



ECD+



POLICY

RECOMMENDATIONS

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



**Co-funded by
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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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

PROJECT RESULT 4

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Introduction

“*Strengthening and Supporting the Early Childhood Development Workforce - ECD PLUS*” is a European project implemented by the non-governmental organisations - SKOLA DOKORAN - WIDE OPEN SCHOOL from Slovakia (project coordinator), POMOC DECI UDRUZENJE GRADJANA from Serbia, CIAPE - CENTRO ITALIANO PER L'APPRENDIMENTO PERMANENTE from Italy, and PARTNERS FOR DEMOCRATIC CHANGE HUNGARY from Hungary. It received support within the ERASMUS PLUS Programme of the European Union.

The partners 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. Indeed, the 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.

The project activities, implanted during the two last years, showed how the advancement of Early Childhood Development (ECD) holds a paramount significance for nurturing the potential of children and fostering a more inclusive, cohesive and equitable society in Europe.

This document, presents a comprehensive set of policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the quality and accessibility of preschool education for children within the European and sub-national contexts, starting from the lessons deriving out of the project activities and sectoral researches conducted in Hungary, Italy, Serbia, and Slovakia. These recommendations are intended to guide policy makers across various levels, ranging from local representatives of municipalities to national stakeholders in ministries and European officials dedicated to ensuring equal opportunities in education from an early age.

The landscape of ECD is multifaceted, shaped by historical traditions, cultural nuances, and the evolving needs of each country's diverse population. In this regard, the recommendations in this document are founded on a thorough analysis of the conditions that govern the participation of preschool children in the preschool education system within the unique contexts of each investigated country. The goal is to address existing gaps, capitalize on successful practices, and establish a comprehensive framework that aligns with the holistic development of young learners.

The recommendations outlined by the project consortium span two crucial dimensions: content-based enhancements and structural transformations. Content-based improvements focus on elevating the quality and accessibility of preschool education, particularly for marginalized groups such as Roma children. These recommendations also encompass strategies for individualized learning, inclusive

pedagogy, literacy enhancement, parental involvement, and the professional development of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) professionals. The structural dimension emphasizes the importance of involving the broader local community and engaging in transnational knowledge exchange to foster cross-cultural insights and practices. By bridging the gap between diverse communities and fostering collaborative learning, the ECD PLUS partnership aims to create a more inclusive and supportive ecosystem for ECD.

Our policy recommendations not only reflect the consortium's dedication to improving the ECD landscape but also serve as a guide for policymakers to navigate the complex decisions that shape early childhood policies. By providing evidence-backed advice, these recommendations enable policy makers to leverage research findings and evidence to make informed choices that benefit the well-being and future prospects of our youngest generation.

A policy recommendation is not just a set of guidelines; it is a roadmap towards a brighter, more equitable future. It seeks to represent a call to action, an invitation to employ research and evidence as tools for positive change. Through these recommendations, we aspire to contribute to the empowerment of policy makers, educators, families, and communities as they collaborate to build a solid foundation for the flourishing of every child, regardless of their background, abilities, or circumstances.

1. An overview of ECD state of play in Hungary, Italy, Serbia and Slovakia

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 a 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 is 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 competence. Moreover, regions should comply with the provisions of national legislation. Schools are autonomous with regard to 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 have to 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.

Despite the fact that 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.

In general, 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.

2. Emerging Trends and Pressing Issues in Early Childhood Development in Hungary, Italy, Serbia and Slovakia

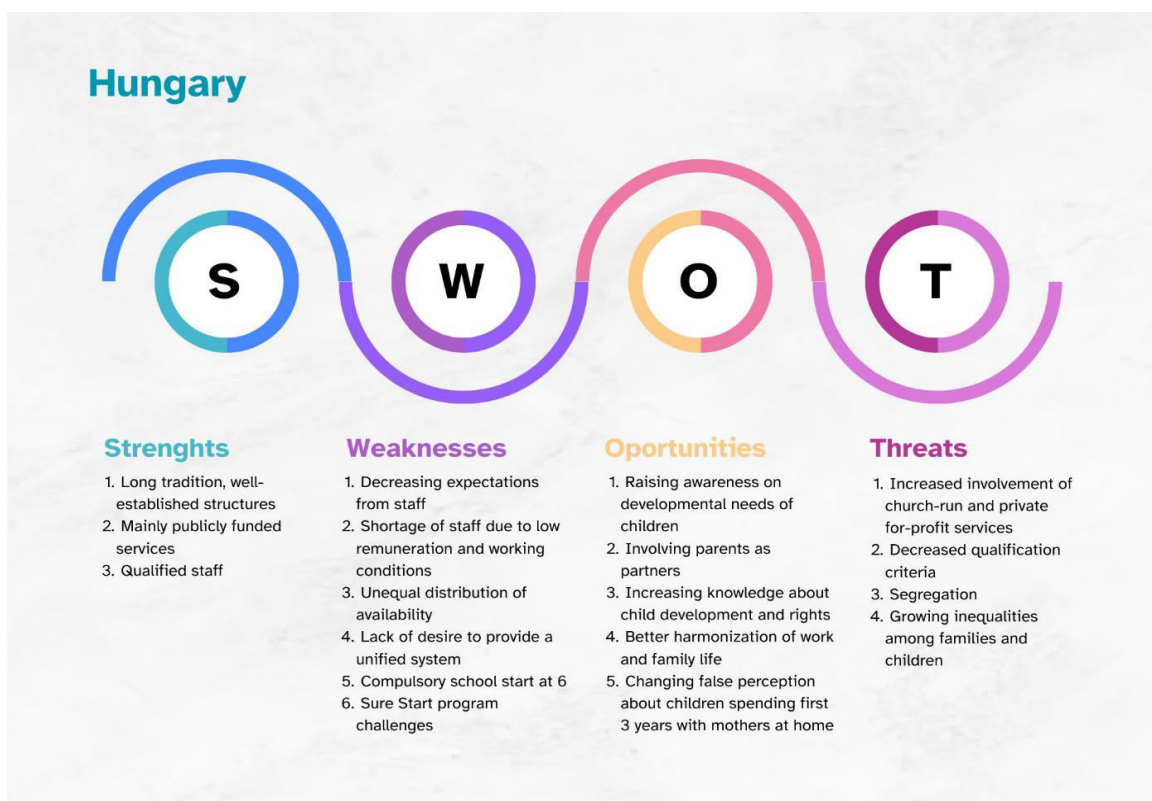
In this paragraph the consortium provides an analysis of the most pressing issues in public discourse and identify the evolving trends that are shaping the direction of ECD policies and practices in a number of Member states. The pressing issues reflect the dynamic nature of early childhood development policies and practices. While each country faces unique challenges, such as unequal access and workforce issues, they also share common aspirations for quality ECEC. Efforts in professional development, policy reform, and expanding access underscore the commitment to ensuring that every child has a strong foundation for future success. By addressing these issues and embracing emerging trends, these countries can collectively contribute to the well-being and development of their youngest citizens and, by extension, the prosperity of their societies. Each country is also attributed a visual SWOT analysis, providing a concise summary of each country's ECD situation, helping to identify key areas of strength, areas that require improvement, potential opportunities, and external threats.

Hungary

Hungary grapples with several critical challenges in the realm of ECD:

1. **Lack of placements:** A significant issue is the scarcity of available placements for children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) facilities. The demand often outstrips supply, leaving many parents struggling to secure quality ECD services for their children.
2. **Unequal distribution of service provision:** ECEC services are unevenly distributed across the country, leading to disparities in access for children from different regions and socioeconomic backgrounds.
3. **Segregation:** Some ECEC facilities face issues of segregation, where children from marginalized communities may be isolated from mainstream educational settings, impacting their social integration and development.
4. **Overcrowded facilities with insufficient staff:** Overcrowding is common in ECEC facilities, often resulting in a low number of care providers and professionals per child. This situation can compromise the quality of care and education.
5. **Low salaries and poor working conditions:** ECEC staff in Hungary face low salaries and suboptimal working conditions, which can affect their motivation and retention in the field.

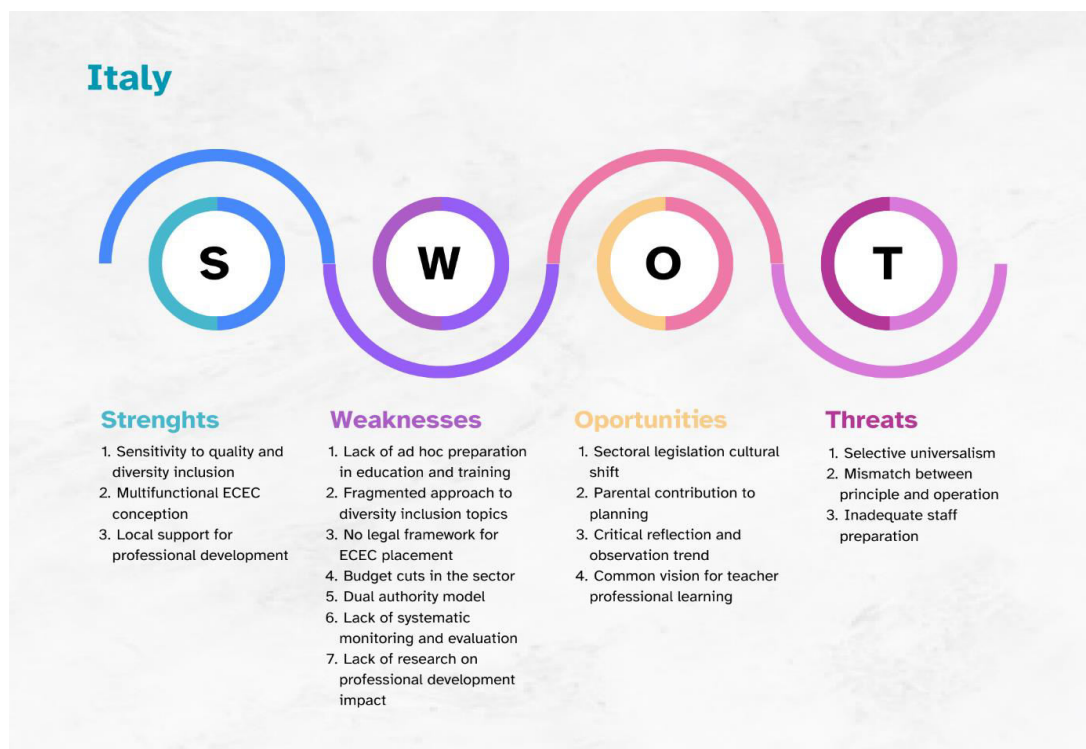
6. **Lack of support services:** There is a shortage of psychologists, special educators, assistants, and social workers to support children, families, and pedagogues, hindering the provision of comprehensive care.
7. **Compulsory school start at age 6:** Despite the diverse developmental stages and needs of children, Hungary enforces compulsory school attendance from age 6, potentially overlooking the benefits of ECEC for younger children.
8. **Sure Start program challenges:** The Sure Start program, designed to support disadvantaged children and families, may not effectively promote early inclusion and integration as intended.



Italy

In Italy, recent trends and developments in ECD include:

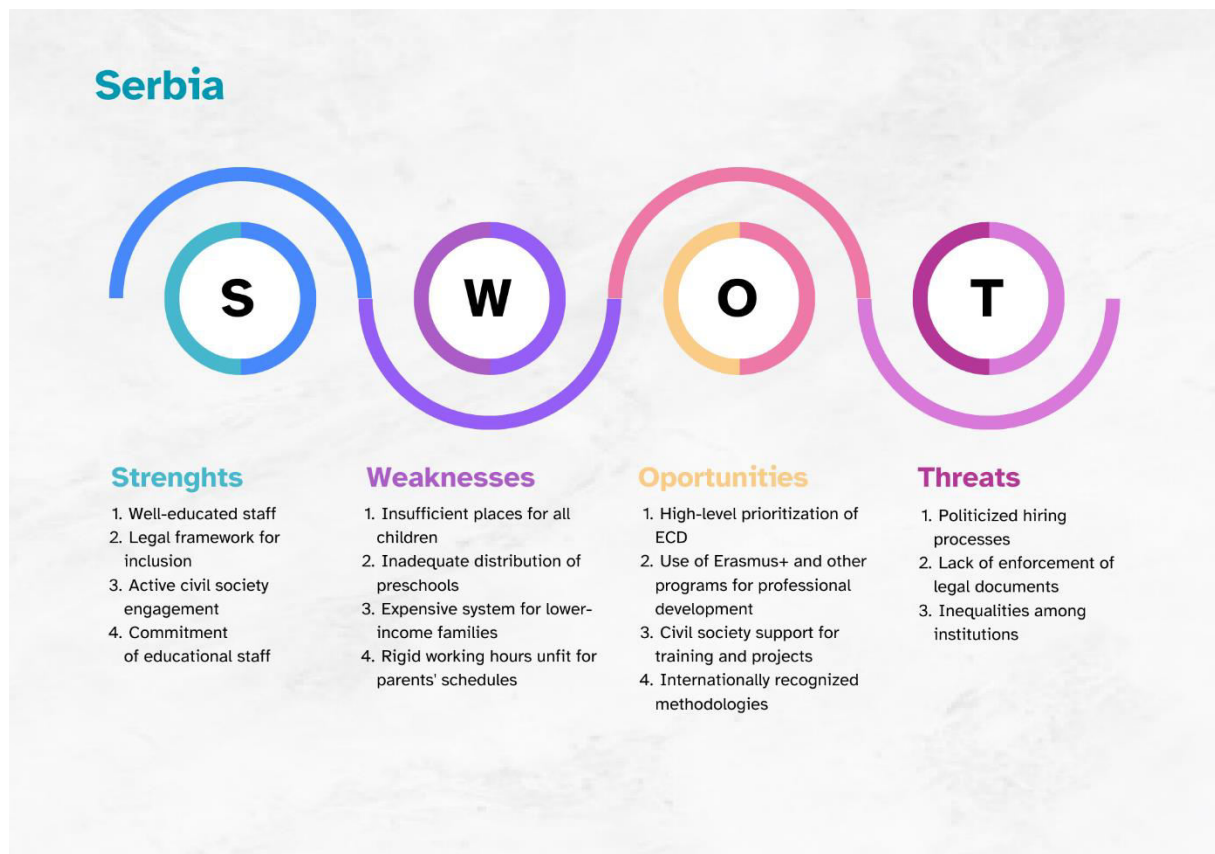
1. **Continuing Professional Development (CPD):** Since the 1970s, Italy has invested in CPD at the local level. Cities have fostered connections with universities and research centers to facilitate ongoing professional development for ECEC educators. However, opportunities for CPD can vary significantly across regions.
2. **Professional development networks:** Municipalities such as Milan, Genoa, Turin, Rome, Reggio Emilia, and Trento have maintained funding for CPD and established connections with academic institutions and research centers. These networks promote reflective work, teamwork, and community involvement.
3. **Teacher qualifications:** State preschool teachers in Italy are required to hold a Master's degree in primary education sciences, reflecting the country's commitment to raising the qualifications of ECEC personnel.
4. **Compulsory CPD:** Italy has made CPD mandatory for all teachers, including those in ECEC. Schools define and organize in-service training activities in alignment with national priorities.
5. **Regional Collaboration:** Professional development activities, especially in nursery settings (nidi), exhibit common features in priorities and approaches across regions, emphasizing collaboration and shared goals.



Serbia

Serbia is experiencing shifts in ECD discourse and emerging trends:

1. **Learning through play:** A new public discourse promotes learning through play as a cornerstone of ECD. However, some educators are skeptical of excessive digital device use and advocate for the development of social and conversational skills.
2. **Digital integration:** The integration of digital devices and technology in ECEC is a trend, though it raises concerns about its impact on children's social and language development. Some educators prioritize promoting social and verbal skills over digital use.
3. **Rural mobile ECEC:** Mobile ECEC initiatives cater to rural children and those not enrolled in formal ECEC programs, ensuring access for underserved populations.
4. **Increased coverage:** Serbia is actively working to increase ECEC coverage for children aged 6 months to 3 years and from 3 years to 5.5 years. This expansion involves building new preschool facilities and seeking additional funding sources.



Slovakia

Slovakia is embarking on a new path in ECD:

1. **National Strategy for Early Care:** Slovakia is in the process of developing the National Strategy for the Development of Coordinated Early Intervention and Early Care Services 2022-2030. This strategy aims to create a coordinated support system for children with health and social disadvantages, starting from birth.
2. **Inter-departmental cooperation:** The strategy involves collaboration between multiple ministries, state organizations, and non-state entities to ensure comprehensive support for children and families.
3. **Focus on children under 3:** Efforts are directed towards providing ECEC services to children under 3 years old, particularly those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, who are often cared for by their parents.



3. Policy recommendations for the enhancement of ECD in Europe

This comprehensive set of policy recommendations is aimed at enhancing the quality and accessibility of preschool education for children within the European and sub-national contexts. These recommendations derive insights from project activities and sectoral research conducted in Hungary, Italy, Serbia and Slovakia between 2021 and 2023. They are intended to guide policymakers across various levels, from local representatives of municipalities to national stakeholders in ministries, as well as European officials dedicated to ensuring equal opportunities in education from an early age.

The landscape of Early Childhood Development in Europe is multifaceted and richly diverse, shaped by historical traditions, cultural nuances and the evolving needs of each country's unique population. Therefore, the recommendations in this document are founded on a thorough analysis of the conditions governing the participation of preschool children in the education system within the specific contexts of these four investigated countries. The overarching goal is to address existing gaps, capitalize on successful practices, and establish a comprehensive framework that aligns with the holistic development of young learners.

Content-based enhancements

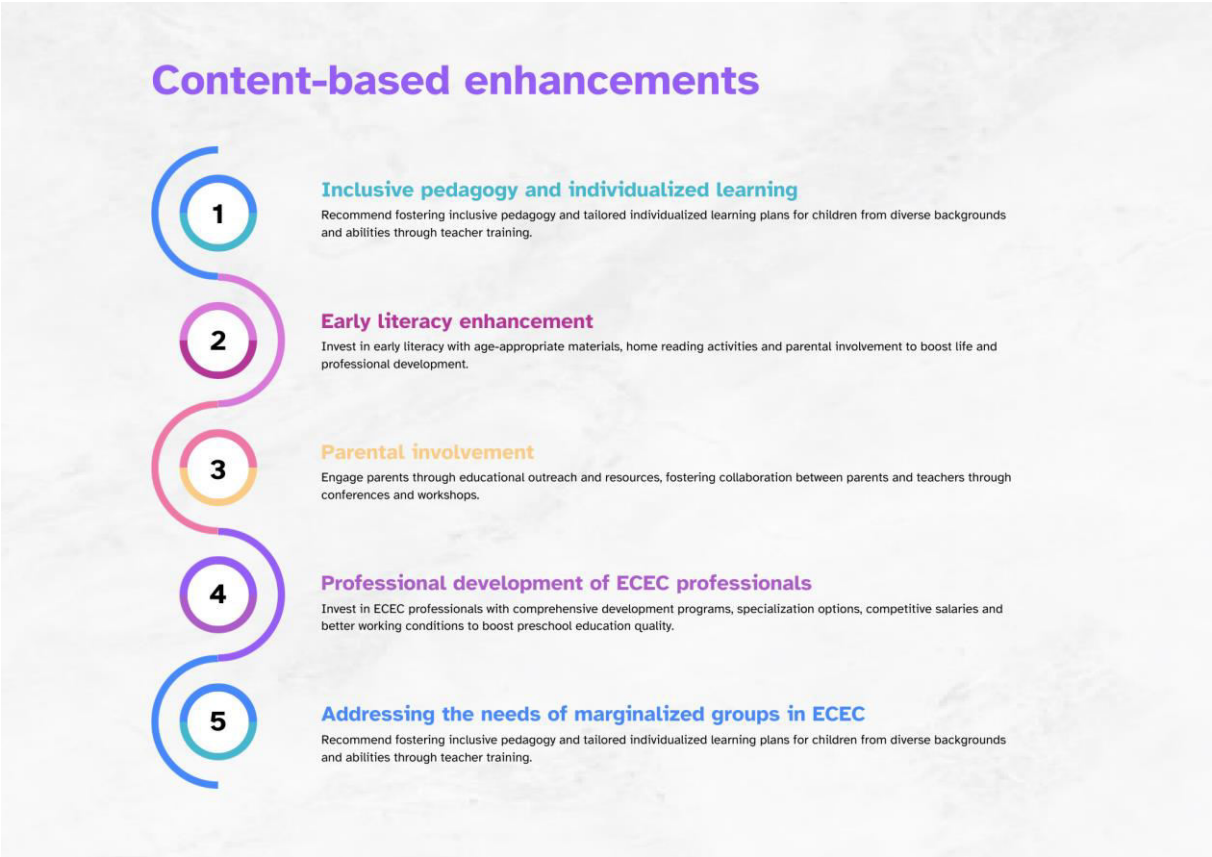
1. Inclusive pedagogy and individualized learning: Recognizing that children in preschools come from diverse backgrounds and have varying developmental needs, we recommend fostering inclusive pedagogy. This approach ensures that every child, regardless of their socio-economic status, ethnicity, or abilities, receives tailored support. Individualized learning plans should be developed for each child to maximize their potential. Training programs for preschool teachers should emphasize strategies for accommodating diverse learning styles and needs.

2. Early literacy enhancement: Early literacy is the cornerstone of academic success. To promote early literacy, governments should invest in age-appropriate reading materials and literacy programs. Additionally, storytelling sessions and activities that encourage reading at home should be promoted, involving parents as partners in their child's literacy journey.

3. Parental involvement: Engaging parents as active partners in their child's education is critical. Governments should develop initiatives to inform parents about the importance of preschool education and provide resources for them to support their child's learning at home. Parent-teacher conferences and workshops should be organized to facilitate communication and cooperation between parents and teachers.

4. Professional development of ECEC professionals: The quality of preschool education hinges on the competence and commitment of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) professionals. Policymakers should invest in comprehensive professional development programs for ECEC professionals, including ongoing training and opportunities for specialization in areas like special education and child psychology. Competitive salaries and improved working conditions should be offered to attract and retain qualified staff.

5. Addressing the needs of marginalized groups in ECEC: Roma children and other marginalized groups often face barriers to accessing and prospering in quality preschool education. Policymakers should develop targeted strategies and resources to ensure these children have equal access and treatment in ECEC. This includes providing additional support, such as educational assistants, intercultural mediators, and social workers, to help bridge the educational gap and promote inclusion, curricula that helps them feel accepted and equal, and staff that has competences to create and sustain an inclusive environment.



Structural transformations

6. Broader community engagement: The involvement of the broader local community is pivotal to the success of preschool education. Preschools should be seen as community hubs, fostering collaboration between schools, parents, local businesses, and community organizations. This not only enriches the learning environment but also ensures that preschools are responsive to the specific needs of their communities.

7. Transnational knowledge exchange: Cross-cultural insights and practices can greatly enhance the quality of preschool education. National policymakers should encourage and facilitate transnational knowledge exchange between countries. They should support the ECEC settings participation in Initiatives such as study tours, collaborative projects and partnerships with institutions from different countries that can lead to the adoption of innovative practices and the enrichment of teaching methods.

8. Holistic monitoring and evaluation: Robust, ongoing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be put in place to assess the effectiveness of preschool education programs. These mechanisms should not only focus on academic outcomes but also on the social and emotional development of children. Regular assessments can guide the refinement of policies and practices.

9. Infrastructure development: Investment in preschool infrastructure, including the construction of new facilities and the renovation of existing ones, and making them accessible is crucial to meet the growing demand for preschool education. Special attention should be given to underserved areas to ensure equitable access.

10. Policy alignment and coordination: Coordination between various government departments and agencies is essential to create a unified, coherent early childhood development system. Policymakers should work collaboratively to align policies related to education, health and social services, e.g. the European Child Guarantee, to provide comprehensive support for young children and their families.

Structural transformations

6

Broader community engagement

Promote preschools as community hubs by enhancing collaboration among schools, parents, businesses and organizations, enriching the learning environment and meeting community-specific needs.

7

Transnational knowledge exchange

Promote cross-cultural learning in preschool education through international partnerships, study tours and collaborative projects to enrich teaching methods and foster innovation.

8

Holistic monitoring and evaluation

Establish continuous evaluation to assess academic and social development in preschool education, guiding policy improvement and program effectiveness.

9

Infrastructure development

Crucial investment in preschool infrastructure, new construction, renovation and equitable access to meet growing demand, particularly in underserved areas.

10

Policy alignment and coordination

Essential coordination among government departments to establish a unified early childhood system, aligning education, health and social services policies for comprehensive support, e.g. European Child Guarantee.

4. Conclusions

Preschool education plays a pivotal role in nurturing the intellectual, emotional and social development of young children. It sets the foundation for lifelong learning and has a profound impact on future professional and personal success.

In the European context, ensuring access to high-quality preschool education is not just an educational imperative deriving from the ECEC Quality Framework: it is a fundamental element for achieving social justice and equal opportunities.

The policy recommendations provided in this document drawn upon the insights gained from researches conducted in Hungary, Italy, Serbia and Slovakia between 2021 and 2023, acknowledging the diverse contexts and challenges faced by each country in the realm of early childhood education. These recognize the unique contexts of each country while acknowledging the common aspirations for quality and accessible preschool education across Europe. They encapsulate the shared commitment to building a more inclusive and supportive ecosystem for Early Childhood Development.

Content-based enhancements encompass inclusive pedagogy and individualized learning, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and addressing the diverse needs of all children. Literacy enhancement programs underscore the value of early language development, while initiatives to promote parental involvement and engagement highlight the pivotal role of parents as partners in their child's educational journey. The call for the professional development of Early Childhood Education and Care professionals underscores the centrality of skilled educators in providing high-quality early education. Furthermore, the focus on addressing the needs of marginalized groups, particularly Roma children, reflects a commitment to breaking down barriers and ensuring equal access for all.

Structural transformations are equally pivotal in reshaping the landscape of ECD in Europe. Broader community engagement recognizes that preschool settings should not operate in isolation but should be hubs of community life, promoting collaboration and responsiveness. Transnational knowledge exchange acknowledges that the collective wisdom of Europe can elevate the quality of preschool education, fostering cross-cultural insights and innovative practices. Holistic monitoring and evaluation underscore the importance of assessing the effectiveness of education systems not just academically but also in terms of holistic child development. Investment in infrastructure, policy alignment and coordination complete the structural framework, ensuring that the vision of high-quality preschool education is fully realized.

The overarching message conveyed by ECD PLUS is clear: the investment in quality preschool education is an investment in our collective future. It is an investment in the well-being and success of every child, irrespective of their background or circumstances. It is an investment in the development of an

inclusive and equitable society, one where opportunities are not determined by the circumstances of one's birth but by the boundless potential of every kid.

However, this journey is not without its challenges and complexities. Each country grapples with a unique set of circumstances, ranging from insufficient resources and unequal distribution of services to changing societal perceptions and the need for broader community engagement. The threat of growing inequalities, particularly among families and children, looms large. The entrenchment of political interests in educational appointments and the need for financial linkages across ministries pose significant hurdles.

Nonetheless, these challenges are not insurmountable. They are opportunities for growth, innovation and transformation. The policy recommendations offered in this document are a roadmap, a guide to navigating the intricate terrain of ECD in Europe. They are a call to cross-sectoral action for policymakers at all levels, from local representatives to national stakeholders and European officials.

To implement these recommendations effectively, collaboration and commitment are paramount. ECD is not the responsibility of a single ministry or institution; it is a shared societal endeavor and responsibility. It requires cross-sectoral coordination, knowledge exchange and a sound commitment to the principles of inclusivity and equal opportunities.

The path forward is clear. The children of today are the leaders, thinkers and innovators of tomorrow. The quality of their early education will shape the future of Europe. Let us rise to the occasion, heed these recommendations and work collectively to ensure that every child, regardless of their background, has access to the highest quality preschool education. This is not just a policy imperative, it is a moral imperative: a commitment to nurturing the potential within every child and building a Europe that is inclusive, equitable and cohesive.