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REPORT ON NATIONAL ECD POLICIES IN PARTNER COUNTRIES

**STRENGTHENING AND SUPPORTING THE EARLY
CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT WORKFORCE - ECD PLUS**



**Co-funded by
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Table of contents

Introduction	3
1. An overall assessment of the level of ECD in your country - traditions, social and cultural contexts.	6
1.1 Hungary	6
1.2 Italy	9
1.3 Serbia	10
1.4 Slovakia	12
2. What are the legislative frameworks for the implementation of ECD in your country? Who, which actors can implement ECD within the legal possibilities?	14
2.1 Hungary	14
2.2 Italy	16
2.3 Serbia	17
2.4 Slovakia	18
3. Who are the main actors of ECD? Are there specific professional qualification requirements for the provision of ECD services?	19
3.1 Hungary	19
3.2 Italy	22
3.3 Serbia	25
3.4 Slovakia	25
4. What changes have taken place in the ECD field in the last period (10 years)?	27
4.1 Hungary	27
4.2 Italy	28
4.3 Serbia	28
4.4 Slovakia	29
5. What research exists in the field of ECD? What topics is it focusing on? What results does it produce?	29
5.1 Hungary	29
5.2 Italy	31
5.3 Serbia	31
5.4 Slovakia	32

6. What are the possibilities for parental involvement and what is the level of their interest in institutional ECD?	33
6.1 Hungary	34
6.2 Italy	34
6.3 Serbia	35
6.4 Slovakia	36
7. Which are the social groups that are at risk of inadequate access to ECD? Characterise them and describe the related problems.	37
7.1 Hungary	37
7.2 Italy	37
7.3 Serbia	38
7.4 Slovakia	39
8. Which ECD issues are currently perceived as the most pressing in public discourse? What are the trends in the direction of ECD?	40
8.1 Hungary	40
8.2 Italy	41
8.3 Serbia	42
8.4 Slovakia	43
9. Examples of good practice	44
9.1 Hungary	44
9.2. Italy	44
9.3 Serbia	45
9.4 Slovakia	45
10. SWOT analysis of ECD - main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.	46
10.1 Hungary	46
10.2 Italy	47
10.3 Serbia	48
10.4 Slovakia	49

Introduction

90% of the brain's capacity develops before the age of 5, yet the workforce that serves young children is too often undervalued, underpaid, and inadequately prepared. Recognition of the importance of Early Childhood Development (ECD) services is increasing in many parts of the world. Still, little attention is placed on one of the most critical factors in influencing children's learning development – the early years' workforce.

Decades of research have shown that home visitors can increase parental wellbeing and efficacy, decrease child maltreatment, and improve child outcomes. Across sectors, too little is known about those working with families and very young children as well as those who mentor them. Because of this, it is necessary to provide a clear picture of the early years workforce. Considering the diverse backgrounds and experiences of individuals delivering ECD services, training and professional development programs offer an opportunity to impart a core set of knowledge and skills to members of the early childhood workforce, which is particularly important as programs look to scale and reach a greater number of young children and families. There is evidence to suggest that supporting individuals with such opportunities can influence child development outcomes.

A well-trained and supported early childhood workforce is key to providing high-quality services to young children and families but so far there have been limited efforts to systematise the various approaches taken across the entire workforce. Supporting families of young children before birth and during the child's first years is of great importance. It can result in lifelong benefits for children, communities, societies, and nations. Home-visiting programs in particular have been found to increase parental wellbeing and parenting efficacy, as well as child outcomes.

Early Childhood is the most critical time for positive intervention. Children's development during this stage is strongly affected by their environments, and that effect continues to exert a strong influence on the rest of their life. It is crucial that education and life skills programmes also begin at this early stage. This project is focused on developing the competencies of the ECD Workforce, especially those who are working with young children from socially disadvantaged environments and their parents.

Children aged 3 to 6 years must learn to accept diversity found in other children and build relationships with children of other nationalities. Well-designed programmes motivate children to be active, self-motivated learners eager to understand the world they live in.

Strengthening and Supporting the Early Childhood Development Workforce - ECD PLUS is a project in which the participating countries, represented by the non-governmental organisations - SKOLA DOKORAN - WIDE OPEN SCHOOL, NO from Slovakia, POMOC DECI UDRUZENJE GRADJANA from Serbia, CIAPE - CENTRO ITALIANO PER L'APPRENDIMENTO PERMANENTE from Italy and PARTNERS FOR DEMOCRATIC CHANGE HUNGARY from Hungary within the ERASMUS PLUS scheme decided to contribute to the change in a domain of pre-school education our kindergartens are not accustomed to work with and to involve parents in direct work with the target groups. Parents are the main figures in children's lives and can significantly influence their attitudes and positive approach to the surrounding world.

This report provides basic information on the state of ECEC in each of the participating countries. Its content is divided into several chapters that seek to provide key information regarding ECD-related topics in the participating countries.

Although the history of the participating countries differs, in all of them the attempts to institutionalise ECEC date back to the 19th century. The developments in each of the countries have historically taken slightly different paths but what connects them today is a common understanding of ECEC as an essential basis for lifelong success in learning, social integration, and personal development. In each of the participating countries, this understanding of ECEC has taken a different form. Ways are sought to meet the needs of asylum seekers and refugees or to further develop the long-established institutional system of ECEC, which is currently facing particular challenges related to the integration of marginalised social groups, especially members of the Roma population living in unsatisfactory social conditions with hindered access to educational institutions.

Greater differences between the participating countries can be observed in the field of ECEC organisation at the institutional level. This is true even in the case of Hungary and Slovakia, two countries that share a long common history. In Hungary, the current system of early childhood education and care (ECEC) comprises two stages and is bi-sectoral (social care and education). The first stage consists of the provision of non-compulsory institutional care for children aged 0–3 years, the second stage is mandatory for all children from the age of 3 years until school age, and it is free of charge. In Slovakia, the ECEC provision is controlled by different ministries: health, social affairs and family, and education, and divided between different levels of administration. The services and interventions are fragmented, and a comprehensive approach and coordination are missing.

Italy's education system is organised according to the principles of subsidiarity and school autonomy. The state and the regions share legislative competences. Moreover, regions should comply with the provisions of national legislation. Schools are autonomous regarding didactics, organisational and research activities. In Serbia, ECEC can be organised by any private or public institution, but each municipality has at least one public ECEC institution. For the mandatory preschool year, the private ones must have a state licence. Public preschools in most cases have nursery groups (6 months to 3 years of age), kindergartens (3-5.5 years of age) and preparatory groups (5.5 - 6.5 years of age).

The main actors of ECD in all the countries are predominantly the state institutions, even though the role of regional and local authorities, as well as NGOs, is not negligible. What distinguishes the participating countries of the project is the degree of decentralisation in the management of the ECEC organisation and processes. Whilst in Italy the education system is organised according to the principles of subsidiarity and school autonomy, in Hungary, there are very few NGOs involved as ECEC has traditionally fallen under the state responsibility and despite the role of the church organisations, only a few for-profit institutions have appeared so far. Serbia and Slovakia are moving from a highly centralised system to decentralisation, and NGOs play a significant role here.

Regardless of who the main actors of ECEC in each country are, the trend is towards strengthening the scope and quality of ECEC provision and raising the minimum qualification requirement for all staff working with preschool children. This process is supported by research and research projects that monitor the level of ECEC, analyse gaps and provide suggestions on how to address them. Most of these are based on cooperation between ECEC actors and local universities and research centres.

Even though the role of parents in the ECEC process is crucial, it appears that their cooperation with ECEC institutions is not satisfactory. The relationship between schools, parents and families can be difficult. It is, in particular, true for parents from disadvantaged backgrounds, from Roma community, refugee or IDP backgrounds.

In the ECEC settings, the importance of dealing with the individual needs of (vulnerable or disadvantaged) children, especially when it comes to integration of children from migratory backgrounds and Roma, Sinti and Caminanti is still too often forgotten. Children from rural areas are frequently not enrolled. There are also problems within the current ECEC services as regards catering to children with SEN (including children from SDB, children with disabilities and children with special talents) and the inability to apply an individual approach.

However, a positive trend can be seen in the pursuit of solutions to emerging problems related to efforts toward ECEC quality improvement. It includes the introduction of innovative pedagogical programmes such as Step by Step, the early Sure Start programmes in Hungary or the internationally.

well-known initiatives in Reggio Emilia in Italy, which has a similar tradition of close and specific collaboration between the municipality and the universities (the University of Modena and Reggio where Reggio Emilia experts give courses). The mobile ECEC in Serbia, where teachers, teachers' assistants and other members of staff go to the places where children are not enrolled in ECEC and organise activities with these children, bring various didactic materials and work with them once a week. The Omama programme in Slovakia aims to promote early stimulation and healthy development of children in the MRC from birth to 3 years of age, which is considered a key age for early intervention.

We can generally conclude that ECD's strengths lie in tradition, structure, and staff, while the lack of placements and unequal distribution of service provision represent its weaknesses, albeit to varying degrees in each of the participating countries. However, the growing interest and raising awareness of the developmental needs of children in the early years give hope that with a gradual change in education and social policy not necessarily based on profit services, the mismatch between statements of principle and the operational phase can be resolved and sufficient material and human resources for early care services for socially disadvantaged families can be found, leading to major improvements in the area. This is what our joint project Strengthening and Supporting the Early Childhood Development Workforce - ECD PLUS seeks to do.

1. An overall assessment of the level of ECD in your country - traditions, social and cultural contexts.

1.1 Hungary

The history of nurseries and kindergartens is quite long in Hungary. The first kindergarten was founded in Buda in 1828, to provide care for children from poor families. Its task was "*nevelés*" (upbringing): developing skills and emotional wellbeing, by creating loving relationships, setting good models, and singing, playing. The first nursery was opened in Pest in 1852, to look after children of poor mothers while they worked. The task was to care for infants and to contribute to the support of family life as well. Working mothers could leave their children in the nursery early in the morning, where the children were bathed and checked by a doctor. During the day they were given meals and could play under the supervision of adults. Their mission was ahead of the ideas of child-care at a time, addressing child protection and family support as well.

After World War II until 1989, early childhood education and care service provision were the responsibility of the state (including local authorities) managed in a highly centralised and uniformed way for all. There were very few private facilities, mostly informal, home-based care opportunities. There has always been a split system for 0-3 years old - nursery and 3 years to school age - kindergarten. Supporting women's equality, rights and obligation to employment, the idea to contribute to increase the impact of community and ideology-based upbringing, required state funding and the fast establishment of the places. Based on a two-income family pattern and short maternal leave was also determining the needs for more services. Up to 1967 20 weeks maternity leave was available for those insured, 12 weeks fully paid.

In 1967 extended maternal and childcare leave and allowance was introduced until the third birthday of the child. The official explanation was the developmental needs of young children and the very low birth rate. In reality it was meant to get rid of women with low qualifications from the labour market due to the intensified modernization and the prohibition of unemployment in accordance with the socialist principles. It was also much cheaper to pay stay-at-home mums than building and running day care centres. Consequently, the demand for, and the number of nursery places was low since most childcare was provided in-home by the mothers. At the same time, more kindergartens were needed to achieve full coverage of children between the ages of three and the onset of mandatory schooling.

The social pressure and false belief in the children's developmental needs has led to a system still dominantly influencing the approach to day care of young children. According to recent research over two third of women aged 18-55 believe that mothers should stay at home until the age of 3 of their children and the only acceptable exception is the material, financial need in which case mothers should return to the labour market.

Since the mid 80's the focus has been on encouraging higher status families to give birth supported by a differentiated allowance system, prioritising those with at least two years of employment prior giving birth, providing them with 70% of their former income up to the age of two, following the 20 weeks full salary paid as a maternity leave. In the third year the previous allowance has remained. In the last decades, the system has become even more perverted offering mothers (and fathers as well during the last couple of years) full time employment opportunities while also being eligible for the allowances. This has led to an increased demand for nurseries, where children coming from these families are also entitled for the highly subsidised placements, often leading to the rejection of children in need of placement.

Governance structure:

Following the political and economic changes in 1989 has led to changes by decentralizing the governance by establishing a system of local governments and dividing responsibilities and authority. Service provision has become the responsibility of the county and local authorities, within the three-tier system of government (national, county, and local).

As a result, the central government has provided normative financing services among others for child-care through local governments by redistributing resources. Universal, insurance-based financial support, tax benefits, and the financing for provisions-in-kind have been covered. The relevant ministries were developing legislation, policies, the public administration ensuring and inspecting the legal compliance.

Childcare services, especially nurseries have not been developed in line with the growing demand. Demographic goals have always been a priority, especially encouraging better off families having more children by introducing better payment and conditions for parents (even grandparents) to stay at home for at least two years and paying much less for those in disadvantaged situations. On the other hand, to increase labour force participation of women it has become important to provide more affordable and more diverse opportunities and more services for children.

The reasons for changes in childcare policy and services were numerous. Some of these were related to ideology, some to financing issues, and some to new or unmet needs. The overwhelming majority of the services are still run by local authorities Whereas companies previously maintained a substantial share of places for childcare, their involvement has dropped significantly, however recently a new provision – nursery at place of work – has been reintroduced, enabling employers to provide limited child-care. Mini-nurseries (up to 8 children) and home-based facilities for children under 3 have been opened in the last 5 years due to the legislation changes, however, their involvement is still limited. Emerging flexibility and diversity could be seen (e.g., flexible opening hours, different additional services offered, parent involvement, etc.), and family day care has emerged to a very limited extent. The home-based facilities aimed at serving children and families in settlements with limited options are extremely expensive and those most in need of day care under 3 do not have any opportunities. As the establishment of nurseries is only obligatory for over 10 000 inhabitants, villages mostly lack access to the services. The opportunities to establish nursery groups affiliated to kindergartens were abolished in 2015 for unknown reasons.

Hungary still has not reached the Barcelona targets, it is still 16,2% related to women's employment, and services for children, respectively. However, there are many challenges and problems that are rooted in the inherited system, financial constraints, and policy making (including the perceptions

and attitudes of decision makers). Birth rates have been falling for a long time, the society is ageing, and these trends are coupled with low activity rates, especially pertaining to women's employment.

Legislation and licensing

The system of children's services in Hungary is split. Policy responsibility for children under the Ministry of Human Capacities. Schooling age in Hungary is six, and kindergarten is compulsory as part of the public education system from age 3. The *1997 Act on the Protection of Children*, and the *2011 National Education Act* are the relevant pieces of legislation for nurseries and kindergartens. Regulations govern the system of administration and inspection, define minimum criteria, set educational content, establish quality standards and access to childcare, respite care, long term care services, kindergarten, and after school care. Licensed family day care and home childcare were also included in the 1997 legislation as basic services to be provided for families with young children. The laws define the duties of local governments also, and state what basic services they are required to ensure for the population in their area of authority. These duties can be fulfilled by the localities by setting up and operating programs either directly or in partnerships, as well as by contracting out the services. Licensing regimes vary according to the type of service and are based on the criteria set in legislation for the different services. Local authorities are the issuing agents for operating licences. Inspection is done by the county guardianship offices (part of the public administration system) once every four years and by the licensing local authority once a year for nurseries and family day cares. The inspection of kindergartens is the duty of the maintainer, which are mostly local authorities. The maintainer also evaluates the professional work in the kindergarten based on the pedagogical measures and evaluations of pedagogical service, the expert opinion of persons in the national register, the report written by the institutions of public education, and the opinion of supervisory body of kindergartens. Registered professionals must be asked to comment on plans for setting up or closing services.

1.2 Italy

Interest in national provision for the care and education of young children has not been limited to contemporary Italy, the first expressions arising in the period of Italy's reunification (late 19th Century), with significant experiences that have influenced far beyond the context in which they emerged, as in the case of Maria Montessori, the Agazzi sisters or the Reggio Emilia model.

Today, in Italy - as in Europe - early childhood education and care (ECEC) services were above all considered as places to favour the reconciliation and therefore female employment, according to an

interpretative framework that has strongly evolved over the years towards a multifunctional perspective, leading to the conception of the wider aims - primarily educational - of services for early childhood development.

In the wake of the recent European political trajectories drawn at the EU-level in the field - e.g. through the Communication n.66 of 17 February 2011 which explicitly sees ECEC as an essential basis for the success of lifelong learning, social integration and personal development, or the recent Commission Recommendation of 20 February 2013 "Investing in children to break the vicious circle of social disadvantage" (2013/112/EU), as well as recalled within the Europe 2020 Strategy, stating that services for children aged 0 to 3 play an essential role in raising education levels and social inclusion, and also the recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning adopted in May 2018 by the Council of the EU - Italy resulted in a number of context-specific actions towards an increased quality and inclusiveness of diversity in ECEC provision.

Indeed, despite the European Commission advocating and supporting EU Member States towards higher quality ECEC, it still remains the responsibility of Member States. This is probably because quality is variably interpreted and that contextualised responses to the questions of quality ECEC should be embedded within the cultural context and reflective of the diversity of populations within them. Also, definitions of diversity in ECEC literature are diverse and influenced by the differences which are important in that particular social and cultural context.

The social groups interested in Italy by higher or special support in the ECD frame are nowadays children experiencing psycho-physical disabilities and special educational needs (more details within the next paragraph). Also, Italy is increasingly becoming a destination country for third-country asylum seekers and refugees: given the increasing diversity of Italian society, the new teacher preparation programmes more and more include training in bilingual language development and multicultural education.

1.3 Serbia

Traditionally, ECD was considered as "baby-sitting" service for families where both parents worked and there were no extended family members available for looking after young children whilst parents were at work. Learning was seen as a "serious thing", so children were thought to be better off if left to "play and have fun" as long as possible before starting to go to school and are asked to "start learning". However, as soon as the first preschool in today's Serbia was opened in 1844 in the northern town Subotica, and the first kindergarten was opened in 1881 in Vrsac, the decision-makers formulated the aims and tasks of the preschool institutions as support for the development and

preparation for school. In 1890, a Kingdom of Serbia's Decree on the Serbian kindergartens formulated them as: "the aim of the kindergarten is to help children's upbringing till the school age, to develop a child's body, senses and spirit and to prepare a child for education at school".

After the First World War, this approach of developing both the "body and soul" of children in kindergartens was not visible much in any of the documents between the two World Wars.

After the Second World War, the main guiding principles were based on the Soviet pedagogical thought – there were four priorities: health care, physical development, mental development, and patriotic emotional development.

Towards the end of the fifties, the priorities shifted towards supporting and promoting creative and spontaneous characteristics of a child in the field of sensory, physical development, emotional, social, and intellectual development of a young child. Based on the new literature and knowledge, in the nineties, the focus shifted towards development of the communicative, constructive, content child from the earliest years.

Up until 2002, Serbia had a split system in which part of the preschool education and care was the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs, and part under the Ministry of Education. In 2002, a decision was made to transfer all the responsibilities for preschool education and care to the Ministry of Education. This means that the framework for curriculum is developed centrally at the State level. In terms of financing though, the responsibilities are split between the central and local municipal (self)governments. From six months of age to 5.5 years of age, the costs are borne mainly by local Municipalities, whilst salaries of the preschool teachers in the mandatory year prior to elementary education (from 5.5 to 6.5 years of age) are secured by the central Government.

Preschool education and care are (like all levels of education) inclusive with the possibilities for developing individual educational plans for each child that needs special support (children of Roma ethnic background in the areas where only Roma language is spoken at home and children do not learn Serbian (the language of tuition) at home, for children with learning or developmental difficulties, or extremely gifted children). At preschool level, there are Inter-sectoral Commissions in each municipality made up of specialists from different fields (social, special pedagogy, regular preschool teachers, social workers...) and in cooperation and consultation with parents, they may develop individual educational plans for each child that needs additional or special support.

1.4 Slovakia

The Slovak educational system is the result of historical development and began to be developed systematically in the 18th century. It is characterised by several historical factors mainly the centralising tendencies. This also applies to the concept of ECEC and how it is approached. In line with this policy, Slovak Republic has built up a relatively complex infrastructure of educational institutions which, under the control of the state authorities, were dedicated to the educational, social and health care of children from essentially a few months after their birth. A relatively dense network of nurseries and kindergartens, established by the state, was built up, which families with children from approximately 6 months of age to 6 years of age could use free of charge. After the political changes in 1989, this infrastructure was disrupted as a result of the restructuring. Nowadays, one of the key themes in the ECEC policy is to build the spatial capacity to meet the needs in this area, especially following the introduction of compulsory schooling from the age of 5.

As far as institutional ECEC facilities are concerned, there are three types of facilities: nurseries (official name - childcare facilities for children up to 3 years of age) for children up to the age of three, early intervention services provided to children of up to the age of seven if their development is at risk due to a disability or to a bad family situation, and kindergartens providing services to children from 3 to 6 years of age (they can accept children from the age of 2 onwards if they have favourable conditions). Both nurseries and kindergartens may be established by municipalities, economic entities, churches, and private persons, including non-profit organisations. Day nurseries function as a social service to promote the reconciliation of family and working life.

The **nurseries** are defined as a social service for working parents. They provide routine childcare, nutrition, and education. Young children can also stay with childminders. The parent can choose the nursery of his/her choice, the rules for admission are determined locally. The capacities are however not sufficient and prices in private nurseries exceed the amount of the state contributions available to parents. Socially excluded and poor families have virtually no chance to participate in early care programs for children under 3 years. According to the central register in 2020¹ the service was provided in 220 facilities. Of these, 180 were non-public and 40 publicly funded. The number of pending applications for child placement for capacity reasons was 311 in 2020 (219 pending applications were registered for non-public providers and 92 for public providers).

Specialised social counselling, social rehabilitation, stimulation of complex development of a child with disabilities as preventive activities are provided within the framework of the early intervention service. The early intervention service can be provided through an ambulatory social service, a field-

¹ <https://www.employment.gov.sk/sk/centralny-register-poskytovatelov-socialnych-sluzieb/>

based social service or a field programme. Families with children with disabilities can participate in the system of early intervention but the services are only accessible to approx. 11% of the families in need.

In the case of kindergartens (for children from 2 or 3 to 6 years of age), capacity shortages sometimes result in discriminatory practices in the enrolment process. The chances of children with disabilities entering kindergartens are greatly reduced and nearly 60% of these children do not attend them². The participation of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and excluded localities in ECEC services is very low and only about a third of these children attend state provided ECEC services³. This is one of the reasons why compulsory schooling has been introduced from the age of 5 years that is implemented in kindergartens. However, enough places have still not been created for 5-year-olds and, in some cases, the enrolment of 5-year-olds reduces the capacity to enrol 3-year-olds. There appears to be a lack of professional staff - qualified teachers - in the newly created kindergarten classes. The Ministry of Education reports that up to 5 % of 5-year-olds in approximately 76 municipalities encounter capacity problems in their place of residence. The lack of capacity is particularly acute in the Prešov and Košice regions. In these regions, there is a relatively high representation of children from marginalised Roma communities who have not attended kindergarten before⁴. According to M. Rehúš⁵, 91.5 percent of children aged five attended kindergartens in the 2021/2022 school year, compared with 86.2 per cent last year and 85.9 percent the year before. But in the worst performing regions of Košice and Prešov, it is just 81.8 per cent and 87.5 percent respectively. Nevertheless, in the Košice Region, this represents an increase of 9.8 percentage points compared to last year. There was also a relatively high increase in the Prešov Region (7.4 percentage points).

Currently, another serious challenge, especially in the Bratislava region, is the placement of children of Ukrainian residents in kindergartens that do not have sufficient space and staff capacity.

² Hapalová, M., (2019) Deti so zdravotným znevýhodnením v MŠ. In Hall, R. et al. Analýza zistení o stave školstva na Slovensku: To dá rozum. Bratislava: MESA 10. Retrieved on January 15, 2021, from: <https://analyza.todarozum.sk/docs/19081119130001dnx1/>

³ Educational Policy Institute, Value for Money Department, (2019) Revízia výdavkov na skupiny ohrozené chudobou a sociálnym vylúčením. Priebežná správa. Január 2019, Retrieved on January 10, 2021, from: <https://www.minedu.sk/revizia-vydavkov-na-skupiny-ohrozene-chudobou-alebo-socialnym-vylucenim-2019/>

⁴ [Nedostatok kapacít v MŠ je najmä v Prešovskom a Košickom kraji \(skolske.sk\)](https://www.skolske.sk/clanok/56567/) <https://www.skolske.sk/clanok/56567/>

⁵ <https://dennikn.sk/2678662/skolsky-tyzden-ani-po-zavedeni-povinnosti-nechodia-do-materskej-skoly-vsetky-patrocne-deti/?ref=tit>

2. What are the legislative frameworks for the implementation of ECD in your country? Who, which actors can implement ECD within the legal possibilities?

2.1 Hungary

In Hungary, the system of early childhood education and care (ECEC) comprises two stages and is bi-sectoral (social care and education). The first stage is the provision of non-compulsory institutional care for children aged 0–3 years, either with full fees being charged or subsidized by the state (nursery; outside the scope of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)). The second stage is mandatory for all children from the age of 3 years until school age, and it is free of charge (kindergarten; ISCED level 020). The institutional systems of both stages are overseen by the Ministry of Human Capacities but fall under the competence of different state secretariats. Nurseries are supervised by the State Secretariat for Family and Youth Affairs whereas kindergartens, as part of the public education system, fall under the responsibility of the State Secretariat for Public Education.

The aim of nursery education is for young children to acquire the skills and abilities that will help them to behave effectively and in a balanced way in their own cultural environment, and to successfully adapt to changes. Nursery education achieves this through approaches and methods that respect the primacy of family care and declares its obligations to do so.

A further aim of nursery care is to carry out prevention activities for all young children and their families, in line with a broad interpretation of the approach to early childhood intervention. Institutions providing nursery care, as family-friendly institutions and services, contribute to improving the quality of life of families and increasing the employability of parents.

Since 1 January 2017, day-care for children has been provided in two forms: centre-based provision (nurseries and mini-nurseries) and non-centre-based types of service provision (family nurseries and workplace nurseries).

Nurseries

Nurseries are the most common providers of childcare for children under the age of 3 years. In the new system of nursery care, 'nursery' refers to the traditional institution of a nursery, which provides day-care in accordance with the National Core Program of Nursery Education and Care.

In addition to basic care, nurseries can – at least in principle - support families by providing special advisory services, temporary childcare, a residential service, and other childcare services.

Nurseries may provide a residential service, providing up to 24 hours of continuous care for a children whose parents are temporarily unable to take care of them. The service can also be provided during weekends and holidays, but its duration may not exceed 10 days of care per child within a school year.

Another possible institutional service is a playgroup. In playgroups, children and parents can play together – with the help of the person providing nursery services.

Mini nurseries are institutions providing professional nursery care and education in smaller groups than in nurseries, and under simpler rules governing personnel, materials, and operation. Local governments can now establish this type of institution if there is a need to care for a maximum of seven young children (or eight children if all are over the age of 2 years) in a settlement.

Workplace nurseries: provide a day-care service maintained by an employer primarily for the children of people working for the employer. A service-type nursery, which does not operate within an institutional framework, may operate primarily on the premises where the work is performed, at a property owned by the employer or at a property rented for this purpose by the employer. A workplace nursery group can care for a maximum of seven children.

Family nurseries (home-based provision): Children can be cared for in family nurseries from the age of 20 weeks to the age of 3 years. Due to the nature of the service, family nurseries can be significantly easier and faster to set up than institutional service provision. Care is provided either in the service provider's own home or in another facility designed for this purpose.

Kindergarten

A kindergarten is a public education institution that cares for a child from the age of 3 years until the beginning of school education. Kindertartens gradually prepare the child for school education, especially in the final kindergarten year. As specified by the National Core Program of Kindergarten, the aim of kindergarten education is to promote the multifaceted, harmonious development of children, to promote the development of children's personalities and to mitigate disadvantages, considering the ages, individual characteristics, and different developmental stages of children (including children with special educational needs). Participation in kindergarten care is obligatory for children aged 3 years until school age for at least 4 hours per weekday. According to the National Public Education Act (§8(2)), children must attend kindergarten from 1 September of the year in which they reach the age of 3 years until 31 August of the following year. At the request of the child's parent, the body designated by the government may exempt the child from compulsory participation until the age of 4 years. This can be justified by family circumstances, the development of the child's abilities and their particular situation.

Sure Start Houses

Sure Start Houses were set up in early 2000 adapting the British model to support early inclusion and integration and providing better opportunities for children in vulnerable living conditions. It was serving children from 0 to 5 years until the introduction of the compulsory kindergarten from age 3. They were set up in the most disadvantaged rural sub-regions, mostly in small settlements. Sure Start programs offer opportunities for children and parents to spend a couple of hours together and learn by doing about the developmental needs of children, and play. The Houses also offer counselling, food, washing and bathing facilities, job seeking. Currently 114 Houses are operating as part of the preventive measures of child protection and with support of EU funding there are substantial developments of more provisions.

2.2 Italy

Achieving the goals of quality and access depends on a well-trained and knowledgeable core of early childhood educators. Various laws and regulations have been enacted with the aim of raising the qualifications for pre-school teachers to university level from 1992 on in Italy. Indeed, Early Childhood Education and Care is a sector where Italian legislation and policies have been focusing much effort during the last decades, especially in a view to make it more inclusive and accessible. To cite one figure: Italy is, so far, according to the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, the only European country which has reached 99.6% inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream education. In fact, by law there are no special schools or classes in the Italian school system. Teachers are provided by the MIUR. In-service training for curricular and support teachers provides instruction on different types of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and how to cope with them (specific curricula). Here for example the laws that have been enacted and constitute the framework for the rights of children with SEN:

- Law 104 of 1992 'Framework Law for the assistance, social integration and the rights of the disabled'. The Law 104/1992 provides for the removal of barriers (architectural or sensorial) and the introduction of appropriate aids and tools to support pupils with disabilities in education and training.
- Law 170 of 2010, which guarantees the right to education of pupils and students with Special Learning Disabilities (SLD). This Law and related guidelines state that pupils with learning disorders do not need special teachers, but a new way of teaching, according to their way of learning. The aim is to shift the focus from a clinical to a pedagogic view, by empowering all subjects involved in the educational process. As pupils with SLD are under the responsibility

of the curricular teachers, the MIUR has issued guidelines to help schools support pupils with SLD. Schools should activate specific pedagogic and didactic measures to guarantee their achievements. They may also use personalised education plans (PDP) and have the possibility of using compensatory tools and dispensatory measures.

- Law 107/2015, known as “The good school”, goes further, introducing important novelties such as: redefining support teachers’ initial training; providing indicators for self-evaluation and evaluation of school inclusion; re-organising the regional workgroups for inclusion; providing compulsory initial and in-service training for school leaders and teachers on pedagogic, didactic and organisational aspects for inclusive education; identifying the in-service training requirements on school inclusiveness for the administrative, technical and auxiliary staff, according to their specific expertise.

Italian current legal possibilities as for the support to ECD show that the country is in the process of bringing ECEC under responsibility of the Ministry of Education, although the regions are still the main regulators of provision for under-3s. Indeed, Italy’s education system is organised according to the principles of subsidiarity and school autonomy. The state and the regions share legislative competence. Moreover, regions should comply with the provisions of national legislation. Schools are autonomous with regard to didactic, organisational and research activities.

2.3 Serbia

Up until the age of 5.5 years of age, ECEC can be organised by any private or public institution. Each municipality has at least one public ECEC institution. Private ones exist mainly in bigger towns. The private ones are sometimes registered as playhouses, kindergartens, or child-care places. For the mandatory preschool year, the private ones must have the State licence.

Public preschools in most cases have nursery groups (6 months to 3 years of age), kindergartens (3-5.5 years of age) and preparatory groups (5.5-6.5 years of age).

The National framework curriculum adopted by the Ministry of Education guides the educational aspect of the preschools. Two main laws govern preschool education and care – the Law on education in Serbia and the Law on preschool education and care.

In terms of different aspects of preschool organisation, access, and quality, various by-laws regulate the priorities, quality standards, and (self)-assessment of the work of the preschool institutions.

There are also religious preschools managed and run by different religious groups. It is a rather grey zone when it comes to the quality standards, framework curriculum and licensing of these preschools. There are also a few NGOs running preschool programmes and specialised Montessori, Waldorf, and Step by Step kindergartens.

It is important to mention that among the public preschools, there are preschools in which the language of instruction is in one of 8 recognised languages of the ethnic minorities (Slovak, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian, Rusini and Romanian languages).

2.4 Slovakia

The ECEC provision is controlled by different ministries: health, social affairs and family, education, and divided between different levels of administration (state, higher territorial units, self-governments). The services and interventions are fragmented, and a comprehensive approach and coordination are missing. This affects mainly the most vulnerable groups of children as the challenges they face are complex and require a complex and interconnected system of support. Between 2021 and 2024, Slovakia is undergoing an educational reform, which should include a strategy to eliminate this fragmentation.

National Program for the Development of Education (NPDE) is a national program aimed at improving the educational process and the school system. It was adopted in 2018 with the horizon to 2027. A part of it concerns inclusive education. Measures foreseen in NPDE at the regional level are:

- to create a strategy for the gradual development of inclusive education in Slovakia
- to create material and technical conditions to ensure the fulfilment of the needs of children and pupils with SEN
- to increase the number of professional staff in schools, especially teacher assistants, social pedagogues, school psychologists, and special pedagogues
- to improve the functioning of the school facilities for educational guidance and prevention

Zero Action Plan of the Strategy for Inclusive Approaches in Education and Training (ZAP) was prepared by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic in November 2020 in an interdepartmental dialogue and cooperation with experts from practice. ZAP tackles some of the long-postponed educational challenges from practice, which are divided into five areas: desegregation of the education system, inclusion in early years and preschool age (0-7 years),

conditions for inclusion (the content of education and staffing), support measures in education, and special pedagogical support in education and counselling⁶. The existing commitments of the Slovak Republic in the field of inclusive education, the setting of the ESIF programming period for the years 2021 - 2027, and the goals defined in the strategic documents of the European Commission: The Anti-Racism Action Plan, the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation, as well as the relevant proposal from the Recommendation of the Council, were considered in its development. Further steps for a long-term and strategic development of inclusive education in Slovakia will be identified in the forthcoming Strategy for Inclusive Approaches in Education. The comprehensive and long-term Strategy along with the action plan for the period of 2022 - 2024 is currently being prepared in cooperation with other ministries and experts from practice and should be adopted later this year.

Since 1 September 2016, the State Curriculum for Pre-primary Education in Kindergartens has been in force for kindergartens included in the network of schools. The State Pedagogical Institute is responsible for drawing it up. It lays down the basic requirements of the State for the provision of institutional pre-primary education in kindergartens. It defines the objectives of pre-primary education in kindergartens and constitutes the basic framework for the development of school educational programmes of specific kindergartens. The school curriculum is the basic curricular document governing how education and training in kindergartens are carried out.

3. Who are the main actors of ECD? Are there specific professional qualification requirements for the provision of ECD services?

3.1 Hungary

Qualification requirements:

The first national professional guidelines for the staff in nurseries and kindergartens was developed in 1953 and in 1954. Even though nurseries and kindergartens fall under two different ministries (health and education), the principles of the provision of full-time services for children to cover the developmental needs, care, and education, also including 3 times catering for children attending.

⁶ Monika Filipová, State Secretary of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Slovak Republic for Inclusive Education and National Education, retrieved on January 10, 2022 from: <https://www.minedu.sk/nulty-akcny-plan-je-prvotnym-vychodiskom-pre-urychlene-nastartovanie-funkcnych-zmien-k-zvyseniu-inkluzivnosti-vo-vzdelavani/>.

Nurseries

In principle, the group size should not exceed 12 children, in case all the children attending are older than 2, it is 14. If a child with special needs is attending, 10 children and 1 child with special needs form the group. This rule is often not obeyed and the groups are oversized as they are counting on absence of children due to illness or other family reasons.

In every group, two qualified early childhood educators and a technical assistance provider are required. The qualification of early childhood educator can be a BA in early childhood education, or several accredited vocational training courses, a health visitor or a person with another type of higher education - special education teacher, educational assistant, or a pedagogist. (Decree 15/1998. (IV.30.) NM). The technical assistants (called nannies) need at least primary education and to attend training of 100 hours (70 hours theory, 30 hours practice) ending with an exam. (Ministry of Human Capacities decree 20/2017 (IX.18) on the Professional and Examination Requirements of the Training of Crèche Nurses and staff and Day-care Workers providing crèche education and childcare). In the other types of nurseries, lower qualification (nanny) is required as a minimum, a fact criticised by many professionals, including the Trade Union of Nurseries.

In case the workers do not have the needed qualification but are already enrolled in an educational institution, they are obliged to acquire it within 3 years and continue working in the meantime. In this case the operational permissions are temporary for the services. There is also compulsory vocational training for all those working with children regulated in the decrees 15/1998. (IV.30.) NM, 51/D.§.; 51/H.§. (4) and 51/M.§. (4), requiring everyone to participate every 3 years in a training organised by the Methodology Centre of MACSKE. Professional training is provided by colleges and universities while vocational courses are provided by accredited state, private or non-profit run institutions. There are very few NGOs involved in nursery services as nurseries have traditionally been a state responsibility and despite the role of the church organisations being important, only few for profit institutions have appeared so far.

Kindergartens

According to the law, the group size may vary between 13-25 children, depending on the circumstances but it is allowed to have up to 30 children in the group if there are children who need to attend kindergarten and have no other options. This leads in many cases to overcrowded groups in limited spaces, small rooms without a playground or garden nearby, where children don't spend enough time outside. The 2012 CXC National Public Education Law § 61 regulates the requirements concerning qualification of kindergartens staff. Kindergarten teachers' training has been at college

level only since 1993, compared to the previous decades of mixed systems, providing secondary education qualification as well. Since 1996 only those who have studied at a university for at least 4 years and have a university degree can be employed as kindergarten pedagogues.

The 2012 Law on National Public Education regulates the qualification criteria for those working in kindergartens. According to the latest government decree (33§ (5) issued on 31. August 2020 before 8 o'clock in the morning and in the afternoon (from 12 o'clock), it is not compulsory anymore to employ kindergarten teachers due to the shortage of them. Assistants and technical assistants, nannies, can supervise children. There have been a lot of protests on behalf of professionals, trade unions, parent's advocacy groups opposing these provisions as this might decrease the quality of care and lead to providing "babysitting" activities instead of professional work with children. The protesters claim this is backstepping, and underestimates the role of trained kindergarten educators providing essential care and education for children, especially those coming from disadvantaged families, environments.

Nannies are participating in the care and nurturing of children, 1 person per group with at least primary education and vocational training (480-720 hours). 1 pedagogical assistant has to be employed for every 3 groups of children with at least secondary education and vocational training (1000 hours).

Kindergarten and school psychologists do not need a qualification in school psychology based on the same decree, despite the critical shortage of professionals in mental health all over the country.

Main actors

In the field of ECD, local authorities are the dominant actors with a growing number of private and church run provisions.

In 2021 41 117 children under the age of three attended one of the four types of nurseries that offer 52 822 places, unevenly distributed in the country, 2875 children were rejected due to the lack of placements while in other places there were high numbers of vacancies not used.

Among those attending nurseries, 869 children with special needs and 1188 children with multiple disadvantages (extreme poverty, poor housing, unemployed parents with low qualifications) have been served. 8213 trained early childhood educators and 2035 non-trained helpers have been taking care of the children in the nurseries, while 1691 caretakers without known qualifications have been working in the newly formed provisions.

In 2320 settlements 56 000 children had no access to the facilities or lacked the facilities. This is a 5,5% decrease compared to 2017. In 4779 groups, 875 local authority or state-run nurseries, 280

mini-nurseries, 994 family/homes-based nurseries and 11 workplace nurseries have provided services.

In 2020/21 4575 kindergartens have been operating (5% increase in 10 years) with 384 thousand places, 84% of them run by local authorities or the state, the dynamic increase since 2010 of church run kindergartens has reached 8,8% in 2021. 323 thousand children have attended kindergartens 7,8 thousand less than in the previous year. The placements and the needs for them are not matching, leading to overcrowded groups and facilities in some areas while in others with free places available. 31 thousand trained kindergarten teachers have been employed, providing a 10,4 child/staff ratio on average, although the average group size is till 21,5, but in private and church run facilities it means 18 child per group. In a group in principle there are two professionals taking care of the children, but due to the shortage of professionals there are a growing number of facilities where non-skilled workers are only available.

In every settlement with over 40 children under the age of 3 and in settlements where at least 5 families with children under 3 require day care a nursery should be established. This has not happened so far due to the shortage of resources.

3.2 Italy

The organisation of ECEC provision and the rules that apply largely depend on the nature of its governance. In countries that have separate age-dependent settings, which is the case for Italy, the dual authority model largely prevails. The responsibility for ECEC is thus divided between two different ministries (or top-level authorities). The ministry for education or another top-level education authority is responsible for the pre-primary education of children aged 3 and over, while the 'childcare-type' provision for children under age 3 falls under another ministry or authority, usually that dealing with children or family affairs.

As stated before, Italy is bringing ECEC under responsibility of the Ministry of Education, although the regions are still the main regulators of provision for under-3s. Indeed, Italy's education system is organised according to the principles of subsidiarity and school autonomy.

The multi-level framework for inclusive education involves all levels of government in the process and can be synthesised as follows:

- The MIUR is responsible for inclusion policies and their funding.
- Local authorities provide ancillary services and assistance.
- Regions regulate school assistance (direct and indirect interventions).

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- Municipalities offer support services and assistance to personal autonomy.

Among the most active national children's rights organisations, that has worked uninterruptedly for over six centuries to help children and families, there is the Istituto degli Innocenti in Florence, a state-owned company providing services for the public. Today the Institute's activities include establishing and testing educational and social services, studying the condition of children, and promoting children's rights and culture, in line with the UN Convention on the rights of the child. The Institute carries out its mission e.g. managing the documentation and monitoring activities of the National Centre for Documentation and Analysis for Childhood and Adolescence, that, every two years, draws up a Report on the condition of childhood and adolescence in Italy. An interesting feature of the Report is that of paying particular attention to new phenomena or those that are once again taking on priority value in the universe of children and services dedicated to it, including those related to diversity inclusion.

In terms of professional qualification requirements, Law 107/2015 established that the continuing professional development of teachers is compulsory, permanent, and structural also as for the field of Early childhood education and care. Each school defines and organizes in-service training activities, including networking with other schools. The activities must be consistent with the three-year plan of the school's training offer, with the self-assessment report and with the school improvement plan, based on the priorities indicated by the Ministry every three years. Below, the priorities identified for the current period:

- Foreign languages.
- Digital skills and new learning environments.
- School and work.
- Didactic and organisational autonomy.
- Evaluation and improvement.
- Teaching for skills and methodological innovation.
- Integration, citizenship skills and global citizenship.
- Inclusion and disability.
- Social cohesion and prevention of juvenile distress.

CPD-related training initiatives usually take place outside teaching hours, and participation in them constitutes a right for the staff, as it is functional to their full realisation and development.

professionalism. Teachers are also entitled to use five days during the school year for participation in training initiatives with exemption from service.

To stimulate teachers to participate in in-service training activities, law 107/2015 also provides for an economic incentive awarded in the form of an electronic card. Each year, the teachers receive a maximum of € 500.00 for the purchase of books, magazines, hardware, and software; attendance of courses offered by accredited bodies or higher education institutions; participation in cultural events (performances, films, live events) and visits to museums and exhibitions; activities consistent with the three-year plan of the school's training offer and with the national training plan. However, there is no stringent control as to the areas covered by these extra opportunities for professional development, and it is not possible to ex post trace the areas eventually improved/benefited by the initiative.

The European Commission's School Education Gateway is an online platform aimed for teachers, school leaders, researchers, teacher educators, policy makers and other professionals working in the field of school education, including early childhood education and care (ECEC). Resources for both initial teacher education and continuing professional development of teachers are available there and are essential to ensure the acquisition of skills, competences and knowledge that enable teachers to cope with the different situations that may arise in the classroom. This is especially important for teachers working in more difficult contexts, such as schools with high levels of educational and socio-economic disadvantage and very heterogeneous groups of students. The section "Erasmus+ Opportunities", for example, gathers a huge number of Erasmus+ KA1 professional development courses for schoolteachers and staff, as well as job shadowing opportunities abroad. Areas of interest can be searched for by applying filters: inclusion is a very present topic.

In addition, the Eurosofia platform, Italian non profit body active in the vocational education and training of school staff, pursuant Directive 90/2003 and Directive 170/2016 with Ministerial Decree gathers multiple learning resources in the form of online courses. Lots of them cover the topics of disabilities and multiculturality.

The role of CIAPE in the ECD field has grown from 2019 to today, promoting initiatives with a European vocation aiming at the professionalisation of the ECEC staff, especially with a view to increase the inclusiveness of ECEC settings. See, for example, the Diversity+ experience www.diversity-plus.eu, supported by the European Erasmus+ programme of the EU, providing

Governance, Benchmarking and Training tools for this scope (check out more via the Toolkit section of the website).

3.3 Serbia

In nurseries, for the professional staff, the minimum education required is secondary vocational medical school, profile preschool teacher. From kindergarten level to elementary school, the minimum required education is post-college level preschool teacher, but master level is becoming a norm among the younger preschool teachers.

There is also a system of mandatory continuous professional development – in-service training. The National Agency for Quality Improvement in Education has a list of priorities for three-year cycles and every third year it opens a public call for submission of training proposals that are in accordance with the set priorities. Any training service provider, NGO, professional education group can submit proposals. Upon the Agency's selection process, a list of accredited trainings is published in a catalogue with the short description of the training, names of the trainers and organisation/institution responsible, price per person / training and the number of points towards (re)licensing it will provide (between 4 and 24 points depending on the duration of the training). Any international training is also recognised and valued (only the number of points is lower than for the accredited training).

3.4 Slovakia

There are many NGOs that support ECD. Among the most important:

The Healthy Regions Organisation is a state-funded organisation of the Ministry of Health, whose mission is to implement and develop temporary compensatory measures in the field of health. Its activities and actions are focused on social determinants of health, which include health-related behaviours, material conditions, psychosocial factors, barriers to access to health care, health literacy and structural constraints (e.g. discrimination, racism, low levels of education, related legislation, etc.).

Cesta von is a civic association that implements the Omama programme in Slovakia, which aims to promote early stimulation and healthy development of children in the MRC from birth to 3 years of age, which is considered a key age for early intervention.

The National Project "Building Professional Capacity at Community Level" to provide quality professional support to individuals and families at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

help solutions to their social problems, as well as to provide support leading to the development of the whole communities through the targeted use of community resources. In addition to staffing, the project will also focus on training and methodological anchoring of the community work model.

Škola dokorán – Wide Open School n. o. (SD-WOS) has been working since 2012 on strengthening of Roma families in segregated and marginalised localities in Slovakia, by supporting parents (both mothers and fathers) in their efforts at raising their children in a safe, secure and caring family environment, offering parents information and knowledge regarding early childhood development, the importance of their role, information regarding alternative, effective parenting, foster improved communication and understanding between parents and their children (through encouraging parents to invest in spending quality time with their children and support their development through activities with them), supplementing the discovery and learning experiences of their children (through a better understanding of children's development), and promoting positive parental attitudes towards education (particularly in the early years) throughout their children's school years. SD-WOS has been promoting inclusion through supporting Roma parents to access community preschool, kindergarten and early primary services and provision, in integrated settings. This methodology has assumed that it is not enough to draw up policies of change. Change needs to be reflected at school level and in the environment of the children and there is often a gap between the statements and requirements in policy documents and the reality in which these need to be implemented. Practice has proven that for schools to overcome the rift of exclusive teaching and learning approaches, they must re-examine what they teach, how they teach and how they assess learners' performances. A real link with the non-formal education and the support for families and communities is necessary to create a shift in education - for the benefit of all learners.

Despite the efforts to diversify the ECEC system, the kindergarten still remains a key institution in its provision. Educational activities are carried out as a continuous sequence of activities in the morning and afternoon with different content, focus and organisation. Education and training in the kindergarten are carried out through the following forms of daily activities: games and activities of the children's choice, health exercises, educational activities, outdoor activities, and activities to ensure well-being (personal hygiene, eating, rest). Only professionals who have completed the relevant training may be kindergarten teachers. Although it is still acceptable to have a secondary vocational education, an increasing number of kindergarten teachers have completed a first or second cycle university degree. Regardless of the level of education, however, kindergarten teachers must meet the professional standards set by the Ministry of Education in 2017. The professional standards set out requirements separately for teachers with completed secondary.

education, with a completed first and second degree, for teachers with a first and second attestation, and in each category for beginning teachers and for independent teachers. The professional standards are defined in the following competence areas: the child (knowledge of the child), the educational process (designing, planning, implementing, and evaluating the educational process), professional development (identifying with the professional role, planning, and implementing professional development).

4. What changes have taken place in the ECD field in the last period (10 years)?

4.1 Hungary

There have been ambitious plans to open more nurseries, based on the growing needs and the efforts made to increase women's labour market activities, but the targets have not been achieved.

Opening of the workplace run mini nurseries and private, home-based ones has led to decreased requirements in qualification of staff in those settings and unequal situations compared to "regular" nurseries. The extremely high prices of private facilities have led to earlier segregation of children with different socio-economic backgrounds and have not provided support for families not capable of paying but in need of child-care for children younger than 3.

Introduction of compulsory kindergarten from age 3 as part of the public education was meant to support children in vulnerable situations. In practice there have been many protests on behalf of parents, who would not agree with the compulsory nature of kindergarten up to age 5, as obligatory preschool years have been accepted for a long time. On the other hand, the regulations issued have not been accompanied by the information sharing on the purpose of the new legislation, nor by the needed support provided to parents and professionals attached. In many settlements neither the kindergartens physically, nor the staff and the families have been prepared to accept the inflow of children with developmental and socialisation delays, many coming from very poor households, not knowing the use of running water, toilets, etc. This has led to growing rejection of the children and families on behalf of the professionals and many families, who have decided to take their children to other services in nearby districts, towns, cities.

The punitive approach of this new legislation making kindergarten compulsory (withdrawal of family allowance in case of more than 50 hours unjustified absentee and in extreme cases the placement of

the in care, separation from the family), instead of advocacy and awareness raising about the aim of the new regulations and ensuring the needed support to the families and children in need.

The regulations on compulsory kindergarten at the same time has led to increased segregation of Roma children, more segregated kindergartens and has not supported the integration inclusion neither Roma nor children with disabilities, chronic diseases, or any other vulnerabilities.

Changes in legislation has decreased the qualification criteria due to the fast-growing shortage of staff, due to the very low remuneration and unfavourable working conditions leading to lowering the quality of care and education of children in kindergartens.

The substantial increase of church run facilities are demonstrating the political commitment to favour religious education not necessarily serving the best interests of children.

4.2 Italy

Since 2015, several Member States have introduced reforms regarding the qualification of ECEC personnel or its continuous professional development: Italy is one of those countries that are in the process of raising the minimum qualification requirement for all personnel working with preschool children. Also, in this country, training pathways to attain the necessary degrees have been established, and the continuous professional development of staff is a duty, also necessary for promotion.

The Law 107/2015 established that the continuing professional development of teachers is compulsory, permanent, and structural also as for the field of Early childhood education and care. Each school defines and organises in-service training activities, including networking with other schools. The activities must be consistent with the three-year plan of the school's training offer, with the self-assessment report and with the school improvement plan, based on the priorities indicated by the Ministry every three years.

4.3 Serbia

Over the last ten years, the main change is a new framework curriculum adopted two years ago. The work on this new framework curriculum started long ago (in the early 2000s). The challenge in the previous framework was that only two pedagogical approaches were recognised – a more traditional one which was understood as the one requiring less resources and a more directive in approach, and the more flexible one, more based on the children's needs which was associated also with more modern and expensive resources required. Teachers complained that although they themselves.

could prefer, know, and want to implement the more flexible one, if the preschool could not afford the required tools, space, resources, in their planning and reporting system, they would have to choose a more traditional one to satisfy all the criteria.

So, a new framework has been developed and adopted, but now, another challenge has appeared – inspectors are not trained to understand the changes, teachers trained and used to the old approach are feeling rather confused and even those who have been proactive and willing to accept new trends are sceptical how this new framework makes sense.

4.4 Slovakia

The ECEC system should provide support for the development of all children from birth (or even before birth) to the age when they start school regardless of their social background, disability, or other characteristics. The concept of ECEC, which has long been narrowly defined, is gradually being broadened. However, certain historically developed institutional divisions of ECEC remain in place. Mention should be made of the concept of early intervention, which has often been, and to some extent still is, identified with ECEC. It is seen as an outreach service provided for children up to the age of seven who are either disabled or whose development is at risk due to an adverse social situation of their parents. In terms of the current government policy, ECEC is closer to being understood as an educational, social and health service for children from birth to the age of 6, when children start school.

As mentioned above, nowadays, one of the key themes in the ECEC policy is to build the spatial capacity to meet the needs in this area, especially following the introduction of compulsory schooling from the age of 5.

5. What research exists in the field of ECD? What topics is it focusing on? What results does it produce?

5.1 Hungary

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 10. Hajdú Tamás, Kertesi Gábor (2021): Statisztikai jelentés a gyermekegészség állapotáról Magyarországon a 21. század második évtizedében, KRTK Közgazdaságtudományi Intézet, Egészség és Társadalom Lendület csoport, (Statistical Report on the Health Status of Children in Hungary in the Second Decade of the 21.Century)
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5.2 Italy

The *Diversity+* experience previously mentioned is an innovative example of how the research is being conducted in the country nowadays towards the development of ECD as a key education area for the future development of all individuals.

As an example, some investigations conducted in Italy by CIAPE, the *Diversity+* project coordinator, consisted of a focus group aimed at deepening the skillset needed by ECEC workforce so that they are increasingly able to adopt a diversity inclusive approach while implementing their educational services, as well as to highlight the areas to be consolidated in the perspective of continuous professional development. Inclusive education and diversity inclusion in ECEC settings confirm to be high among the priorities of staff and school heads: the ability to observe and read the learning context in a holistic way, thus not limiting the professionals' initiative to the needs of individual children, emerged to be essential: *what does the group need?* must be the guiding question. A deep trust in individual resources and potential is a must. And of course, in a view to provide more and more meaningful services, the periodical update of skills by the workforce (lifelong learning; C-VET approach), as well as the enhancement of the parental alliance, is key to design and implement a participatory and inclusive educational project.

Some of the experts interviewed stressed the importance of introducing, within ECEC, CPD programmes, approaches, and theories responding to the contemporary reality, which is increasingly multifaceted. These include e.g. Marshall's approach to empathic communication, the intersectional feminism, as well as F. Canfora's neuroatipicity approach to diversity inclusion.

5.3 Serbia

This is difficult to estimate since most of the research in Serbia is either related to the requirements of the education (graduation paper, Master's thesis) or prompted by the available financial resources. Few researchers have their own field of interest in which they continuously study certain elements. Majority of academic people engage in research ad hoc.

The same applies to any research in the field of ECD. For instance, when the World Bank was interested in providing a loan to Serbia to increase the coverage of young children in ECEC, some of the researchers who had not been interested in this field got engaged because of the financial incentives.

However, most of the research in the field of ECD recently has been related to the development of the new framework curriculum, parents' involvement in the children's education and care and cooperation with the preschools, benefits/bad sides of the use of digital learning in early years (related to COVID-19 measures when all the education went online). Most of the papers are prepared and presented in Serbian, usually at the annual professional conferences (pedagogues, psychologists, preschool teachers). These papers are mostly dealing with specific aspects (use of storytelling in the early development, capacities of young children to learn foreign languages...).

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8. Vančíková, K., Kuťková, K. (2013). *Pripravenosť materských škôl na realizáciu multikultúrnej výchovy ako prierezovej témy*. In Vančíková, K. (ed.): *Multikultúrna výchova - jej miesto v príprave učiteľov = Multicultural education - its place in teachers education*. Banská Bystrica : Univerzita Mateja Bela, Pedagogická fakulta, 2013.

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Everyone should have access to early childhood education and care programmes, and these should help all children start on an equal footing when they later commence their schooling. Research findings confirm that if children participate in these programmes, it has a positive effect on their future learning. However, no attention is placed on programmes for children aged below 3 in Slovakia, and the state cannot guarantee access to pre-primary education even for those who are willing to participate in it. Many children are left in front of the kindergarten gates, as confirmed by the *Learning Makes Sense* questionnaire survey. Almost 50% of kindergarten principals surveyed stated that demand for places in their school outnumbered vacant capacity in the school year 2017/2018. Introducing compulsory pre-primary education for children aged 5 and above contributed to the pressure for capacity increase, although the risk of insufficient capacity remains.

6. What are the possibilities for parental involvement and what is the level of their interest in institutional ECD?

6.1 Hungary

Traditionally it has been very limited, and in most instances, parents are instructed rather than involved as partners in general. There have been several experimental programs and attempts to challenge these hierarchical relationships with limited success. (Step by Step program, Sure Start Houses, etc.)

6.2 Italy

As emerged in the frame of the research conducted by CIAPE in the frame of the Erasmus+ *Diversity+* project, an area likely to produce innovation and successful results is represented by the role of parents within the ECEC planning: most of the experts interviewed shared the will of an increased parental participation in the definition of services and learning paths for children. It reveals to be essential for a successful path towards more inclusive and effective ECEC provision: therefore, parents are the most important partners in delivering high-quality ECEC. Most interviewees encourage ECEC settings to include specific parent-friendly measures in their educational planning.

According to the School education gateway, parents and families have the most direct and lasting influence on the learning and development of children and young people: as first educators, they play a fundamental role in the educational path of their children. A stimulating home environment that encourages learning is critical to a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development, as is parental involvement in school activities. Playing with children or reading to them from early childhood, helping them with homework or talking about school life at home, attending meetings with teachers and other school initiatives are all activities that have positive and lasting effects on children's motivation to learn about their level of attention, their behaviour, and their academic results. Parents' expectations of their children's education also play a key role in shaping their learning. Creating a school-family alliance and involving parents as learning partners from the earliest years is therefore essential to improve the development of children and young people.

However, the relationship between schools, parents and families can be difficult. Many parents from disadvantaged backgrounds, while having high expectations and wanting the best for their children's education, may not commit themselves as they are unfamiliar with the current school system and feel distant from the school culture and its "language". Some may be demotivated by their experiences of failing at school or feel unable to support their children. Parents with a migrant background may feel penalised by the lack of the language skills necessary to communicate with school, help their children and monitor their progress; moreover, they may be discouraged by the

distance between their values and their culture and those of the host country, as they are represented by the school. Single parenthood or occupations involving long, or inflexible working hours can also hinder parental involvement.

On the other hand, teachers may perceive parents as passive, opportunistic or intrusive, or they may not have the time or experience to communicate with parents from heterogeneous backgrounds, approach them and engage them effectively. They may fear that their parents' involvement will rob them of time and negatively affect their duties as teachers. In some cases it may be that communication with parents and their involvement are not adequately recognized as one of the fundamental tasks of teachers and schools to promote academic success. Furthermore, the reasons behind some parents' distance or inertia are not well understood by teachers and the roles of parents in schools are unclear.

To be effective, the school-family alliance must be based on mutual respect and the recognition of the values, qualities, and skills of each party. Parents and families from all backgrounds and school levels need to feel welcomed in school and be seen as resources; they need to be recognized and adequately supported as co-educators in their children's learning from the earliest years.

Research shows that a multidisciplinary approach, with the involvement of parents, children, teachers, and other professionals, is essential for solving students' behavioural problems.

6.3 Serbia

At the systemic level, there is a mandatory Parents' Council in every preschool. In addition to that in the Management Board of any public preschool, out of nine members, three come from the preschool staff, three from the municipality and three from parents.

In practical terms, the involvement of parents in these two bodies is more administrative (political) – the Parents' Council approves the suppliers for food/meals for children, any recreational trips outside the place of residence, publishing house for any didactic/learning material for mandatory preparational year before school.

Parents involved in the Management Board give their vote in the election of the preschool Director, or when it comes to major reconstruction works.

In terms of daily involvement of parents, it is mostly happening when they bring or come to take their children from preschool when sometimes a quick chat about the child happens with the preschool teachers. Some volunteer their time for particular activities (to present their profession/job, to support teachers when they are taking the whole group to a theatre, or any similar

outside visit). There are also organised parental meetings with the lead preschool teacher of their group of children, especially at the beginning of the school year or at the end of it, sometimes also at half term.

Most frequently, parents of higher educational levels or better social position are the ones who get involved. Hard to reach parents are mostly those of low(er) levels of education, those from Roma community, refugee or IDP background.

In recent years, most of the preschool teachers complain that young children come with no skills usually expected at a certain age (children of 3 years of age still wearing diapers, with delayed speech (not based on health problems, but socially not prompted or supported to talk). When they try to discuss these issues with parents, parents show lack of consistency, determination, or skills to help their children acquire these skills.

6.4 Slovakia

The Omama program is a good example of trying to get involved in ECEC, especially in marginalised Roma communities. Trained Omama workers - coming directly from the community - visit the homes of families, where they work with children and their parents (most often mothers) on various games and activities aimed at psychosocial stimulation (fine and gross motor skills, cognitive, language, communication skills, socio-emotional areas). They follow a standardised manual with activities adapted to the age of the children that become increasingly complex week by week for the child to develop his/her potential age-appropriately. They involve parents in the activities and teach them what they can do with their children at home for the rest of the week. All steps and results of the child's paediatric screenings and the level of family involvement are recorded by the Omamas in a special mobile phone app. The organisation thus has a detailed overview of all children's development and calls in professional help when necessary. Each Omama is accompanied by a 'middle class' mentor who provides practical support and encouragement. In addition to ongoing training, Omamas also receive regular on-site supervision visits to improve their work with the families. One Omama visits between 15 and 30 families per week (depending on her contract). In addition, she counsels both mothers and pregnant women and organises monthly parenting clubs where the involved mothers meet, often with invited experts. The programme was launched in 2018 in three at-risk communities and has since spread rapidly, and by 2021, 27 "omamas" are already working in 20 excluded communities with more than 560 young children and their families.

7. Which are the social groups that are at risk of inadequate access to ECD? Characterise them and describe the related problems.

7.1 Hungary

Children in vulnerable situations, living in poverty and in isolation, especially Roma children and children with disabilities and those with multiple disadvantages. (See more above)

7.2 Italy

Diversity inclusion in ECEC is a theme attracting more and more attention, interest, and resources from a wide range of stakeholders, from policy makers to national and sub-national authorities' representatives, experts and professionals, parents, and advocacy groups. This is reflected by the fact that both legislation and policies have been focusing much effort on its improvement during the last decades. It is also true, however, that beyond theories, too often the enhancement of diversity inclusion is still weak in everyday approaches and services.

A specific critical aspect arises when considering the multicultural inclusion of children: in Italy, language support is available for children over the age of 3; however, there are no measures to improve children's skills in their home language where it is not the main language used in the ECEC and school context. This is particularly critical in the case of children belonging to ethnic minorities.

It is interesting to note that the Italian legislation in the field of inclusive education contributed to produce a shift in the culture and social perception of diversities in the country, with a special focus on disabilities. 1977 was the first year when pupils with disabilities entered mainstream schools. At that time, pupils were not accustomed to diversity. Families themselves were ashamed. Nowadays, Italian pupils experience diversity in their everyday life, tend to accept it and feel personally responsible for the well-being of classmates with disabilities. The whole school community (teachers, other staff, parents) feels fully committed to inclusion, although not necessarily adequately prepared for it, as highlighted within most of the field interviews carried out.

Still too often in ECEC settings it is forgotten the importance of dealing with the individual needs of (vulnerable or disadvantaged) children, especially when it comes to the integration of children from migratory backgrounds and Roma, Sinti and Caminanti (RSC), still tending to consider diversity as a threat or a problem rather than experiencing it as an enrichment or an opportunity, both for the school (where it would also be functional to an effective implementation of the peer approach) and

the future society. A similar situation, less critical though, as for the ECEC strategies and interventions currently implemented to favour a better social inclusion of children with disabilities.

The situation appears even more critical when considering that the Italian education system has no legal framework to ensure a place in ECEC. Even if a universal place guarantee is achieved in practice without a supporting legal framework since the child starts *scuola dell'infanzia*, in the case of socio-economic vulnerabilities, the ECEC access criteria can be seen as instruments of selective universalism. On the other hand, the percentage of children enrolled in ECEC is only 22,8% for nurseries by reason of the tariff taxation expected to be borne by households, with different percentage across regions, and this is crucial in determining wider policy outcomes e.g. promoting occupation, or relieving families of burdensome care responsibilities.

Children/learners who are considered out of formal education are those not involved in any kind of education, whether institutionalised, intentional, or planned through public organisations or recognised private bodies. Some of them are in non-formal education and others in informal education.

The reform introduced by the Legislative Decree 65/2017 offers a new horizon for the Governmental action: starting from the affirmation of the right to education from the early years, it opens up to the progressive prospect of diffusion of generalized ECEC services, with the development of initiatives aimed at reducing/eliminating fees charged to families, referring them to contribute only for the canteen service; the increase in nursery places association and further development of the system through investments for renovation or new constructions.

7.3 Serbia

Officially, there is a by-law “Priorities in enrolment of children into ECEC” which puts the most disadvantaged groups as priority for enrolment. However, in practice, children from both working parents are usually accepted first for financial reasons – parents pay part of the costs directly to preschool. If a preschool enrolls children from disadvantaged groups, it is the municipality that needs to pay preschool instead of parents, and this becomes a huge obstacle for a preschool (waiting a long time to receive the money, sometimes not even receiving it in the end...).

The current statistics show that only about 50% of the children between 3-5.5 years of age enrol into preschools. Children from rural areas frequently are not enrolled – partly because there is someone at home to take care of them, so this becomes an unnecessary expense, partly, because families consider preschool as part of the too early “school experience” so they think it is better for a young child to just play and have fun before starting a “serious education at school”, and partly, the reason.

for not enrolling children is that a kindergarten is not available nearby, but in a different village (sometimes seven or more kilometres away) with no organised transport for children. Roma children are usually also not enrolled, mainly for financial reasons.

Children with disabilities are also in this group, partly because parents do not think their children would benefit in a group of other “average” children, partly because preschools are reluctant to accept these children claiming that teachers do not have necessary skills or support to take proper care and work in any particularly needed manner with these children.

7.4 Slovakia

Several barriers contribute to the low kindergarten attendance rates: kindergartens are not completely free, geographical unavailability of kindergartens affects about one-fifth of the excluded Roma communities, kindergartens are not prepared to work with children with a different mother tongue, and Roma parents lack information about the administrative requirements for enrolling children in kindergartens. However, research shows that as many as half of the Roma parents whose children do not attend preschools would consider enrolling them if there was a Roma teacher or teacher assistant. Roma parents lack trust in educational institutions and their worries need to be alleviated through communication and cooperation. Unfortunately, programs aimed at cooperation with the parents are still missing.

The biggest problems of the current ECEC services as regards catering to children with SEN (including children from SDB, children with disabilities and children with special talents) are the inability to apply an individual approach to children due to high numbers of children in classes, lack of teacher assistants and professional staff (special pedagogues, psychologists, social pedagogues), physical barriers in the ECEC facilities, and lack of funds. Due to staff shortages, many teachers do not feel ready to accept more children with SEN in their classes.

Children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, who are often at risk of developmental delay and consequent social exclusion due to generational poverty, currently do not have sufficient access to systematic and individualised support at an early age. For this reason, it is important to introduce legislation to enable specialist family support activities to be provided in a field-based manner, with close links to the community, taking into account individual needs, activating beneficiaries, and involving people directly from the community who know the language of the community. However, the service must meet the low-threshold attribute.

According to the EU SILC 2020⁷ survey, 798 000 people in Slovakia were at risk of poverty or social exclusion (14.8% of the population). The proportion is higher for children aged 0-17 years, at 19.2%. Of these, up to 17% are at risk of poverty and 6.4% of children in Slovakia experience severe material deprivation. At the same time, it can be expected that the social situation of many families has/will further deteriorate after the Covid pandemic. In Slovakia, the 7353 children aged 0-3 living in the marginalised Roma communities (MRCs), are particularly vulnerable to generational poverty⁸.

These risk factors can negatively impact the child's development during the mother's pregnancy, at an early and later age, as well as the child's school performance, the process of learning and ability to learn, acquire and assimilate new knowledge and skills during compulsory schooling and, ultimately, their ability to find employment in their future life.

Currently, there are mainly project-based activities in Slovakia, but these do not sufficiently cover the need and demand for services aimed at families with young children. Services aimed at preventing and supporting socially disadvantaged families to increase their parenting competencies and positively influence the healthy development of the child are crucial for this target group.

8. Which ECD issues are currently perceived as the most pressing in public discourse? What are the trends in the direction of ECD?

8.1 Hungary

- lack of placements,
- unequal distribution of service provision,
- segregation,
- overcrowded facilities with low number of care providers, professionals,
- very low salaries for staff and poor working conditions
- lack of psychologists, special educators, assistants, social workers supporting children, families, and pedagogues,

⁷ Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky. 2021. EU SILC 2020. Indikátory chudoby a sociálneho vylúčenia. ISBN 978-80-8121-828-6 (online)

⁸ Útvár hodnoty za peniaze MF SR - Inštitút vzdelávacej politiky MŠVVŠ SR. 2020. Revízia výdavkov na skupiny ohrozené chudobou alebo sociálnym vylúčením, p. 54.

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- compulsory school start for children at 6 despite of the diverse developmental stages and needs of children, withdrawn opportunity from kindergarten teachers to make suggestions based on their experiencing with children.
 - Sure Start program has become a service for the most disadvantaged children and families not serving the early inclusion, integration.

8.2 Italy

Starting from the 1970s and 1980s, the Italian ECEC system invested in continuing professional development (*formazione permanente*) at the local level. Many cities created connections with universities or research centres to establish both regular professional development practices and action-research, or to supervise experiments characterised by teamwork, co-constructed project work documentation, reflective work and a focus on the work with families and community (*partecipazione*). At present, opportunities for professional development and in-service training vary across the country, and between the nursery school and preschool sectors. Municipalities which have invested in ECEC tend to maintain funding for in-service professional development for nursery school educators as much as possible, and in some instances, they make connections with universities and research centres such as the Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies (ISTC) or the National Research Council, or set up documentation centres or local centres/services which organise and provide, directly or by hiring experts, supervision on specific projects. Examples of such municipalities include Milan, Genova, Torino, Rome, Reggio Emilia, and Trento. Other providers might organise their own professional development programmes. For preschool teachers, continuous training is provided for public schools by the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research, although funds allocated to this purpose have steadily and markedly decreased over recent years. For municipal schools or schools run by other providers, the situation is the same as for nursery schools, as described above.

The two most important providers of CPD in Italy are a cooperative consortium (PAN) for nursery schools and FISM (Federazione Italiana Scuole Materne) for preschools, guaranteeing at least 12 hours per year, with the opportunity to increase the hours for special projects. In some places with strong traditions in ECEC investment, municipalities may entrust ECEC services to external services, often educational cooperatives, which guarantee between two and five hours per week for continuing professional development.

The activities of the Gruppo Nazionale Nidi Infanzia constitute a good example of agency involvement in professional development. It is a bottom-up network of practitioners, researchers.

(academics), administrators and coordinators, which has acted to share experiences and promote connections through professional journals such as *Bambini* and *Infanzia*. The National Documentation Centre (Istituto degli Innocenti) and groups at the regional level have been the motors and disseminators of good practices, through conferences, local seminars, advocacy initiatives, publications, and training institutes, and today they have become important interlocutors at the national level. The result of this networking is that in-service professional development, especially in nidi, shows many common features in priorities, approaches, and themes in the same periods across the country.

Early childhood education and care in Italy is organised in the 'integrated system 0-6' that was introduced by law 107/2017 and is regulated by the D.Lgs 65/2017. The integrated system is part of the education system and is organised into two separate levels that welcome children according to their age: the 'educational services for childhood' (servizi educativi per l'infanzia), for children aged between 0 and 3 years; 'childhood school' (scuola dell'infanzia), for children from 3 to 6 years of age.

Teachers in State settings must hold a Master degree (ISCED 7) in primary education sciences and follow the same initial education programme of primary school teachers.

As mentioned above, since 2015, several Member States have introduced reforms regarding the qualification of ECEC personnel or its continuous professional development: Italy is one of those countries that are in the process of raising the minimum qualification requirement for all personnel working with preschool children. Also, in this country, training pathways to attain the necessary degrees have been established, and the continuous professional development of staff is a duty, also necessary for promotion.

The Law 107/2015 established that the continuing professional development of teachers is compulsory, permanent, and structural also as for the field of Early childhood education and care. Each school defines and organises in-service training activities, including networking with other schools. The activities must be consistent with the three-year plan of the school's training offer, with the self-assessment report and with the school improvement plan, based on the priorities indicated by the Ministry every three years.

8.3 Serbia

Official, new public discourse and promoted trend is learning through play, but the new framework curriculum is perceived as non-functional and made to change things for the sake of changing something, not achieving better results and quality by many preschool teachers. New trends are also including digital devices and learning which preschool teachers of 15-20 years of experience are not.

seeing as productive because they already see that young children come with lower social, conversational and group playing skills than before and they think that this is due to too much of digital use at home, so they think that ECEC in those 4-8 hours per day should actually promote social and speech and conversational skills, support verbalisation of emotions, attitudes and opinions in young children rather than use of digital technology.

Among the inspiring practices are activities organised as mobile ECEC for rural children and those who are not enrolled into formal ECEC for any other reason.

Among the trends is also political and policy level intention to increase the coverage of children in the age group 6 months to 3 years and from 3 years to 5.5 years of age. In this respect, new preschool buildings are built and equipped, and new donors are sought after to secure more funds.

8.4 Slovakia

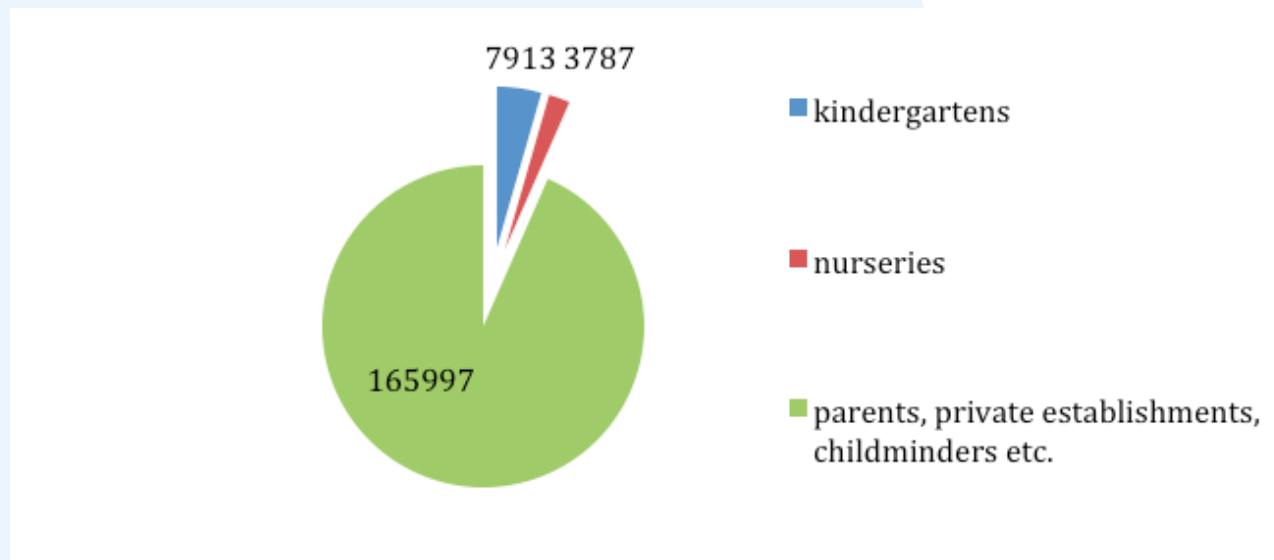
In 2021, discussion began on the adoption of the National Strategy for the Development of Coordinated Early Intervention and Early Care Services 2022-2030⁹. The main purpose of the submitted national strategy is to create a coordinated support system as a cross-departmental strategy for early care. The main objective is therefore to strengthen inter-departmental cooperation to ensure that children with health and social disadvantages and their families receive adequate support from birth. The fact that representatives of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health, as well as other state (e.g. the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities) and non-state organisations (e.g. the Alliance of Private Nurseries and Kindergartens, the Platform of Parents of Children with Disabilities, and the civic association Cesta von) were involved in the process of developing the strategy can be considered a positive step forward. The need for a national strategy stems not only from the need for supra-ministerial coordination but also from the fact that a significant proportion of the under-three population, especially children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, is not involved in institutional ECEC (see chart).

In 2020, kindergartens included in the network of schools and school facilities in the Slovak Republic provided care for 7 913 children under 3 years of age. Registered childcare facilities for children up to 3 years of age provided care for 3 787 children. A total of 11 730 children under three years of age were cared for in registered childcare facilities for children under three years of age and in

⁹ Retrieved on 12th January 2022 from <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Material/25932/1>

kindergartens included in the network of schools and educational establishments. However, practice shows that vast majority of children with disabilities and from socially disadvantaged backgrounds under the age of three are in the care of their parents.

Graf: Childcare services - children up to three years of age¹⁰



9. Examples of good practice

9.1 Hungary

Several projects, including Step by Step, the early Sure Start programs have provided promising practices but are still isolated and not mainstreamed.

9.2. Italy

A couple of examples of promising innovative approaches to in-service professional development are:

ECEC as a city laboratory born from the collaboration between the Municipality of Milan and the two universities there which carry out education research (University of Milan-Bicocca and Catholic University of Milan). The aim was to create an articulated long-term plan of in-service training for nursery school educators and preschool teachers. This project involved 70 ECEC centres in the Municipality of Milan.

¹⁰ Retrieved on 12th January 2022 from <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Material/25932/1>

Another interesting case is Reggio Emilia, which has a similar tradition of close and specific collaboration between the municipality and the universities (the University of Modena and Reggio where Reggio Emilia Experts give courses). The system includes the newly established Reggio Children–Loris Malaguzzi Centre International Foundation, which focuses on research, study, and development aimed at high-quality education for everyone, along with Reggio Children S.R.L. and the infant-toddler centres and preschools of Reggio Emilia municipality. The entities jointly organise short, medium, and long-term professional development initiatives on various themes and topics. Among the initiatives promoted: professional development courses, master's degrees, summer schools, study groups, and opportunities to visit the schools and the international centre.

9.3 Serbia

There are many examples of good practice at local levels. Most of them are initiated by the teachers themselves or through various projects, but some have been initiated by the state.

One of them is mobile ECEC where teachers, teachers' assistants and other members of staff go to the places where children are not enrolled into ECEC and organise the activities with these children, bring various didactic materials and work with them once a week.

The other good practice relates to the inter-sectoral commissions in each municipality so that experts from different fields analyse together the needs of a child that has difficulties or is extremely gifted and together develop an individual educational plan for the particular child. This plan is then discussed with the parents and upon mutual agreement, it is implemented.

The third example of good practice is recognition of Pedagogical assistants – people who assist preschool teachers in the preschools with many Roma children especially in the areas where Roma families speak only Roma language at home and neither children nor parents feel confident in themselves to participate or get engaged with the preschool. In these cases, a Roma Pedagogical Assistant is a bridge between the family and preschool, children, and preschool teachers. Similarly, in the places where children with developmental or physical difficulties are enrolled, Pedagogical teachers' Assistants become a bridge between these children and teachers or other children. This is a recognised profession, and it is financed by the municipalities.

9.4 Slovakia

As mentioned above, Cesta von is a civic association that implements the Omama programme in Slovakia, which aims to promote early stimulation and healthy development of children in the MRC from birth to 3 years of age, which is considered a key age for early intervention. Trained Omama workers - coming directly from the community - visit the homes of families, where they work with children and their parents (most often mothers) on various games and activities aimed at

psychosocial stimulation (fine and gross motor skills, cognitive, language, communication skills, socio-emotional areas). They follow a standardised manual with activities adapted to the age of the children that become increasingly complex week by week for the child to develop his/her potential age-appropriately. They involve parents in the activities and teach them what they can do with their children at home for the rest of the week. All steps and results of the child's paediatric screenings and the level of family involvement are recorded by the Omamas in a special mobile phone app. The organisation thus has a detailed overview of all children's development and calls in professional help when necessary. Each Omama is accompanied by a 'middle class' mentor who provides practical support and encouragement. In addition to ongoing training, Omamas also receive regular on-site supervision visits to improve their work with the families. One Omama visits between 15 and 30 families per week (depending on her contract). In addition, she counsels both mothers and pregnant women and organises monthly parenting clubs where the involved mothers meet, often with invited experts. The programme was launched in 2018 in three at-risk communities and has since spread rapidly, and by 2021, 27 Omamas are already working in 20 excluded communities with more than 560 young children and their families.

10.SWOT analysis of ECD - main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

10.1 Hungary

S	STRENGTHS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> long tradition, well-established structures, mainly publicly funded services with qualified staff

W	WEAKNESSES
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decreasing expectations from staff, shortage of staff due to low remuneration and working conditions, unequal distribution of availability, lack of desire to provide a combined, unified system for 0-school aged children instead of the split system

O	OPPORTUNITIES
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raising awareness on the developmental needs of

T	THREATS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased involvement of church run and private for profit services,

- children in early years,
- involving parents as partners,
 - increasing the knowledge about child development, child rights, better work and family life balance.
 - Changing the false perception on the need of children to spend the first 3 years with mothers at home

- decreased qualification criteria, especially in home-based and company run facilities, segregation,
- growing inequalities among families and children

10.2 Italy

S STRENGTHS

- General sensitiveness to the topic of quality and diversity inclusion within ECEC services
- Multifunctional conception – mainly educational – of ECEC services
- ECEC workers' professional development has a strong tradition of local support in Italy, especially among certain regions and municipalities

W WEAKNESSES

- Not enough places for all children (especially in bigger towns)
- Inadequate distribution of the existing preschools
- Expensive for lower income families
- Rather rigid schedule of working hours not fitting parental needs or working schedules which leads to lower enrolment of children and lower involvement and engagement of parents

O OPPORTUNITIES

- Sectoral legislation likely to produce cultural shift within the educational community/society
- Existence of an Annual Plan for Inclusion
- Parental contribution to ECEC services' planning

T THREATS

- Selective universalism in ECEC access, namely for children 0-3 at risk of poverty or social exclusion
- Mismatch between statements of principle and the operational phase
- Inadequacy of ECEC staff preparation when dealing with specific needs and vulnerabilities (system still too focused

- Critical reflection, connected to observation and documentation, is the central trend
- Common vision that all teachers can access careerlong professional learning opportunities

on the inclusion of children with disabilities or special educational needs)

-

10.3 Serbia

S

STRENGTHS

- Professional, well-educated staff
- Integrated approach to ECEC
- Legal framework promoting inclusive ECEC
- Active engagement of civil society in addressing parental engagement, positive parenting, learning through play, gender equality, prevention of sexual abuse from early years...
- Commitment of the majority of the educational staff to children's development and support

W

WEAKNESSES

- Not enough places for all children (especially in bigger towns)
- Inadequate distribution of the existing preschools
- Expensive for lower income families
- Rather rigid schedule of working hours not fitting parental needs or working schedules which leads to lower enrolment of children and lower involvement and engagement of parents

O

OPPORTUNITIES

- High level of prioritising ECD at both European political and funding levels

T

THREATS

- Extremely politicised environment in which both the Directors of the public preschools and educational staff get

- Erasmus+ and other programmes which offer many opportunities for professional exchange of good practices and professional development of the educational staff and leadership in ECEC
- Many civil society organisations are willing and capable to provide support for educational staff, parents and also children through training opportunities, projects and also knowledge of some internationally recognised methodologies not taught in detail in pre-service schools and colleges

- employed, elected based on their political affiliation, not skills or knowledge
- Lack of responsibility and political will to enforce the legal documents in practise (frequently the number of children accepted is higher than allowed per law, but “influence” from locally important people (politicians, wealthy families, “acquaintances”) is stronger than the legal framework)
- Local municipality’s responsibility for setting up and financing a local public ECEC institution which creates inequalities among and between different preschool institutions in differently affluent municipalities
-

10.4 Slovakia

S STRENGTHS

- Established legal environment, underpinned by supranational strategic and programming documents,
- reform changes across ministries and the creation of new support systems
- the willingness of stakeholders to develop services
- the experience of piloting

W WEAKNESSES

- low regional services availability
- Lack of information campaigns and outreach programmes
- the inconsistent quality of services provided across Slovakia,
- insufficient funding
- insufficient sustainability of projects after their completion
- insufficient flexibility in support systems
- lack of interventions and services

services for socially disadvantaged families by non-profit organisations

- compulsory participation in the kindergarten education programme for children aged 5 and over

causing a negative impact on families

- dependence of existing programmes and projects implemented in the MRC on EU funding
- poorly developed institutional infrastructure and lack of qualified professionals for ECEC

O

OPPORTUNITIES

- Linking health, social care and education systems
- overall improvement and availability of social services and interventions for children and families with children,
- better use of information and linking of systems increasing the commitment of providers to the development of the service training of staff
- support for the development of newly established services
- funding from the Structural Funds,
- increasing the independence and inclusion of people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, should they have access to support services in childhood

T

THREATS

- Lack of financial linkages requiring the involvement of several ministries for selected services and responsible actors,
- sustainability of change and continuity
- failure of effective dialogue between the partners involved,
- an absence of professional staff,
- lack of interest of providers to provide services
- the current pandemic situation
- Lack of political will to allocate the necessary funding for early care services for socially disadvantaged families