



Strengthening the quality of early childhood education and care through inclusion



Employment,
Social Affairs
and Inclusion

Overview

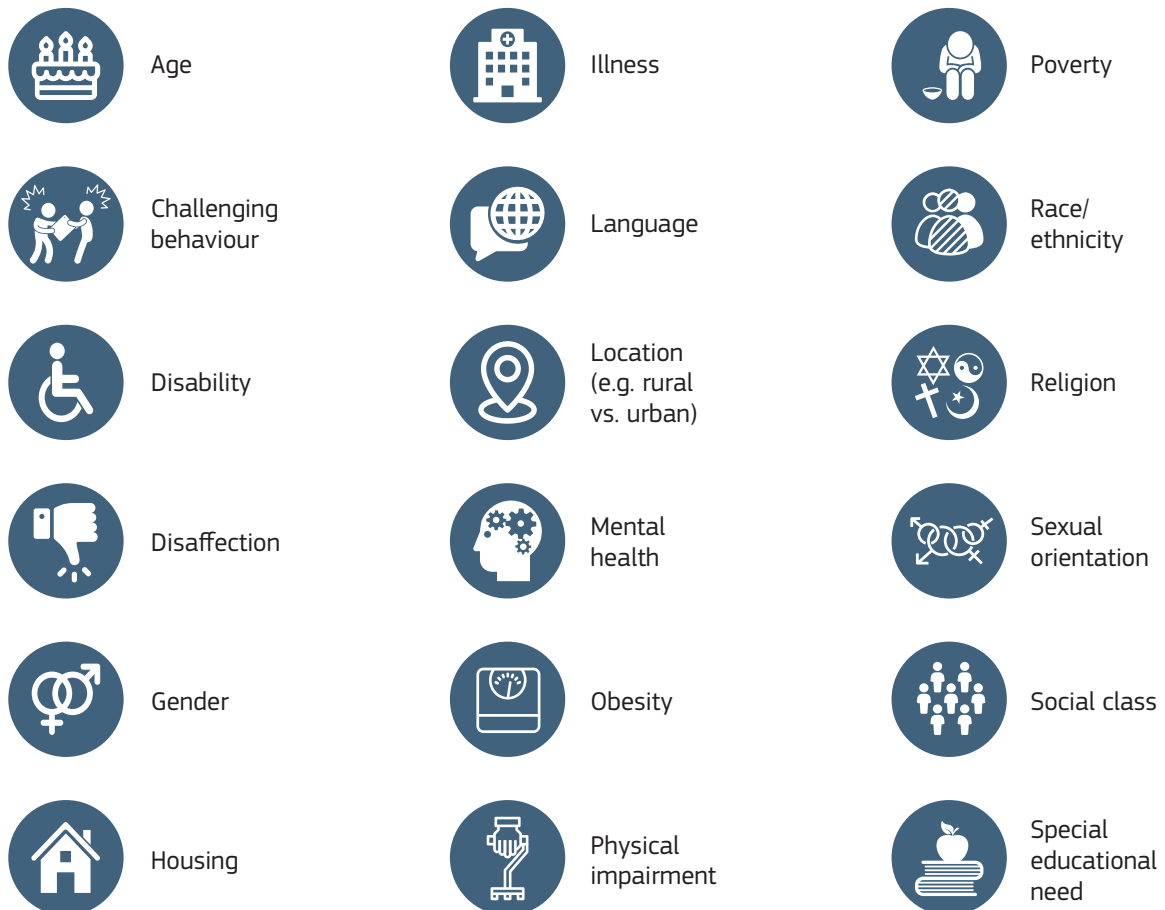
Recently, a vision for a more inclusive Europe has been growing,^{1,2,3} especially given increasing levels of societal inequality⁴ and increasing diversity^{5,6} within and between European countries. At the same time, quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)⁷ has risen up the policy agenda globally,⁸ leading to a general consensus that quality ECEC can lead to positive and equitable outcomes for all children.⁹ Given these contexts, the European Commission (hereafter, the Commission) considers inclusion as an integral part of quality ECEC.^{10,11} However, ensuring effective access to quality ECEC for all children remains a challenge, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is in part because both inclusion and quality ECEC are multi-faceted concepts. The present policy memo helps policymakers better understand this challenge and suggests some possible solutions. To do so, this memo introduces what inclusion means in education generally and in ECEC particularly, and then discusses how inclusion in ECEC is understood in the current EU policy context. Lastly, the memo summarises findings from recent EU-level projects on how inclusion is integrated into different aspects of quality in ECEC.

What is inclusive education?

Inclusive education is closely related to the idea of social inclusion (Box 1), which is the bedrock of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,¹² as well as the European Pillar of Social Rights.¹³ Inclusion in education seeks to fulfil the fundamental human right to education, by addressing and removing various forms of discrimination in learning. In education, discrimination in learning occurs along multiple axes, which often overlap and interact with each other to influence inequities in complex ways (Figure 1).^{14,15} The 2018 Council of Europe Recommendation on *Common Values, Inclusive Education and the European Dimension of Teaching*¹⁶ states that individuals face exclusion in education due to their migrant origins, disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, disabilities and special needs or exceptional talents. It recommends that EU Member States provide ‘the necessary support to all learners according to their particular needs’.

Efforts to tackle discrimination in education have been understood and implemented in different ways at different times (Box 1). The efforts have had most visible impact on

FIGURE 1. THERE ARE MANY ARENAS OF DISCRIMINATION AND MARGINALISATION IN EDUCATION, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO THE BELOW



education for children with special needs and disabilities, but inclusive education is generally concerned with all potential discrimination in education. In this light, inclusive education is regarded as a wider reform of education, rather than the adjustment of individual differences to the system. Inclusive education is also regarded as a provision of environment where different learners learn together rather than separately. This aspect of inclusion distinguishes the concept from other models, such as integration and mainstreaming (Box 1). As such, the goal of inclusive education – as envisioned by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) – is that ‘all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers’.

Inclusive ECEC can benefit all children

Research has shown that inclusive ECEC programmes are of higher overall quality than non-inclusive programmes.¹⁷ This evidence, together with evaluations of case studies, suggests a close association between inclusion and aspects of quality that promote positive outcomes for all children.^{18,19}

For example, inclusive environments may have significant impact on child well-being and learning. Feelings of belonging and being welcomed are closely linked to well-being, which in turn is a pre-requisite for quality learning.^{20,21} By focusing on children’s voices and fostering identity and self-esteem, inclusive practices could nurture young children’s positive sense of belonging.²² Inclusive practices can also promote



BOX 1. KEY TERMS ASSOCIATED WITH INCLUSIVE EDUCATION.

Social inclusion is the process of improving the terms of participation in society, particularly for people who are disadvantaged, by enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights.²³

UNESCO defines **inclusion in education** as a process that helps overcome barriers that limit the presence, participation and achievement of learners.²⁴

As can be seen from the definitions for both social inclusion and inclusion in education, inclusion is understood as a ‘process’ that aims to reduce barriers to participation. In this regard, an inclusive ECEC setting would not necessarily mean that, for example, the representation of vulnerable children (e.g. migrant children, children with disabilities) is higher – rather, it would mean that there are constant efforts to reduce any potential barriers for these children to participate in learning and development in the ECEC setting.

Equity is about ensuring that there is a concern with fairness – in terms of opportunities, access, treatment and outcomes – such that the education of all learners is seen as having equal importance.^{25,26}

‘Integration’ and ‘mainstreaming’ are previous terminology used to discuss actions and measures related to inclusion. **Integration** refers to the practice of placing some learners labelled as having ‘special educational needs’ in mainstream education settings.²⁷ **Mainstreaming** is the practice of educating students who have learning challenges in regular classes during specific time periods, based on their skills. Both terms imply the need for a student to adapt to pre-existing structures, attitudes and an unaltered environment.²⁸ **Inclusion**, in contrast, focuses on the ability and willingness of the school itself to transform its system to accommodate a diversity of needs and to support full participation of learners.²⁹

respect for others. Early childhood is a period when children have not yet developed strong stereotypes about other people. By fostering positive interaction with peers of varying ability and background, inclusive ECEC settings have great potential to nurture social competence for children from an early age.^{30,31}

One common perception around inclusive education is that it only benefits those with special needs or disadvantaged backgrounds. To the contrary, research on school children has demonstrated that inclusive education can benefit all students, in terms of academic, behavioural, social, post-secondary and employment outcomes.³² A recent meta-analysis, based on studies from North American and European countries, shows that students without special educational needs achieve higher academic attainments when they are taught together with students with special educational needs in the same classroom.³³ More similar research on inclusive ECEC will be needed to directly assess the effectiveness of inclusive ECEC, not only upon later academic achievements but also upon well-being and social relations with peers and teachers.

Opportunities for inclusion begin in early childhood

Not only are the early years a critical time for child development, it is also clear from the evidence that opportunities for inclusion (and conversely exclusion) begin in early childhood. For example, in European countries there are significant socio-economic disparities in ECEC enrolment rates from very young ages, with the lowest rates consistently noted for children from the lowest income groups.^{34,35} Children who face multiple disadvantages,³⁶ undocumented child migrants/asylum seekers and Roma and traveller children are also at a particular risk of exclusion from ECEC.^{37,38}

Importantly, not only enrolment to ECEC but also the *quality* of ECEC are likely to differ by children's backgrounds. For example, studies conducted in Germany and in Australia have found that children from families of low socio-economic status attend lower quality ECEC.^{39,40} This finding may hold in other countries: families with children exhibit higher income inequality,^{41,42} which may in turn underlie differential access to quality ECEC services if quality ECEC is not affordable for everyone (Box 2).

These findings are worrisome, particularly given the considerable research evidence that the quality of ECEC is important for learning and development in children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.⁴³ For example, quality ECEC could strengthen children's capacity to benefit from later education and promote smooth transition into primary education settings.^{44,45} For children with special needs, the benefits of quality ECEC also include lower rates of special education use, parents being better prepared to

identify and advocate for their children's rights, and better child development outcomes.^{46,47}



BOX 2. BALANCING BETWEEN UNIVERSAL ACCESS AND TARGETED SUPPORT

Inclusion in ECEC is closely linked to the principle of 'progressive universalism', defined as an effective balance between universal and targeted policies.⁴⁸ To achieve inclusion in ECEC, universal policies should guarantee equality of access to ECEC and quality services. The progressive aspect of universalism comes in providing, in addition to the general policy, targeted support for particularly vulnerable sub-groups. A 2014 study⁴⁹ mapping child poverty policies in the context of the 2013 Commission Recommendation on *Investing in Children* found that EU Member States with high child poverty levels struggle to find a balance between universal and targeted approaches in the provision of ECEC. This study also suggested making progressive universalism a central element of the exchange of good practices between the Member States.

Inclusion and Quality ECEC: EU policy context

While many EU Member States are moving towards an inclusive education model, most policies thus far have focused on compulsory school systems⁵⁰ and particularly on children and youth with specific learning difficulties.⁵¹ The need to expand inclusive practices in ECEC services towards inclusive quality ECEC has been expressed in several recommendations by the Council of the European Union, as well as in EU-level initiatives (Box 3). In addition, legislation within EU Member States (Box 4) could provide an important route for policymakers to enact inclusion in ECEC settings.



BOX 3. EU-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS AND INITIATIVES RELATED TO INCLUSIVE ECEC

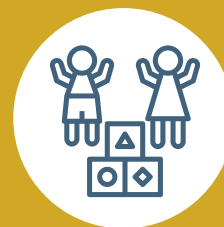
Some of the key Recommendations by the Council of the European Union for supporting inclusive ECEC are:



2013 Recommendation on *Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage*, which promotes ‘access to high-quality, inclusive ECEC’ as a way to reduce inequality at a young age.



2018 Recommendation on *Common Values, Inclusive Education and the European Dimension of Teaching*, which calls for inclusive and high-quality education and training ‘at all levels and from an early age’ to ensure ‘social inclusion by providing every child with a fair chance and equal opportunities to succeed.’



2019 Recommendation on *High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems*, which recognises the role of good quality ECEC services in promoting social inclusion.

The 2019 Recommendation formalises the EU Member States’ vision about the importance of quality ECEC.⁵² Its annex, the Quality Framework for ECEC, is based on a proposal elaborated in 2014 by the ET (Education and Training) 2020 framework Thematic Working Group on ECEC under the auspices of the Commission’s DG-EAC.⁵³ Importantly, the Recommendation embeds inclusion as a running theme for all areas of quality ECEC. As such, the Recommendation could serve as a readily available guideline for implementing and evaluating inclusion in ECEC settings with measures to target structure, process and outcome of quality services. For example, the Recommendation envisions that children are at the centre of ECEC practices, and are viewed as different from each other, and bringing unique characteristics and strengths that should be valued and taken into consideration by ECEC settings. The Recommendation also emphasises the broader role of ECEC in promoting inclusive society, for example, by recognising families and local communities as the most important partners in ECEC and by allowing for flexible career pathways that favour the inclusion of staff from disadvantaged groups. The Recommendation also refers to the role of ECEC in heterogeneous societies: for example, ECEC services can serve as meeting places for families, for learning both the language of the service and the first language, and for socio-emotional learning of values such as rights, equality, tolerance and diversity.

In addition to the Recommendations by the Council of the European Union, the **Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the Education and Training 2020 Strategic Framework (2015)**⁵⁴ reaffirms inclusive education as a priority area and promotes ‘laying the foundations for more inclusive societies through education – starting from *an early age*’ [italics added].

BOX 4. EXAMPLE LEGISLATION FOR INCLUSIVE ECEC IN EUROPEAN MEMBER STATES

Below are examples of laws and national policies on inclusion in ECEC, as implemented in some EU Member States. The examples are drawn from the EASNIE's Legislation Updates, which are based on the analytic framework developed through the Country Policy Review and Analysis project.⁵⁵



Czech Republic's Education Act (2004) reinforced the trend towards the inclusion of pupils –including pre-primary groups – with special education needs in mainstream school; in general, the emphasis is on integration. The revised legislation in 2018 guarantees that pre-primary education is free of charge in the year prior to compulsory education. For children with special needs, there is no time limit for free pre-primary education.



Estonia introduced a new recommendation in the Pre-Primary Child Care Institutions Act (2018) that a local government may form integration groups that include children with special needs together with other children.



Hungary's National Public Education (2012) updates the previous rule requiring learners with special educational needs to be educated partly or completely with peers and learners in the same pre-school group, by adding pedagogical assistance services (e.g. mobile network of specialist educators) to support learners with special educational needs.



Portugal has enacted legislation making disability discrimination in education unlawful since 2008. But since 2018, the country's new School Inclusion law enacts a legal framework for including students with and without disabilities in education, moving away from a rigid focus on clinical categorisation of disability to inclusion of all learners from early childhood.



Sweden introduced Education Act (2019) to guarantee early support for learners in pre-primary and primary school, expanding the previous initiatives for older age groups. The Act also strengthens and extends the right to pre-primary education in national minority languages. Sweden has also enacted a Discrimination Act (2017) which will help pre-schools to prevent discrimination with the participation of learners and professionals.

Inclusion in quality ECEC: how does it work in practice?

While the previous sections demonstrate the importance of inclusion in early years and ECEC quality, and how this is reflected in the EU policy context, further efforts to understand the function of inclusive quality ECEC include how inclusion is implemented in ECEC, and how this in turn strengthens the quality of ECEC. This section will provide such information, by summarising findings from recent EU-level projects on inclusive quality ECEC.

The **Inclusive Early Childhood Education** (IECE) project (2015–2017)⁵⁶ was funded by the Commission and carried out by the EASNIE. It aimed to identify, analyse and promote the main characteristics and factors (facilitators and barriers) of quality inclusive early childhood education for all children in European countries.⁵⁷ To do so, the project carried out a literature and policy review, collected and analysed national policy and practice in relation to inclusive early childhood

education, and conducted case-study visits. The three main conclusions and new contributions from the IECE project were as follows.

First, high-quality inclusive early childhood education services were guided by an inclusive vision and worked towards inclusive goals. Participation was a key outcome for inclusive early childhood education in the cases examined and the literature reviewed (Box 5).

Second, the IECE project produced a Self-Reflection Tool (Box 6) – a monitoring tool for ECEC staff to reflect on inclusive practices.⁵⁸ Self-reflection is often the most meaningful way of evaluating early years practices,⁵⁹ especially if done as shared activities and conversations among colleagues.⁶⁰ Professionals and stakeholders can use the tool to gain a picture of inclusiveness of an ECEC setting, and to describe, formulate and prioritise areas for improvement of inclusive ECEC practice. The tool is a non-copyright material and is available in over 20 languages from the EASNIE website.

Third, the IECE project developed a new framework to support policymakers and practitioners in planning, reviewing and improving quality ECEC provision using inclusion as a guiding principle. The framework places the

outcome-process-structure model, which underpinned the Quality Framework for ECEC, into an ecological systems model, offering a holistic view to examine a child's learning and development within communities and broader society.



BOX 5. PARTICIPATION IS A KEY OUTCOME OF INCLUSIVE QUALITY ECEC

From an inclusion perspective, the most important and meaningful outcome of quality ECEC is that all children participate. Participation entails both processes of 'being there' (attendance) and 'being engaged' (involvement) in social environments (e.g. friendship) and physical and learning environments.⁶¹ The 2013 Recommendation in Investing in Children⁶² supports the participation of all children in play, recreation, sport and cultural activities both in and outside of schools.

Related to this, the **Hear our Voices!** project (2012–2014), funded by the Fundamental Rights & Citizenship Programme of the EU,⁶³ developed support mechanisms for promoting participation of children with intellectual disabilities in their communities, including school setting and child-care services.⁶⁴ One of the tools developed – **Participating in My Life: Hear My Voice!** – describes participatory mechanisms and examples for child-centred planning.

BOX 6. SELF-REFLECTION TOOL DEVELOPED FROM THE IECE PROJECT FOR INCLUSIVE ECEC PRACTICES

The Self-Reflection Tool for inclusive ECEC practices consists of eight indicator areas:



Overall welcoming atmosphere



Inclusive social environment



Child-centred approach



Child-friendly physical environment



Materials for all children



Opportunities for communication for all



Inclusive teaching and learning environment



Family-friendly environment

The tool provides examples of probing questions to evaluate within each indicator area. For example, for 'Overall welcoming atmosphere', one might ask: Do all children and their families feel welcome? How do the setting's leaders promote a collaborative and inclusive culture? How does the setting reflect and value the diversity of the local community? How are children enabled to feel that they belong to the peer group?

Depending on specific ECEC contexts, these questions can be adapted and the use of the tool can be repurposed. Before asking these questions, it is also recommended to think about the purpose of self-reflection and, based on the answers to the questions, to summarise necessary changes and their priorities.

As a result, the new framework identifies five levels at which inclusion can be implemented to aspects of quality ECEC:

- 1 participation as a key outcome of inclusive ECEC;
- 2 promoting outcome through child-centred processes; and supporting the process at
- 3 ECEC;
- 4 community; and
- 5 regional/national levels.

Drawing on analyses of 32 European inclusive early childhood education settings, the IECE project provides examples of inclusive practices that promote quality of ECEC at the five levels.⁶⁵ ISOTIS – meaning equality and fairness in Greek – an EU-funded project from 2017–2019, also provides examples of inclusive practices in ECEC and shares them through virtual learning tools (e.g. app, online courses).⁶⁶ In addition to these examples, a report is expected to be published by summer 2020 through the ET 2020 Expert Group on ECEC to provide concrete examples and advice on implementing inclusive ECEC.

Summary

Inclusion in education is an ongoing process of removing barriers that prevent some learners to participate in quality education. This policy memo demonstrates that inclusive ECEC could further the goal of inclusive education, by ensuring that inclusion begins early in the trajectory of lifelong learning. There is still a significantly low enrolment level to ECEC in Europe,^{67,68} and evidence suggests low access to quality ECEC for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as families of low socio-economic status.^{69,70} Importantly, examples from European inclusive ECEC practices have shown how inclusion can be linked to quality ECEC practices. In this regard, through joint efforts to implement inclusion in ECEC practices, we can hope that quality ECEC provides a critical step towards building a more cohesive and inclusive European society.

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