EU Policy on and Practices in EU Member States Regarding Inclusive Education in Early-Years Settings[1]

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Preface

This report is an outcomes of the Erasmus+ Project (Key Action 2: Strategic Partnerships) *Designing Curriculum for Preschool Teachers Who Work in Inclusive Classroom Settings*, contract number 2016-1-TR01-KA201-034660. The project is financed by the European Union Erasmus+ Programme and coordinated by the Turkish National Agency (Directorate of European Union Education and Youth Programmes Centre, Turkish Ministry of European Union Affairs).

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Report

This report presents a literature review of current and relevant policies of the European Union regarding inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), thus contributing to Project Outcome No. 1: Inform the development of high quality inclusive ECEC services in Turkey.

The outcomes of the project, including this report, will be published via the Erasmus+ Dissemination Platform: http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/.

"For many children, their introduction to ECEC [Early Childhood Education and Care] represents their first step into society. It presents them with a mirror on how society looks at them and thus how they may look at themselves, since it is only in a context of sameness and difference that identity can be constructed. It is in this public mirror that they are confronted with these essential and existential questions: Who am I? And is it OK to be who I am?"

(Vandenbroeck, 2012, cited in Bennet, 2013, p. 5)

Introduction

This report presents current policy initiatives of the European Union regarding Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). It focuses on developing more inclusive practices in EU member states to provide all young children with high quality ECEC.

The opening citation clearly recognises the importance of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for all children. However, for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, a challenging part of engaging with these existential questions is how they are perceived and treated by their peers, families and others in their communities. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006) states that:

> *"Children with disabilities are more vulnerable to all forms of abuse be it mental, physical or sexual in all settings, including the family, schools, private and public institutions, inter alia alternative care, work environment and community at large. It is often quoted that children with disabilities are five times more likely to be victims of abuse. In the home and in institutions, children with disabilities are often subjected to mental and physical violence and sexual abuse, and they are also particularly vulnerable to neglect and negligent treatment since they often present an extra physical and financial burden on the family. In addition, the lack of access to a functional complaint receiving and monitoring mechanism is conducive to systematic and continuing abuse. School bullying is a particular form of violence that children are exposed to and more often than not, this form of abuse targets children with disabilities."* (p. 42)

The European Union recognises its responsibility for individuals with disabilities and, therefore, ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which went into effect for the EU on January 23, 2011 (Inclusion Europe, Lumos, & Eurochild, 2014). The adoption of the UN Convention by the EU, which means that the EU seeks to promote individual human rights, is unprecedented in its history. Both the member states (after ratifying the UN Convention) and the EU are now jointly responsible for helping to achieve the maximum progress possible regarding the rights of children with disabilities. For example, the European Commission recognises that:

> *"The Member States are primarily responsible for the content and teaching methods of special needs education (SEN) within their borders, including the curriculum for training SEN teachers or methodologies for drafting individual educational plans. The EU complements this by putting at the disposal of the Member States resources (through the Structural Funds) for building accessible schools, exchange of best practices on SEN education, staff training or taking measures to eliminate discrimination in vocational training."* (Inclusion Europe, Lumos, & Eurochild, 2014, p. 9)

Therefore, the individual EU countries have specific responsibilities regarding the implementation of ideas and measures in the daily routines of their citizens to promote the well-being of children and youth with disabilities within ECEC provision and at all levels of the education system. The EU itself does not interfere with **how** member states put these ideas and measures into practice. Rather, it

facilitates and supports projects and research in which institutions from member states collaborate in studying and developing examples of good practice, create new knowledge and learn from each other.

In his review study, Bennet (2012) refers to claims by several independent agencies that with regard to ECEC provision for specific groups of children, such as children growing up in poverty, services in Europe remain inadequate and that "the issue of child poverty and child well-being is not sufficiently addressed in the Europe 2020 process" (p. 6). To improve ECEC provision throughout Europe, Bennet suggests the following agenda:

- *A universal entitlement to publicly funded, affordable ECEC provision from the end of parental leave or at least by the age of three or four years;*
- *The integration of ECEC systems (regulation, administration and funding) that promote more equitable access and a more unitary approach to 0-6 provision;*
- *A combination of high quality ECEC centre-based provision and parent support programmes (family health, parent education, counselling, adult education ...);*
- *A valued, well qualified and adequately supported workforce;*
- *Inter-agency cooperation between ECEC centres, health and social services, local authorities;*
- *A political commitment toward democracy, equality and civil rights.* (p. 7)

Bennet concludes that, to date, few European countries have succeeded in implementing all points of this agenda. However, some examples of good practice – integrating these points into ECEC services – may be found; in particular, in the Nordic countries and Slovenia (Bennet, 2012). With specific regard to the inclusion of disadvantaged children, Bennet found that universal services for all yield better outcomes than separate provisions for specific groups of children. Further, it seems that countries that have succeeded in creating greater equality (e.g., the Nordic countries) are also better equipped to bring about more social equity, social justice and social inclusion for all citizens (Bennet & Moss, 2010).

Referring to the work of Wilkinson and Pickett, in particular, their book *The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies almost always do better* (2009), Bennet and Moss (2010) suggest that it is not enough to tackle exclusion solely through education. To make a true difference, countries must address the underlying issues of social exclusion, such as unemployment, lack of health care, poor housing conditions, the impact of drugs and violence, etc. The authors also point to some more general features of the ECEC sector that may contribute to inequality in services for young children: the gendered workforce (women comprise about 98% of the workforce in ECEC settings); the generally poor quality of their employment (e.g., low salaries, poor working conditions and little opportunity for professional development); the relatively low qualifications that are required, in particular for children under 3 and in systems that divide services into those for children under the age of 3 and those for children over the age of 3 (see Table 1); the lower standards in ECEC for children under 3; and access barriers for disadvantaged children (Bennet & Moss, 2010).

Table 1
Qualification Levels for Employees in ECEC

Country	Integrated or split systems[36]	Level of basic education for lead workers with children[37] 0-3 years CSA	3 years-CSA	Workforce qualifications in the 0-3 sector compared to 3-6s[38]
DK Denmark	Integrated	ISCED 5		Same
FR France	Split	ISCED 3,4	ISCED 5	Lower
IT Italy	Split	ISCED 3	ISCED 5	Lower
HU Hungary	Split	ISCED 4	ISCED 5	Lower
NO Norway	Integrated	ISCED 5		Same
PL Poland	Split	ISCED 4	ISCED 5	Lower
PT Portugal	Split*	ISCED 5	ISCED 5	Lower
SI Slovenia	Integrated	ISCED 5		Same
SE Sweden	Integrated	ISCED 5		Same
U. Kingdom	Split	ISCED 3	ISCED 5	Lower

(From Bennet & Moss, 2010).
(Note: in this Table ISCED 5 refers to bachelor's level. In the new International Standard Classification of Education of 2011 a successfully completed bachelor's study is classified at level 6 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012))

Inclusive ECEC services can make a difference, both for children and their families. Small (2009), for example, conducted research on networking; in particular, the experiences of New York City mothers whose children were enrolled in childcare centres. His findings showed that through the child centres these mothers became included in the life of the centre and thereby developed networks that stimulated their social participation, their children's school achievement and even finding paid work. Small argues that organisational conditions, for example, the efforts ECEC staff put into engaging parents by organising activities, such as flexibility regarding drop-off or pick-up times, parties, fieldtrips, fundraising events and spring cleaning, actually promoted their social inclusion and participation.

In summary, one could argue that "early childhood education and care is not a magic solution to poverty and social inclusion, but it has a part to play" (Bennet and Moss, 2010, p. 62).

EU Policy Regarding Children With Disabilities

The European Commission (2010) presented its European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 – A Renewed Commitment to a Barrier-Free Europe on November 15, 2010, to the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions. The overall aim of the strategy is "to empower people with disabilities so that they can enjoy their full rights, and benefit fully from participating in society and in the European economy" (p. 4). As mentioned, the EU only facilitates this goal by, for example, providing funds for research, staff training, awareness raising, data collection and sharing and exchanging examples of good practice. As a result, the member states are responsible for putting these ideas into everyday practice in all domains of life and at all levels of society, in particular, when they themselves have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities of 2006.

In supporting national efforts, the European Commission suggests eight main areas for action: Accessibility, Participation, Equality, Employment, Education and Training, Social Protection, Health and External Action (European Commission, 2010). The areas mentioned here form the basics of understanding disability, disability rights and the idea of inclusion. These concepts will be discussed in more detail below.

- **Accessibility** is a necessary requirement for participation at school, in society and in the economy. According to the European Commission, major barriers still exist regarding the accessibility of the physical environment, transportation, information and ICT technology as well as many other services and facilities. The principles of universal design (e.g., Dinnebeil, Boat & Bae, 2013) may serve as practical guidelines to make not only the built environment more accessible, but also the virtual environment (e.g., accessible websites and assistive technology), products, services and all sorts of provisions, like ECEC, schools and the labour market to support the full participation of people with disabilities.
- **Participation** includes the right of people with disabilities to free movement, to choose where, how and with whom they want to live, and to have full access to cultural, recreational and sports activities. People with disabilities share with other people valued roles like being a consumer, a student, an economic and political actor and a respected member of the family and the local community.
- **Equality** refers to enjoying the same rights as all other people and having the means to exercise these rights. Protection from discrimination of any kind should be supported by clear national policies combatting discrimination and promoting equal opportunities. Awareness raising is the key word here.
- **Employment** is a basic human right for all people because it ensures economic independence, enhances personal achievement and may protect people from experiencing poverty. Realising employment for young adults requires specific attention to their preparation for and their transition from school to the labour market.
- Regarding **education and training**, the European Commission (2010) clearly advocates a view that children and youth with a disability should have access to the general education system. It leaves no room for doubt when it states that

    > [w]ith full respect for the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems, the Commission will support the goal of inclusive, quality education and training under the Youth on the Move initiative. It will increase knowledge on levels of education and opportunities for people with disabilities, and increase their mobility by facilitating participation in the Lifelong Learning Programme. (pp. 7-8)

    Once again, it is made clear that what is taught and how teaching and learning are organised is up to the member states.
- The European Commission (2010) calls upon all member states to strengthen their **social protection** systems, aiming at overcoming income inequalities, poverty, social exclusion and isolation for people with disabilities.
- Member states are stimulated to combat **health inequalities** for people with disabilities. That is, all people with disabilities should have equal access to (preventive), affordable and quality healthcare, taking into account their specific needs.

Note. **External action** refers, for example, to working with non-EU countries and candidate and potential candidate countries.

Another key document, focusing in particular on ECEC in the European Union, is the report of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (2014) under the auspices of the European Commission: *Proposal for Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care*. This report was used for this Erasmus+ project to (a) gain an in-depth understanding of key issues regarding ECEC in the European Union; (b) distinguish relevant ideas, concepts and principles

that may guide the needs analysis for preschool teachers in inclusive ECEC settings (project goal 1); (c) provide input into designing a tool to evaluate inclusive preschool settings from the perspective of EU quality indicators (project goal 2); and (d) track down relevant literature that supports the realisation of project goals 1 and 2 (the so-called snowball method).

To start with it is important to understand what ECEC is and how we define inclusion in this project.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is defined as all arrangements providing education and care for children **under the compulsory school age**, regardless of setting, funding, opening hours or programme content (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2001). Bennet (2012) defines ECEC as "all publicly funded services aiming to ensure the well-being, health and education of young children **from prenatal to primary school entry**" (p. 12).

Defining *inclusion* is more complicated because it is not a legal term. Rather, it represents **a philosophy or a set of values** related to the importance of children, young people and adults fully belong to the communities where they grow up and live (Richardson-Gibbs & Klein, 2014). The Council of Exceptional Children, Division for Early Childhood (DEC), and the National Association of Education of Young Children (NAEYC), both professional organizations in the United States, define **early childhood inclusion** as follows:

> *Early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential. The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high quality* [and inclusive] *early childhood programs and services are **access, participation**, and **supports.*** (DEC/NAEYC, 2009, p. 2)

The report of the Working Group on early Childhood Education and Care (2014) does not in itself discuss the concept of inclusion in relation to ECEC. However, it does address issues of diversity and inequality, due to, for example, social disadvantage membership of minority ethnic groups. Thus, the report advocates for a universal entitlement to ECEC provision and a goal of reducing the attainment gap, often evident in children from minority ethnic groups.

The concepts of diversity and inclusion are closely related. Banks et al. (2005) observe that within nation states throughout the world, diversity is increasing. They go on to argue that "[o]nly when a nation-state is unified around a set of democratic values such as human rights, justice, and equality can it secure the liberties of cultural, ethnic, language and religious groups and enable them to experience freedom, justice, and peace" (p. 7). Their overview of **diversity variables** may help to better understand the concepts of inclusion and diversity and the challenges these bring when trying to develop inclusive institutions like ECEC (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Diversity variables.
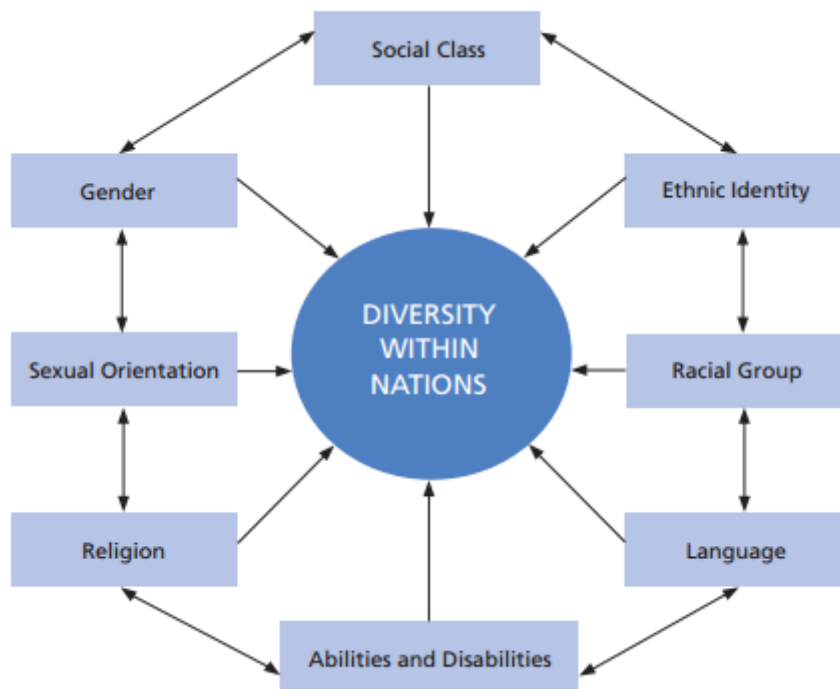
(From Banks et al., 2005, p. 17).

Although this Erasmus+ project focuses on young children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), it seems important to recognise that these disabilities may coincide with one or more of the other diversity variables such as coming from a disadvantaged social background or belonging to an ethnic minority group.

For a definition and a better understanding of intellectual and developmental disabilities, we refer to the American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD, 2017), whose definitions are widely accepted:

- *Intellectual disability encompasses the "cognitive" part of this definition, that is, a disability that is broadly related to thought processes. Because intellectual and other developmental disabilities frequently co-occur, intellectual disability professionals often work with people who have both types of disabilities.*
- *Intellectual disability is a disability characterized by significant limitations in both **intellectual functioning** (reasoning, learning, problem solving) and **adaptive behaviour**, which covers a range of everyday social and practical skills. This disability originates **before the age of 18**.*
- *Developmental disabilities is an umbrella term that includes intellectual disability as well as other disabilities that are apparent during childhood. Developmental disabilities are severe chronic disabilities that can be cognitive, physical or both. The disabilities appear before the age of 22 and are likely to be lifelong. Some developmental disabilities are largely physical, such as cerebral palsy or epilepsy. Some individuals may have a condition that includes both a physical and an intellectual disability; for example, Down syndrome or fetal alcohol syndrome.* (AAIDD, 2017, http://aaidd.org/intellectual-disability/definition/faqs-on-intellectual-disability#.WNT7k9LhDIU)

Thus, the definition of intellectual disability centres around three criteria: significant limitations in intellectual functioning, adaptive behaviour and onset before the age of 18 (AAIDD, 2017). Specifically, individuals with an IQ below 70 and no higher than 75 are considered to demonstrate limitations in intellectual functioning. Limitations in adaptive behaviour, in turn, manifest themselves in three types of skills:

- **Conceptual skills** — language and literacy; money, time, and number concepts; and self-direction.
- **Social skills** — interpersonal skills, social responsibility, self-esteem, gullibility, naïveté (e.g., wariness), social problem solving, and the ability to follow rules, obey laws and avoid being victimized.
- **Practical skills** — activities of daily living (personal care), occupational skills, healthcare, travel/transportation, schedules/routines, safety, use of money and use of the telephone.

It is important to note that intellectual disability **is not a static condition**. It may be improved by the provision of quality supports and appropriate programmes of teaching and learning. To that end, the position paper of Inclusion Europe (2008) suggests that important characteristics of the provision of educational services for children and young people with an intellectual disability are as follows:

- it is provided close to home;
- it means growing up among peers;
- it offers a physically, socially and emotionally safe environment;
- it provides for an adequate and adaptive practice, that can be adjusted to the individual needs of the student;
- it offers choice for the students involved;
- it provides choice for the parents of these children (e.g., mainstream classes or special classes attached to mainstream schools); and
- it supports the development of arrangements for life-long learning.

Early Childhood Education and Care Provision in the EU

Learning and education start from birth, and provide a solid foundation for personal development, successful lifelong learning and participation in society at micro, meso and macro levels. Therefore, it is important to secure accessible, affordable, quality, effective and sustainable ECEC services for all children (Working Group, 2014).

The Council of the European Union (2011) finds that, among other factors:

- *ECEC tends to receive less attention than any other level of education and training despite evidence that investing efficiently in quality early-years education is much more effective than intervening later and brings considerable returns throughout the life cycle, particularly for the disadvantaged;*
- *since ECEC provides an opportunity for early detection of learning difficulties and early intervention, it can help to identify young children with special educational needs and, wherever possible, facilitate their integration into mainstream schools;*
- *attention needs to be devoted to issues such as environment and infrastructure, staffing, the curriculum, governance and quality assurance;*
- *a systemic and more integrated approach to ECEC services at local, regional and national levels involving all the relevant stakeholders — including families — is required, together with close cross-sectoral collaboration between different policy sectors, such as education, culture, social affairs, employment, health and justice;*
- ***comparatively little research on young children's education has been conducted or gathered at the EU level that can inform the development and implementation of ECEC***

policies in the member states. There is a need to make existing research evidence more widely accessible and to supplement this with more extensive research into ECEC provision and its effects across the member states, taking account of cultural diversity and recording examples of good practice and experience. (pp. 8-10)

Therefore, according to the Council of the European Union (2011), it is necessary, among other things, to:

- *promote cross-sectoral and integrated approaches to care and education services in order to meet all children's needs — cognitive, social, emotional, psychological and physical — in a holistic way, as well as to ensure close collaboration between the home and ECEC and a smooth transition between the different levels of education;*
- *promote developmentally appropriate programmes and curricula that foster **acquisition of both cognitive and noncognitive skills**, while **recognising the importance of play**, which is also crucial to learning in the early years;*
- *support the professionalization of ECEC staff, with an emphasis on the development of their competences, qualifications and working conditions, and enhancing the prestige of the profession. In addition, developing policies aimed at attracting, training and retaining qualified staff in ECEC and improving the gender balance;*
- *support parents in their role as the main educators of their children during the early years and encouraging ECEC services to work in close partnership with parents, families and communities in order to increase awareness of the opportunities offered by ECEC and the importance of learning from an early age; and*
- *promoting quality assurance with the participation of all key stakeholders, including families.* (pp. 8-10)

The key themes emerging from the foregoing focus on ECEC services in the European Union include: a holistic perspective of child development; integration of students into mainstream schools; recognising play as an important condition for learning and participation; making sure that programmes and curricula fit the developmental stage of the individual child; securing smooth transitions to primary schools and. later, to advanced levels of education; developing and maintaining close partnership with parents, families and the community; supporting parents; collaborating with other relevant agencies; supporting the continuing professional development (CPD) of ECEC staff; securing a rich, stimulating and adaptive environment with an appropriate infrastructure; and using a quality monitoring and evaluation system to establish whether children learn, participate and feel valued and respected.

Motiejunaite, Delhaxhe, Balcon, and Borodankova (2014) point to a number of areas that policymakers at national, regional or local levels need to address when developing inclusive ECEC services (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. ECEC areas that policymakers may directly influence.
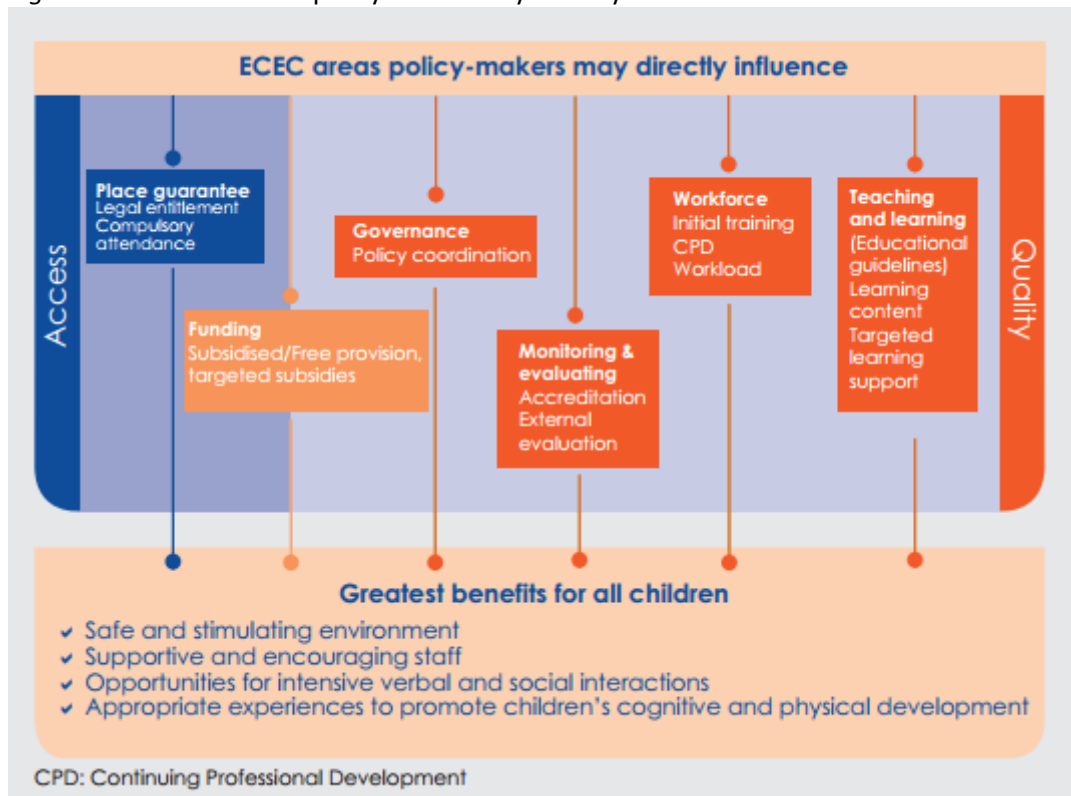
(From Motiejunaite et al., 2014, p. 4).

As illustrated in Figure 2, quality and access are key issues when developing safe and stimulating practices that allow all young children to thrive regardless their abilities or disabilities. *Quality* is about building a skilled workforce, constantly improving teaching and learning and monitoring and evaluating the processes and outcomes of ECEC provision. *Access* is about availability and affordability for all children. It is estimated that in 2011 32 million children were entitled to ECEC services in Europe, but almost 20 million did not receive such services (Motiejunaite et al., 2014).

The majority of European countries choose one of two options to provide ECEC services for their young children: (a) a legal entitlement, which implies that children have e right to ECEC, giving their parents a choice to make use of the service or not; and (b) compulsory attendance, which means that children have a legal obligation to attend (Motiejunaite et al., 2014). A few European countries do not have specific measures to stimulate the use of ECEC services. Only six European countries (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Norway, Slovenia and Sweden) guarantee a legal right to ECEC to every child, often immediately after the childcare leave of the child's parents (Motiejunaite et al., 2014). In about a third of the European countries (Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Spain, France, Luxembourg, Hungary, Malta, Portugal and the United Kingdom), the legal entitlement to publicly funded ECEC services starts when children are 3 years old, or a few months before they reach the age of 3 (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Guaranteed ECEC placements in European countries.
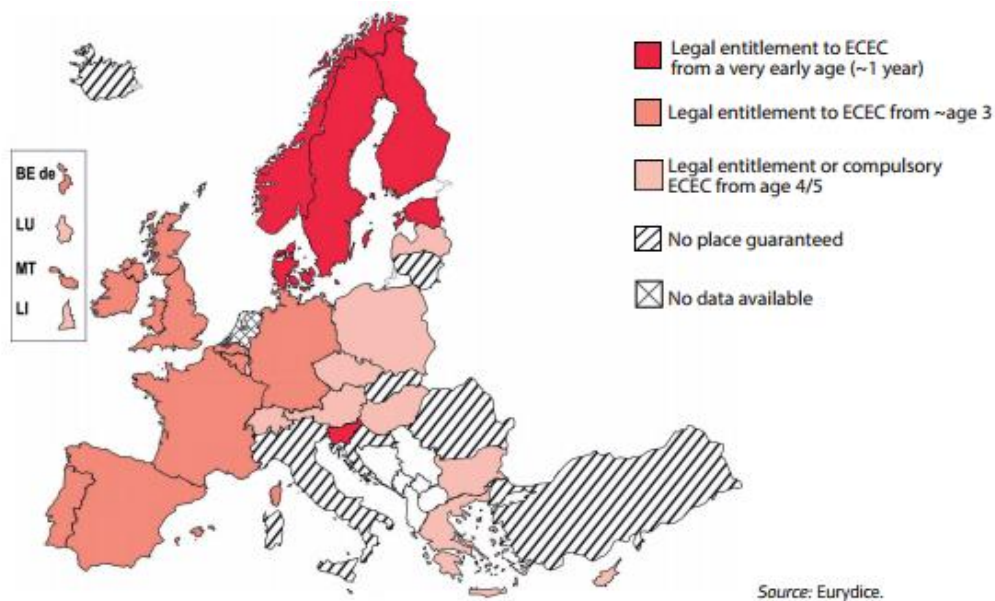
(From Motiejunaite et al., 2014).

Many countries find it difficult to balance supply and demand. In fact, only Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway seem to be able to meet the demand for ECEC services sufficiently for any age group (Motiejunaite et al., 2014). Countries also vary considerably regarding the age when compulsory education starts. In Sweden, for example, all children from the age of 1 are legally entitled to attend ECEC services. When parents request a place for their child, the local authority is obliged to offer one within a period of four months (Motiejunaite et al., 2014). Further, such a placement should be as close as possible to the child's home.

Figure 4 shows the proportion of children under the age of 3 attending ECEC services other than home-based care. The 33% line marks the target the European countries had set for 2010. In 2011 only 11 countries had been able to reach the target (Motiejunaite et al., 2014).

Figure 4. Participation rates of children younger than 3 years old in ECEC placements in European countries.
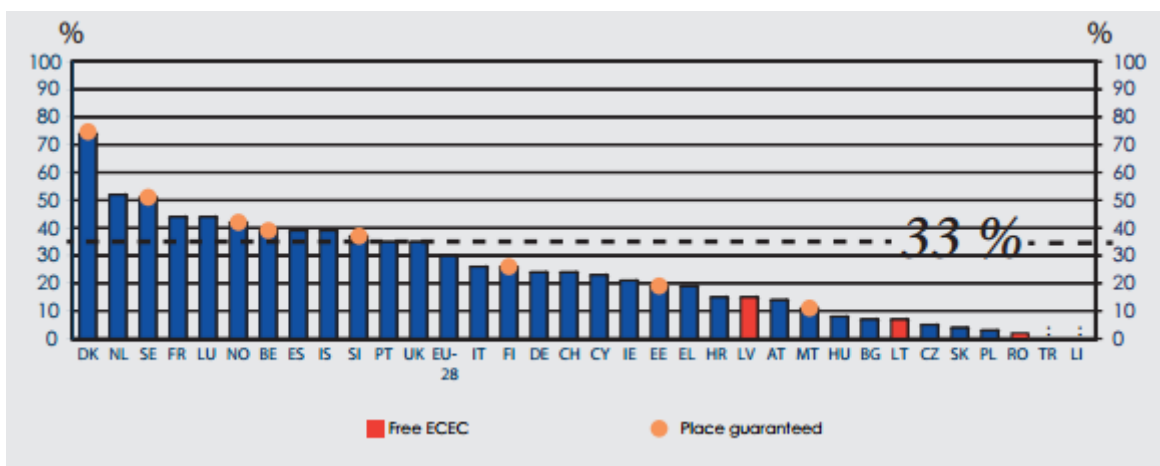
(From Motiejunaite et al., 2014).

In the majority of European countries, centre-based ECEC services are split into two separate phases: younger children attend different settings than older children. As a result, at a certain age (mostly around the age of 3), young children transit to another setting. However, most of the Nordic countries, the Baltic countries, Croatia and Slovenia operate a unitary system, which means that children do not need to experience interruptions or transitions before they start primary education. Finally, some countries provide both unitary and separate settings (e.g., Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany and Spain) (Motiejunaite et al., 2014) (see also Figure 5).

Figure 5. Unitary or split ECEC provision in European countries.

Source: Eurydice.
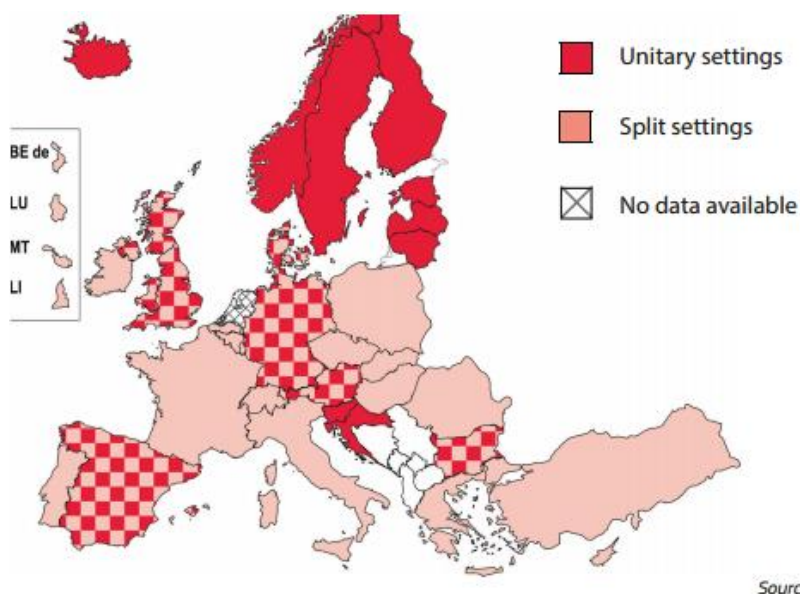
(From Motiejunaite et al., 2014).

The different ways of organising ECEC services in EU countries, either in unitary or split settings, have implications regarding, for example, the ministry that is responsible for the services, educational guidelines, requirements for staff qualifications, the adult-child ratios and whether a place is guaranteed.

Key Principles of a Quality Framework for ECEC Provision in the EU

The task of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (2014) was to identify measures that would help member states to address and achieve measurable improvements in ECEC. As part of its task, the Working Group recognised that there is **no internationally agreed-upon concept of quality in ECEC services**. Nevertheless, the group distinguished between three kinds of measures:

- Measures targeting the **structural quality** of services, focusing on the system and how it is designed, organised and regulated.
- Measures targeting the **process quality** of services, focusing on what is actually happening in practice within a particular ECEC setting.
- Measures targeting the **outcome quality** of services, focusing on the benefits for children, families, communities and societies.

The CORE review of the University of East London, Cass School of Education & the University of Ghent, Department for Social Studies (2011) suggests that it is generally agreed that, at the end of the day, "the quality of early childhood services – and ultimately the outcomes for children and families – depends on well-educated, experienced and 'competent' staff" (p. 7). But at the same time, it poses the question: What makes for a competent early childhood practitioner?

What counts as quality in ECEC?

What counts as quality seems to depend on the views people in general have about how children should learn and grow up in society (Working Group, 2014). Thus, the Working Group (2014) found that rationales underpinning ECEC policy reforms differ greatly across countries in the European Union. However, member states seem to agree on a number of quality indicators, including the following:

- **Children are seen as active learners**. They benefit from a combination of playing, learning and being cared for; and they all differ from each other, bringing unique characteristics and strengths that should be valued and taken into consideration in every ECEC setting.
- **All children have the right to speak out**, have a voice that is heard and has an impact. A key word in the following definition is *belonging*: "children's identities need to be nurtured by feelings of belonging that are developed through meaningful relationships with adults and peers and through the interaction with **a welcoming environment that values their languages and cultural backgrounds**" (p. 24).
- **Parents are the most important partners,** and their participation is fundamental in ECEC. Although they have very diverse backgrounds and live in very diverse communities, this diversity needs to be valued and respected as an asset and taken into account when working with parents and families. The Working Group is quite clear about the importance of this indicator: "A mono-cultural arrangement of ECEC services that do not recognise or practise diversity, generally fails to gain the trust of minority ethnic groups and in the worst case generates segregation and reinforces discrimination" (p. 24).
- **Quality is based on values and beliefs and, therefore, is context-specific**. This implies that defining quality is an ongoing and dynamic process susceptible to, for example, contextual changes and evolving views, evidence and practices.

Most European countries use educational guidelines to influence and secure the quality of ECEC teaching and learning (Motiejunaite et al., 2014). Educational guidelines "may cover learning content, objectives and attainment targets, as well as teaching approaches, learning activities and assessment methods" (Motiejunaite et al., 2014, p. 19). Some countries have included their guidelines in legislation; others have incorporated them as recommendations in a broad framework, thus providing space for local ECEC settings to develop context-relevant and tailor-made practices. About 50% of the European countries only provide guidelines for children over 3 years old (see Figure 6).
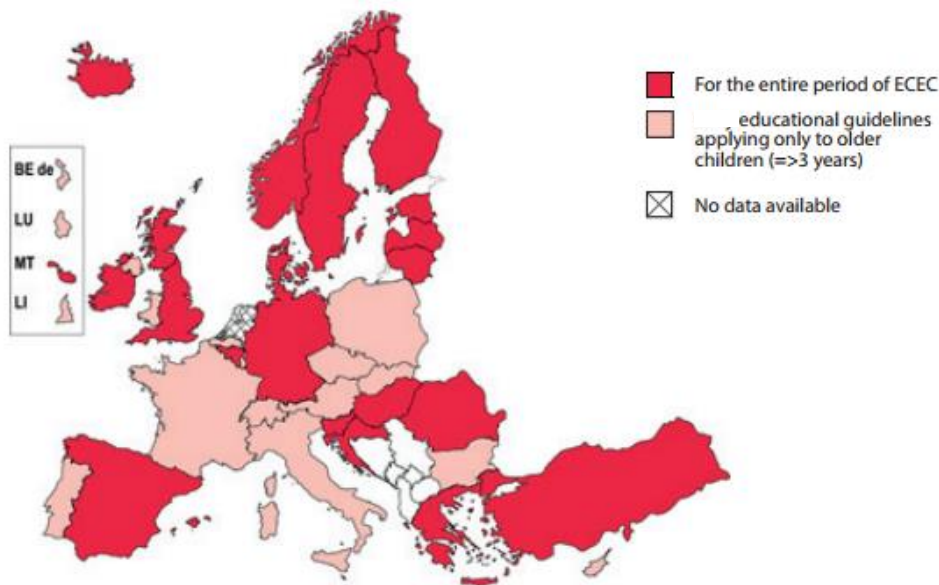
Figure 6. Educational guidelines in governmental steering documents in European countries.

(From Motiejunaite et al., 2014).

Despite the differences outlined above, all guidelines present areas for learning and development, focusing on the same learning objectives regarding personal, emotional and social development of the children, language and communication skills, expressive and creative skills, physical development, health education and understanding of the world in which they grow up (Motiejunaite et al., 2014) (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Areas of learning and development in ECEC settings in European countries.
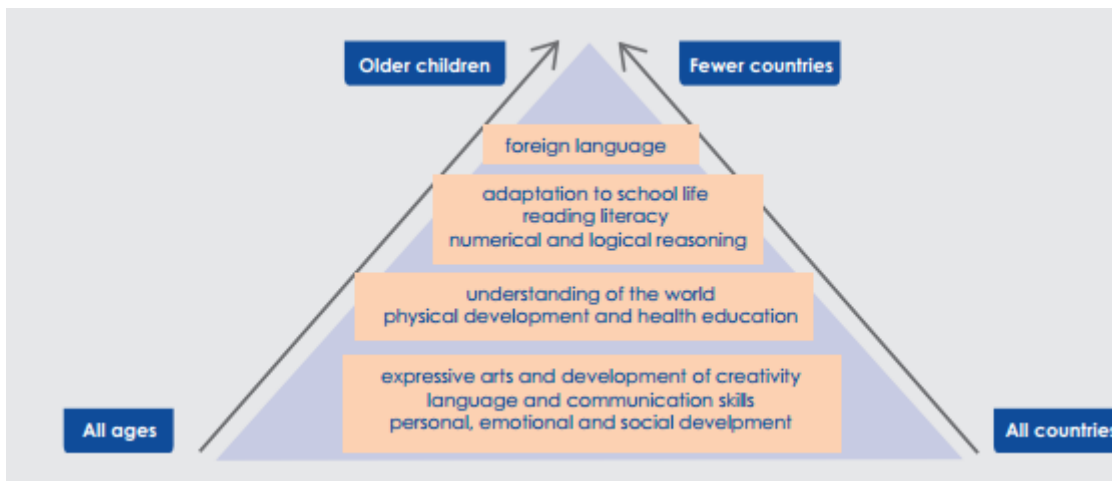
(From Motiejunaite et al., 2014).

Most European country guidelines also emphasise the importance of striking a fair balance between adult-led and child-initiated activities. About 50% of the countries underline the importance of free play. After consulting for three years with organisations representing childcare workers, teachers, parents, policymakers and researchers, Ireland developed its National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Siolta, 2010). The framework was designed to define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in early childhood care and education settings

where children aged birth to 6 years old are present. These settings include full and part-time daycare and infant classes in primary schools.

Since December 2008, the Early Years Education Policy Unit, in the Department of Education and Skills in Ireland, has been responsible for the implementation of Síolta, the Irish acronym for the framework (http://siolta.ie/about.php). The framework consists of three distinct but interrelated elements: 12 Principles, 16 Standards and 75 Components of Quality. The 12 Principles present the overall vision of the framework. The 16 Standards and 75 Components define quality practice within the framework and help practitioners to translate the vision to their everyday ECEC practices. Each standard has a number of associated components that break down the standards into "bite-sized" items. Signposts for Reflection and Think-Abouts support practitioners during their daily routines in becoming more aware of and critical of their work. Practitioners are to think of them as discussion points or thought-provoking suggestions. As such, they may be used by individuals who wish to take some time to consider their own work; and by groups, either within an individual setting or in a larger network. They offer a focus for discussion about quality improvement in individual work, in the work of the setting or in a number of other situations. They are explicitly open-ended. There are no right or wrong answers and, most important, they should not be used as checkboxes (http://siolta.ie/about.php). Table 2 provides an overview of the Irish principles for ECEC.

Table 2

The 12 Principles of the Irish National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education

Principle	Explanation
The value of early childhood	Early childhood is a significant and distinct time in life that must be nurtured, respected, valued and supported in its own right.
Children first	The child's individuality, strengths, rights and needs are central in the provision of quality early childhood experiences.
Parents	Parents are the primary educators of the child and play a pre-eminent role in promoting her/his well-being, learning and development.
Relationships	Responsive, sensitive and reciprocal relationships that are consistent over time are essential to the well-being, learning and development of the young child.
Equality	Equality is an essential characteristic of quality early childhood care and education.
Diversity	Quality early childhood settings acknowledge and respect diversity and ensure that all children and families have their individual, personal, cultural and linguistic identity validated.
Environments	The physical environment of the young child has a direct impact on her/his well-being, learning and development.
Welfare	The safety, welfare and well-being of all children must be protected and promoted in all early childhood environments.
Role of the adult	The role of the adult in providing quality early childhood experiences is fundamental.
Teamwork	The provision of quality early childhood experiences requires cooperation, communication and mutual respect.
Pedagogy	Pedagogy in early childhood is expressed by curricula or programmes of activities that take a holistic approach to the development and learning of the child and reflect the inseparable nature of care and education.
Play	Play is central to the well-being, development and learning of the young child.

(From http://siolta.ie/media/pdfs/siolta-manual-2017.pdf)

The 16 Standards of the Irish framework along with examples of Components and Signposts for Reflection are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

The 16 Standards of the Irish National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education With Examples of Building Components and Signposts for Reflection

Standard	Example of component	Example of Signpost for Reflection
1: Rights of the Child	1.2 Each child has opportunities and is enabled to take the lead, initiate activity, be appropriately independent and is supported to solve problems.	How is the child provided with opportunities within the daily routine to use her/his initiative and to be appropriately independent?
2: Environments	2.5 The outdoor environment provides a range of developmentally appropriate, challenging, diverse, creative and enriching experiences for all children.	How does your setting provide and promote opportunities for the child to experience the outdoor environment?
3: Parents and Families	3.2 There are a variety of opportunities for parents to be involved in activities within the setting, taking into account the range of parents' interests and time-constraints.	How is parental involvement supported and encouraged within your setting?
4: Consultation	4.1 The setting actively invites contributions to decision-making processes and strategies for the development and delivery of the service from a wide range of interested stakeholders.	How do you encourage consultation with staff, parents, children and other appropriate stakeholders?
5: Interactions	5.3 The adult uses all aspects of the daily routine (both formal and informal) to interact sensitively and respectfully with the child.	What kind of interactions do you have with the child during your daily care routines?
6: Play	6.3 The opportunities for play/exploration provided for the child mirror her/his stage of development, give the child the freedom to achieve mastery and success, and challenge the child to make the transition to new learning and development.	What kind of play is the child currently engaging in?
7: Curriculum	7.6 Planning for curriculum or programme implementation is based on the child's individual profile, which is established through systematic observation and assessment for learning.	What are the different elements of your system of child observation and assessment?
8: Planning and Evaluation	8.1 Each Standard area of practice is reviewed regularly through appropriate and tailored processes of observation, planning, action and evaluation.	What types of review processes are appropriate to each of the 16 Standards specific to the Quality Framework?
9: Health and Welfare	9.5 The setting has made significant efforts to ensure that children's need for rest, quiet time and privacy is appropriately catered for and respected.	How do you make appropriate space available for quiet time and relaxation, away from the other activities in your setting?
10: Organisation	10.3 The management of financial resources within the setting is efficient, effective and ensures the sustainability of the service.	What systems do you have in place to make sure that financial records are accurate and well maintained?
11: Professional Practice	11.4 Adults within the setting are encouraged and appropriately resourced	In what type of professional development activity do adults working in the setting participate?

	to engage in a wide variety of regular and ongoing professional development.	
12: Communication	12.3 Confidentiality is a feature of the way staff record, store and share information in the best interests of children.	How is information shared in a confidential manner?
13: Transitions	13.3 Parents, children and relevant professionals are consulted and involved in ensuring that transitions are made as smooth as possible for children.	How are parents, children and relevant professionals consulted and involved in children's transitions into/ within/from your setting?
14: Identity and Belonging	14.3 The setting promotes positive understanding and regard for the identity and rights of others through the provision of an appropriate environment, experiences and interactions within the setting.	How does the environment promote positive understanding and regard for the identity and rights of others?
15: Legislation and Regulation	15.1 All relevant legislation and regulations are met or exceeded by the setting.	Is your service compliant with relevant legislation and regulations?
16: Community Involvement	16.4 The setting actively promotes children's citizenship in their local, regional and national community.	How do you try to ensure that setting activities are regularly coordinated with community agencies and/or local schools?

(From http://siolta.ie/media/pdfs/siolta-manual-2017.pdf)

Quality statements for ECEC

The Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (2014) identified 10 quality statements regarding ECEC:

1. ECEC provision is **available**, **affordable** and **accessible** to **all families and their children,** and they need to be able to recognise the usefulness of these provisions.
2. ECEC provision **encourages participation**, **strengthens social inclusion** and **embraces diversity**.
3. **Well-qualified staff** is employed, whose initial and CPD enable them to fulfil their professional role.
4. **Supportive working conditions** are in place, including professional leadership that provides time and opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and working with parents.
5. The curriculum is based on **pedagogic goals, values and approaches** that enable children to reach their full potential in a holistic way.
6. The curriculum requires and challenges staff to **collaborate with children, colleagues and parents** and to reflect on their own practice. In particular, ECE provision should be negotiated and matched to the parents' views, values and expectations, taking into account their diverse backgrounds.
7. **Monitoring and evaluation** produce information at the relevant local, regional and/or national level to support continuing improvements regarding the quality of policy and practice.
8. Monitoring and evaluation are always in the **best interest of the child**.

In order to realise these quality statements in everyday practice, the Working Group added two standards regarding governance arrangements:

9. Stakeholders in the ECEC system of a particular country **work together** and **share their understanding of roles and responsibilities** with a focus on inter-professional, interdisciplinary and inter-agency collaboration.
10. Legislation, regulation and/or funding support progress towards a **universal legal entitlement** to publicly subsidised or funded ECEC, and progress is regularly reported to all stakeholders.

These statements are reflected in the following framework (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Structure of the key principles for a quality ECEC framework in the EU.

(From Bolla, 2016).

In addition to high quality, both at the system and the curriculum level, Bennet (2012) points to **duration** and **intensity** of ECEC programmes as decisive characteristics. He also points to the importance of a smooth transition to and collaboration with the primary school. *Duration* refers to the number of years/months children may be in ECEC placements before entering primary education. *Intensity*, in turn, is about the number of hours/days per week and months per year children may attend an ECEC programme. Within the EU, there are huge differences from country to country regarding these two aspects. In the Nordic countries and in Slovenia, for example, children have access to a full-day, 11-month-a-year experience in a setting of high-quality provision.

However, Bennet (2012) warns that "given the diversity of European contexts, it is risky to generalise research and policy findings across the Union" (p. 48). Thus, as discussed earlier, it is important to take into account the history, traditions, organization and practices of early childhood services in the different EU countries and the values they favour and that underpin these practices. Elaborating on the latter, Bennet argues that in some European countries the focus in ECEC provision departs from a rights-based approach, emphasising pedagogical goals and participatory processes rather than focusing on the evaluation of children's outcomes and their assumed future contribution to a competitive economy as is the case in some other countries.

Finally, regarding quality standards, Bennet (2012, p. 55) cautions that, when used inappropriately, such standards may actually undermine professional autonomy and responsibility. Instead, he refers

to the seven ISSA (International STEP by STEP Association; www.issa.nl) principles, developed through praxiological research (research carried out by teams of practitioners who know their context well), which may stimulate and support an open dialogue between all stakeholders regarding the quality of a specific ECEC practice. These principles are:

1. Interactions;
2. Family and Community;
3. Inclusion, Diversity and Values;
4. Assessment and Planning;
5. Teaching Strategies;
6. Learning Environment; and
7. Professional Development.

Such a dialogue should be a learning experience for all involved, even though it may present all kinds of challenges to the participants.

Implications for Practice

Considering the day-to-day work of teachers and its contribution to long-lasting positive effects on children's development, a literature review by Lazzari and Vandenbroeck (2012) of studies on effective practice suggests that it is important in ECEC provision, among other things, to ensure that:

- education and care are combined;
- stimulating and sustaining curiosity in children is viewed as more important than formalised learning;
- the curriculum allows for **both staff- and child-initiated activities**;
- children are able to make their own decisions about their learning (co-creation of the learning process and learning environment);
- **play is vital** for children to gain understanding of their surrounding world;
- the importance of **collaboration with parents** and **shared decision-making** are self-evident; and
- **children's progress is monitored, evaluated, documented and shared with their parents/caretakers**.

The Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (2014) emphasises taking into account the views and the needs of all children. **Children should be regarded by all stakeholders as citizens with the fundamental rights all citizens have**. This implies that the practitioners working with children are committed to values such as social justice and recognising and valuing diversity and that they are creating welcoming, inclusive environments where all children can learn, participate, feel nurtured, respected and safe and have the opportunity to relate to both adults and peers.

Regarding the curriculum, research (Working Group, 2014) indicates that across the member states of the European Union there is consensus on the **broad developmental domains** that need to be addressed in ECEC settings, including:

- emotional, personal and social development;
- language and communication;
- knowledge and understanding of the surrounding world;
- creative expression; and
- physical development and motor skills.

However, there seems to be less consensus on the emphasis placed on academic learning (Working Group, 2014).

Professional Qualifications

The Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (2014) suggests that regarding workforce qualifications, at least half the staff should hold a bachelor's degree (level 6 of the International Standard Qualification of Education [ISCED]). This standard is developed by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2012) and serves as a framework to classify educational activities as defined in programmes and the resulting qualifications into internationally agreed categories. The Institute (2012) distinguishes nine separate levels:

0. Early childhood education
1. Primary Education
2. Lower secondary education
3. Upper secondary education
4. Post-secondary non-tertiary education
5. Short-cycle tertiary education
6. Bachelor's or equivalent level
7. Master's or equivalent level
8. Doctoral or equivalent level
9. Not elsewhere classified

However, there seems to be a tendency in European countries to employ less qualified staff for the younger children, who demand more "care," and better qualified staff to older children, who may require more teaching (Motiejunaite et al., 2014). In some countries (Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Slovakia, the United Kingdom and Liechtenstein), it is not obligatory to have at least one member of the staff in an ECEC setting with at least a bachelor's degree. Figure 9 shows the requirements in the various European countries for staff to have at least a bachelor's degree in centre-based ECEC settings. In Norway, for example, both in home- and centre-based ECEC settings, at least one member of the staff must have at least a relevant qualification at bachelor's level (ISCED 6).

Figure 9. Bachelor's degree (ISCED 6) required for ECEC provision in European countries.
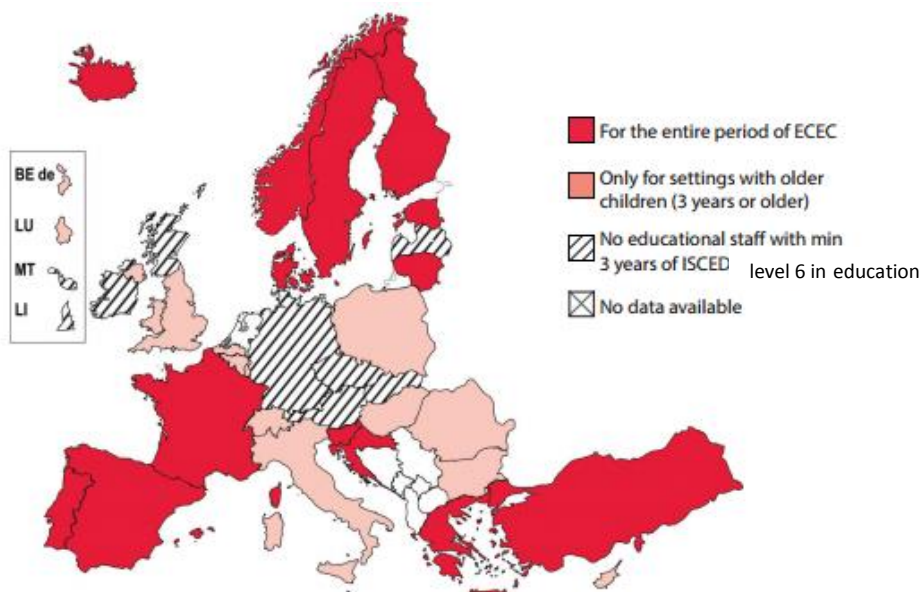
(From Motiejunaite et al., 2014).

Continuing Professional Development

When continuing professional development (CPD) of staff is expected to have an impact on improving ECEC practices, it is important that such CPD:

- addresses explicitly the challenges they face in **their daily practice**;
- is **co-designed** with practitioners and the teaching staff of the CPD programme, regarding both the content of the CPD and the accompanying activities, aimed at dealing with these challenges effectively and successfully, thus tailoring it to their specific needs;
- **brings theory and practice together**;
- stimulates staff to jointly engage in **practice-based and participatory research projects** through a cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, both on process and outcomes. Specifically, the Working Group (2014) suggests that:
  Involving parents and professionals in participatory research projects in which meaning and value are negotiated - and new pedagogical knowledge is constructed and shared – is highlighted as a key success factor of inclusive practice as it encourages educational experimentation and generates sustainable change within ECEC settings. (Working Group, p. 26)

It seems evident that **staff working conditions** (e.g., the staff-to-child ratio, group size, wages, planning and preparation time, consultation with peers, management support, opportunities for CPD) and the overall quality of ECEC provision may stimulate or impede their CPD (Working Group, 2014). Therefore, practitioners in ECEC provision should be stimulated to engage in sharing examples of good practice and working together in professional learning communities with their peers. They should also have access to specialised staff, ready to support them to deal with the complexities of their daily practice (e.g., dealing with diversity). They should familiarise themselves with working with professionals from a variety of disciplines and agencies. In addition, a specific focus of the CPD should be on meeting the needs of disadvantaged children (e.g., children with a disability, from low-income families or with an ethnic minority background) (Working Group, 2014).

The Working Group refers to the Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years Project (Siraj-Blatchford, Muttock, Sylva, Gilden, & Bell, 2002) in identifying the characteristics of effective learning support for young children. Effective learning support implies engaging in a process of reflexive co-construction of both the curriculum and the day-to-day activities, which means that activities and conversations are both teacher-led and child-led. The teaching staff is expected to demonstrate, explain and ask questions (preferably open-ended questions) to stimulate the thinking and learning of all children.

Characteristics of a Challenging Curriculum for ECEC Settings

It seems important to make clear what is meant by the word *curriculum* in early-years settings. Bennet (2013) argues that it should not be confused with a

> traditional subjects approach. Rather it is focused on meaning-making – his/her place in the family; the roles and work of significant adults; forging a personal identity; how to communicate needs and desires; how to interact successfully and make friends; how things work; the change of the seasons and other remarkable events in the child's environment. These and other developmental tasks are the subject matter of the early childhood centre and are expressed constantly in the child's make-believe play. (p. 7)

A challenging curriculum is based on values and principles that recognise the rights of all children as these are laid down in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). It has a broad

pedagogical framework that guides the staff's actions regarding, for example, adult interaction and involvement, group management, creating rich learning environments, making use of group work and group activities and involving parents and caregivers. **It recognises the whole child, supports a holistic perspective and stimulates children to communicate, interact and participate, both with adults and their peers**.

According to Bennet (2013), learning in the early years is about:
- *meaning-making, that is, making sense of the world around us;*
- *the construction of knowledge, rather than transmission of knowledge;*
- *experience, hence 'learning by doing' — real life experience is the best learning;*
- *understanding and using knowledge — you can't claim understanding before you can successfully apply it in practice; and*
- *learning in groups.* (p. 5)

Teacher Competencies in ECEC

The Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care study (University of East London & University of Ghent, 2011), commissioned by the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Care, states "that there is **no clear profile of agreement** across Europe on the competence requirements for working with young children up to the age of school entry" (p. 37). Thus, the study reports "**considerable variance** in the formal level of the professional education/training required for work with young children, but also in the professional profiles pursued" (p. 37).

More generally, the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (2014) recommends that decisions about the competencies teachers need in ECEC settings should take into account the importance of:
- a critical awareness of self and others and the values and principles stakeholders bring with them to the workplace;
- celebrating diversity and taking into account the challenges diversity brings;
- critical reflection both at an individual and a collective level;
- collaboration with parents, fellow practitioners, staff from other disciplines and agencies;
- understanding the local context;
- a positive stance toward ongoing professional development, innovation and improvement which is tailored to meet staff needs and is supported with on-line resources;
- recognition of prior learning and experience;
- a continuous deepening of pedagogical understanding;
- engaging in small-scale action-oriented research projects with colleagues and other stakeholders, thus integrating theory and practice;
- a well-established induction programme with sufficient room for mentoring and supervision; and
- teamwork and networking: "[t]he development of competent practice is not the sole responsibility of individual practitioners – it is better understood as a joint effort that involves teams, training centres, local administrative institutions, and non-governmental bodies" (p. 32). **Key for the teachers seem to be the exchange of good practice, the establishment of professional learning communities, creating peer learning opportunities and guidance by specialists when matters become complicated**.

The Working Group (2014) further stresses the importance of pedagogic leadership, which is seen as supplemental to leadership that solely focuses on administrative duties. Lazzari, Vandenbroeck, and Peeters (2013) analysed the competences professionals need when working with children from

disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., children from low-income and migrant families). Working with an increasingly diverse group of children challenges ECEC staff to reflect continuously on their practice; to systematically engage in CPD activities; to engage in meaningful and responsive interactions with all children; and to intentionally establish good working relationships with parents from a wide range backgrounds and cultures as well as stakeholders from the local community.

To make this happen advanced competences for inter-professional, interdisciplinary and inter-agency collaboration are necessary (Schuman, 2014). In that regard, an important competence for working together is understanding, valuing and celebrating the diversity that colleagues from different backgrounds bring with them to the workplace (Lazzari et al., 2013).

The education of **all** children in inclusive ECEC settings presents specific challenges to the workplace. ECEC teachers may lack the competences to adapt their teaching in these settings to the diverse learning needs of their young students. In particular early identification of a disability requires high awareness among teachers, health professionals, parents as well as other professionals working with children. This calls for competence in identifying early signs of disability and arranging appropriate action for diagnosis, intervention and support (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006).

Monitoring and Evaluating ECEC Practices

Monitoring and evaluating ECEC provision is vital for knowing whether services deliver high-quality outcomes for children and families and for how to improve the overall quality of these services, if needed. The OECD notes that in ECEC "quality encompasses all the features of children's environments and experiences that are presumed to be beneficial to their well-being" (Taguma & Litjens, 2013, p. 6). However, definitions of quality may differ between countries since quality is a value- and cultural-based concept (Taguma & Litjens, 2013).

Based on the OECD literature review, the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (2014) recommends four dimensions for monitoring and evaluating the quality of ECEC provision:
1. **service quality**, a measure for external accountability purposes; it encompasses, for example, compliance with regulations and standards and the general quality of services;
2. **staff quality**, a measure for internal accountability purposes aimed at improving staff skills and identifying areas for CPD; it can make use of self-evaluations, observations, rating scales, checklists, peer reviews and portfolios;
3. **child development and outcomes**, a measure for assessing how children have developed and what they have learned; and
4. **curriculum implementation**, a measure for understanding the usefulness of the curriculum, the need for change or improvement, and how it is connected to everyday practice; for example, making a distinction between the intended curriculum (the content we are expecting teachers to cover), the implemented curriculum (the content teachers have actually delivered) and the attained curriculum (the content that is actually learned by the children) (Marzano, 2003).

Quality is a dynamic, value- and cultural-based concept and, therefore, expresses itself differently in different countries (Taguma & Litjens, 2013). Nevertheless, the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (2014) claims that there is general consensus on the importance of involving parents, families, staff and other stakeholder in monitoring and evaluation, thus generating a **multi-perspective view** of what high-quality provision entails in a specific context.

The evaluation of child development and outcomes may be enriched by using nonformal monitoring procedures such as observation, documentation of children's learning and socialising experiences and the use of portfolios (Working Group, 2014). Taguma and Litjens (2013) suggest that narrative

assessment techniques may be more appropriate for a holistic evaluation of a child's development than standardised tests. They also refer to the complexities involved when trying to establish a causal relationship between the monitoring and evaluation process and the quality of a specific practice. They argue that using only one monitoring instrument may not generate reliable or valid data about the quality of ECEC. They also point out tools adopted from another context or country need to be validated in the new context/country where they are put to use.

Most important, every evaluation must be in the best interest of the child. This implies that monitoring and evaluation be carried out within **clearly defined ethical guidelines** that take into account the fundamental rights of children, their families and staff involved, giving them the opportunity to express their views and opinions. Among others, this calls for joint decision-making regarding the aims, purposes and procedures of monitoring, evaluation and sharing the outcomes (Working Group, 2014).

Motiejunaite et al. (2014) distinguish **accreditation** from **monitoring and evaluation**. *Accreditation* "is the process of assessing whether settings intending to provide ECEC comply with the regulations in force, i.e., a certain set of rules and minimum standards" (p. 24). Regarding *evaluation*, a distinction may be made between external evaluation and internal or self-evaluation. External evaluation "is a quality control process carried out by individuals or teams from outside an educational/care setting which seeks to evaluate and monitor the performance of ECEC settings, report on the quality of provision and suggest ways to improve practice" (p. 24). Staff self-evaluating tools, in particular, seem to support CPD, critical reflection and staff collaboration. Taguma and Litjens (2013), in turn, argue that monitoring includes both evaluation and assessment. *Assessment* refers to a process of "deciding, collecting and making judgments about evidence relating to the achievement of children and staff" (p. 8). *Evaluation* is used for "the process of deciding, collecting and making judgments about systems, programmes, materials, procedures and processes" (p. 8).

The Dutch Consortium for Child Care Research (NCKO) has developed a self-assessment tool for childcare centres that can be used to identify strengths and weaknesses. It makes use of checklists and rating scales to assess the interactions of staff and to evaluate the quality of provision and services (NCKO, 2007). Training courses have been developed to support staff and management in the use of this monitor. Taguma and Litjens (2013) refer to Dahlberg and Moss (2005), arguing that "[r]ating scales are sometimes criticised as normalising, decontextualised instruments that may undermine more participatory and democratic reworking of quality by local communities" (p. 10), and, therefore, using such scales makes it necessary to train staff to fully understand both the theoretical and the cultural assumptions behind them as well as how to use them.

Another measurement instrument, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System™ (CLASS) (http://teachstone.com/; Hamre, n.d.) is specifically used to assess the quality of teacher-child interactions in centre-based ECEC services. An observational tool, CLASS provides a common lens, metric, and language to identify and describe the classroom interactions that promote children's development and learning. Data from CLASS observations are used to support teachers' professional development needs as well as provide system-wide data on the interactions children experience. Versions of CLASS currently exist for toddler to high school classrooms (https://curry.virginia.edu/classroom-assessment-scoring-system).

Working Together at Micro, Meso and Macro Levels

At the local level, the Working Group (2014) stresses the importance of inter-agency collaboration and networking among stakeholders in order to develop integrated support systems for children and their families. An integrated approach at the local, regional and national level is expected to improve ECEC provision. However, the Working Group also suggests that decentralisation may lead to

unanticipated differences between regions regarding access and quality. The group specifically refers to research arguing that marketization of ECEC provision may be detrimental to disadvantaged families and their children and, instead, proposes a "**universal provision of publicly subsidised ECEC**" Working Group, 2014, p. 65).

Outcomes of the Provision of High-Quality ECEC

Bennet (2012) listed the following outcomes for high-quality ECEC programmes:

- Long-lasting effects on the cognitive development of participating children, such as general knowledge appropriate for their age; receptive and expressive communication skills; early literacy and numeracy skills; and school readiness.
- Positive effects on the acquisition of social skills and their socio-emotional development, such as self-regulating skills, sharing, cooperating with others, empathy and a positive disposition toward learning. However, studies (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004).suggest that these skills may fade out during the early years of formal education. Therefore, it seems important that the primary school keep focusing on teaching and learning social skills and supporting the socio-emotional development of all children, emphasising motivation, perseverance and tenacity.
- Children from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular, benefit from ECEC, and it stimulates a smoother transition into primary education. Studies (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004) indicate that a universal ECEC provision for all generates more positive outcomes than separate provision.

The European Disability Strategy (2010-2020)

The European Commission's progress report on implementation of the European Disability Strategy (European Commission, 2017) makes clear that the EU remains committed to removing barriers that prevent people with disabilities from full participation in society. As part of that commitment, it advocates for a paradigm shift towards a human rights approach of disability policies, which is in line with the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD) of 2006 by the EU. It also recognises that the recent economic crisis in Europe has weakened the prospects of people with disabilities in terms of employment, education and social inclusion. Specifically, with regard to education, the report states that access to an inclusive, quality education remains difficult for many children and young people with disabilities. In fact, almost 22.5% of young people with disabilities leave school early, compared to 11% for students without disabilities (European Commission, 2017), increasing their risk of poverty and social exclusion.

The report also presents an overview of what has been achieved during the first five years of the Disability Strategy and action plans for the next five years for the eight areas that have been identified as priority: Accessibility; Participation; Equality; Employment; Education and Training; Social Protection; Health; and External Action. Furthermore, it contains recommendations of the UN Committee regarding the ongoing implementation of the CRPD.

First we will address the achievements to date, focusing on those that may have an impact on ECEC:

- *The development of a European standard on the accessibility of the built environment (i.e. accessible ECEC facilities).*
- *Adoption of Common European Guidelines on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care.*
- *Awareness raising actions to spread knowledge among people with disabilities, civil society and employers, including general public seminars, diversity days, journalist awards and artistic competitions.*

- *The publication of a Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the Education and Training 2020 (ET2020) Strategic Framework, with priority given to enhanced access to quality and inclusive mainstream education and training for all learners.*
- *Inclusion of the rights of persons with disabilities as a topic for discussion in the EU Human Rights dialogues with third countries and other meetings.*
- *A closer collaboration with civil society and disabled people's organisations.*
- *The promotion of the concept of universal design, through policies, research and innovation projects, for example to develop interfaces and assistive technologies.*
- *Erasmus+ (2014-2020), which not only includes special needs support for mobility actions, but also funds disability-focused projects and organisations such as the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters and Telecentre Europe.* (European Commission, 2017)

Second, plans of the European Commission for the next five years that may have an impact on ECEC provision include the following:
- *Ensuring that people with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their education, and that effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.*
- *Supporting the work of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) to facilitate the collection, processing and transfer of European-level and country-specific information on education of people with disabilities.*
- *Collecting data on access and participation of persons with high dependency needs in the education system.*
- *Improving the digital skills and competences of persons with disabilities.*
- *Promoting the exchange of good practice on inclusive education and lifelong learning for students and pupils with disabilities within the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ET 2020.*
- *Disseminating research, information and guidance materials on the application of the reasonable accommodation principle in education and training.*
- *Monitoring recent developments regarding national and/or Europe-wide curricula for professionals in the built environment, transport and ICT on design for all to improve their knowledge, skills and competences on accessibility and encourage the development of a European curriculum.*
- *Highlighting disability, where appropriate, as a human rights issue in EU human rights dialogues with third countries, based on the principles of the UNCRPD.*
- *Supporting awareness-raising activities (including in the media) to highlight the capabilities and contributions of people with disabilities.* (European Commission, 2017)

Third, the UN Committee, evaluating the progress that has been made after the EU ratified the UNCRPD, provided recommendations regarding the ongoing and full implementation of the CRPD. We focus below on their recommendations that may have an impact on ECEC:
- *Ratify the optional protocol to the Convention.*
- *Conduct a cross-cutting, comprehensive review of EU legislation in order to ensure full harmonization with the provisions of the Convention, and actively involve representative organizations of persons with disabilities and independent human rights institutions in the process.*
- *Set up a structured dialogue with an independent budget line and sufficient funding for coordination among EU institutions, agencies and bodies and for meaningful consultation with and the participation of persons with disabilities, including women, and girls and boys with disabilities, through their representative organizations.*

- *Ensure that discrimination in all aspects on the grounds of disability is prohibited, including multiple and intersectional discrimination.*
- *Mainstream a women and girls with disabilities perspective in EU's forthcoming gender equality strategy, policies and programmes, and a gender perspective in its disability strategies.*
- *Develop affirmative actions to advance the rights of women and girls with disabilities, establish a mechanism to monitor progress and fund data collection and research on women and girls with disabilities.*
- *Develop support services for boys and girls with disabilities and their families in local communities, foster deinstitutionalization, prevent any new institutionalization and promote social inclusion and access to mainstream, inclusive, quality education for boys and girls with disabilities.*
- *Ensure that boys and girls with disabilities and their representative organizations are consulted on all matters that affect them and that appropriate assistance, according to their disability and age, is provided.*
- *Enforce the implementation of EU legislation on access to information and communication so as to facilitate access in accessible languages, formats and technologies appropriate to different kinds of disabilities, including sign languages, Braille, augmentative and alternative communication, and other accessible means, modes and formats of communication of their choice, including easy-to-read formats, for all persons with all types of disabilities, and to promote official recognition of sign language and Braille.*
- *Take appropriate measures to ensure that the EU's economic and social policies and recommendations promote support for families with persons with disabilities and ensure the right of children with disabilities to live in their communities.*
- *Evaluate the current situation and take measures to facilitate access to and enjoyment of inclusive, quality education for all students with disabilities in line with the Convention, and include disability-specific indicators in the Europe 2020 strategy when pursuing the education target.*
- *Prohibit, explicitly, discrimination on the grounds of disability in the field of health care, and take measures to ensure access to quality health care for all persons with all types of disabilities.*
- *Set a social protection floor that respects the core content of the right of people with disabilities to an adequate standard of living and to social protection.*
- *Interrupt any international development funding that is being used to perpetuate the segregation of persons with disabilities, and reallocate such funding towards projects and initiatives that aim at compliance with the Convention.*
- *Take the necessary measures to ensure that all students with disabilities receive the reasonable accommodation needed to enjoy their right to inclusive quality education in European schools.*
- *Implement a non-rejection policy on the grounds of disability, and ensure inclusive, quality education for all students with disabilities.* (European Commission, 2017)

The European Parliament produced a report in 2016 with about 180 recommendations intended to help develop policies, legislation and practices to support the full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of 2006. It calls for "a comprehensive revision of the European Disability Strategy" (European Commission, 2017, p. 156).

European Initiatives That May Have an Impact on EU Policy Regarding Inclusion

Several organisations representing people with disabilities are working at the European level to influence European policies in favour of a greater quality of life for all persons with disabilities. The

main principles these organisations share, and that apply to both children, young people and adults, focus on the following (Inclusion Europe, 2017a):

- Non-discrimination: People with disabilities are not treated differently from other people because of their disability.
- Social inclusion: Persons with disabilities have the same opportunity as other people to participate and take up valued roles in society.
- Inclusive education: Children and young people with disabilities get the support they need to go to the same school and educational facilities as their brothers, sisters and peers.
- Legal capacity and access to justice: People with disabilities are guaranteed to be treated fairly and equally by the law.
- Independent living: Persons with disabilities have the right to decide where, how and with whom they want to live with.
- Self-advocacy: People with disabilities are consulted on all matters that are relevant to them, and they have the right to speak up for themselves. From an early age, children with disabilities should have ample opportunities to learn how to self-advocate and speak up.
- Accessibility: Media, places, events and information, to name a few, should be accessible for all people with disabilities.

Inclusion Europe – The European Association of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities and Their Families. The organisation is supported by the European Commission and "represents the voice of people with intellectual disabilities and their families throughout Europe" (Inclusion Europe, 2017b, http://inclusion-europe.eu/?page_id=83). The organisation's slogan is: "Respect, solidarity and inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities and their families."

The major goals of Inclusion Europe are to:
- Stimulate the exchange of knowledge, ideas, experiences and examples of good practice across Europe for including people with intellectual disabilities in all aspects of society.
- Support organisation members (71 members in 38 European countries).
- Influence European policies.

The organisation applies a rights-based approach: ***we want rights, not favours!*** Their key message is that people with intellectual disabilities are citizens like everybody else, have the right to be included in all areas of life, and have the right to live, learn, work and have fun together with others. However, they also acknowledge that despite the statement in the preamble paragraph of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006: that "persons with disabilities should have the opportunity to be actively involved in decision-making processes about policies and programmes, including those directly concerning them"), "people with intellectual disabilities still feel left out and marginalized in these consultations, sometimes even within the organized disability movement" (Inclusion Europe, n.d., p. 3).

In their position paper *Guidelines for involving people with intellectual disabilities in policy consultations* (Inclusion Europe, n.d.) they present three guidelines to be taken into account to support the participation of persons with intellectual and developmental difficulties in consultations and decision-making processes that are relevant for them. These guidelines can be translated to ECEC provision, because, from an early age, children need to learn to become self-advocates:
- Children need age-appropriate information that is accessible to them (e.g., in easy-to-read language, making use of symbols, pictures, audio and tactile aids).
- Children should be allowed much more time, compared to many of their peers, to think about and discuss topics in order to gain understanding.

- Children need support that takes into account their views and best interests and that helps them to make their own decisions.

The European Platform of Self-Advocates (EPSA).
EPSA is a member of Inclusion Europe, and is made up of organisations of self-advocates from different countries in Europe. The group defines self-advocacy as: "Self-advocacy is all about getting stronger and making our voices heard" (http://inclusion-europe.eu/?page_id=85).

The mission of EPSA is to **…**
- *tell people about the rights, abilities and needs of people with intellectual disabilities.*
- *represent self-advocacy groups in Europe.*
- *speak to decision-makers about what is important to self-advocates.*
- *publish accessible information about important European issues.* (http://inclusion-europe.eu/?page_id=85)

Their activities include, among others:
- *teaching other self-advocates how they can speak for themselves.*
- *organising conferences to exchange experiences.*
- *making self-advocacy known everywhere in Europe.*
- *maintaining an up-to-date list of self-advocacy organisations.*
- *publishing guidelines on topics that are of interest to and concern self-advocacy.* (http://inclusion-europe.eu/?page_id=85)

EPSA has published a leaflet that may inform teachers in ECEC settings about the long-term goals that are relevant to the children with intellectual and developmental disabilities they work with and how they can start from a very early age to familiarize their students with them and learn how to put them into practice. Examples include …
- *Self-advocacy is about YOU learning to say "I." Self-advocacy is speaking up for yourself and for others.*
- *Self-advocacy is about listening and about being heard.*
- *Self-advocacy is about making your own decisions. "I choose my clothes. I choose what I want to eat. I choose the people that will represent me." It is about getting on the way to independence.*
- *Self-advocacy is about participation. In family, in society, in policy. It is about getting involved.* (EPSA, 2017)

Hear Our Voices!
The EU project Hear Our Voices!, financially supported by the Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Programme of the European Commission, has produced three publications aimed at promoting, in particular, the participation of all children with intellectual disabilities in all issues that concern their lives, including situations of participatory activities in school settings and child-care services, with particular insight into the process of de-institutionalisation (www.childrights4all.eu):

- *Hear Our Voices! Developing Participatory Processes with Children with Intellectual Disabilities – Concepts, Tools and Good Practices* (Inclusion Europe, 2014a). This publication addresses the assumption that adults can exercise control over all aspects of children's lives. Instead, it advocates a view that sees "**every child as an active agent, entitled to be involved in matters of concern to them**" (Inclusion Europe, 2014a, p. 4). Every child has the right to

present his or her views and ideas. To make this happen, children need creative and committed adults who are able to elicit their views and teach them how to self-advocate.

- *Participating in My Life: Hear My Voice*! (Inclusion Europe, 2014b). This publication describes the work done in Bulgaria and the Czech Republic with children living in small group settings and in large institutions. It includes examples of good practice and "lessons learned." The concept of person-centred planning and its tools (i.e., making use of *Path: Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope*) played an important role in the project.
- *Participating at School: Hear My Voice!* (Inclusion Europe, 2014c). This publication's starting point is article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This article ensures that children and young people with disabilities have access to mainstream schools. *Hear My Voice* however advocates that Articles 29 and 30 are equally important to consider because they address the right of these students to participate and furthermore what needs to be done to achieve this. It is not enough for the student to be present. He or she should become engaged and involved. Case studies suggest how this may be realised.

As part of the project Hear Our Voices!, an assessment was carried out regarding the specific situation of children with disabilities in the European Union. Five areas were considered: participation, family life, freedom from violence and abuse, education and health. The resulting paper provides recommendations to EU policy makers to guarantee the right of children with disabilities in the EU, in agreement with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) of 2006 (Inclusion Europe, Lumos, & Eurochild, 2014).

Important recommendations that seem relevant to inclusive ECEC provision are the following:
- *Enhance accessibility and secure provisions on (alternative) communication methods and specific means of advocacy to ensure that children with severe disabilities and/or complex needs can meaningfully contribute, be heard and understood.*
- *Develop guidance to the member states on participatory activities, specifically insisting on making these* [activities] *fully inclusive of children with physical, sensory, intellectual and psychosocial disabilities.*
- *Provide support and financial assistance to projects that aim to meaningfully consult children with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities, in matters of importance, using accessible, non-threatening and appropriate communication.*
- *Support the development of national plans for transition from institutional to community-based living.*
- *Promote campaigns to de-stigmatise disability and to inform families, professionals and the general public about the rights of disabled children and the irreversible harm of institutionalisation.*
- *Ensure that the specific vulnerabilities of children in institutions, those with disabilities and children with intellectual disabilities, to violence, abuse and neglect are understood and addressed by all stakeholders.*
- *Make sure … to promote inclusive education for children and young people with disabilities in accordance with the obligations of the EU and its Member States under the CRPD.*
- *Ensure the upcoming quality framework on ECEC promotes inclusion of children with disabilities by supporting professional training, improving infrastructure and proving individualised support tailored to the needs of pupils with disabilities.*
- *Facilitate equal access to healthcare services by children with disabilities … the funded measures should include not only disability-specific healthcare, but also mainstream services, such as dental and eye care, sexual health and preventive services.* (Inclusion Europe, Lumos, & Eurochild, 2014)

Summary

The foregoing makes it clear that the European Union is not setting out in law what member countries must do. Rather, based on research, it formulates recommendations, provides and promotes examples of good practice and common sense and relies upon and works with internationally agreed-upon conventions, like CRPD (UN, 2006). The EU provides guidance on what may work and stimulates, promotes and finances further research, collaboration between member states and their institutions and the exchange of ideas and examples of good practice.

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Websites of Interest
- Able to Include: www.able-to-include.com
- Childrights4all: www.childrights4all.eu
- Easy to Read: www.easy-to-read.eu
- Europe in Action: www.europeinaction.org
- European Platform of Self-Advocates (EPSA): www.self-advocacy.eu

- Life After Violence: www.life-after-violence.eu
- New Paths to Inclusion Network: www.personcentredplanning.eu
- Choices, a platform on supported decision-making: www.right-to-decide.eu
- Safe Surfing: www.safesurfing.eu
- TopSide: www.peer-support.eu
- Voting for All: www.voting-for-all.eu

Glossary of Key Concepts

(Source: Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014).

Access
A family is considered to have "access" to ECEC when a place is available or can be made available in a quality ECEC setting where neither distance nor cost presents a barrier to attendance.

Accessibility issues
Accessibility refers to problems parents experience in gaining access to ECEC services. These can be caused by explicit or implicit barriers, such as parents' inadequate knowledge of procedures or the value of ECEC, physical barriers for children with disabilities, waiting lists, a lack of choice for parents, language barriers, etc.

Child-centred pedagogy, including the interest of the child
A child-centred approach is one that builds on children's needs, interests and experiences, including cognitive, social, emotional and physical needs. A child-centred approach uses a pedagogy that promotes children's holistic development and enables adults to guide and support their development.

Children from groups who are at risk of disadvantage
Children can be at risk of disadvantage because of their individual circumstances or because they, or their families, belong to a group that is disadvantaged in society. These children may include those with disabilities, with mental health problems, in alternative care, at risk of neglect/abuse, undocumented child migrants/asylum seekers, those whose families live in poverty or are socially disadvantaged, those whose families have a migrant and/or second language background, those whose families have limited access to services, Roma and traveller children.

Competent ECEC system
Competence in the ECEC context should be understood as a characteristic of the entire system. A competent system includes competent individuals; collaboration between individuals and teams in an ECEC setting, and between institutions (ECEC settings, nurseries, pre-schools, schools, pre-primary settings, support services for children and families, etc.); and effective governance arrangements at a policy level.

Comprehensive service
A comprehensive service is one that extends beyond the provision of ECEC and includes a cooperative approach with other services to focus on all other aspects of children's development, such as their general health and well-being, child protection and support for them and their parents in their home and community environments.

Curriculum
An ECEC curriculum (which includes aspects that are implicit rather than explicit) covers developmental care, formative interactions, children's learning experiences and supportive assessment. This is sometimes set out in formal documentation, which advances all young children's personal and social development, their learning and prepares them for life and citizenship in their society.

Curriculum framework
A curriculum framework (can be a national, regional or local arrangement) expresses a set of values, principles, guidelines or standards that guides the content of and approach to children's care and learning.

ECEC
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; it includes centre and family day care; privately and publicly funded provision; preschool and pre-primary provision.

Evaluation
The systematic assessment of the effectiveness of the design, implementation or results of an ongoing or completed ECEC project, programme or policy.

Governance
Governance is the allocation of responsibility within and across levels of government and between public and nonpublic providers, and includes mechanisms to coordinate these responsibilities.

High expectations
High expectations occur when the ECEC system, and staff within the system, is child-centred and focuses on what individual children can do; what they can learn; and what they can achieve with support. This helps to create an environment where children are actively encouraged to reach their full potential, and their success and achievement are recognised and seen as an important part of the learning and caring environment.

Holistic approach
A holistic approach to ECEC is child-centred, paying attention simultaneously to all aspects of a child's development, well-being and learning needs, including those that relate to social, emotional, physical, linguistic and cognitive development.

Integrated systems
"Integration" refers to a coordinated policy for children where related care and education services or systems work together. In this context, other services such as social welfare, schools, the family, employment and health services can also collaborate to support children in an ECEC context. When all ECEC services for children are integrated, this is usually described as comprehensive provision. Collaboration includes a close working relationship between those with administrative responsibility for providing ECEC services at a national, regional and/or local level.

Legal entitlement
A legal entitlement exists when every child has the enforceable right to benefit from ECEC provision.

Monitoring
In an ECEC context, monitoring refers to the continuous and systematic collection of quantitative and qualitative data to support a regular review of the quality of the ECEC system. It is based on pre-agreed-upon quality standards, benchmarks or indicators that are established and modified through use.

Outcomes
Outcomes are the actual or intended short- and long-term changes arising from the provision of ECEC services that will benefit children, their families, communities and society. These changes are measurable, and the benefits for children typically include:
- the acquisition of cognitive skills and competences;
- the acquisition of non-cognitive skills and competences;
- the successful transition to school;
- participation in society and preparation for later life and citizenship.

Play, including free play
Spontaneous and unstructured play is child-led and child-initiated activity. It offers children opportunities to explore and reflect on their interests and issues that are relevant to and meaningful in their lives. The role of staff in these situations is to encourage children's play through creating the right environment and using play as a pedagogic approach to learning.

Professional leadership
Professional leadership in an ECEC context requires skills, behaviours and competences related to supporting children's care and education, pedagogy, engagement with parents, the local community, staff management and organisation. As with other leadership roles in the education sector, ECEC leaders need to establish a culture and purpose that ensures high-quality provision is available to all children, and that staff and parents are involved and supported.

Professional role
A professional role is one that is regulated and requires individuals to develop and reflect on their own practice and, with parents and children, create a learning environment that is constantly renewed and improved. Those fulfilling these roles will have appropriate qualifications and will be expected to take responsibility for the provision of high quality ECEC services in line with the available resources and the requirements and expectations of their system.

School readiness
When a member state uses this concept, school readiness implies that a child possesses the motivation and the cognitive and socio-emotional abilities needed to learn and succeed in school.

Split system
In a 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
In a 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.

Workforce
The workforce refers to all staff members working directly with children in any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to primary-school age. The workforce includes leaders, managers and other professionals working in ECEC settings.

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Research for his doctoral degree focused on the impact of a visual impairment on family relationships and personal well-being, the struggle for inclusion, the development of an empowering curriculum and supporting students with learning disabilities to speak out for themselves.
Diversity, participation, citizenship and inclusion of people with disabilities and action research are the main themes of his research, which furthermore seeks to include participation of the people who are affected by the research findings.

Schuman has presented at international conferences and participated in international projects; for example, in Turkey, Malawi, Azerbaijan and Ukraine, as well as in several EU-funded educational projects.

He is currently serving as senior lecturer and researcher at the Utrecht University of Applied Sciences in the master's programme Educational Needs. He is also working in Research and Development at Heliomare, a rehabilitation centre and a school for special education with four locations north of Amsterdam, Netherlands. His work for Heliomare focuses on innovation and curriculum development through practice-oriented research projects with teachers and support staff who work together in a research group. The research group is supported by professional learning communities composed of staff working in one of the four special schools.

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