



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

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

**Synthesis Report**

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background and purpose of the Peer Review

Within the framework of the Mutual Learning Services, Social Protection and Social Inclusion Strand, a Peer Review on 'Furthering quality of Early Childhood Education and Care', was held in Copenhagen, Denmark, on 13 and 14 December 2018.

The event was hosted by the Danish Ministry for Children and Social Affairs bringing together government representatives from six Member States in addition to Denmark, namely Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Germany, Luxembourg and Malta, as well as a national expert<sup>1</sup>, a thematic expert, interest organisation representatives<sup>2</sup> and a representative from an EU NGO<sup>3</sup>. Other participants included representatives from the European Commission and the Mutual Learning Services team.

The Peer Review provided an opportunity to explore current practices, challenges and ongoing policy initiatives to increase the quality and flexibility of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The discussion mainly focused on how policies are set in place to improve and assess the quality of ECEC systems, on the measures to ensure the flexibility of ECEC for families and how aims concerning pedagogy, learning, development, well-being and *bildung* are set and achieved.

The starting point of the Peer Review was Denmark's recent reform package aimed at strengthening and improving the quality of ECEC. Denmark has a long tradition of ECEC and virtually all children aged zero to six years old participate in some form of ECEC on a daily basis for five to seven hours, in either a childminding, nursery or kindergarten setting. In June 2017, the Danish Government adopted the political agreement 'Strong ECEC – all children should be included in communities' with a view to support a strengthened quality and flexibility of ECEC facilities for families. This agreement focused in particular on the following three areas: flexibility and freedom of choice for families with children; better learning and well-being for all children and cohesiveness of children's life; and high quality through professionalism and clear leadership.

Special attention was also paid to the relevance and comprehensiveness of the EU Quality Framework for ECEC, its key areas and its ten core indicators. Participants were invited to reflect on which areas and indicators more specifically are the focus of their policy measures and initiatives related to improving quality of ECEC facilities and highlight any recent shifts in priority areas and challenges causing these shifts.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 provides a brief overview of recent European Commission initiatives in relation to improving the quality of ECEC systems;
- Section 3 explores, within the context of the EU ECEC Quality Framework for ECEC, the national policy priorities and approaches aimed generally at improving quality of ECEC;
- Section 4 focuses on approaches and measures specifically targeted at increasing flexibility in the provision of ECEC services, also in the context of improving work-life balance for parents;
- Section 5 discusses policies and practices on how the pedagogical framework is defined and implemented; and
- Section 6 summarizes the main learning points from the Peer Review.

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<sup>1</sup> For Germany.

<sup>2</sup> Namely from BUPL- the union of pedagogues in Denmark.

<sup>3</sup> The participant represented the Save the Children Europe NGO and was based in Ireland. This brought, in addition to the other seven Member States represented, also the Irish policy and practices into the discussions.

## 2 EU policy development in ECEC

Good-quality formal childcare contributes to the development and well-being of the child and is important for equality between women and men.<sup>4</sup> ECEC refers to 'any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to compulsory primary school age - regardless of the setting, funding, opening hours or programme content - and includes centre and family based day-care; privately and publicly funded provision; pre-school and pre-primary provision'.<sup>5</sup> It has a strong impact on two areas: children's short and long-term development and hence their chances in later life, as well as on employment possibilities of the parents – if provided in a non-family based setting.

At European level, the relevance of formal ECEC has been recognised in various policy areas. The EU policy approach evolved from having a primary focus on increasing employment for parents, and in particular mothers, to considering childcare as a fundamental first step in the lifelong learning path of an individual, necessary also to break inter-generational transmission of poverty.

The EU has no competence in the policy area of ECEC and therefore its actions are limited to providing policy guidance on the basis of non-binding recommendations. In 2002, leaders in the EU agreed on the **Barcelona targets**:<sup>6</sup> by 2010, Member States should have at least 90% of children between three years old and the compulsory school age participating in ECEC whereas at least 33% of children under three years old participating. This distinction between children under three years and pre-school children (generally from three years until compulsory school age) is often applied because of the varying developmental needs of children according to their age.

The Barcelona targets, while mainly aiming at improving availability of childcare as a means to bring more mothers to employment, also embraced new ideas which pointed at the need for a child-centred (and childcare-based) social investment strategy, implying the need for high-quality childcare.<sup>7</sup> These ideas were fully embodied in more recent policy initiatives. The European Commission Recommendation **on 'Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage'**<sup>8</sup> (2013) emphasises childcare as the essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration and personal development and shows a new interest in the quality of childcare. The **EU Social Investment Package** (2013), placed childcare in a central position as a key element in the overall strategy to strengthen children's current and future capacities as citizens and workers.

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<sup>4</sup> Esping-Andersen, G. 2009. *Incomplete Revolution: Adapting Welfare States to Women's New Roles*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>5</sup> Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care Report of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission (2014). Available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf), last accessed 28 December 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Presidency conclusions, Barcelona European Council, 15 and 16 March 2002, SN 100/1/02 REV 1. Available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/invest-in-research/pdf/download\\_en/barcelona\\_european\\_council.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/invest-in-research/pdf/download_en/barcelona_european_council.pdf), last accessed 15 January 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Such as an influential evaluation by Esping-Andersen and colleagues (2002) for the EU Presidency. See Tine Rostgaard, Thematic Paper: The policy road to better and more affordable care for all children?, Peer Review on "enhancing Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care", Copenhagen 13-14 December 2018.

<sup>8</sup> European Commission (2013) Recommendation on Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32013H0112>, last accessed 15 January 2019.

In the European Commission's flagship policy, the **European Pillar of Social Rights** (EPSR)<sup>9</sup>, Principle 11 states that children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality.

The ECEC Thematic Working Group, established under the auspices of the EU Commission as part of the EU's policy cooperation process in the context of the Education and Training 2020 Strategy<sup>10</sup>, developed the proposal for **Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)**.<sup>11</sup>

These key principles are reflected in the 2018 European Commission's proposal for a **Council Recommendation on high quality early childhood education and care systems**.<sup>12</sup> This proposal seeks to establish a shared understanding of service quality and helps Member States to improve quality and access to ECEC.

This quality framework is based on the following five dimensions that can be targeted to improve quality:

- **Access:** ECEC is available and affordable to all families and their children and encourages participation, strengthens social inclusion, and embraces diversity;
- **Curriculum:** A curriculum based on pedagogic goals, values and approaches which enable children to reach their full potential in a holistic way. Staff collaborates with children, colleagues and parents and reflect on their own practice;
- **Governance and Funding:** Legislation, regulation and/or funding supports progress towards a universal legal entitlement to publicly subsidised or funded ECEC, and progress is regularly reported to all stakeholders. Stakeholders in the ECEC system have a clear and shared understanding of their role and responsibilities, and know that they are expected to collaborate with partner organisations;
- **Workforce:** The ECEC workforce consists of well-qualified staff whose initial and continuing training enables them to fulfil their professional role. There are supportive working conditions, including professional leadership, which creates opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation with parents;
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** evidence is used to produce information at the relevant local, regional and/or national level to support continuing improvements in the quality of policy and practice and is in the best interest of the child.

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<sup>9</sup> European Pillar of Social Rights, November 2017. Available at : [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/social-summit-european-pillar-social-rights-booklet\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/social-summit-european-pillar-social-rights-booklet_en.pdf) , last accessed 07 January 2019.

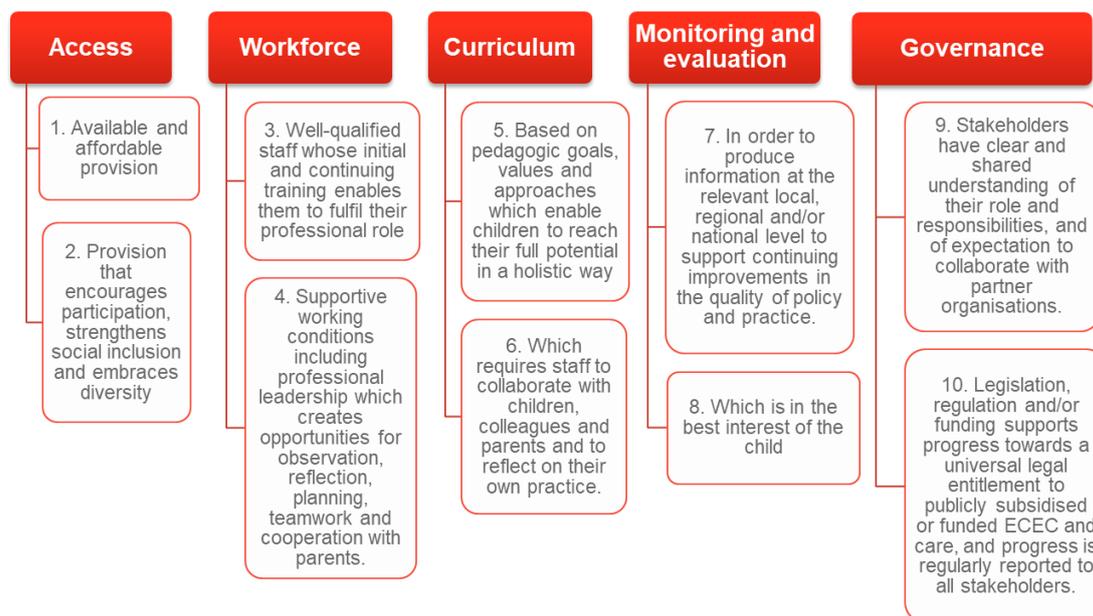
<sup>10</sup> Council conclusions (2009) on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex%3A52009XG0528%2801%29> , last accessed 07 January 2019

<sup>11</sup> Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care Report of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission (2014). Available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf), last accessed 28 December 2018.

<sup>12</sup> COM/2018/271 final - 2018/0127 (NLE), Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0271&from=EN>, last accessed 28 December 2018.

As illustrated in Figure 1, for each of the five areas, two recommendations were formulated. To guide Member States in developing their policies for furthering quality of ECEC and monitoring progress made, each recommendation is accompanied by one or several indicators totalling 22 indicators, of which the Commission selected ten priority indicators.

**Figure 1- The five Quality Areas and the ten principles**



Source: Tine Rostgaard, *Thematic Paper presentation: The policy road to better and more affordable care for all children?*

### 3 Policy priorities and approaches to ECEC quality improvement

#### Learning points:

- Increasing 'access' remains a key priority across participant countries and is considered as a tool for social inclusion.
- Ensuring quality alongside access increasingly becomes a central point of attention.
- Workforce, as another priority area, is a challenging one as the quality of the workforce has to be ensured alongside sufficient supply to meet increasing demand.
- Member States have paid increasing attention to monitoring and evaluation in recent years. It is desirable to create an 'evaluation culture' and avoid that evaluation and monitoring are used and perceived as merely control measures.
- Unitary systems facilitate coordination, the implementation of a common curriculum and transitions, ultimately benefitting the quality of ECEC.
- The commitment of various stakeholders is important for good quality ECEC. At the system level, this means involving stakeholders in reform processes. At the level of ECEC facilities, it is crucial to engage parents in a wide range of activities and more formal collaboration, such as through a Board of Parents.

### 3.1 ECEC systems and the quality framework

High quality ECEC contributes to good educational performance and social inclusion. Quality is a complex process and so are the measures to improve it. Adult-child ratio and group sizes are often regarded as important easy-to-measure quality indicators: increased adult-child ratio and reduced group sizes are expected to increase quality. The use of a curriculum framework that fosters a balance between play, self-regulation and pre-academic activities and allows for flexibility in its implementation to adapt it to the needs of individual children, has also been recognised as a quality factor.<sup>13</sup>

All the participants in this Peer Review reported on recent or ongoing initiatives to improve the quality of ECEC. The **design of ECEC systems and reforms** to enhance their quality, mirror to a great extent each **country's cultural values** and related understanding of what is in the best interest of the child. This can vary significantly, even between countries which are culturally similar. For instance, while Denmark has strongly supported ECEC to be provided from very early ages onwards, Sweden and Finland prioritise caring at home, through long parental leave (up to 12 months in Sweden<sup>14</sup>) or through cash-for-care benefits (in Finland)<sup>15</sup>.

Reforms are conditioned by the countries' **ECEC institutional framework** (unitary or split system see further below), can happen as a result of historic evolution (e.g. outdated legislation, change in government and its priorities) and be motivated by educational, economic or social reasons. Policy initiatives can be triggered by the will to increase educational attainment at higher levels of education (e.g. after disappointing results), to increase labour market participation of mothers or to foster social inclusion of children in vulnerable situations (e.g. refugees, children with special needs).

Regarding countries' ECEC institutional framework, the EU Quality Framework defines two main types:<sup>16</sup>

- **Split system** - ECEC provision is offered in separate settings for different age groups, often under different administrative structures. The age ranges vary between countries but usually covers 0/1 to 2/3 years and from 3/4 years up to start of primary schooling (usually 5/6 years).
- **Unitary system** - Provision for all children from birth to primary school is organised in a single phase and delivered in settings catering for the whole age range. The age range is usually defined in the national or system context. Unitary systems are usually governed by one Ministry.

Participants in the Peer Review positioned their countries as having split (Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Ireland), unitary (Denmark, Germany) or mixed systems (Luxembourg, Malta), and discussed the relation between the institutional framework and quality in ECEC. In split systems responsibilities are distributed between different services and governance tends to be more complicated, whereas in unitary systems coordination is easier. Unitary systems are found to facilitate the implementation of a

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<sup>13</sup> Roosgaard, T. (2018). Peer Review on "Furthering quality and flexibility of Early Childhood Education and Care". *Thematic Discussion Paper*. The policy road to better and more affordable care for all children?

<sup>14</sup> ICF and Cambridge Econometrics for the European Commission (2017), Study on the costs and benefits of possible EU measures to facilitate work-life balance for parents and care givers

<sup>15</sup> Roosgaard, T. (2018), *supra*

<sup>16</sup> Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission (2014) Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, p. 71. Available at [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education\\_culture/repository/education/policy/strategicframework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/policy/strategicframework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf), last accessed on 15 January 2019.

common curriculum and ease transitions between ECEC age groups, ultimately benefitting the quality of ECEC.

In some countries, there have been recent shifts towards more unitary systems. In **Luxembourg**, all education and care institutions were brought under the same Ministry in 2013. **Malta** unified under one department the responsibility for external quality assurance of all ECEC services in 2016.

At the Peer Review, national policies were discussed against the **five dimensions defined by the Quality Framework for ECEC** (see Section 2).

**Curriculum** is high on the ECEC policy agenda of several participating countries (Denmark, Cyprus, France and Malta). Ongoing measures are discussed further below (see section **Error! Reference source not found.**).

### 3.2 Access

The majority of participants in the Peer Review considered that policy priorities in their country address the need to widen **access** to ECEC while also devoting efforts to ensure the quality of provision. Only Denmark and Luxembourg have switched their main focus from access to other elements of quality. Nevertheless, all participating countries reported having measures in place to promote access: e.g. the voucher-system 'chèque service accueil' in **Luxembourg**, the decision of the **Danish** government to make childcare mandatory for children who are living in disadvantaged areas from one year old, the 'free childcare scheme for working or student parents' in **Malta**, free ECEC for children aged zero to three years old and reserve of vacancies for children from underprivileged families in France. Some of these schemes particularly target vulnerable groups.

#### **Box 3.1. Bulgaria: Making kindergarten free is key to increasing enrolment of children from disadvantaged groups**

In Bulgaria there is a low participation of children from minority and marginalised communities in kindergarten (3-6 years-old).

The 'springboard for social readiness programme', coordinated by the World Bank and the Trust for Social Achievement in 2014-2015, analysed the barriers to kindergarten attendance for Bulgaria's disadvantaged population and tested different strategies to increase participation, using a randomized control trial.

The study showed that making kindergarten free of cost for families reduces non-enrolment rate of children from disadvantaged groups in half and raises daily attendance by 20 %. Also, information campaigns had a positive impact on parents' understanding of the importance of early education and their perceptions of their children's potential, especially for girls within Roma and other minority communities.

However, due to low quality of teaching and the lack of parental involvement, the service did not entirely deliver the expected outcome. The participation in kindergarten did not benefit children's cognitive development, and in some developmental domains, it even had negative effects that were worse for Roma and Turkish children. The adoption of a holistic approach would have contributed to a higher-quality service and, consequently, resulting in a more positive outcome for the children.

In addition, some countries have put in place measures to **increase flexibility** of access to ECEC facilities for families. Such measures can potentially increase participation from children whose parents have non-conventional working hours or other situations making use of standard opening hours challenging. These are discussed below (see section **Error! Reference source not found.**).

### 3.3 Workforce

The **quality of the workforce** is also regarded as a priority in the majority of participating countries. On the one hand, it is key to improve staff qualifications and skills by raising the qualification standards and organising upskilling sessions for the pedagogues. On the other hand, it is important to improve pedagogues' working conditions to be able to attract and retain good quality professionals. Unfavourable working conditions are behind large staff turnover in countries such as **Ireland**.

Participants at the Peer Review also discussed gender imbalance in the profession, with a clear predominance of women across European countries. Low male involvement is related to the persistence of traditional gender roles but may also be linked to the low prestige of the profession and the low wages in ECEC.

The attractiveness of the profession can be improved through pay rises (e.g. equivalent to the salary level of primary teachers as is the case in **Cyprus** and thus also raising the prestige of this job title). Creating more favourable working conditions may also involve establishing a balance between contact and non-contact time in order to give the pedagogue the possibility to prepare the activities as well as keeping children in comfortable group sizes.

In fact, the group discussed that the following **indicators from the Quality Framework for ECEC** should, given their country's current needs, be included among the priority indicators:

- Indicator 10a - The average ratio of children to all staff working directly with children.
- Indicator 10b - The average ratio of children to professionally trained staff working directly with children.
- Indicator 11 - The percentage of time assigned to staff for preparation and reflection i.e. when they are not working directly with children.

A main challenge faced by countries is that the quality of the workforce has to be ensured alongside sufficient supply to meet increasing demand. The need to hire more personnel to be able to expand ECEC provision, limits the resources available for bettering working conditions. For instance, in **Denmark** the raise in ECEC attendance was accompanied by a decrease in adult-child ratio since 2000. In **Germany**, increasing demand has put pressure on the efforts to raise the qualification levels of early childhood educators (see box below). **In Malta**, ECEC providers are struggling to find enough appropriately qualified members of staff to respond to the ongoing increase in the number of zero to three years old children attending ECEC. To tackle this situation, Maltese education and training institutes are offering options that allow staff - who are already employed in ECEC centres (0-3 years) - to become qualified through for example work-based learning training programmes.

#### **Box 3.2. Germany: Limited availability of better paid positions for academically qualified ECEC teachers**

In Germany, the minimum qualification for educators in ECEC 0 to 2/3 years-old is a vocational programme of 3 to 4 years (depending on the Land they live in). Efforts have been made over the past 15 years to raise the qualification levels of these professionals. New courses have been established at a number of German universities to train academically qualified teachers specifically in early childhood education.

However, only a very limited number of better paid positions for academically qualified teachers have opened in ECEC centres. As a result, the proportion of teachers with an academic education is still very small.

### 3.4 Monitoring and evaluation

In recent years, there has been increasing attention to **monitoring and evaluation**. Member States can use a variety of indicators to monitor the quality of their ECEC systems, including adult-child ratios and group sizes. Countries also organise inspections and external evaluations or reviews by central or regional authorities (e.g. Cyprus, France, Ireland and Malta), internal evaluations or reviews by ECEC providers (e.g. Denmark and Malta), and evaluation studies conducted by national authorities (e.g. Denmark) or external research entities (e.g. Denmark). An important focus of these exercises is curriculum implementation, among other elements, and is further discussed in section **Error! Reference source not found.**

A common challenge to monitoring and evaluation is the difficulty to define quality and its elements. Moreover, it is difficult to establish causal links between specific measures and outcomes of ECEC as these are rather the effect of a combination of several measures, alongside other external factors. However, evaluation is needed to understand the impact of implemented policies and strive for the best possible use of available resources. Also, a lack of evaluation may contribute to the perception that measures introduced by governments are not binding. In some Member States, such as **Luxembourg**, evaluation is used to determine if quality measures established by the government are being adequately implemented, and public funding is linked to the achievement of positive results.

At the same time, countries are trying to move away from the conception of monitoring and evaluation as a mere control measure and create an 'evaluation culture'. This means abandoning the strictly top-down approach, and empowering providers to conduct their own monitoring and evaluation. This involves for instance the promotion of internal reviews that encourage self-reflection among practitioners. The use of 'critical friends' (e.g. external researcher) can support such processes (Iceland, New Zealand; **Malta** also used this approach some years ago in schools).

In **Denmark**, ECEC providers are asked to assess their progress against set learning objectives on a daily basis whilst involving children in this exercise. The system is fully decentralized to municipalities who are the sole entities responsible to monitor the quality of ECEC services, while there is no central monitoring system or quality benchmarks set at national level. In **Malta**, ECEC schools for over three years-olds are expected to carry out self-evaluation leading to the elaboration of school priorities. Self-evaluation will also be implemented in ECEC centres for 0 to 3 years old.

One of the main challenges to the development of an evaluation culture at the provider level is the need for staff to have time for evaluation and necessary reflection. It is important that relevant authorities acknowledge that documenting and monitoring staff's own practice and children's progress is time-consuming and consider actions to avoid that such practices end up having a negative impact on the time available for direct contact with the child. This relates to the point discussed above of the need to find an adequate balance between contact and non-contact time.

Also, it is desirable that ECEC providers' internal evaluation data would ultimately be used to improve the system. For this to be possible, data collection needs to be standardised to a certain extent. For instance, in **Malta** the internal review (self-evaluation) exercise is a structured procedure based on a set of standards and a simplified reporting template as produced by the relevant ministry.

Finally, it takes time to create an evaluation culture. Communication and capacity-building actions are needed to raise awareness among practitioners of the potential benefits that evaluation and monitoring can have in their daily practice. Some initiatives are being implemented in this area. As an example, **Malta** foresees actions to strengthen ECEC centres' capacity to perform an effective internal review exercise to inform continuous improvement in the near future.

Several countries referred to **increased funding** to ECEC in order to meet the demand (e.g. "KitaPlus" in Germany), support the implementation of ongoing reforms (e.g. Denmark), and attend to more vulnerable children (e.g. Denmark and France). For instance, **Denmark** established, as part of the proposal of the political agreement, a specific fund to support the hiring of more pedagogical staff in ECEC facilities with a high number of children in vulnerable situations. **France** has implemented financial bonuses for ECEC professionals caring for underprivileged or disabled children<sup>17</sup>.

### 3.5 Governance

The **governance of the ECEC system** has an impact on the way funding flows through the system. In **Germany**, the constitution establishes that only Länder can permanently finance educational or social issues, and this poses challenges to the allocation of funding to ECEC by the Federal level. Currently, the Federal government is facing difficulties to distribute a foreseen investment of 5.5 billion EUR in ECEC as some Länder perceive it as a threat to their autonomy.

Governance is also about who is involved in the planning and implementation of ECEC. Countries acknowledge that the commitment of various stakeholders is important for good quality ECEC. At the system level, this means involving stakeholders in reform processes and **Denmark** provides a good example of this (see box below). At the level of ECEC facilities, parents are crucial partners and it is desirable to engage them closely in a wide range of activities and more formal collaboration, such as through a Board of Parents.

#### **Box 3.3. Denmark: Wide involvement of stakeholders to ensure joint ownership of the ECEC curriculum**

The development of the new 2018 curriculum in Denmark was characterised by the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders.

The process involved the establishment of a master working group, sub-working groups, and regional dialogue meetings. The master working group was composed of a wide range of stakeholders including representatives of the municipalities, the pedagogical staff and leaders, parents, researchers, etc. This group was in charge of developing a master framework for a strengthened pedagogical curriculum from February to May 2016.

From June to October 2016, six sub-working groups further developed the six curriculum themes proposed by the master working group and formulated broad pedagogical objectives for each theme.

Regional discussion meetings bringing together about 800 ECEC practitioners were held in September 2016. In the regional meetings, the master framework was presented and participants were invited to provide feedback on the curriculum content and implementation. Participants could also submit their comments and proposals through a mailbox. The feedback collected was communicated to the sub-working groups who took them into account for their final proposal.

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<sup>17</sup> Geste, (2018), Final report : Expertise des conditions d'accueil et de prise en charge des enfants en situation de handicap ou de maladie chronique établissement d'accueil du jeune enfant (EAJE) et en maison d'assistants maternels (MAM), p.51. Available at: [https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/geste\\_dgcs\\_rapport\\_etude\\_handicap\\_eaje\\_mam\\_17octobre2018.pdf](https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/geste_dgcs_rapport_etude_handicap_eaje_mam_17octobre2018.pdf). Last accesses 15 January 2019.

## 4 Initiatives to increase flexibility of ECEC facilities for families

### Learning points:

- Flexible ECEC facilities aim to increase the participation of women in the labour market, to foster social inclusion of vulnerable children, and allow free choice between ECEC services, including family-based and facility-based care.
- The measures undertaken by the Member States consist mainly of extending care to early morning, evenings, and weekends delivered by either flexible centres or through a combination of these with subsidised home-based provision.
- To enhance the right of choice of parents, institutions could invest in expanding the offer of type of ECEC facilities available and lifting restrictions to parents' possibility to apply and be waitlisted for all types of ECEC facility or childminders.
- Flexibility in which areas and themes of the pedagogical curriculum to weight, is needed to best accommodate the learning needs of children from vulnerable groups.
- Flexibility measures requires significant investments for re-qualification of teachers, adjustment of working methodologies and of the physical environment of the ECEC facilities
- To reduce the high costs of flexibility measures, institutionalized solutions for flexible ECEC services, could be combined with forms of subsidized home-based care.

### 4.1 Need for more flexible ECEC services for families

Flexibility in the provision of childcare is considered a quality dimension and specifically a factor contributing to ensure access to ECEC. Flexibility is intended to ensure that ECEC services respond to families' specific needs and circumstances, through adapted opening hours and content of the programme.

Flexible measures are critical in the context of policies for **reconciliation of personal and professional life** as the opening hours of ECEC facilities are often not compatible with the regular working schedule of parents. Parents working non- conventional hours (night shifts, late evening hours, or weekends) may face great challenges to ensure adequate care for their children while they are at work. Access to ECEC services may be further challenging for single parents, or in cases where there is a significant distance between the ECEC facility and the workplace. In these situations, the lack of flexible arrangements is likely to negatively affect the capacity of one or both parents to remain or return to employment. There is ample evidence that this situation disproportionately affects women who are more likely to stay at home or take-up part-time jobs to take-up caring duties.<sup>18</sup>

Flexibility in the provision of services is not only relevant in the context of work-life balance. The inflexibility of opening hours and bureaucratic enrolment procedures (e.g. waiting list, monolingual information leaflets and forms which need to be completed) are a major deterrent to ECEC participation for **children coming from vulnerable groups**. Reports show that this especially affects children from ethnic

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<sup>18</sup> See for instance: *Eurostat Statistics Explained (2018), People outside the labour market*. Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/People\\_outside\\_the\\_labour\\_market](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/People_outside_the_labour_market). See also ICF and Cambridge Econometrics for the European Commission (2017), *Study on the costs and benefits of possible EU measures to facilitate work-life balance for parents and care givers*.

minorities,<sup>19</sup> or from families at risk or in situation of poverty. No or low participation in early childhood education is likely to further exacerbate the learning and development gap for children from different backgrounds, severely affecting their possibilities later in life. Flexibility of ECEC services should therefore also serve to facilitate access to ECEC for children from vulnerable groups as a means for boosting social inclusion and equal chances for all.

Finally, flexibility in the provision of ECEC services should also respond to the **right of parents to choose between the different ECEC services on offer**, adopting methodologies in line with their values and interests, but also to have **free choice between either facility- or home- based ECEC** or a combination of these. With regard to the latter, parents are currently limited in such freedom when the assignment of places in ECEC facilities is centrally done only based on available places rather than on parents' preferences.

From the point of view of the institutions and the central services in charge of assigning places to families, it is challenging to deal with significant amounts of requests and fulfil parent's right of choice with regard to their preferred facility as explained by **Denmark and Malta**.

#### **4.2 Combining attendance in regular ECEC facilities with more flexible care options**

Against this background of challenges as set out in section 4.1 above, several measures have been put in place across Member States.

A wide number of measures target the needs of working parents by offering services at **extended or unusual opening hours**. In **Denmark**, to address the need of parents working extended or irregular working hours, a '**combined ECEC**' option was made available. The scheme gives the opportunity to parents to complement a part-time enrolment to a ECEC facility with a grant from the municipality which can be used to hire a flexible home-based caretaker while the parents are at work.

In **Germany**, working parents can benefit of the great flexibility of opening hours of ECEC facilities. ECEC facilities are open from early morning until evening, matching a regular working day, with variations between the western and eastern parts of Germany: in western Germany they are usually open between 7.30h and 16.30h while in eastern Germany between 6.00h and 17.00h.

Parents have the possibility to opt (and pay) for a certain number of hours that their child will spend in the ECEC centre during the week, within the limit established by law of nine hours per day that a child can spend in an ECEC facility. Several facilities also offer extended opening hours in the evenings, overnight and in the weekend, making use of government subsidies as part of the programme called 'KitaPlus' (see box 3.1). This offers parents the possibility to choose the period of time that is most convenient to them.

Discussions about overnight ECEC services have been prompted by private providers in **Malta**, and it is expected that the government will soon issue guidelines setting standards to provide this kind of flexible services. Otherwise currently, to meet parents' needs, ECEC facilities offer the possibility to have after-school services until 4pm and organize summer activities.

#### **Box 4.1.: Germany: KitaPlus programme – 'Because good care is not a matter of the time of the day'**

The programme KitaPlus (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2018b) was started in 2016 to help parents who have unusual working

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<sup>19</sup> OSCE (2010) *Mapping of participation of Roma and Sinti children in early education processes within the OSCE region*. Retrieved from: [www.osce.org/odihr/73874](http://www.osce.org/odihr/73874).

hours (evening, night, early morning, weekend), aiming at facilitating employment through customised care time.

The programme consists of grants for ECEC institutions and childminders to fund pilot projects targeting single parents, shift workers and other persons in unusual working hours, and young parents who are still studying or in training.

The grant allows for a variety of approaches and concepts, provided that the proposal is based on a needs analysis and a pedagogical concept.

Most facilities used the grant to extend their opening hours to evening hours, overnight or during the weekend. Counselling services for parents are also provided.

Acknowledging that special services require a requalification of educational staff, as well as a re-arrangement of the facilities, the programmes cover costs for personnel expenses, investment in environment (e.g. places for sleeping) and professional training.

To address the need of vulnerable families and **increase participation of disadvantaged** children in ECEC, measures were put in place combining financial incentives and tailored pedagogical programmes.

In **France**, combatting social inequalities inherited from birth is a priority integrated in the whole design of the ECEC system. This is largely achieved through a 'color blind' approach in which it is assumed that the ECEC structure has to adapt to the specific needs of the children. This is largely reflected in the design of the pedagogical programmes at the *école maternelle* which incorporates the acquisition of fundamental knowledge, and especially language, from the earliest age, as a precondition to support the child to succeed in later education in schools and ultimately in life. Similarly, adapting the curriculum to the needs of children with disabilities, or coming from a different ethnic or migration background is an important aspect in the implementation of the curriculum in **Denmark** (see section 4).

Flexibility for vulnerable families means also the availability of flexible financial support for families and ECEC facilities and is therefore closely linked to the affordability of ECEC services. In **France**, ECEC for children younger than three years old is largely subsidized by public funding, while ECEC for children older than three years old is provided free of charge as part of the general education system. ECEC providers can benefit of government financial support to bear extra costs linked to the re-arrangement of facilities to accommodate the special needs of the children – in terms of staffing or of the facility.

Flexibility of ECEC services means also to fulfill the **right of parents to choose** the education and care methodology which they deem best for their children and in line with family values. For instance, giving the possibility to opt for a facility where children exercise outdoor activities or are have a place in a specific area. In **Denmark**, this is a critical aspect of the new approach introduced by the political agreement adopted in 2017. The political agreement enshrines the right of families to enroll the child in the facility of their choice. This reflects the political intention to address the fact that families are different and value different things: exercise and outdoor life may be important to some families while music or arts might be more important to others. Parents will be allowed to apply and be waitlisted for all types of ECEC facility or childminders in the municipality, and not just the ECEC facilities with available capacity. Furthermore, parents will also enjoy the right to stay on the waiting list for a specific ECEC facility, even if their child is enrolled elsewhere. As part of their freedom of choice, flexible measures also include providing **multiple care options**, including possibilities to opt for a family-based ECEC instead of a facility-based one. In this vein, in **France** for instance, parents can choose among several options: *Crèche* (kindergartens), *halte-garderie* (an occasional solution offered to children up to six years old), *multi-accueil facilities* (facilities that regroup both the crèche and halte-

garderie), or child-minders. Families who opt for family based-care, can benefit of tax reduction to help them bear the costs for hiring a professional carer.

### 4.3 Challenges in the implementation of flexibility measures

The implementation of flexibility measures for ECEC services encounters a number of challenges and concerns.

Flexibility measures, in particular extended opening hours and night shifts, require, alongside other things, the **re-organization of work methodologies** as a whole and the establishment of new procedures (i.e. for emergencies). Furthermore, the environment might have to be modified in some centres, for instance to install separate sleeping areas in facilities providing over-night care. In **Germany**, some centres with long opening hours had to establish discrete play zones, so that the children's play was not disturbed or interrupted by parents that picked up their children.

Furthermore, flexibility measures imply a **re-qualification of teachers**, who need to adapt their methodologies and working approaches to address the specific needs of children and/ or the different nature of the service provided (i.e. for night shifts). In **France**, the resistance (due to both a lack of training and/or of willingness) of the staff to work with children with disabilities or to adapt to other non-standard situations appears to be a main obstacle in the implementation of flexibility measures for families coming from disadvantaged groups.

During the Peer Review discussion, Denmark highlighted concerns related to the **well-being of the child**. The child may face significant stress due to changing schedules which mean changing classmates and teachers and may suffer being far from home for long hours.

A concern for public authorities is also the **high costs** of flexible measures. In addition to the costs incurred to make the changes and adaptations mentioned above, facilities should account for salaries to hire additional staff or accommodate extra shifts, organizing trainings as well as for higher utilities' costs due to longer opening hours.

In this context, careful cost-effective calculations are crucial. Currently there is little information about take-up of flexible solutions by parents. In **Germany** about 57% of parents opted for a long ECEC schedule for their children in order to cover their full regular working day. Overnight-care services are requested on a daily basis.

The discussions also emphasized the importance to conduct the assessment of impact of flexibility measures in terms of increased participation of children in ECEC and increased employment rate of parents (especially mothers). This would help authorities to make an evidence-based calculation of the (monetary and non-monetary) returns on investments of flexibility measures.

## 5 Pedagogical frameworks and practices

### Learning points:

- Across the EU there are different degrees to which a national pedagogical framework and guidelines can be applied autonomously at local level. A higher level of autonomy is an opportunity to tailor the implementation of national broader guidelines and to adapt to local needs, however there might be issues to ensure the same quality.
- In a high number of countries there have been recent shifts in the priority themes of the curriculum with an increased focus on the child as the 'co-leader' of his/her own development and a children's perspective. The objectives are set in terms of the creation of an adequate learning

environment rather than on the learning results of the child. Free play is to be appropriately balanced with pre-academic activities.

- An increasingly prioritised area is language, as well as promoting intercultural skills (understanding of cultural and religious differences). The objectives of the curriculum are usually linked to social relations, communities, personal development, active participation, creativity, movement, natural sciences and technology and the role of play.
- There is an increasing attention to creating an evaluation culture, with a two-layered system where the implementation of the curriculum is monitored and assessed by ECEC providers and by the state institutions. The means use across countries differ highly in terms of periodicity and indicators covered.

### 5.1 Centralised vs. decentralised approaches

In general, the introduction of a 'Curriculum framework' at the national level aims at ensuring a more standardised provision of services across regions within a country, formulating explicit and co-ordinated learning goals, as well as facilitating the transition from kindergarten to primary school. Across the EU, the degree of freedom to which the national framework and guidelines are applied at local level varies.

Broad pedagogical frameworks, such as the Danish Common Pedagogical Framework and the Maltese National Curriculum Framework for All<sup>20</sup> follow a **decentralised approach** where ECEC facilities set goals in line with the national framework enjoying a high level of freedom. In **Denmark**, the focus is on creating and evaluation culture seeking continuously adapt the implementation of the curriculum, rather than establishing a system of controls and measurement against set benchmarks. This autonomy granted to ECEC facilities for choosing the specific themes and activities to implement the curriculum, represents an opportunity to adapt to local needs.

In **Germany** education is the responsibility of the individual federal states and each of them develops its own plan, deriving it from a common national framework for ECEC formulated in 2004 by representatives of all Länder. Regional educational plans differ considerably from each other (e.g. in terms of their binding character, age ranges to which they apply and of the aspects highlighted). The educational plans specify the tasks and services of ECEC centres without describing in detail the curricula or the learning goals. These are to be considered rather as rough guidelines for the content and methods that are to be applied.

Other countries follow a more **centralised approach** that leave less autonomy to the ECEC facilities. For instance, in **France**, the programmes to be applied in kindergartens (*écoles maternelles*) were established by the 2014 Act on the reform of the Republic's education system. The main objectives of the pre-elementary education were also set by law in 2018. In any case, the communication and cooperation between different levels (central and regional/municipal) is extremely important.

Across the participating countries there are also differences regarding the **age brackets and the type** of ECEC facilities to which ECEC curriculum framework applies. In **Germany** the age bracket to which the education plan applies, is set at Länder level. In **Bulgaria, Cyprus and France** it covers groups of children older than three. In **Denmark and Malta**, it starts at the age of zero. The case of **Malta** is particularly interesting because it presents an integrated comprehensive curricular approach throughout compulsory education from zero to 16 years.

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<sup>20</sup> Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) (2012), *A National Curriculum Framework for All*.

## 5.2 Content of pedagogical curricula

Curricula are generally organised around a few **development areas and learning goals**, based on pedagogical research. In **Denmark** there are six curriculum themes, namely: versatile personal development; social development; communication and language; body, senses and movement; nature, outdoor life and science; culture, aesthetics and community. The pedagogical curriculum must be developed by ECEC facilities within the context of the theme descriptions and the pedagogical objectives. In **Cyprus** the new curriculum, developed in 2016, highlights elements such as play and a broader concept of learning by combining various subject areas (see box 5.1).

### Box 5.1. The new curriculum in Cyprus

The new curriculum developed in 2016 in Cyprus for the age group three to six years old provides a general framework to be followed by all ECEC providers when developing their pedagogical plan. It is based on principles such as the uniqueness of every child, learning through exploration, play and discussion and the importance of parents as partners of the school, cultural, linguistic and religious pluralism.

Pre-primary education (3-6) ECEC settings have a high autonomy in the used methodological approach and how to combine areas and themes used. However, the pedagogical plan requires approval by the Ministry.

The implementation of the new curriculum is supported by in-service training to kindergarten staff, as well as by employing more teachers in public kindergartens. Moreover a five year development plan for in-service training of teaching staff on issues pertaining to the curriculum was put into effect in 2016.

The boxes below show the main 'groups of elements' on which the new curriculum is based, namely the development areas, the subject areas and the forms of organising learning.



Most of the countries' frameworks include **themes** such as arts, literacy, music, numeracy, social development, physical education and science/technology.

In the last years, countries are increasingly focusing on language and vocabulary as well as cultural and religious differences. The aim is to build children's ability to deal with diversity and acceptance of cultural, linguistic and ethnic differences. This is a

two-way process to help children from a migrant background to better integrate while maintaining their own identity but also to increase the capacity of the other children to accept diversity and respect other identities.

In terms of the implementation of the ECEC curriculum, a major shift has taken place in a high number of countries in recent years towards a more **child-centred approach and a holistic learning experience**, where the child is seen as the leader of his/her own development. Such approach puts emphasis on structured play, as well as free play as tools to enable the child to develop knowledge, emotional and sensorial skills at their own pace.

Moreover, another important element is the emphasis on the 'pedagogical learning environment', which is present both in the **Danish** common pedagogical foundation and **Luxembourg's** national curriculum framework for non-formal education.

### 5.3 Children in vulnerable positions

Usually, the curriculum does not differentiate for children with additional needs but there can be additional funding to provide measures to help children in vulnerable positions and develop tailored solutions at local level. The aim to 'prevent the vicious circle of deprivation and exclusion' of children and the need to take into account children in vulnerable positions is explicitly stated in the **Danish** pedagogical foundation. In **Cyprus** there are special measures to assist to the successful integration of children in vulnerable positions in the mainstream pre-primary education system, such as special educators, public acceptance campaigns, seminars for staff, setting up of special classes in mainstream schools and employment of teaching aids. Other countries, such as **Luxembourg**, do not have any specific provisions for children in vulnerable positions. However, the national curriculum framework takes into consideration all children with their specific needs, guiding pedagogues in creating an educational environment in which all children can progress individually.

**France** follows an approach called 'colour-blind' inclusion which is based on the principle that the ECEC facility needs to adapt to the child, regardless of his/her needs.

#### Box 5.2. France: 'Colour-blind' inclusion

The kindergarten (*école maternelle*) is the place where fulfillment and learning make a reciprocal alliance. It adapts to pupils' cognitive possibilities and to their physiological needs in order to create the best learning conditions. To allow the access of children with special needs to ECEC, France established a principle of 'colour-blind' inclusion. This means that the structure has to adapt to the child, regardless of his/her disability or special needs and that ECEC professionals are expected to adapt to individual situations. All children, whatever their difficulties or their specific needs, are supported. Their needs are taken into account and catered for.

In disadvantaged areas specific arrangements are put in place consisting of one teacher and one social worker for a classroom of around 16 pupils. The premises are adapted as well in order to meet young children's physiological needs.

Some countries, such as Germany and Bulgaria, have special programmes for **children with migrant background** that could have linguistic difficulties. For instance, in **Bulgaria** the "Strategy for Educational Integration of the Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities"<sup>21</sup> foresees additional Bulgarian language classes for children whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian. In **Germany**, there is the

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<sup>21</sup> Eurydice, factsheet on Bulgaria. [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/support-measures-learners-early-childhood-and-school-education-9\\_hr](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/support-measures-learners-early-childhood-and-school-education-9_hr)

'Sprachkitas'<sup>22</sup> programme for teaching German to children with migrant backgrounds funded by the federal government.

Also in **Luxembourg** the government introduced a mandatory plurilingual education programme (*Cadre pour une éducation plurilingue systématique dans les crèches*) aiming at giving children of ages one to four and attending ECEC provision a playful contact with two of the national languages, Luxembourgish and French. A long-term objective of the plurilingual programme is to give children equal opportunities in life and to enhance social cohesion.

Some countries such as **Cyprus** have a Bachelor's degree in Special Education for 'Special Education Teachers' (*Eidikos Ekpaideytikos / Paidogogos*) working in kindergartens and pre-primary education with children with special needs.<sup>23</sup> In **Bulgaria**, additional professional qualification in 'special pedagogy' ('defectology') is required for pedagogues working with children with special educational needs in pre-school and school education.<sup>24</sup>

#### 5.4 Implementation of the curricula

National curricula are of compulsory application for the majority of ECEC providers. In **Denmark** the common pedagogical framework applies to any kind of ECEC provision. In **Luxembourg** as of 2016 the quality framework applies to the entire non-formal education sector for children and youth. In **Malta** it applies equally to ECEC services operating both in the public and private sectors, including centre-based, work-based and home-based services.

However, the way curriculum is implemented in practice can vary a lot across ECEC facilities and **ensuring consistency in implementation** is a concern for many governments. Some countries have put in place initiatives to ensure a common understanding and coherent implementation of the curriculum. In **Denmark** a **wide-ranging partnership** consisting of key representatives from the field of ECEC defines overall guidelines for implementation and contributes to coordination and qualification of specific initiatives, translating knowledge into practice. The implementation of the strengthened pedagogical curriculum in practice is also supported by different kinds of materials, guides, tools for self-assessment and packages of educational material adapted to specific target groups (i.e. professional leaders and specific pedagogical staff, and the administration in the municipalities and other employees connected to the ECEC field). Moreover, a corps of practice consultants and professional units working at the municipality-level collaborate to support the implementation of the pedagogical curriculum and the continuous development of quality in ECEC.

In **Luxembourg** there is a similar system, where ECEC services are requested to elaborate a general pedagogical concept that describes how non-formal education is taking place in the provision according to the principles, the characteristics and the areas of action of the national curriculum framework. ECEC facilities also need to document their pedagogical actions. Regional agents are responsible to advise on the content and the formulation of the pedagogical concepts, to visit the providers at least once a year and to produce reports of their visits. These measures apply to all ECEC services, including home-based facilities and are linked to public subsidies.

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<sup>22</sup> Bundesprogramm Sprach-Kitas. More information available at: <https://sprach-kitas.fruehe-chancen.de>, last accessed 15 January 2019.

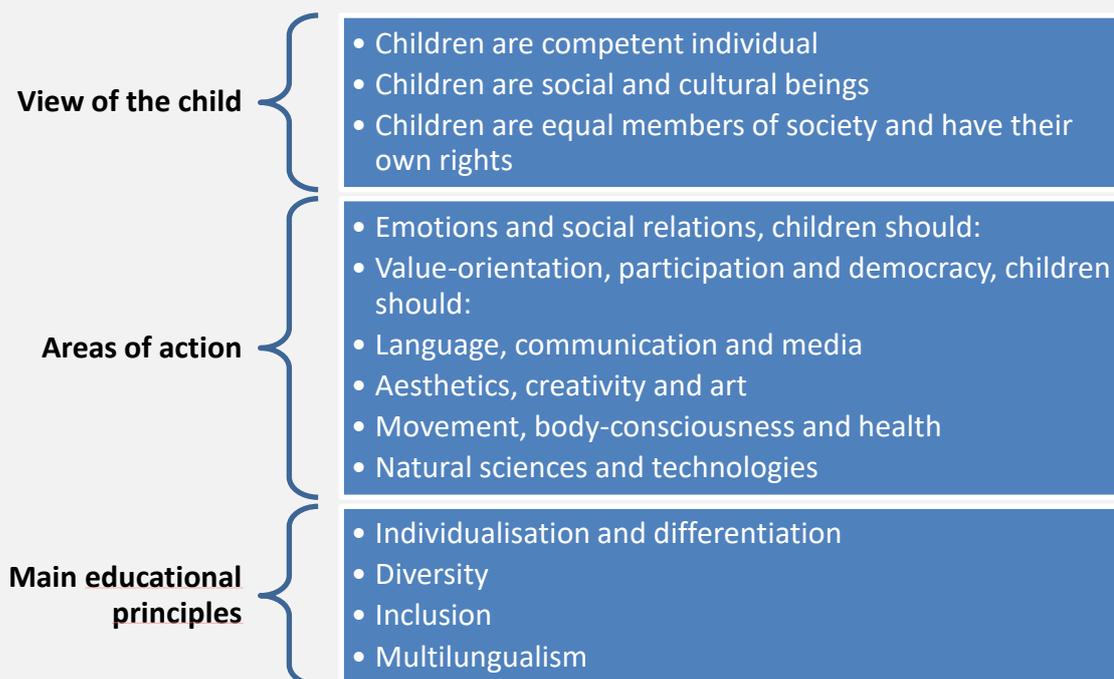
<sup>23</sup> Loizou, E. 2017. "Cyprus – ECEC Workforce Profile." In *Workforce Profiles in Systems of Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe*, edited by P. Oberhuemer and I. Schreyer. Available at: [www.seepro.eu/English/Country\\_Reports.htm](http://www.seepro.eu/English/Country_Reports.htm), last accessed 15 January 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Country information for Bulgaria - Teacher education for inclusive education, European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive education. More information available at: <https://www.european-agency.org/country-information/bulgaria/teacher-education-for-inclusive-education> , Last accessed 15 January 2019.

### Box 5.3. Luxemburg: The national curriculum framework

In Luxembourg, ECEC services need to elaborate pedagogical concepts according to the view of the child, the areas of action and the principles outlined in the national curriculum framework<sup>25</sup> (*cadre de référence nationale pour l'éducation non formelle des enfants et des jeunes*).

The implementation approach of the national curriculum framework is based on provision of guidelines and outreach to all stakeholders, in particular staff and parents. Moreover, the training of the pedagogues is undergoing a revision process to be in line with the content of the national curriculum framework.



A strong emphasis is given to the **training of staff** on issues pertaining to the curriculum. For instance, in Cyprus a five-year development plan for pre-primary school teachers was put into effect as of 2016 – 2017 and in France a national framework for the development of a common professional identity for young children care workers was published in 2017.

### Monitoring and evaluation of curriculum implementation

Countries use different means to monitor and evaluate the curriculum implementation by ECEC providers. Monitoring and evaluation can be conducted by Ministerial or municipal authorities, by ECEC providers themselves, or by external entities such as university or research centres.

**Denmark** is conducting an evaluation of the curriculum in place over the past decade, as a basis to develop a new one. The government identified a set of indicators and developed a questionnaire to be completed by facilities, parents and other stakeholders. Also, Denmark is focusing on the establishment of an evaluation culture

<sup>25</sup>Bühler, C. (2018), *Cadre de référence nationale sur l'éducation non formelle des enfants et des jeunes / Nationaler Rahmenplan zur non-formalen Bildung im Kindes- und Jugendalter*. Available at: <http://www.men.public.lu/fr/actualites/publications/enfance/infos-generales/180219-rahmenplan/index.html>, last accessed 15 January 2019.

in ECEC, meaning that staff and leadership should continuously relate to and reflect on their own practices.

In **Malta**, the quality assurance system foresees both an Internal and an External review. The Internal Review is a structured procedure where schools carry out a self-evaluation against a set of standards and through a simplified reporting template produced by the Ministry of Education and Employment. For the time being, the internal review is in place only for the age group three to six years old, however the need to extend these practices to ECEC centres (0-3 years) is acknowledged.

In 2017 a new External Review model has been developed by the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education to ensure adherence of ECEC provision to the National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities. This external review follows a developmental rather than punitive approach. The report issued during the review gives a clear direction to facilities to focus and manage their improvement process by indicating particular actions that need to be prioritised. After the review there is time for the external reviewer to follow-up with the facilities and provide guidance.

#### **Box 5.4. Malta: National Standards guiding regulation and practice in ECEC Centres**

The National Standards for Child Care Facilities developed by the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity and by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, are intended to apply equally to ECEC services (0-3 years) operating both in the public and private sectors. The range of services includes Centre-Based, Work-Based<sup>26</sup> and Home-Based services. These Standards provide the framework for monitoring and assessing quality and outcomes of service provision.

They are categorised under three broad Quality Areas:



Each Quality Area is accompanied with Quality Indicators that better guide the service provision to achieve the expected quality standard.

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<sup>26</sup> **Work-Based** services are provided within a building occupied by an employer/group of employers and in which employees actually work. These centres are appropriately equipped, and only used, for the provision of ECEC services to children of workers employed/engaged by that same employer/group of employers.

Educators are further supported to better address the learning needs of the children by assessing them against five broad **learning outcomes**:

- Learning Outcome 1: Children who develop a strong sense of identity.
- Learning Outcome 2: Children who have a positive self-image.
- Learning Outcome 3: Children are socially adept.
- Learning Outcome 4: Children who are effective communicators.
- Learning Outcome 5: Children who nurture positive attitudes towards learning and become engaged and confident learners.

In other countries, such as **Cyprus**, ministerial inspections are centralised and take place at national-level on a regular basis. The case is similar in France, where inspectors work at regional level but closely follow the directives established at the central level. In **Luxembourg**, regional agents are responsible to advise the content and the formulation of the pedagogical concepts, to visit the providers at least once a year and to produce reports of their visits. In **Bulgaria**, the implementation of the curriculum is evaluated through the assessment of the learning outcomes of each child against the national Pre-school Education State Standard. In **Germany** the evaluation and monitoring are a competence of the Länder. Evaluation studies are usually conducted by university or research centres.

## 5.5 Challenges related to the curricula and their implementation

Both centralised and decentralised approaches present some challenges to the implementation of the curriculum. While a centralised system might be more difficult to adapt to the local needs, in a decentralised system there might be issues to **ensure the same quality level and a consistent implementation** across the country. In practice there is always the risk that the activities put in place by the ECEC facilities do not reflect what was foreseen by the educational plans. For instance, this has been noticed in **Germany**, where the **mismatch between educational plans and practice** has been identified as a challenge that needs to be addressed. Therefore, different kinds of tools are available to support the implementation of the curriculum at local level such as guides, thematic handbooks for practitioners, website with professional material, information workshops etc. as well as to monitor and evaluate the quality of the activities carried out.

As regards the content of the curricula, one of the main difficulties is to find the right **balance between free play and pre-academic activities**. The tendency to introduce a curriculum in ECEC, as a means to emphasise the creation of a developmental and learning environment, has been criticised by some for the fear that play would be pushed aside in favour of an increasingly strict focus on developing children's learning and skill-set. Indeed, it is beneficial that curricula envisage a balance between free-play, self-regulation and pre-academic activities. The value of play is strongly highlighted in the Danish Day-Care Facilities Act and in **Cyprus'** new curriculum.

## 6 Main conclusions and lessons learned

ECEC policies have gained progressively more attention across Europe and their focus has widened from increasing labour market participation (of mothers) (EU Lisbon Strategy, 2000) to, in addition, ensuring that ECEC benefits the child's development and gives children the best start in life. The relevance of formal ECEC has been recognised in various policy initiatives. Notably, acknowledging the complexity of quality in ECEC, a set of **Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care** was developed under the auspices of the European Commission. The quality framework defines five dimensions of quality, namely Access, Workforce, Curriculum, Evaluation and Monitoring, and Governance and Funding.

Each ECEC system and the reforms to improve its quality are very much shaped by a country's cultural values (including views on what is in the best interest of the child), institutional framework, historic evolution, educational attainment at higher levels of education, labour market participation rate of mothers, and participation rates among children in vulnerable situations.

**Access** remains a priority dimension for a majority of Member States motivated by rising demand from families. The policies implemented pay increasing attention to the role of ECEC in fostering social inclusion of vulnerable groups.

**Workforce** is a challenging area as the quality of the workforce has to be ensured alongside sufficient supply to meet increasing demand. Increasing attention has been given to the need of upscaling staff qualifications and skills to be able to respond to higher expectations in terms of quality of the learning and diversity of services offered. Additionally, the need to improve working conditions in order to attract and retain quality workforce is acknowledged. This could be done through pay rises but also by keeping children in comfortable group sizes and revising working schedules to create a balance between contact and non-contact time in order to give pedagogues enough time for preparation of activities and reflection on their practice. Another important issue that might undermine the quality of the ECEC services is the gender imbalance of the workforce: 95% of the workers in ECEC are women.

The diversity of policy approaches adopted by Member States is also reflected in **governance** structures. Member States distribute responsibilities for ECEC across ministries differently, differentiating or not, children by age groups, e.g. zero to three and three to six. In split systems responsibilities are distributed between different services and governance tends to be more complicated, whereas in unitary systems coordination is easier. Unitary systems are found to facilitate the implementation of a common curriculum and ease transitions between ECEC age groups, ultimately benefitting the quality of ECEC.

Despite the challenges to quality measurement in ECEC, **monitoring and evaluation** are needed to understand the impact of implemented policies and strive for the best possible use of available resources. Also, a lack of evaluation may contribute to the perception that measures introduced by government are not binding. As a result, countries are paying increasing attention to monitoring and evaluation, in particular to analyse the results of recent reforms.

At the same time, it is desirable to create an 'evaluation culture' and avoid that evaluation and monitoring are used and perceived as merely control measures. The creation of an evaluation culture involves having a framework legislation reflecting freedom in filling in the concept of quality. This entails a shift in the approach to monitoring and evaluation in which responsibility is transferred to the implementing levels. For instance, it is desirable to promote internal reviews that encourage self-reflection among practitioners.

**Flexibility** is an important component of the quality framework: to ensure access, ECEC services should respond to families' specific needs and circumstances.

Challenges for families in relation to the inflexibility of ECEC services are manifold. Limited opening hours pose problems to working parents. Inflexible and bureaucratic admission processes are a deterrent for vulnerable families and inflexibility in the pedagogical offers reduces chances of children with special needs to participate in learning. Limited options of ECEC type of services reduces the freedom of parents to choose the kind of service closest to their own values and interests.

Flexible measures respond to these needs. They aim to improve work-life balance for parents and to bring more women into the labour market. They also seek to facilitate participation in ECEC of children that would otherwise be excluded, especially from vulnerable groups.

The measures undertaken by the Member States consist mainly of extending care to early morning, evenings, and weekends. They can be delivered by flexible centres or through a combination of these with home-based provision. Flexibility is also realized through adapted pedagogical plans and teaching methods.

Flexibility measures are highly costly, and good practices combine institutionalized solutions with family support, to maximize the cost-effectiveness ratio of measures. However, more evidence is needed about the take-up of such measures by parents, as well as of the impact of flexibility measures on the employment of mothers and inclusiveness of ECEC alongside cost-efficiency of these measures.

There are many differences across the EU countries regarding **the implementation of the pedagogical curriculum**. In some countries, there is a higher degree of centralisation, while in others the ECEC facilities enjoy more autonomy and can adapt the general guidelines to the local needs. In any case, the cooperation between the different levels (national, municipal, etc.) is an extremely important element to ensure quality of ECEC services across the country.

The curricula are generally organised around development areas and learning objectives, that vary across the EU countries. In the last years the areas that have been generally prioritised are language and intercultural skills. The objectives now tend to focus more on social relations, personal development, active participation, creativity, movement, natural sciences and technology.

In terms of the methodological approach, in recent years there has been a shift to policies that focus on the creation of a learning environment that can benefit the child rather than on children's learning results. The child is at the centre of the learning process, as the 'co-leader' of his/her own development. Also, the importance of free play has been included in the guidelines of many countries.

Monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the curriculum by ECEC providers are considered important elements for ensuring the quality of ECEC. In some countries, these activities are carried out through inspections from the Ministry or external evaluators. However, there is an increasing tendency towards self-evaluation and the shift of the monitoring to the ECEC facilities themselves in the framework of the development of an 'evaluation culture'.

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