stage much too early for a full evaluation of the OMC process, since processes have only recently been initiated at the EU-level. ECEC has now been made a European priority, and quality ECEC a common concern, but common objectives for ECEC are still practically non-existent. The only concretely formulated target is the 2020 goal of 95% participation rate in ECEC by children aged four or older, which, strictly speaking, is not a target for quality ECEC, because it only focuses on the 'number' of places and not on the quality of these places. Overall, common goals, common indicators for quality ECEC do not exist either, and therefore no measures exist to map 'progress' of individual member states.

Instead, some specific elements that could contribute to a successful OMC process are described here. Under some conditions, an OMC process is more likely to be successful than under other conditions. Based on previous research on OMC in other policy fields, the following conditions are distilled that are crucial for successful implementation of the OMC⁹⁶. Based on these conditions, member states, the European Parliament and the European Commission may contribute to the development of a quality framework for ECEC, as part of the broader OMC process.

- **Preparatory political involvement:** The first condition is previous preparatory political involvement. It is essential that at least an increased awareness exists within member states. If the issue is of no interest to citizens or politicians, the OMC process is not likely to be very successful. Over the last few years, many member states have introduced measures with the goal to increase the quality and availability of ECEC places in their country. Even though these activities may not necessarily be linked to international developments on ECEC by the EU or the OECD, it has become a salient political issue in many different member states. As such, the first steps towards apolitical awareness in member states have already been created; the OMC is not perceived to be on a non-issue.
- **Common concern:** Secondly, there should be a common concern among MS that it is important to develop a certain policy field. Even though ECEC is indeed considered a concern for all, the response has largely been a national response; a European discourse has not manifested itself yet, due to the large variety of different educational systems and cultures across the EU. As such, no common goals or objectives for quality ECEC are formulated in response to this common concern. However, by developing a glossary of ECEC terminology, the Thematic Working group is clearly working to facilitate a European discourse in the near future.
- **High level of institutionalisation:** The third condition of successful implementation of the OMC is a high level of institutionalisation. This means that an organisational structure exists where people continuously work on the coordination and improvement of a specific sector. Currently, there is not a very high level of institutionalisation at the EU level, but fits the current policy goals of facilitating cooperation between member states. Should the process move ahead and start actually comparing the performance of

⁹⁶ See: Gornitzka, Ase, Coordinating Policies for a "Europe of Knowledge" Emerging practices of the "Open Method of Coordination" in education and research. Oslo: Centre for European Studies. Working paper No.16. March 2005, 2005; Humburg, Martin, The Open Method of Coordination and European Integration. The Example of European Educational Policy. Berlin: Jean Monnet Chair for European Integration and the Freie Universität Berlin. Working paper No.8, 2008; Newgov, Classifying and mapping OMC in different policy areas. Reference number: 02/D09. Dublin: University College Dublin, 2005; Ruiters, de, Rik, 'Variations on a Theme. Governing the Knowledge-Based Society in the EU through Methods of Open Coordination in Education and R&D'. European Integration. Vol.32. No.2: 157-173, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2010; Tholoniat, Luc, 'The Career of the Open Method of Coordination: Lessons from a 'Soft' EU Instrument'. West European Politics. Vol.33. No.1: 93-117. Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2010; Regent, Sabrina, 'The Open method of Coordination: A New Supranational Form of Governance?'. European Law Journal. Vol.9. No.2: 190-214. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003.

member state on the basis of concrete policy targets and indicators, a higher degree of institutionalisation will be required.

- **Availability of specific objectives, benchmarks and indicators:** Another condition is the availability of objectives, benchmarks and indicators. At this stage, the only benchmark is the 95% participation rate, as set in the Europe 2020 goals. Based on the outcomes of the development of a quality framework, the European Commission, in close collaboration with the European Parliament and member states, may invite member states to formulate additional more specific objectives regarding the quality of ECEC. This will prove to be difficult given the large diversity across Europe, but is an important factor for success of an OMC; without indicators, no-one can effectively evaluate the progress of member states.
- **Involvement and cooperation of stakeholders:** The fifth condition, namely the involvement and cooperation of stakeholders, is of crucial importance for the success of the OMC, as the method is theoretically supposed to work bottom-up. For this purpose, a stakeholder group has formed parallel to the activities of the thematic working group. At this stage, however, the stakeholder group is not really involved in the process and is primarily awaiting the deliverables of the thematic working group. Guidance and coordination at the community level will only be effective and sustainable, if the developed programme is supported by civil society and actively implemented at the local level, with their support.
- **Presence of conflict between MS with incentive or reluctance to act:** A final condition is the presence of a conflict (policy directions / ideology) between MS with an incentive to act or reluctance to act. Because of a conflict of opinions, the MS with an incentive to act will try to persuade the reluctant MS to join them in developing a particular policy field. Even though it is still rather early in the process to come to conclusions about the state of this particular requirement, the large diversity in different educational systems is likely to lead to conflicts between member states, so as to create effective traction towards common goals.

7.2. General conclusions regarding EU developments

Clearly, the issue of quality in early childhood education and care has gained currency in the European Union. ECEC has now been tied in with broader goals than just labour market participation of parents, and now also focuses on educational performance of children, such as reducing early school leaving or promoting lifelong learning. Also through other international organisations, such as the OECD or UNESCO, the issue of developing the quality in ECEC is reaching and taken up by the member states.

At this moment, the European Union finds itself at a critical junction, where a future direction has to be chosen in the next few years. On the one hand, the Commission has initiated a broader process of defining quality in ECEC throughout the EU, through the Thematic Working Group that started its work in 2012, as part of an OMC process. This will prove to be a difficult task given the enormous variety of different educational systems and cultures across the EU. The concept of quality itself is inherently bound to cultural contexts and may (and should) be changed by political debate and democratic processes. Therefore, as a first step, the Working Group is working towards a glossary of ECEC terminology so as to support the development of a future European discourse on quality of early childhood education and care.

At this moment, however, ECEC policies are very diverse across the EU and consists of numerous different national policy goals and target groups for ECEC, let alone the number of opinions on what quality in ECEC includes or should include. In the framework of the EU 2020 goals, member states have agreed to increase the overall participation in ECEC services of children aged four and older to 95% by 2020, which is a clear, albeit quantitative goal. Especially in the light of the recent economic and financial crisis that hit EU member states, this quantitative target may actually pose a significant risk to the quality of ECEC provision across the EU in the years to come.

In order to fully assess the state-of-play of quality in ECEC across the EU it is important to first have a clearer picture of quality in ECEC more general, and of current developments at the level of the member states. The Commission has therefore set up a Thematic working group on quality in ECEC, and in parallel a stakeholder group. Some crucial conditions for success in an OMC process were defined based on earlier OMC in different policy areas. Through the OMC process, member states can work together to raise the quality of ECEC, by learning from each other. A first target for now should be that the initial developments in the OMC are supported by efforts done by member states and national and EU-wide stakeholders.

8. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1. Introduction

The previous chapters include an assessment of recent developments in the ECEC sector across Europe, structured by the identified individual elements of quality. Based on the empirical research literature and the political priorities in the EU, this study defined (1) participation / access, (2) political, legal, and financial structures, (3) staff, (4) curriculum, and (5) involvement of parents. The state-of-play for each of these individual elements of quality in early childhood education and care was examined in relation to European targets and policy developments in all member states, with additional attention for six selected member states. Based on the data collection at the level of the EU, and the national member states, but also on the level of regional governments, individual providers and parents, this study identifies possible shortcomings and improvements for European and national policies on quality in ECEC.

This chapter will start by defining the most important conclusions that can be drawn from the individual chapters and addresses some important challenges based on the findings on the national level. These challenges may inform national policymakers that are engaged in raising the level of quality in ECEC in their countries. However, this study also aims at contributing to the ongoing work of the Thematic Working Group on quality in ECEC towards developing a European quality framework for ECEC, as part of the OMC process.

8.2. State-of-play of ECEC in Europe

Clearly, this study shows how the issue of quality in early childhood education and care has gained currency in the European Union. Coming from a focus on labour market policies, ECEC has now been tied in with **broader developmental goals that focus on educational performance**, such as reducing school leaving or enhancing lifelong learning. Also through other international organisations, such as the OECD or UNESCO, the issue of further developing quality in ECEC has engaged member states.

It has however also been shown that there **are as many approaches to ECEC as there are member states**. These different approaches are rooted in the different political, social and cultural traditions that helped shape the educational systems in different member states to what they are now and still impact political choices, policies and practices today. It is very important to be aware of such traditions and approaches; what works in one member state may in fact have undesirable effects or may not work at all in another country. This study showed first of all that ideas about participation, the structure of ECEC, staff, curricula or ways to involve parents are **very diverse** across different member states, and are generally even far from uniform in one member state. On the issue of ECEC provision, many regulations are often set by local authorities such as municipalities, provinces or states, and therefore specific to regional and local communities. Given the significant regional diversity that already has a large impact on *national* policymakers, it is very important to appreciate the larger diversity of models and approaches that exist at the *European* level.

The diversity of goals, approaches, policies and practices that this study identified notwithstanding, **this study also found some common trends** in the broader development of quality in ECEC. These have already been discussed in detail in the individual chapters of this study, and are therefore only mentioned briefly here.

- Practically all member states are developing policies towards reaching the Europe 2020 goal of reaching **95% participation in ECEC** of children aged four and older; a clear upwards trend in participation rates closing in on 95% was found.
- Increasingly, member states are working towards **integrating governance structures** for ECEC provision of all age groups. We found examples of merged ministries, joint policy units, and integrated services, all with the intention to remove differences in provision across arbitrary age splits.
- Several member states recently **introduced pre-school programmes** for the oldest children under the compulsory schooling age as preparation for entering primary education for children. Across the EU, ECEC programmes are increasingly concentrating on enhancing more educational aspects, such as enhancing numeracy and literacy.
- Although often not regulated by law, individual providers are developing **many different initiatives** to engage parents in the development of their child and involve them in the activities of the provider.

A common concern for all member states when developing ECEC policies is the **lack of empirical evidence** to support new developments and policy initiatives. At this moment, many policy initiatives are taken, without the backing of empirical evidence that these actually contribute to positive outcomes, such as lower school leaving rates, or better educational performances on international comparative assessments, such as PISA. Even though the OECD has also formulated this concern in all of its studies on ECEC, empirical based policymaking remains one of the highest priorities for member states and the EU alike⁹⁷. The analysis of the European state-of-play and recent developments in providing quality ECEC can serve as valuable input for national policymakers. Being aware of developments and policy initiatives in other countries may prove insightful in targeting particular problems in one's own country.

8.3. Challenges in providing quality ECEC

Some challenges were also identified, which have an important impact on the wide diversity of systems and broader policy trends across the EU that have been studied. These challenges have an equal impact on all constitutive elements of quality in ECEC, and are therefore of high importance for both national and European discussions on improving quality in ECEC. For each of these transversal challenges, an initial attempt is formulated to deal with the challenge, based on the findings of this study.

- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** A constant dilemma for national (or local) governments is how to ensure the level of quality in ECEC. For each constitutive element of quality, regulations can be introduced by authorities as a means to try to reach a minimum level of quality for ECEC providers. However, if providers have no incentives to raise quality themselves, such regulations for reaching minimal quality standards hardly have an impact. Still, most member states set such minimal requirements, on which inspections subsequently monitor compliance. A main challenge when raising quality is therefore to design effective evaluative systems that provide clear incentives for providers not just to do the absolute minimum, but to try to excel in their provision of quality ECEC. Instead of increasing top-down regulations that often frustrate innovative initiatives on the ground, raising quality bottom-up may be a better alternative. On top of the minimum requirements that may be set by the authorities, **an active involvement of parents in combination of a high regard for ECEC professionals** may therefore

⁹⁷ OECD (2001, 2006, 2012), Starting Strong studies.

provide a more effective pathway to raise quality of ECEC provision across all individual quality elements.

- **“Practice what you preach”**: All member states under study have numerous policy documents and proposals on raising participation, integrating services, raising staff qualifications, balancing curricula or involving parents. However, more important than such plans alone is to follow through with consistent policies, and for instance to find societal support for the plans. A striking example is for instance how Ireland raised the minimal qualification requirements for ECEC staff, yet did not support the existing staff to actually gain the required qualification. Initiatives to raise quality can only be successful if they are grounded in **support by the involved stakeholders**, and **backed-up by all levels of government**. An excellent example of dealing with challenge is given by Germany (NRW), in which the interaction between different administrative levels was streamlined by a specific taskforce, to make sure that public authorities on all levels of government would cooperate instead of work against each other.
- **Economic and financial crisis**: This study investigated how member states tried to improve quality in ECEC over the last years; raising the quality of ECEC costs money, so much is clear. As a result, the economic and financial crisis has exerted a large impact on such developments. Due to the large-scale austerity measures in all EU member states, the budgets for developing quality in ECEC become tighter, all ambitious Europe 2020 targets notwithstanding. This study showed how the crisis created a clear divide between developments before the crisis and the most recent (scaled-down) quality initiatives developments. Various examples show how very ambitious national quality targets or national quality frameworks were established and introduced for participation, staff, curriculum or parental involvement, only to be side-tracked in the first round of budget-cuts. Even though the ambitions usually remain, national governments simply do not assign sufficient funds to secure these ambitions. At the same time, the crisis also affects individual citizens. Due to increasing unemployment levels, citizens can contribute less to day-care services. At the same time, those citizens without jobs have no direct need to send their children to the day-care so have even less incentive to enrol their child in ECEC. As such, these children are left behind and do not receive the valuable developmental foundation that they specifically may need. In these times, it is important for national governments not just to **maintain spending levels** on ECEC in order to ensure quality ECEC provision on all different elements of quality. It is even more important that initiatives are developed to **ensure that the groups that need ECEC the most are reached by ECEC initiatives** so as to provide equal chances for all children.

8.4. Policy recommendations for providing quality ECEC

8.4.1. General policy recommendations

By describing and analysing good practices in different institutional contexts across the EU, the observations of this study may inform policymakers on issues of quality ECEC, which were defined as participation, governance systems, staff, curriculum, and parental involvement. Here, preliminary, yet substantive conclusions based on the findings are formulated for each of the constitutive elements of quality. These recommendations are not only of value to national policymakers that are engaged with raising quality in ECEC, but may equally prove of value to the work done at the European level to develop the elements of a quality framework for ECEC.

- **Evidence-based policymaking:** Although not defined as an actual element of quality in this study, it is, as outlined above, absolutely vital that policymakers base new policy initiatives on substantial empirical foundations. Too often, policy developments are initiated and defended without any justification of empirical evidence. **Therefore, more attention is needed for the empirics of “what works” in ECEC.** This may be done through supporting longitudinal cohort studies in an EU context, in which actual effects may be discovered on the long term.
- **Participation:** Since the 2001 Barcelona targets that aimed to increase the participation rate of young children in ECEC, member states have worked to create additional capacity for children or provide financial incentives for parents to send their children to ECEC services. However, instead of only *increasing* participation, **more focus should be put on widening participation.** In general, the families that are not reached by regular policies or financial incentives are exactly the ones that require additional support through the early intervention potential of quality ECEC provision. Member states should pay additional attention to regional differences in participation in ECEC, which can signify problems of access; it should be made a priority to widen the participation in ECEC also beyond metropolitan areas, and also **provide equal opportunities for parents and their children in more rural parts of the country.**
- **Integrating systems:** The conclusions of this study support the increasing international consensus that integrated systems for ECEC provision deliver better results than split or separated systems can. A holistic approach of policies and ECEC providers to children’s development is found to lead to better educational outcomes. It is **therefore recommended that policymakers responsible for the youngest children work closely together with their colleagues developing policies for older children;** this helps creating a fertile ground for ECEC providers on the ground to also have unified approach to children’s development.
- **Staff:** The same that amounts to general expenditure also amounts to the requirements for staff. This study further underlines the importance of properly qualified staff. Staff with higher qualifications can better reflect on their own and their colleagues’ activities and can therefore continuously contribute to quality development in an institution. However, it is unnecessary to have an entire ECEC workforce with higher education qualifications, since equally important supporting work can be executed by staff with vocational qualifications. **Some minimal qualification guidelines for all ECEC staff on the national level are however necessary** in order to have a basic quality level.
- **Curriculum:** Numerous publications, often funded by the EU, have underlined the importance of balancing cognitive and non-cognitive aspects in curricula. At the same time, this study identifies a broader European trend towards ECEC programmes with a stronger focus on educational goals, such as literacy and numeracy targets. Given the empirical evidence that calls for balanced curricula, it is relevant to **make sure the balance between cognitive and non-cognitive aspects is kept** in approaching children under the compulsory schooling age, even if educational goals are put more central. Professional and well-educated ECEC practitioners also play a crucial role in keeping this balance.
- **Parental involvement:** Even though relatively little regulation exists for involving parents in ECEC this study further underlines its importance. Child-focused parental involvement is a very important aspect to improve quality, by improving home learning environments and supporting parents with questions about their children. Centre-focused parental involvement may also further contribute to quality ECEC, as it allows parents to discuss and change the policies of their ECEC provider. It is actually this

mechanism through which ECEC provision may be most effectively quality assured as it allows parents to voice concerns and demands on top of existing local or national legislation and regulations. This study therefore recommends member states to further **assist ECEC providers in encouraging meaningful involvement of parents**, while paying respect to cultural differences that may exist in different regions or for different groups.

- **ECEC expenditure level:** Even though the act of spending money on ECEC does not automatically improve quality, there is a clear link between member states that spend significantly more on ECEC and their educational results in international tests, like PISA. Even though higher spending itself – without proper policy – does not guarantee higher quality ECEC, cutbacks on ECEC budgets do often immediately lead to lower quality provision of ECEC. The current global economic and financial crisis is therefore an enormous challenge to take into consideration as it has a significant impact on budgets. However, a **strong financial commitment is crucial** for developing quality on the aforementioned elements. In order to ensure this financial commitment, it is **recommended that member states work together to make national expenditure on ECEC policies more comparable** across different member states so that performance may be compared across the EU.

8.4.2. Policy recommendations in support of the OMC process

This study identified the developments on the European level and in individual member states. At this moment, the developments at the level of the EU are still at a premature stage and can in this stage not yet be evaluated. Currently, a process of defining a quality framework for ECEC has been initiated by the Commission, through the Thematic Working Group that started its work in 2012, as part of the ongoing process of Open Method of Coordination (OMC).

Instead of evaluative remarks about the OMC, this study offers some recommendations to the European Parliament, the European Commission and individual member states that can support the ongoing work towards developing a European quality framework in early childhood education and care.

- **Preparatory political involvement should be stimulated** to ensure that sufficient awareness is given to the policy area, now and in the near future; if quality ECEC is of no concern to citizens or national stakeholders, the OMC process is not likely to succeed. The development of a quality framework in ECEC should be more than developing a technical checking box and is also a political process, which requires political involvement.
- Secondly, a **common concern should be raised among member states** about the importance of developing quality in ECEC. If member states do not see the added value of working together towards common goals, the OMC is very unlikely to be successful. Member states should therefore together decide on common goals as input for the quality framework.
- Thirdly, it is important that **institutional structures** are used to support the OMC process, as the Commission has now done with the founding of the thematic working group and the stakeholder group.
- **Availability of objectives, benchmarks and indicators** is also an important component for a successful OMC process. These are currently being developed by the thematic working group and are essential to compare progress on the quality framework for ECEC. Clear and comparable objectives, benchmarks and indicators are needed on all the individual elements that are identified in this study: (1) participation /

access, (2) political, legal, and financial structures, (3) staff, (4) curriculum, and (5) involvement of parents. Such comparable data is essential to create incentives for member states to work towards the common goal. The use of empirical studies for developing such evidence-based objectives or benchmarks must therefore be supported.

- European policymakers should **make sure to involve stakeholders** and build meaningful cooperation with them. This is crucial for the success of the OMC process, as it is a bottom-up process. Development of a quality framework for ECEC should be more than a high-level policy project, but must instead be clearly rooted in actual ECEC practices. This is especially important for a quality framework in ECEC, since policies are often delegated to the lower levels of government and smaller providers.
- Finally, **conflicting positions** (in terms of policy directions or ideology) between member states generally help the OMC process forward, and should therefore not necessarily be prevented by European policymakers. When this is the case, member states with a clear agenda will try to persuade reluctant member states to work towards the common goal; since the initiative has to come from member states, this condition is very relevant for the success of the OMC process.

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