



# **Peer Review on “Furthering quality and flexibility of Early Childhood Education and Care”**

**Copenhagen, Denmark, 13-14 December 2018**

**Peer Country Comments Paper - Cyprus**

## ***“Early Childhood Education and Care: Situation in Cyprus”***

DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

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## **Introduction**

This paper has been prepared for the Peer Review on "Furthering quality and Flexibility of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)". It provides a comparative assessment of the policy example of the Host Country and the situation in Cyprus. For information on the Host Country policy example, please refer to the Host Country Discussion Paper.

## **2. Situation in the Peer Country**

### **2.1 ECEC Split System**

As in Denmark, all children in Cyprus aged zero to five years and eight months can participate in some form of ECEC. In Cyprus, ECEC forms a split system. ECEC is delivered in separate settings for younger children, which are under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance (MLSW) and older children, which are under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and Culture (MOEC). Namely, younger children, from zero to four years and eight months, can either enrol day-care centres or taken care by child minders. Both facilities are under the supervision of the MLSW. Older children aged three years to five years and eight months can attend kindergartens, which are under the supervision of the MOEC. Children between the ages of three and four years and eight months can either attend a day care centre/child minder or a kindergarten.

The day care system supports children's well-being, development and formation giving special emphasis on play and nonformal educational activities. Kindergartens focus on the education aspect of ECEC following a formal curriculum which focus on specific educational aims.

### **2.2 Ministry of Education and Culture**

Kindergartens in Cyprus fall into three categories: public, community and private. Public kindergartens are founded by the MOEC. Community kindergartens operate only in cases where the public kindergarten classes available do not meet the needs of all the children in the community. They are founded and set in operation by the parents' associations or the local authorities and they are registered with the MOEC, which grants a subsidy to cover some of the expenses. Parents undertake the rest of the expenses concerning the operation of these schools. Private kindergartens are established and set in operation by individuals in the private sector after the approval of the Ministry. Their operation is regulated by the Law on Private Schools and Institutes. These are for-profit organisations.

As of 2004/2005 school year, pre-primary education (one year before enrolling primary school) in Cyprus is mandatory and offered free of charge, for public kindergartens, to children aged between four years and eight months to five years and eight months. Children of the above-mentioned age group are obliged to attend, either, public, community or private kindergartens, which are registered and approved by the (MOEC). Younger children aged between three years and four years and eight months take up vacant places in public kindergartens and pay low fees.

Before 2004, kindergartens were characterized by a high degree of freedom. The introduction of compulsory pre-primary education increased the expectations from the kindergartens and focused their work on developing children's learning and skills. As part of the existing curriculum, kindergartens have had to set goals for children's learning according to defined curriculum themes. As in Denmark, part of the pedagogical staff was focusing more on the implementation of the curriculum, as a way of expressing the professionalism and reflect on their own pedagogical practices. Others were more sceptic whether the focus on learning and competences will diminish the children's natural curiosity and exploration, through free play and interaction with other children. In 2016 the MOEC proceeded to the development of the new curriculum for pre-school Education focusing on the age group of three to six

years old. The completion of this text sets out a new policy in the field of preschool education and supports quality in ECEC.

## **2.3 Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance**

Before entering kindergartens, children can attend day-care which is regulated by the Social Welfare Services (SWS). According to the relevant legislation, the SWS are responsible for the registration and supervision of private and community day-care centres and child minders who look after children up to the age of four years and eight months.

SWS day-care system provides the framework for children's well-being, development and formation in which the notion of play is at its centre.

To ensure quality of the day-care system, SWS give priority to the local provision of accessible and affordable childcare services with the involvement of local stakeholders.

In terms of governance, the day-care system is the responsibility of the SWS being the competent authority for the registration and inspection of the social care programs. The legislation for the social care programmes<sup>1</sup> prescribes the minimum requirements that social care programmes must fulfil, the compulsory registration obligation and regular inspections. The prescribed standards cover issues on health and safety, staff qualifications, space requirements and child - staff - ratio. The programmes can be operated by private individuals or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The legislation of SWS does not touch upon the educational aspect of childcare. It is to the discretion of the professional providers to develop an educational programme. They usually follow the programme of the MOEC. According to law, SWS are responsible for registering and inspecting:

- day-care centres for pre-school children from zero months up to four years and eight months old (overall there are 340 centres), and
- child-minders, for children from 0 months up to four years and eight months old (overall there are 51 child-minders).

A legal reform is currently ongoing to improve the governance system (see section 3.2 below).

The provision of **accessible and affordable** social care programmes, which provide people with quality services at local level (i.e. childcare services, long-term social care services to the elderly and persons with disabilities) is a key priority of the government. The MLWSI as the competent authority is implementing State Aid Schemes, under the Regulation 360/2012, and the Commission Decision 2012/21 EU, for the provision of services of general economic interest where NGOs and Local Authorities may receive state aid, if they fulfil certain criteria, for the development and functioning of quality social care programmes. Under the State Aid Scheme of the MLWSI around EUR 1 400 000 was provided for the funding of 56 NGOs Day-Care Centres for preschool-age children in 2017.

## **3. Assessment of the policy measure**

### **3.1. Ministry of Education and Culture**

#### **3.1.1 Quality of ECEC: Development of a new Curriculum**

High quality pre-primary education in Cyprus has been translated into practice through the development of a new curriculum. The creation of a democratic and human school was the main objective of the Educational Reform to formulate a new up-to date curricula in 2016. The new curriculum, based on the age group three to six,

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<sup>1</sup> The Children Law, (Chapter 352, section 28); the Amending Children Law N. 143(I)/2002 and N.62(I)/2011; Regulation 262/2011.

focuses on developing capable, dynamic, determined and optimistic children, who develop through relationships in different socio-cultural contexts. Children who are actively and critically involved in the negotiation of their relationships and shape their future and society.

Content: The curriculum consists of seven basic pedagogical principles which highlights similar elements of the pedagogical foundation of the Danish new curriculum such as play, a broader concept of learning (project work), respect of the different views and needs of the children and emphasis on the importance of the cooperation with parents. It highlights the fact that each child is unique, has its own rhythms of learning and development, is an active member of many groups and has a voice and rights in the processes of learning and development.

The goal of all adults involved in educational processes is to give space and time to each child individually and to each group of children to develop and demonstrate their potentials and abilities. The completion of this text sets out a new policy in the field of preschool education and supports quality in the education of three to six-year-old children. The above pedagogical environment supports children's learning in four developmental areas: personal and social understanding, emotional empowerment, mobile competences and mental strengthening. The curriculum consists of seven curriculum subject areas: music, art, physical education, social studies, language, maths and natural sciences. As in Danish curriculum, the subject areas are connected and interact with one another to ensure a broad understanding of learning. For this reason, special focus is given to project work.

Another similarity to the Danish curriculum is the focus on a learning environment which not only constitutes planned structured activities but also spontaneous activities, especially during play. The kindergarten teachers must be able to carefully formulate a pedagogical content based on the different activities taking place. Transition to primary school is an ongoing discussion in Cyprus, as well. Should kindergartens prepare children for the transition to the 1<sup>st</sup> grade of primary school and learn how to read and write? The new curriculum focuses on the cooperation between primary schools and kindergartens through common meetings and activities.

Financial support: The implementation of the new curriculum was supported by providing additional in-service training to kindergarten staff, as well as by employing more teachers to public kindergartens.

Workforce: In connection with the educational reform outlined above, emphasis was given on the implementation of the new curriculum and to the in-service training of teaching staff on issues pertaining to the curriculum. To this aim, a five-year development plan for pre-primary school teachers was put into effect as of 2016 - 2017. As in Denmark, the training programme focuses on a common understanding of the curriculum. It includes training sessions in small groups of kindergarten teachers in specific subjects, for different developmental areas and by using various educational approaches. Training sessions focus on deepening specific subject knowledge, designing courses, classroom practices, self-assessment, feedback and reflection. Head teachers and Assistant head teachers also participate in full-day training programmes on all curriculum subject areas.

### **3.1.2 Accessibility and Availability**

Access in kindergartens is a big issue for Cyprus, as it has a low participation rate in early childhood education (89,6%) and remains below the EU average (93,20%). Reaching the ambitious national target 2020 (95%) claims for reinforced efforts and a more ambitious policy, focusing on encouraging and motivating families to enrol their younger children at kindergarten schools. For example, by giving more opportunities to these families to enrol their children in public schools and by increasing the number of available places.



The MOEC assessed and reviewed the criteria used to allocate the vacant places to younger children of non-compulsory education (aged three to four years and eight months old), in public kindergartens, due to the socio-economical changes the last years in Cyprus. According to the revised criteria, priority is given to children at risk and socioeconomic deprivation. For example, some of the new criteria include children under the protection/supervision of the Welfare Office or orphans or poor children, children whose parents are unemployed, children of a family with many children or a single parent family as well as children of political refugees or of different origin. Priority is now given to children of these categories in order to encourage and motivate these families to enrol their younger children in kindergartens.

Irrespective of age priority is given to children of special education needs. Emphasis is given on the education of almost all children with special needs within mainstream schools starting from the age of three years old. Many factors have assisted integration, mainly the increased number of special educators and peripatetic teachers, public acceptance campaigns, staff seminars, setting up of special classes in mainstream schools and employment of teaching aids. There are no special pre-primary schools.

The Government also grants a subsidy to cover some of the expenses for community kindergartens, which operate only in cases where the public kindergarten classes available do not meet the needs of all the children aged three to four years and eight months old in the community. Parents undertake the rest of the expenses concerning the operation of these schools. The attendance fees for community schools are much less than the private schools.

Another policy measure is the extension of the length of compulsory pre-primary education, through the gradual extension of compulsory pre-primary education from one year to one year and four months, and the gradual increase of the entry age for primary education. This measure will provide to a highest percentage of parents with legal entitlement to free access to public kindergartens.

To ensure more flexible access to ECEC services for working parents, the "All-Day School" in public kindergartens was implemented during the school year 2005-2006. These kindergarten schools operate as All-Day Schools on an optional basis until 4:00 p.m. That is, they have three or four additional afternoon periods.

Based on social need and demand in the last few years, the MOEC also started the "Public Summer Schools (PSS)". The programme of PSS was first introduced in the summer of 2015. PSS offer creative activities during the summer, especially for children of disadvantaged socioeconomic origin.

### **3.2 Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social insurance**

As a means towards higher quality of the childcare system, priority was given to the reform of the governance system, notably through the revision of the Children's Law (Chapter 352).

The proposed legislation seeks to modernise and harmonise the Cypriot ECEC system with the relevant international and EU conventions. The new legislative framework, which is currently at the stage of legal vetting, aims to abolish of the Children's Law (Chapter 352) and separate it in two separate regulations. The first concerns the custody of children, and the second concerns child protection and care, which aims to improve and modernise the criteria and procedures for approval, inspection and closure of social care programmes for minors as infant and / or care facilities i.e. Nursery, at home Child Care, Protection and Creative Activity Centres for Children and Child Protection Units and Care.

In the proposed legislation and regulations, the responsibilities of the staff and the duty of any person who maintains, operates or manages a day-care centre for pre-school children are modified to include the following:

- Safeguarding the rights and interests of children, taking into account their personal needs, their potential and interests;
- Making the necessary arrangements to meet the needs of children, taking into account their age, gender, religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic identity and any disability;
- Cooperating with parents or legal guardianship to promote the well-being of children and ensure continuity in their care;
- Changing of the staff qualifications (a university degree in matters related to infant and pre-school education and training);
- Training for staff to ensure the continuous development of the knowledge and skills, by attending training seminars, the updating of knowledge and information on developments in childcare and protection;

Additionally:

- The staff must be able to communicate in the language spoken by the majority of children. The staff should build relationships of trust with children based on confidentiality, understanding and responding to the individual needs of each child, applying sensitivity to disabilities, interests, feelings, family status and children's religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic identity.
- Day-care Centres for pre-school children operates in such a way as to ensure that children's safety, health and well-being. Arrangements must be taken for proper care and supervision of children, ensuring protection from all forms of violence and intimidation.

## **4. Assessment of success factors and transferability**

### **4.1 Ministry of Education and Culture**

Denmark's recent policy focusing on strengthening the pedagogical curriculum and providing high quality ECEC, has many common procedures with the development and the implementation of Cyprus curriculum reform. Several success factors could be applied to Cyprus' educational reform like:

*Packages of educational materials:* There is a need to create a common understanding of the purpose and working steps about the change to curriculum (e.g. the in-service training of staff, the guiding materials-documents or website design) and for a better coordination of the implementation and the assessment of the new curriculum. Thus, the definition of benchmarks and guides based on the Danish document "Partnership for development of Competence and Knowledge in Practice" could be studied in order to be adjusted to the needs of the curriculum implementation procedure in our country. The development of self-assessment tools and tools to support the work of pedagogical practice could be also useful.

*Guidance-consulting:* A professional Unit could also be established in order to support the implementation and the assessment of the new curriculum.

### **4.2 Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance**

Furthermore, Denmark's recent policy focusing on providing high quality ECEC, has some commonalities also with the development and the implementation of Cyprus legislation reform. Two success factors could be transferred to Cyprus:

- *Developing of an informal guiding document:* as highlighted also above about the development of a new curriculum, there is a need also to create a common understanding about the purpose and the process to change the legal and institutional framework on provision of child-care services.
- *Cooperate with the Ministry of Education and Culture:* for the preparation of a pedagogical curriculum from zero to five years old.

## **5. Questions**

No further information or clarification needed.

## **6. List of references**

Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010. Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education Curriculum. Nicosia: Cyprus Pedagogical Institute. Available at:  
[http://www.moec.gov.cy/analytika\\_programmata/index.html](http://www.moec.gov.cy/analytika_programmata/index.html)

Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance, Social Welfare Services:  
[www.mlsi.gov.cy/sws](http://www.mlsi.gov.cy/sws)

## Annex 1 Summary table

The main points covered by the paper are summarised below.

*Please summarise the main points covered by the paper. Give a maximum of five bullet points per heading.*

### Situation in the peer country

- In Cyprus, ECEC forms a split system:

Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance: 0-4 years & 8 months, Day-care centres/Child minders

Ministry of Education and Culture: 3-5 years & 8 months, Kindergartens

#### Ministry of Education and Culture

- Since 2014 pre-primary education (one year before enrolling primary schools) is compulsory
- Different views from staff regarding the delivery of the existing curriculum
- Development of the new curriculum for 3-6 years old to support quality in the field of ECEC, started in 2016.

#### Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance

- Reform and revision of the Children's Law and Regulations 2014-2016 in order to modernize and harmonize with the relevant international conventions that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Hague Convention for the Protection of Children and the European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights.

### Assessment of the policy measure

#### Ministry of Education and Culture

- Content of the new curriculum, financial support and workforce
- Based on 7 basic pedagogical principles, 4 developmental areas and 7 curriculum subject areas.
- Similar elements of the pedagogical foundation of the Danish curriculum: new curriculum include play, a broader concept of learning, respects different views and needs of children and cooperation with parents. Also, as in Danish curriculum, the subject areas are connected and interact with one another to ensure a broad understanding of learning. The focus of the curriculum is on a learning environment. The kindergarten teachers must be able to carefully formulate a pedagogical content based on the different activities taking place.
- The new curriculum focuses on the cooperation between primary schools and kindergartens through common meetings and activities.
- Additional in-service training to kindergarten staff, and recruitment of more teachers to public kindergartens.
- 5-year development plan for in-service training of teaching staff on issues pertaining to the curriculum, put into effect in 2016. As in Denmark, the

training programme focuses on a common understanding of the curriculum.

- Accessibility and Availability
- Assessment and review of criteria used to allocate the vacant places to younger children of non-compulsory education (aged 3 to 4 years and 8 months old), in public kindergartens.
- Financial support to Community kindergartens.
- Extension of the length of compulsory pre-primary education, from 1 year to 1 year and 4 months, and the gradual increase of the entry age for primary education.
- Increase of numbers of "All-Day Schools" in public kindergartens as a measure for working parents.
- Functioning of "Public Summer Schools" which offer creative activities during the summer, especially for children of disadvantaged socioeconomic origin.

#### **Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance**

- The new proposed legislation and regulations, the responsibilities of the staff and the duty of any person who maintains and operates or manages a Day-care Centres for pre-school Children are changed to ensure:
- Safeguard the rights and interests of children,
- Cooperation with parents or legal guardianship on the well-being of children;
- Changing of the staff qualifications (a university degree in matters related to infant and pre-school education and training). Training of staff to ensure the continuous development of the knowledge and skills

### **Assessment of success factors and transferability**

#### **Ministry of Education and Culture**

- Defining benchmarks and guides based on the Danish document "*Partnership for development of Competence and Knowledge in Practice*" could be studied in order to be adjusted to the needs of the curriculum implementation procedure in Cyprus. The development of self-assessment tools and tools to support the work of pedagogical practice could also be useful.
- A professional Unit could also be established in order to support the implementation and the assessment of the new curriculum.

#### **Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance**

- Developing of an informal guiding document in order to provide a better care quality.
- Cooperate with the Ministry of Education and Culture in order to prepare a curriculum from 0 - 5 years old.

### **Questions**

- No questions

## Annex 2 Example of relevant practice

Short summary of a relevant policy practice/example, key fields indicated below (max. 1 page)

Name of the practice:	Development of a New Curriculum for 3 to 6 years old
Year of implementation:	2016
Coordinating authority:	Ministry of Education and Culture
Objectives:	Quality in ECEC
Main activities:	Development/implementation/assessment
Results so far:	One-year implementation and one-year in-service training for kindergarten staff

