



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

Denmark, 13-14 December

Peer Country Comments Paper - France

National framework for early childhood care

DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

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Table of Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Situation in the Peer Country.....	1
2.1	Collective versus individual childcare arrangements for children under three years old	1
2.2	Early childhood education for children from three to six years old: the "école maternelle"	2
3	Assessment of the policy measure.....	3
3.1	Similarities between the French and the Danish ECEC systems.....	3
3.2	Differences between the French and the Danish ECEC systems	5
4	Assessment of success factors and transferability	5
5	Questions	6
6	List of references	7
	Annex 1 Summary table.....	8
	Annex 2 Example of relevant practice.....	9

1 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 France. For information on the Host Country policy example, please refer to the Host Country Discussion Paper whereas attached to this Paper are the "French National framework for early childhood care", and the "Early Childhood Development, Care Arrangements, Professional Training" report summary, in the context of the Early Childhood Action Plan. These two documents, which can be food for thought were issued by the French Ministry for Families, Childhood and Women's Rights.

2 Situation in the Peer Country

France is known for having **one of the best childcare systems in the world**. It was indeed one of the six countries to have already achieved both Barcelona targets by 2011. To adequately take care of this matter, the French system holds a variety of childcare possibilities (both collective and individual) largely financed by public funds. It therefore aims at providing the necessary flexibility by allowing parents to freely choose the most convenient solution according to their working hours and financial means.

The childcare services' offer is diverse and well developed: in 2014, the reception capacity for children under three by formal childcare services amounted to 1 359 900 i.e. 56.1 spots for 100 children (excluding the Mayotte Department) with 53 500 new spots created between 2010 and 2014. In France, day nursery is the care arrangement favoured by French people. It is said to encourage socialization. It is a norm in France since the 1960s that the young child is cared for outside of the family home. In 2008, 43% of French children younger than three years old frequented a full-time care service. The workforce in the childcare arrangements for children aged under three years old is certainly the largest in the EU: 600 000 people (=2% of the working population), with 300 000 to 350 000 childcare assistants, 150 000 to 200 000 workers in "crèches", and 100 000 home-based care workers.

2.1 Collective versus individual childcare arrangements for children under three years old

Collective childcare arrangements

The "**Crèche**" is offered for children under three years old and is the main option for a regular use. The cost is determined by the parents' income, according to a national scale. It is mainly funded by the family branch of the French national security, even though it can also be funded by municipalities, employers, etc.

The "**Halte-garderie**" is a more occasional solution offered to children up to six years old. The funding and management provisions are similar to the ones for *crèches*.

There are "**Multi-accueil**" facilities i.e. facilities that regroup both the crèche and halte-garderie. This kind of facility expanded tremendously over the last 20 years.

Individual childcare arrangements

Child-minders (**Assistants maternels**) are the main kind of individual care for children under three years old. They represent the major increase in places between 2010 and 2014 with more than 79 800 places created for children under three. In 2015, one in four children were entrusted to a child-minder. A child-minder is a professional entitled to take care of a maximum of four children at his/her home and can gather with up to three other child-minders in a collective facility "*Maison d'assistants maternels*". In March 2016, the Ministry of Families, Childhood and Women's rights published a guide to ease the creation and management of those facilities, allocating EUR 3 000 to new "*Maison d'assistants maternels*".

Parents can also privately hire a non-professional to take care of their child at their home but this is the most expensive and least used option.

The French framework for children under three years old (2017)

The following provides the common guidelines for all structures welcoming children under three years old:

High-quality care must respect the specific aspects of overall and interactive early childhood development, with the aim of early education in mind.

"I make progress at my own pace and I develop all my faculties at the same time: everything is about language, body and experience for me. I need to be talked to and to have time and space to play freely and put my various abilities into practice."

Early childhood professionals are intermediaries between the family and society: as they are part of the private and daily lives of children, they are guides who help children to socialise.

Early education is underpinned by knowledge of the wealth of abilities, but also of the vulnerability and sensitivity which characterise young children. It involves supporting children in the implementation of their own abilities to think and act. Namely, patiently helping them to become aware of what they experience and do and to shape their personalities.

Early childhood care requires an overall, non-normative and considerate understanding of early childhood development and parenthood. This must inspire the care plans developed by early childhood care institutions (*EAJE*), child minders and in-home care providers.

For young children, everything is about language, body, play and experience. The physical, cognitive, emotional and social aspects of their development are inseparable and in constant interaction.

Every child develops at her/his own pace. The first few years of life are characterised by discrepancies in maturation between the different areas of development, which does not happen in a linear fashion, nor in stages, but in waves; acquisitions are lost to make room for new ones, then come back in another form at another time.

Spontaneous play and activity foster early learning and autonomy. Play is an essential vehicle for the development of self-regulation, language and social and cognitive skills. By drawing on children's interests and favouring free activity, the child's development before the age of three can be considered in a different way than in terms of established educational stimuli.

Given the risks for their development, it is not recommended to leave children under the age of three in front of a screen (smartphone, tablet, computer or television). Children need to interact with their environment, use their five senses and move around.

France dedicates an important amount of its finances to early childhood: EUR 30.372 billion in 2017 (of which EUR 13.819 billion for children aged under three years and EUR 16.553 billion for children aged under three years, according to "PQE famille"¹).

2.2 Early childhood education for children from three to six years old: the "école maternelle"

France is one of the best-ranked countries regarding the access to and availability of "école maternelle": **nearly 100% of French children of three to five years old are in school**. Only eight countries out of 34 dedicate, like France, more than 1% of their

¹ <http://www.securite-sociale.fr/Annexe-1-du-PLFSS-2018-PQE-Famille?type=part>

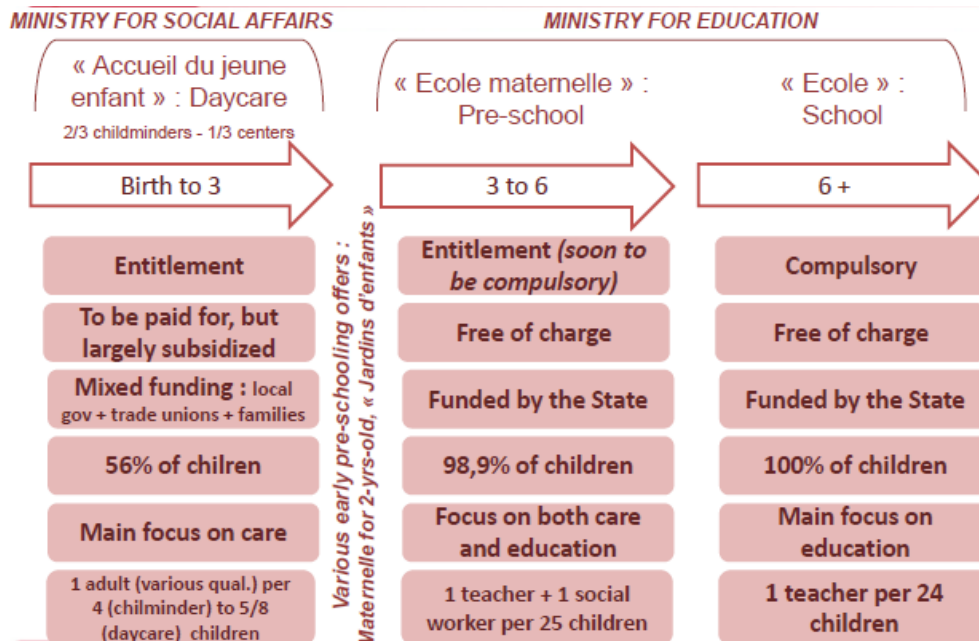
GDP to early childhood education and care. France is often taken as an example for the quality of its "école maternelle".

3 Assessment of the policy measure

3.1 Similarities between the French and the Danish ECEC systems

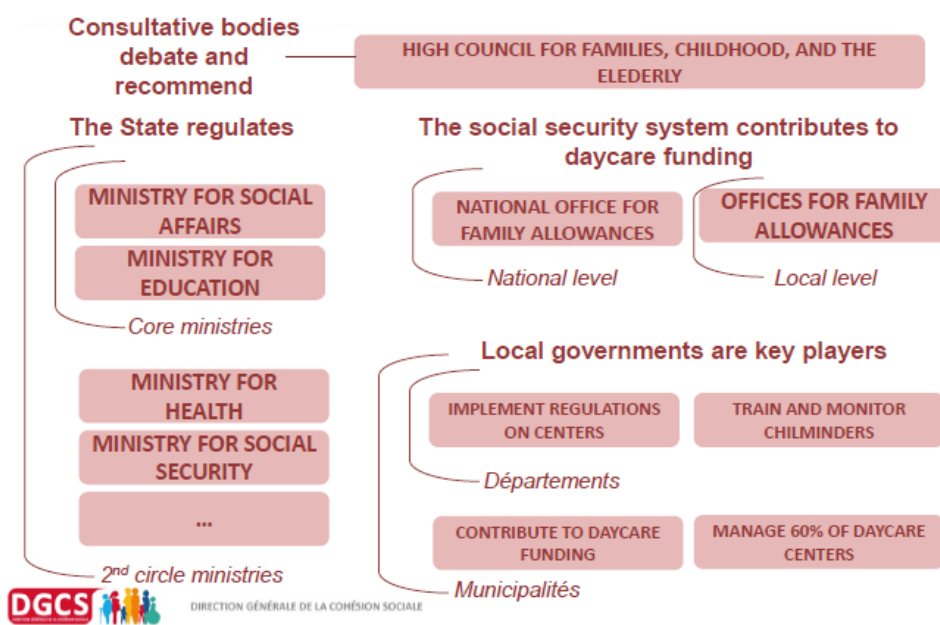
Below are two figures explaining the French governance of ECEC. France has a split system, which separates early care (Ministry for Social Affairs) from education (Ministry for Education).

Figure 1. Governance of ECEC policy area in France



Bodies that are not ministries also have an important role to play in ECEC, like the High Council for Families, Childhood and the Elderly, or local governments for instance.

Figure 1. Other relevant institutions in the area of ECEC



As part of the pedagogical curriculum, day-care facilities in Denmark have had to set goals, since 2004, for children's learning according to six nationally defined curriculum themes whereas before the area of learning to be provided to the zero to six years old age range was characterized by a relatively high degree of freedom. The introduction of a mandatory curriculum of 2004 was the first time that the political system signalled that there were more specific expectations from the Danish nursery and kindergartens.

Similarly to the ECEC as concerns the three to six years old (before entry into primary education), the French administration also tried to structure the various structures welcoming the children under three years (who cannot yet go to *école maternelle*) around a common curriculum. According to a *bulletin officiel* of June 19th, 2018, the main objectives of pre-elementary education are the acquisition of oral language, the establishment of relationships with other children and adults, and the discovery of written language. In 2014, the law on the reform of the Republic's education system gave a new mission to the *école maternelle*, and allowed a consultation on new programmes to be applied in the *écoles maternelles* in order to prepare children to elementary school while respecting their rhythms and reducing inequalities as early as possible, in particular with regard to language competence.

Denmark and France also both worked on more inclusive ECEC systems.

For children under three years old, the French government relied mainly on mere regulatory commitments to include all children. To improve the access of children of underprivileged parents, one out of every five spots is theoretically reserved. To allow the access of children with special needs to ECEC, France established a principle of "colorblind" inclusion (the structure has to adapt to the child, regardless of its disability). Finally, ECEC professionals are expected to adapt to individual situations, and financial bonuses for ECEC professionals caring for underprivileged or disabled children were implemented.

For children older than three years old, territorial inequalities are strong in France, especially in the Overseas areas (Guyana and Mayotte) where only 80% of children between three and six years old are schooled. Consequently, in disadvantaged areas like those, children can be pre-schooled in the *école maternelle* before three years old. Specific accommodations were also put in place consisting of one teacher and one social worker for a classroom of around 16 pupils. The premises were also arranged to meet young children's physiological needs.

With regard to the ECEC related to the children under three years old, the management of care centers also evolved, more specifically regarding the training of the workforce and the curriculum. Following a scientific debate in 2015-2016 whose conclusions led to the establishment of the report "development of the young child, ways of care, training of professionals", the French government adopted an action plan for early childhood. One of its axes was to develop a common professional identity for young children care workers, thanks to the publication of a national framework. The national framework for the care of the young child, based on the European Commissions' Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, and its charter enunciating 10 rights presented according to the point of view of the child (use of "I") were adopted by the Ministry of Health and Solidarity in 2017. It was disseminated during the Spring of 2017 to all actors in the ECEC field.

As part of the Prevention Strategy against Poverty adopted in September 2018, the French Government plans, according to its 1st commitment, the elaboration and implementation of a training plan and a new frame of reference for 600 000 professionals working in the area of ECEC with the aim of improving the development of the child and the learning of language before entering the *école maternelle*. Preparatory work for the frame of reference has started and was entrusted to the High Council for Family, Childhood and Age, placed alongside the Prime Minister.

In parallel, the 50th article of the Law of 10 August 2018 for a State at the Service of a Trustful Society, entitles the Government to issue ordonnances concerning early childhood as well as review all rules regarding the care of children under three years old, who are consequently not in *école maternelle* yet. The evolution of the legal status of the national framework for the quality of ECEC, which is currently non mandatory, is one of the subjects examined in the context of the preparation of legislative proposals that started late September 2018.

3.2 Differences between the French and the Danish ECEC systems

In France, the *école maternelle* is seen as the foundation for the future student's success. In March 2018, French President Macron announced his intent to lower the age of compulsory education down to three years old (a bill is to be passed in Parliament in March 2019), to generalize the *école maternelle* even more. The curriculum of the *école maternelle* has a *dual purpose*:

- Developing the language and body skills of young children; and
- Favoring play and manipulation through pedagogical methods and spaces adapted to the needs of young children.

The French Government wants to ensure a **solid foundation of socialization for the youngest**. Indeed, the three years of *école maternelle* are those in which the affects and the attachment are created, which allow the child to build his/her relationship with the world and his/her place in a democratic society. All children, whatever their difficulties or their specific needs, are supported. Their needs are taken into account and catered for. The *école maternelle* is also the place where fulfillment and learning make reciprocal alliance. It adapts to pupils' cognitive possibilities and their physiological needs in order to create the best learning conditions. Pupils' timetables (24 hours of instruction) are sequenced by the teaching staff in order to provide rest time, free play time and learning time and, thus, to facilitate regular attendance of all pupils from the age of three. All in all, the *école maternelle* is the place where the link between the school institution and the parents is constituted and structured, a fundamental link that will accompany the pupil throughout his/her schooling.

Another priority of the French government is to **fight against social inequalities inherited from birth**. The French system devotes the pedagogical role of the *école maternelle* to the acquisition of fundamental knowledge, and especially language, from the earliest age, the central place in lexicon learning. The French government wants to prevent school failure and provide the means to significantly reduce the rate of 20% of pupils who, at age 10, do not read properly, write or count.

The French system for children aged three to six years old is based on the acquisition of knowledge, while the Danish system is funded on mastering the concrete aspects of existence, on raising awareness and wanting to understand the world. In the Danish *Børnehaven* (from three to five years old, equivalent of the *école maternelle*), children develop curiosity, autonomy and a sense of responsibility by playing. In kindergarten, Danish children learn to do domestic tasks early on, as well as they learn the rules of social life. The ECEC of the Danish system is also funded on a democratic equality, reflecting the Danish society's ideals.

4 Assessment of success factors and transferability

France could get some inspiration from some of Denmark's characteristics, such as:

- **Its flexibility**: in Denmark, multiple options are offered to families, who have different wishes and needs and who can choose the ECEC they want for their children. For instance, in Denmark, parents have the right to choose the facility where they want to place their child, and to be on the waiting list if it is full, even while their child has a space in another facility. The example of the Danish "combined day care" also seems particularly interesting for parents with

unusual work hours or needs. In France, this freedom of choice is often restricted according to the families' budget or geographical location.

- The French ECEC system is very flexible for children under three years old, with various individual or collective options offered to families, as explained before. However, there are fewer possibilities for children older than three years old: the French *école maternelle* is indeed not mandatory, but no other care centres options exist and it would be financially difficult for many families to place their child elsewhere than in the *école maternelle* as financial benefits for young children decrease after three years old. The placement of children not in the *école maternelle* is still possible, and is mainly used by families with disabled children, who educate their child themselves or with special assistants.
- **The specialisation of its ECEC professionals:** in France, teachers of the *école maternelle* are more qualified than in other countries, often having a master's degree; however they are far less specialized to teach young children, unlike Danish teachers.

5 Questions

- Including more disabled people and children in society is a priority of the French President Emmanuel Macron. Could you give more detail on how you include disabled children in your ECEC system?

6 List of references

- The program for quality and efficiency family (November 2018) : <http://www.securite-sociale.fr/Annexe-1-du-PLFSS-2019-PQE-Famille>
- The report of the national observatory of young childhood from the CNAF (October 2017) : <https://www.caf.fr/presse-institutionnel/recherche-et-statistiques/observatoire-national-de-la-petite-enfance/rapport-annuel-de-l-observatoire>
- The report "development of the young child, different kinds of care, formation of the professionals" of Sylviane Giampino (May 2016) : <https://www.egalite-femmes-hommes.gouv.fr/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Rapport-Giampino-vf.pdf>
- The action plan for young childhood (November 2016)
- The national frame for the care of the young child (March 2017)
- Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care: http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/experts-groups/2011-2013/ecec/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf
- The interdepartmental protocol for cultural and artistic awakening of the young child (March 2017) : <https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/actualites/presse/communiqués-de-presse/article/premiere-rencontre-nationale-de-l-veil-artistique-et-culturel-des-jeunes>
- The first commitment of the prevention strategy against poverty (September 2018): https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/dp_annonce_strategie_v26_page_s.p
- School curricula in "Ecole maternelle" : <http://eduscol.education.fr/pid33040/programme-ressources-et-evaluation.html>
- Children under 3 years of age pre-schooled in "Maternelle" in underprivileged areas ("priority education districts") : [Http://eduscol.education.fr/cid91999/la-scolarisation-des-enfants-de-moins-de-trois-ans.html](http://eduscol.education.fr/cid91999/la-scolarisation-des-enfants-de-moins-de-trois-ans.html)
- Expertise des conditions d'accueil et de prise en charge des enfants en situation de handicap ou de maladie chronique en établissement d'accueil du jeune enfant (EAJE) et en maison d'assistants maternels (MAM) (September 2018) : https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/geste_dgcs_rapport_etude_handicap_eaje_mam_17octobre2018.pdf

Annex 1 Summary table

The main points covered by the paper are summarised below.

Situation in the peer country

- France is known for having **one of the best childcare systems in the world**. It was indeed one of the six countries to have already achieved both Barcelona targets by 2011. Investing in early childhood care and education is of great importance not only to reduce inequalities at an early age, but also to prevent the risk of poverty and exclusion in adulthood by laying the foundations for lifelong learning, social integration and employability. Participation in early childhood care and education benefits all children, but is particularly important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, as it is crucial to improving school adaptation and learning and to preventing and addressing inequalities through early interventions.

Assessment of the policy measure

- France has a split system, which separates early care from education. In France, the *école maternelle* is seen as the foundation for the future student's success. In March 2018, French President Macron announced his intent to lower the age of compulsory education down to three years old (a bill is to be passed in Parliament in March 2019), to generalize the *école maternelle* even more. The curriculum of the *école maternelle* has a *dual purpose*:
 - Developing the language and body skills of young children; and
 - Favoring play and manipulation through pedagogical methods and spaces adapted to the needs of young children.

Assessment of success factors and transferability

- France could get some inspiration from some of Denmark's characteristics such as its flexibility and specialization of its ECEC professionals.

Questions

- Could you give more detail on how you include disabled children in your ECEC system?

Annex 2 Example of relevant practice

Name of the practice:	National Prevention Strategy and the fight against poverty Investing in solidarity for the emancipation of all
Year of implementation:	2018
Coordinating authority:	Ministry of Health and Solidarity
Objectives:	<p>The French authorities are convinced that child poverty is a particularly crucial issue, both for children themselves and for society as a whole.</p> <p>From the perspective of individuals, living conditions, access to education, culture and health, socialization, etc. in childhood and adolescence influence not only their immediate well-being but also the conditions of their development.</p> <p>From the perspective of society as a whole, child poverty raises equally daunting economic, social or political issues in an innovative and knowledge-based economy, where productive efficiency depends, in part, on the quality of its labor force.</p> <p>On 17 October 2017, the President of the Republic announced the launch of a major consultation on the strategy to prevent and combat child and youth poverty.</p> <p>So that prevention is no longer the poor relation of policies to combat poverty, France has made the choice of collective services, crèches, schools, schools, etc. social centers, associations to ensure equal opportunities from the very beginning step of life, amplify the educational effort already underway, support families and exercise of parenthood, strengthen local social action, prevent isolation, guarantee access to the rights and essential services of the most vulnerable.</p>
Main activities:	<p>The government has made 5 commitments as part of a new poverty reduction strategy.</p> <p>This new strategy is part of a twofold approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased investment in children and young people. It is also part of a more comprehensive approach, aimed at preventing vulnerabilities that may affect all people, and at pursuing measures to reduce poverty and strengthen social inclusion. • An assumed emphasis on prevention and social investment. The aim is to break the determinism of poverty and to demonstrate that anti-poverty policies, which contribute to the prevention of breakdowns and improve early support when they cannot be avoided, are not only a burden but also an investment for the future.
Results so far:	Conference in 2019

