# Quality and Curricula in Early Childhood Education and Care

CIDREE

# Imprint

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*(in order of chapters)*

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# Contents

## Jindra Divis

*President*

**President of the CIDREE board**

# President's Foreword

There is a growing interest in early childhood education and care. Research on child development shows that providing children with targeted stimulation in early education has a positive effect on their development. This is particularly beneficial for children whose first language is not the language of instruction, or whose language skills are slower to develop. Stimulating broad development among toddlers and pre-schoolers, including learning areas such as mathematics, citizenship and digital literacy, can prevent early developmental delays. This is also important in the light of equity, developmental advantages, and special educational needs. Thus, early childhood education is a highly relevant and very interesting curricular topic.

This yearbook shows that educating young children is a complex matter, and that there are various opinions regarding the format and content of early childhood education and care. In European countries, childcare and education for children aged 0 to 7 is organised in different ways. Despite the differences, all the chapters of this yearbook tell us that educating children aged 2 to 7 requires a specific approach. Teachers and other pedagogical staff who provide education to young children must make many decisions relating to content. They choose the topics that children will work on, and they ensure that these topics are taught in a responsible manner. The most important criterion in these choices is that children truly progress in day-to-day life, in which they gradually participate more and more. A curriculum in which content and objectives are described is an essential tool in this regard.

In planning education for young children, curricular aspects other than content also play a role. Such aspects include time, relationships, pedagogical-didactical considerations and a rich learning environment. In order to make the best choices in all of these aspects, it is essential to have a vision for early childhood education. A well-considered vision can do justice to all the factors for a good education. For starters, this means providing a rich learning environment and a safe pedagogical climate. A rich learning environment concerns the toys, games and other learning materials available, the layout of the room, the teaching methods and the organisation of the education. In a safe pedagogical climate, children can gain all kinds of different experiences and are encouraged to explore, reflect on their experiences, and thus learn from

# President's Foreword

them. They know from these experiences that the professional will stand by them and provide them with feedback. At the same time, all participants in the educational process have their own responsibility: both the professional and the child itself. The professional gives the children the level of responsibility they can handle. As a result, the children experience playing and learning as something of their own. Step by step, they become more independent and aware of what they want and what they are supposed to do. The professional also ensures that the education reflects the way in which children learn. Broadly speaking, this entails: transitioning from playing to learning through play, then to learning through self-chosen tasks, and finally to learning through tasks assigned by others. In addition, the professional monitors the progress in the children's skills development, for example by using observational tools to observe the children. Lastly, the professional promotes the children's development by providing appropriate content.

The contributions in this book clearly demonstrate that thinking about a framework or curriculum with goals and content for toddlers and pre-schoolers requires thinking about quality. The perspectives and focus areas in the chapters can be divided into three categories: developing a quality framework, working with a quality framework, and evaluating a quality framework.

The chapters show us that there is a huge diversity of issues to consider, but also that there are many shared challenges regarding the curriculum for our young children. While many of these issues are also present in primary and secondary education, this yearbook makes us aware of the fact that it all starts in the early childhood period.

On behalf of all CIDREE members, I would like to thank our Norwegian colleagues for taking the initiative on this very interesting and relevant topic for the 2022 Yearbook, as well as for their coordination and editorial work. And, of course, our thanks go out to all the contributing authors.

This yearbook will be launched and discussed at the 2022 CIDREE conference in Norway. I believe it will enrich the discussion and reflection both during and after this meeting, and that it will provide an impetus for curriculum-related dialogue on the quality of early childhood education.

Happy reading!

**Jindra Divis**
*CIDREE President and Director General of the*
*Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development SLO*

## The Editors



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# Introduction: The importance of quality and quality development in early childhood education and care

**An introduction to the CIDREE Yearbook 2022**

We know that high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) has a significant impact on children's social and developmental well-being, laying the foundation for lifelong learning and development for all children. We also know this is especially significant for children from disadvantaged families (Bonetti and Blanden, 2020; Melhuish and Gardiner 2020, Zachrisson et al., 2021). With this CIDREE publication, we are highlighting a common goal among the CIDREE countries: namely, to establish the best foundation for all children by prioritising quality development in ECEC. The CIDREE countries have demonstrated their overwhelming support for this topic, which illustrates that it is both engaging and often a top political priority. We are thrilled that Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care is given the full attention of the CIDREE Yearbook 2022.

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**Themes for the CIDREE Yearbook 2022**
The focus of this yearbook is on ECEC, an area which we have defined as encompassing children aged 0 to 6. We present the various guidelines and interpretations of quality of the different CIDREE countries. We also share current ECEC research, as well as discussions of how the CIDREE countries are prioritising and making strategic decisions when it comes to quality development in ECEC. Some countries refer to their main guiding ECEC document as a "curricula" while others use the term "framework plan". Furthermore, CIDREE countries come from a variety of backgrounds and histories, and these differences are reflected in each country's approach to, organization of, and responsibility for ECEC.

> **"Common to all the contributions in this yearbook is a commitment to ECEC and an appreciation for the significant role that ECEC plays in children's opportunities and development.**

Nevertheless, this yearbook shares information and experiences that can be useful for all countries. Each country's chapter is introduced with a few key points of information to help make it easier to understand the article's context.

Common to all the contributions in this yearbook is a commitment to ECEC and an appreciation for the significant role that ECEC plays in children's opportunities and development. There is a common focus on early education and care, support for children, and professionalism among staff. We also see a common understanding of the important role that ECEC plays for children and society, as well as common ambitions for developing frameworks that create the best conditions for all children.

In the CIDREE network, we find countries at various stages in their work with ECEC curricula and frameworks. While some countries have had a curriculum or framework that sets a standard for ECEC quality for many years, others have recently revised their curricula/frameworks in line with new research, societal developments, and paradigm shifts. Meanwhile, other countries are now embarking on the process of developing their first curriculum/framework. This yearbook shares valuable knowledge garnered from the countries' diverse experiences. We hope it will serve as a useful tool for stakeholders across Europe and the world.

**ECEC as a place for community and belonging**
ECEC is an arena for the youngest children, and it is often a starting point for families to find community and a sense of belonging. In ECEC, many children have their first experiences outside of the home, and it represents the first stage in their educational journey. ECEC is where many children meet their first peers as well as their first teachers. For any country dedicated to supporting lifelong learning, ECEC is the first step.

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> *"*A curriculum/framework does not exist in a vacuum, and it can be developed and implemented at the same time as other reforms. It is therefore important that a curriculum/framework is developed collaboratively, where different opinions are heard on which elements should be included or excluded.

Similar among all the CIDREE countries is the fostering of values such as humanity, respect, tolerance, and democracy in ECEC reforms, curricula, and frameworks. These values give children an important foundation in the diversity of society and respect for different cultures. However, it is also important to note that, for some children, ECEC can be an arena where children have their first encounters with prejudice, conflict, and other negative experiences. Therefore, good staff are of great importance for raising the quality of a centre. They should act as good role models and have clear guidelines to which they adhere. This has become even more evident in light of the many health and political crises that young children have witnessed in recent years.

**Curricula and frameworks professionalise ECEC**
ECEC centers are diverse: they are large, small, privately owned, and publicly owned. They are in cities and rural areas, and some centers are based upon a certain ideology or religion. There are also many actors involved when preparing national guidelines for ECEC, each with their own specific set of interests and priorities. A curriculum/framework does not exist in a vacuum, and it can be developed and implemented at the same time as other reforms. It is therefore important that a curriculum/framework is developed collaboratively, where different opinions are heard on which elements should be included or excluded. If one succeeds in having a curriculum/

framework that is supported broadly, it will lead to a common professionalisation of the work conducted in ECEC centres. It will also enhance the professional development of teachers and kindergarten leaders.

**Implementing the intentions of the curriculum/framework in local quality development**
A good curriculum/framework alone is not sufficient for achieving high quality in ECEC. Centre leaders must also assume responsibility for ensuring that the intentions of the curriculum/framework plan are implemented in the centre's day-to-day work. Professionals should use the curriculum/framework as a tool for local quality development. This can establish a shared vision and shared practices among staff, for instance. This takes time, skill, reflection, and a willingness to change (Ogden and Fixsen 2014). In order to maintain high quality in ECEC, it is important to step back and evaluate the work. Teachers can reflect on whether their work corresponds with the intentions of the regulations, and on the challenges they face in their systematic quality work.

**Important research and policy development in ECEC**
There is more research happening now about ECEC than ever before, and quality development has come a long way. National understanding of the implementation and implications of these curriculum/framework is

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important for policy development. This CIDREE yearbook explores a number of research projects and discussions about quality in ECEC which can be valuable for all CIDREE countries regardless of where they are in their quality development work.

**Acknowledgements**
The editors would first and foremost like to thank all of the contributors to this yearbook: the talented and knowledgeable authors from Albania, France, Hungary, Ireland, Kosovo, Luxembourg, Montenegro, The Netherlands, Norway, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden, and Switzerland. It has been our pleasure working with all of you this past year, and we've learnt so much from you. We would also like to thank Jindra Divis for the President's foreword to this yearbook. We are grateful to the support we've received from our colleagues at the Norwegian Directorate of Education, including Hedda Birgitte Huse, Hege Nilssen, Annette Qvam, Martin Siewartz Nielsen and Vebjørn Løvås, as well as our partners at JCP and Totaltekst. Finally, we would like to thank Christine Stadnick from the CIDREE Secretariat and Jos Tolboom, Marc van Zenten, and Cynthia Schalkwijk from CIDREE Netherlands for their support and sharing of their experiences throughout this process.

We hope you enjoy reading this yearbook as much as we have enjoyed producing it.

The editors,

*Leah Aursand, Stine Kolstad Jensen, Cecilie Langholm, and Camilla Vibe Lindgaard*

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# Albania

Albania's journey toward quality education and care in early childhood



| 1 | Which department/ministry does ECEC sit under? | Ministry of Health for children aged 0 to 3<br>Ministry of Education and Sport for children aged 3 and up |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | What programs/settings exist for children between the ages of 0-7? | Crèches/nurseries for children aged 0 to 3 (non-compulsory)<br>Pre-school/kindergarten for children aged 3 to 6 (non-compulsory)<br>Preparatory classes/kindergarten for children aged 5 to 6 (non-compulsory)<br>Primary school for children aged 6 to 11 (compulsory) |
| 3 | What percentage of children are in ECEC centers? | 71.8% of children aged 3 to 6 |
| 4 | Link to national/local curriculum for ECEC | Albania has a national curriculum for pre-school education. Albania has been working on developing new curriculum documents since 2017, including:<br>– A curriculum framework for pre-school education<br>– Standards for development and learning for children aged 3 to 6<br>– Curriculum programmes for children aged 3 to 4 (2017), 4 to 5 (2018), and 5 to 6 (2019)<br>– Professional standards for pre-school teachers (2018)<br>– Assessment framework in pre-school education (2019)<br>– Professional standards for pre-school directors (2021) |
| 5 | Who is responsible for inspecting/ monitoring of ECEC? | The Ministry of Education and Sport is responsible for inspecting and monitoring in order to ensure inclusive education, implementation of the curriculum and professional development for teachers and directors.<br>Each municipality is responsible for inspecting and monitoring the administration and management of its pre-school institutions. |

# AUTHORS

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Aurela Zisi is a pre-school curriculum specialist at the Quality Assurance Agency for Pre-university Education. She has a great deal of experience in implementing various different projects, and is the author and co-author of many articles, studies, research projects, educational strategies and books at both the national and international level. She is member of the working groups for pre-school and kindergarten curricula, and the co-author of curriculum documents, guidelines and more. She is also a trainer in the teaching of pre-school and kindergarten curricula based on the competencies, child-centred methodologies and other topics in connection with early childhood education. In her work, she co-operates with international organisations, such UNICEF, Save the Children and UNESCO, in order to improve the quality of services in pre-school education. In December 2021, Aurela Zisi became a member of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), for the European Commission.

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Gerti Janaqi received a master's degree in Social Sciences from University of East London in 2006 and a PhD in Psychology from the University of Tirana, Department of Psychology in 2013. Since 2002, he has worked as a lecturer for the Department of Psychology and Pedagogy in the Faculty of Social Science at the University of Tirana. He has served as the General Director of Quality Assurance Agency of Pre-university Education since November 2013. His research covers the themes of: educational policy, educational governance, professionalism and organisational behaviour, curriculum designation, external and internal quality assurance tools etc. He has co-ordinated commissioned research projects funded by organisations within the secondary and primary education sector, as well as for several UN agencies.

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Dorina Rapti received a master's degree in Teaching in the Social Sciences in 2003 from the Department of Psychology and Pedagogy at the University of Tirana and a PhD in School Leadership from the University of Tirana in 2013. She worked as a mathematics teacher/head teacher within the pre-university education system between 1995 and 2007, and as a lecturer at the Department of Psychology and Pedagogy in the Faculty of Social Science at the University of Tirana since 2010. From 2010 to 2013, she worked for the Ministry of Education and Science as head of the Vocational Education and Training department, and as head of the Teacher Training and Qualification Commission. Since 2014, she has served as the head of the Teacher Qualification and Career Department for the former Institute for Educational Development, now known as the Quality Assurance Agency of Pre-university Education, within the Albanian Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth. Her research covers the themes of: educational policy, school leadership organisation, continuous professional development, the curriculum and external and internal quality assurance tools. She has co-ordinated research projects funded by the World Bank, the European Delegation - Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and several UN agencies.

# Albania's journey toward quality education and care in early childhood

## ABSTRACT

In 2014, Albania began its journey toward the reformation of the entire pre-university educational system, including its pre-school education, aimed at children between three and six years of age. This level of education is not compulsory in Albania. Providing the highest quality services from pre-school education institutions and kindergartens is one of the main priorities for the development of the Albanian education system.

A series of documents and legal acts have been formulated in this context, focusing on: *increasing access to pre-school education; designing the new curriculum based on competency objectives; increasing the professional development of teachers and kindergarten directors; and reforming the pre-school education financial system for an effective fiscal decentralisation policy.*

The kindergarten directors and pre-school teachers are guided by professional standards, and the Ministry of Education and Sports supports them with training sessions, based on the conclusions and recommendations of the 2021 national survey for their training needs and professional development.

Nevertheless, Albania is currently facing a new challenge at the pre-school level, that of designing a system for monitoring and evaluating, to thus provide quality in Early Childhood Education and Care, based on the "Proposal for a Council Recommendation" issued as of 22nd May 2018 from the High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems.

**Introduction**

Albania's educational reform first included the pre-school education system in 2014. The aim of this reform is to increase access to quality education and improve the well-being of children during the years in which they are in early childhood education. Another important goal of the reform is to fill the gap in the legal and professional framework currently lacking at this level of education.

In Albania, early childhood education and care (ECEC) is provided for children aged 0 to 6 years old. Nurseries provide ECEC for children aged 0 to 3. The operating of nurseries comes under the responsibility of local governance units. However, kindergartens fall under the responsibility of two institutions: the Ministry of Education and Sports, when it comes to its teachers and the curriculum, and the individual municipalities, when it comes to the management and administration of the kindergartens.

The objective of the European Quality Framework, formally known as the "Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care", is to provide access to quality early childhood education and care for all children, which it aims to achieve by: ensuring access, affordability, and inclusiveness; supporting professional skills and tasks of the ECEC staff; enhancing the early years curricula in order to meet the well-being and educational needs of the children; promoting transparent and coherent monitoring and evaluating of approaches for early childhood education and care services at all levels with a view to policy development and; ensuring the adequate funding and legal framework for the provision of early childhood education and care services.

The EU Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care is built on five pillars:

1. *Access*

2. *Workforce*

3. *Curriculum*

4. *Monitoring and Evaluation*

5. *Governance and Funding.*

Based on these Quality Framework pillars, this article presents the progress of each pillar in Albania, in addition to the challenges and future plans for ECEC in our country.

**Access**

Albania has recently approved The National Education Strategy, 2021–2026. The vision of the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) for the education sector[1] is to build an inclusive education system that successfully addresses the individual needs of all children and students of all categories, treating them equally and respecting diversity. Inclusion and equality are necessary prerequisites for ensuring quality training for all individuals and for narrowing the gap of educational attainment between different social groups. The strategy is based on the lifelong learning paradigm, which covers all stages of learning, from pre-school to the post-retirement period and also includes all forms of learning, whether that be formal and informal.

The first objective (A1) of the Education Strategy is to: ensure full inclusion in pre-school and compulsory education, as well as to increase

> *"Inclusion and equality are necessary prerequisites for ensuring quality training for all individuals and for narrowing the gap of educational attainment between different social groups.*

[1] *The National Education Strategy, 2021–2026*

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access to pre-school and upper secondary education by creating the appropriate infra-structural conditions and friendly school environments. The desired result (A.1.1.) of the first objective is to: Increase access to pre-school education. To achieve this , the Ministry of Education and Sport will take the following actions:

> *- Raise awareness among parents and the community about the importance of pre-school education, which will be carried out by implementing well-planned activities at the local level, through education offices and pre-school institutions, as well as at basic education schools of which preparatory classes are attached, all of which will be performed in collaboration with the local government. Such activities will also be supported by the civil society organisations and international partners.*

> *- Improve the coordination between the Ministry of Education and Sports, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection and local government for the education in early childhood sector. A study will be conducted in cooperation with the Government's international partners to compile recommendations for the better coordination of activities between the line ministries responsible for pre-school education and the local government, in order to advance the management of this sector.*

> *- Ensure the inclusion of all children aged 5 to 6 years old in the 3rd groups in kindergartens or preparatory classes. In the next five years, optimal conditions will be created for all children aged 5 to 6, to make sure they have access to pre-school education, either through enrolment in 3rd groups at kindergartens, or in preparatory classrooms.*

Based on this strategy and the work plan, the national experts across all relevant institutions will work to plan, monitor and evaluate the process of implementing the educational strategy – step by step.

**Workforce**
The workforce is an important component when it comes to ensuring the successful implementation of the curriculum reform. Over the last few years, Albania has worked on development within the workforce, with both pre-service and in-service teachers.

The education departments at the universities that provide courses to prepare teachers for pre-school education are currently working together to prepare the syllabus for the three year bachelor's degree, while the Ministry of Education and Sports endorsed *the professional standards for pre-school teachers in 2017*. The standards outline what the pre-school teachers should know, demonstrate and apply while working with children. The documents consist of 11 professional standards relating to: the collaboration required of colleagues and parents; professional development; teaching methodology; the use of technology; curriculum implementation; growth; development and learning for pre-school children; inclusive education; respect for diversity; safeguarding and providing a safe environment; and assessment. Each

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standard is further divided into indicators, providing specific details. The teacher can use the standards in order to assess their performance, strengths and needs for professional development.

**The professional growth of pre-school teachers**

A recent study was conducted in 2021 by the Agency for the Assurance of Quality in the Pre-University Education (AAQPUE) *"on the identification of the professional development needs of pre-school teachers"*. The study was based on the 11 professional standards. The results found that improvement on all standards is required for the pre-school teachers, especially in regard to professional development and when it comes to planning and implementing the curricula[2] . As noted in another study carried out by the OECD in 2020, supported by UNICEF Albania – *"OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education Albania"* – the quality of teaching staff and the physical conditions of pre-schools remain key challenges, for example, in some regions, particularly areas with higher [rates of] poverty such as the northeast of the country, it has been difficult to find qualified pre-school teachers, in part due to

migration toward urban centres[3] . Another study conducted in 2017 – the *"Early Childhood Education in Albania at a Glance Subsector Review"*[4] – highlighted that: Recently, a new curriculum has been designed to make activities more developmentally appropriate and to integrate pre-primary and primary learning more coherently. The findings of the "Appraisal of the Pre-University Education Strategy 2014–2020" stated that teachers need to be better prepared, supported, and given better resources, and that the practical teaching component is the least effective part of the system. In the *"European Commission Albania 2020 Report"*[5] it is stated that: "The new competence-based approach requires pedagogical skills that current teachers did not acquire at university, as well as further training, adequate ongoing mentoring, and support. Such support should be arranged in order to ensure effective and meaningful implementation of the reform, help teachers make the shift from memorisation type of learning and teacher-centred learning to the child-centred approach".

In 2016, under the professional development reform, UNICEF supported the Agency for the Assurance of

Quality in the Pre-University Education (AAQPUE) in the creation of a network for teachers. WANDA[6] is one of the methodologies used for the capacity building of pre-school teachers and aims to support professional group self-reflection. The practitioners/teachers are able to come together and reflect on their teaching practices, thus increasing and rediscovering appreciation towards the work (motivation) and towards the people involved (children, colleagues, parents, oneself, community).

Another important document for pre-school education in Albania is the *"Professional standards for kindergarten directors"*. This document is based on 7 standards relating to the administrative and pedagogical functions of the director, such as: communication; collaboration with the staff; partnership between the kindergarten, the families and the community; engagement with professional development; curriculum implementation; the growth, development and learning of pre-school children; and human and financial resource management. Each standard is further elaborated on by its indicators. A recent study was also conducted in this context in 2021,

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[2]https://www.ascap.edu.al/identifikimi-i-nevojave-per-zhvillim-profesional-te-punonjesve-arsimore-ne-arsimin-parauniversitar/

[3]http://www.oecd.org/education/oecd-reviews-of-evaluation-and-assessment-in-education-albania-d267dc93-en.htm

[4]https://www.academia.edu/35872803/Early_Childhood_Education_in_Albania_A_Subsector_Review

[5]https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/albania_report_2020.pdf

[6] Wanda is a method which was developed by VBJK and Artevelde University College in Belgium (Fl.) through a European Social Fund (ESF) project and then adapted to the contexts of four European countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia) within the ISSA (International Step by Step Association) network

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by AAQPUE: *"On the identification of the professional development needs of kindergarten directors"*. The study revealed that there is a great need for all directors to be trained about their standards and functions to provide better services for pre-school children, their families and the community.

Both studies – having had the mutual core aim of uncovering the needs of teachers and directors in regard to training – are crucial in guiding the Ministry of Education and Sports on the formulation of its future policies to advance professional growth in the field.

**Curriculum**
Albania has carried out significant work to create a new curriculum, based on the 7 key competencies:

- *The competence of communication and expressiveness*

- *The competence of thinking*

- *The competence of lifelong learning*

- *The competence for life, enterprise and environment*

- *Personal competence*

- *Social and citizenship competence*

- *Digital competence.*

All of the curriculum documents have been created through the cooperation and mutual efforts of international experts, UNICEF[7] (including technical support) Albania. Every year

since 2014, Albania has worked to fill the gap in the lack of the legal and professional frameworks and guides. The curriculum package includes the following set of documents:

- *The "Pre-school Curriculum Framework" document (2016) was drafted thanks to the contribution and consultancy of international expertise provided by: Sharon Lynn Kagan Ed.D. Teachers College Columbia University, Child Study Centre, Yale University, USA. The pre-school curriculum framework is in full compliance with the compulsory education curriculum. The document was drafted in respect to the fundamental dimensions that support the substantial growth of education for children aged 3 to 6:*

*a. Respecting child individuality*

*b. Inclusiveness of the child regardless of any prejudice*

*c. Cultural diversity as a fact and value*

*d. Gender dimension beyond stereotypes*

*The Preschool Curriculum Framework is currently being implemented in Albanian kindergartens.*

- *The Early Development and Learning Standards for Children aged 3 to 6 (2016) were designed under the guidance of an international expert – Sharon Lynn Kagan – alongside a number of national experts. The*

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[7]*UNICEF Albania has for many years worked to support the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) towards ensuring an equitable and quality system of education for all Albanian children with a special focus on those most vulnerable.*

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> **"** The aim of defining these standards, indicators and strategies for their fulfilment is to educate and transmit the human values and best qualities of the Albanian people, such as: national pride, cooperation, assistance, respect for others, empathy, honesty, love, will, persistence, the management of emotions, tolerance, understanding, diversity and so on.

*standards define what children can and are able to do, say and show during their growth, development and transition from one age group to another.*

The aim of defining these standards, indicators and strategies for their fulfilment is to educate and transmit the human values and best qualities of the Albanian people, such as: national pride, cooperation, assistance, respect for others, empathy, honesty, love, will, persistence, the management of emotions, tolerance, understanding, diversity and so on. The standards of development and learning stem from the following five fields:

- *Health, physical well-being and motor development (6 standards)*

- *Social, personal and emotional development (11 standards)*

- *Language development, reading and writing (7 standards)*

- *Cognitive development and general knowledge (20 standards)*

- *Approach to learning (5 standards)*

Each field then consists of its own sub-fields, which make up the full set of standards. Each standard is composed of age indicators and show what children know and are able to do in different age groups, between the ages of 3 and 6 years old.

In the same line of the standards document, the Agency for the Assurance of Quality in the Pre-University Education designed the *Early Development and Learning Standards for 0-3 years old (2020)*. The key principles for the standards are as follows: each child is able to learn from birth; each child has special skills; each child is unique and has its own pace of developing; and each child

demonstrates the knowledge, skills and competencies in every development field.

- *The pre-school subject programmes* are designed for each age-group: ages 3–4, 4–5 and 5–6. The new curriculum is based on the 7 key competencies and is based on each subject, including: Language, Maths, Science, Citizenship, Arts and Physical Education, Sports and Health. The programmes provide a foundation for the teacher to plan activities based on the learning outcomes, development, and learning standards indicators outlined.

- *The assessment framework in pre-school education* provides specific strategies for classroom teachers and contains crucial information and strategies that kindergarten administrators and other educators should be aware of, when supporting and monitoring education programmes. The document was drafted in 2018 with the guidance of an international consultant – Ms. Teresa Gonzales.

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## Monitoring and Evaluation

Following on from its work of ensuring gaps in the documentation and legal guidelines were filled, Albania moved on to focus on the monitoring and evaluating of quality across all pre-school service areas. The focus of this process is on quality, namely that of: how the new curriculum is being implemented, the welfare of pre-school and kindergarten children, staff qualifications, the partnership with parents, the learning environment and all aspects of kindergarten management.

The document based on monitoring and evaluating the quality of services will be grounded in the European Commission documents and adhere to the updated approaches to pre-school education. With the support of UNICEF, an international expert will guide Albanian experts in the designing of the Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, based on the 5 pillars of: Accessibility, Workforce, Curriculum, Monitoring and Evaluation, and Governance and Funding.

The process of monitoring and evaluating the quality of pre-school education falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Sports as well as the relevant local government unit.

## Governance and Funding

As mentioned above, pre-school education in Albania is a service offered through mutual cooperation between the municipalities (pursuant to Law 139/2015, for "Local Governance") and the Ministry of Education and Sports (pursuant to Law 69/2012,"On the pre-university education system in the Republic of Albania" as amended).

Based on Article 21 (1)[8] : "Pre-school education aims the social, intellectual and physical development of each child, exercise of basic rules for hygiene, the cultivation of values, and the preparation for primary education". Based on Article 32 "Educational institution": "The educational institution has the role for creating a friendly environment for students and the opportunities for each student to demonstrate, develop individuality and realize his potential in accordance with this law". The cooperation between the Ministry of Education and Sports and the local authorities for early childhood education is based on:

*- Improving conditions of kindergartens to guarantee children welfare, growth, good education and safety*

*- Preparing well-trained teachers for pre-school education*

*- Drafting documents and didactic materials for teachers and parents, thus calling attention to the importance of education during early childhood*

Within the framework of effective fiscal decentralisation policies, the Ministry of Education and Sports and the Ministry of Finance and Economy have worked in close cooperation to ensure that the transfer of functions at the local level is accompanied by effective means and understandings to further ensure the creation of an appropriate and beneficial system. In this context, the 2022 budget will continue to use a new formula for allocating funds to the pre-school education sector,

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[8]*the amendment of Law 69/2012, "On the pre-university education system in the Republic of Albania", which focuses on:*

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which implements legislation on pre-university education as well as on governance and local finances, based on international best practices and experiences.

**Conclusions**

A numbers of documents and legislation has been formulated in Albania, within the context of pre-school education, focusing on:

*• Increasing access to pre-school education. Ensuring access to high quality and inclusive early childhood education and care as a specific objective of the National Education Strategy 2021–2026.*

*• Designing the new curriculum based on competencies. For the first time in its history, Albania has a full curriculum package, now including: The curriculum framework for pre-school education, development and learning standards for children aged 3 to 6, as well as subject programmes for each age group and an assessment framework in pre-school education. All of these documents were designed together with international pre-school experts and a focus on the well-being, healthy development and fulfilling of the educational needs of pre-school and kindergarten-aged children.*

*• Strengthening professional development among teachers and kindergarten directors. The kindergarten directors and pre-school teachers are guided by professional standards, and the Ministry of Education and Sports supports them with training sessions, based on the*

*conclusions and recommendations of the national surveys on the needs identified to ensure training and professional growth.*

*• Reforming the pre-school education financial system for an effective fiscal decentralisation policy. This reform launched in 2019, and continues to establish an appropriate and effective financing scheme that aims to consistently improve the quality of services provided in the pre-school education system.*

However, Albania is now facing a new challenge at the level of pre-school education: designing the Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care Systems.
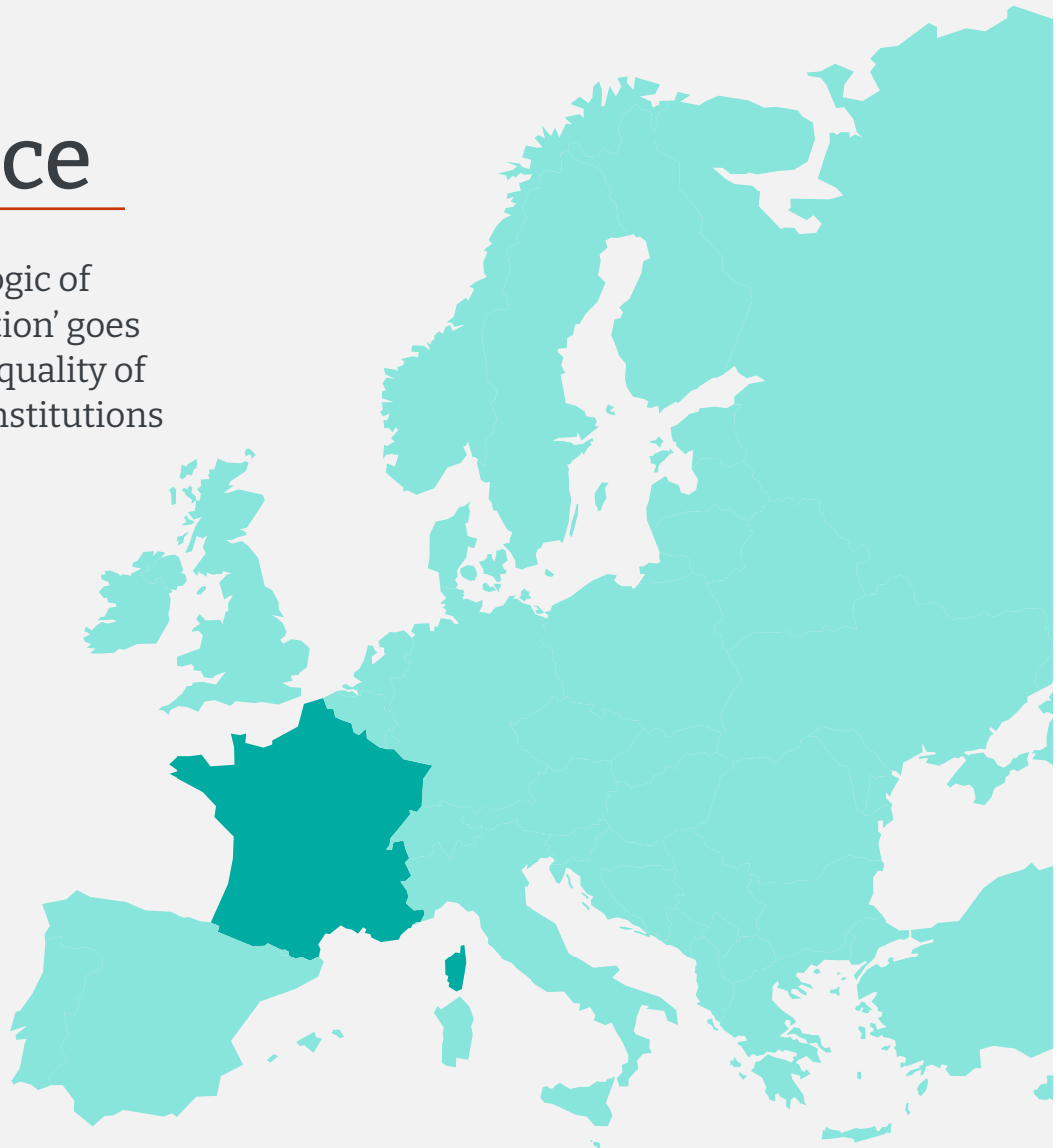
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# France

When the logic of 'schoolification' goes against the quality of preschool institutions

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | **Which department/ministry does ECEC sit under?** | The Ministry of Solidarity and Health are responsible for the French crèches (for children aged 0 to 3)<br>The Ministry of National Education are responsible for French pre-schools (écoles maternelles for children aged 2 to 6) |
| **2** | **What programs/settings exist for children between the ages of 0-7?** | The crèches do not follow a programme but a referencial<br>French preschools operate in line with in an official programme |
| **3** | **What percentage of children are in ECEC centers?** | 100% in French preschool |
| **4** | **Link to national/local curriculum for ECEC** | Click here for the national curriculum |
| **5** | **Who is responsible for inspecting/ monitoring of ECEC?** | Inspectors from the Ministry of National Education |

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Ghislain Leroy is a lecturer in Education Sciences (Rennes 2 University, CREAD Laboratory). He has studied the ways in which the relationship with the child in the French pre-school context has transformed since the 1980s as a result of neoliberal policies having remodelled this system, seeking to make it more and more profitable academically. Ghislain Leroy summarised his work in the book L'école maternelle de la performance enfantine (Peter Lang, 2020). Since then, he has focused on the growing development of so-called alternative pedagogies within both public and private schools – Montessori pedagogies in particular – as well as on family instruction. His last book is "Sociologie des pédagogies alternatives" (La Découverte, 2022). The aim of all his research on pre-schools, schools and families is to understand contemporary child socialisation and what we are trying to do with children today.

# When the logic of 'schoolification' goes against the quality of preschool institutions

## ABSTRACT

Traditionally, pre-school systems in Europe tend to aim either at the holistic development of the child or at preparation for their future schooling. That said, for several decades, the logic of 'schoolification' has taken hold in many European pre-school institutions. Through a study of the French context, we question the consequences of this type of logic. It might, for example, lead to a preference for implementing a harsher vision of the pedagogical relationship (enforcing obedience), a less playful pedagogy and less concern when it comes to taking the children's interests into account. The more formal educational climate can also result in such an increase in the pace of learning that it reaches the point of prematurely marginalising children who do not receive the same level of academic support in their home environment. Finally, this approach to pedagogy can also lead to professionals being less focused on the psycho-affective relationship with the children, and of their emotional security. In short, the logic of 'schoolification' can generate quality deficits in Early Childhood Education and Care.

## Introduction

In Europe, pre-school institutions have traditionally held various educational purposes. It is customary to compare systems that aim for the overall and holistic development of the child with those that focus more on preparation for the child's schooling. However, several studies have made it possible to question recent widespread developments. For example, the study looking into developments in assessment practices by Veuthey, Marcoux and Grange (2016) shows that pre-school institutions in French-speaking Switzerland, Italy, France and Belgium are undergoing fairly similar transformations. Children are expected to be assessed more and more frequently. An injunction to keep records of assessment is reinforced. These assessments are not always used to regulate or improve teaching either, but rather to justify the adults' work. These assessments also take up a lot of time, and thus transform the teaching and learning practices. There is an increasing tendency for such practices to be geared toward future assessments (so-called 'teaching to the test'), meaning those activities or objectives that are least prominent in the assessments are relegated to the background (transversal skills, for example those relating to learning to live together for example). All of this can create a stressful climate for both the teachers and the children. These developments raise questions about the logic of 'schoolification' (Garnier, 2016; Kaga, Benett & Moss, 2010) that is now so common in many pre-school institutions. In countries marked by these changes, pre-school institutions are increasingly responsible for providing basic school learning, which is supposed to enable children to succeed in their future education. These educational developments correlate with the new methods of managing public policies, characterised by a concern with efficiency (Bezes, 2009). The reasoning for this is as follows: making pre-school practices more academic or formal will make them more efficient and useful.

In this chapter, we will put forward the questions raised by this trend towards 'schoolification' and the negative consequences it can cause. It is not certain that the efficiency being sought is always even achieved. We therefore seek to identify the problems that this specific schooling logic can bring about, while also pinpointing ways in which it might be countered. To that end, we will examine the case of the French pre-school system (école maternelle), which has been strongly marked by this logic of 'schoolification' (Garnier, 2016; Leroy 2020a). We have studied the evolution of its official guidelines and other documentation and conducted more than sixty days' worth of direct observation across 20 classes in Paris (with children aged 3 to 6), between 2011 and 2013, and then between 2017 and 2018. We have also compared a corpus of 25 inspection reports dating from the period 2000–2010 with a similar corpus dating from the period 1965–1970, with the aim of highlighting the evolution of the norms held by the inspectors. Finally, we conducted ten interviews with pre-school teachers (in 2009) in order to update their ideas on what the

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adult/child relationship should be. In this text, we will quote excerpts from these interviews and from our observation notebooks, and will also add some illustrative excerpts here and there from our earlier work.

**I. The rise of a schooling logic in official instructions since 1977**

The French preschool system has undergone multiple curricular changes from 1977 to the present day. In the guidelines published in 1977, priority is given to an analysis of the child of psychological and psychoanalytical inspiration.

> *"The excessive significance of the models given by [the adult] would also harm the development of creativity by locking the personality into closed structures of action and thought; the demand for freedom, often mentioned at the beginning of each educational process, leads to the rejection of any stereotype imposed from the outside and likely to lock the child into structures in which their personality would remain a prisoner forever."*
> *(MEN, 1977)*

These guidelines promote free experimentation for children. Adults must let them experiment and therefore keep a safe distance and create a secure emotional environment. As such, these guidelines value shared joy between children (laughter is encouraged), and between children and adults, as well as the affective connections between them. Traditional school learning (mathematics for example) occupies a secondary place in these guidelines. Indeed, the underlying idea is that if children are emotionally well, they will learn readily.

From the 1986 guidelines onwards, things change. The context was that of the end of the "thirty glorious years" (1945-1975) of economic growth following the end of the Second World War and the attendant mass unemployment and persistent economic crisis. Education policies of the time were seeking to ensure that children stayed longer in school and that a higher share left with qualifications. It is also a time when the libertarian and anti-authoritarian educational approaches of the 1970s were coming under increasing criticism. Different approaches to education were emerging. The official guidelines of the period noted that the French preschool system was above all an education system and insisted on the transmission of school learning. Children were not only to play, but also to be introduced to the discipline of formal education.

> *"From this we see that the personality is not the simple manifestation of the power and originality of the child; it is also the acquired power to set itself rules: in this it is characterized by autonomy. [The child] remains free while being able to accept the ever-increasing constraints that will inevitably be imposed by the demands of later schooling and the tasks of adult life." (MEN, 1986)*

In subsequent guidelines, this line of thinking is further reinforced. The 1995 guidelines (MEN, 1995) no longer mention psychoanalysis at all. The dominant approach was now a didactic one, which was supposed to provide the intellectual tools for preschool teachers to set up the most elaborate learning sequences possible. This document insisted that preschool staff must be "teaching profes-

> **The 2015 and 2021 guidelines mark a relative turning point, with psycho-affective themes returning in some passages. However, this return is only relative and does not call into question the many changes that have occurred over recent decades, for example the need for assessment, the programming of learning, the importance of traditional school curricula (mathematics, for example), preparation for primary school, etc.**

sionals"; they were to organize their learning over time and to carry out multiple assessments. These new guidelines were in keeping with the 1989 Guidance Law on Education, which integrated the preschool system into the rest of the French education system, making it its first cycle (it was then no longer an "elsewhere" or a "before" school). These developments are reminiscent of those that took place at the same time in multiple spheres of the world of work, where the logic of qualification was supplanted by the logic of competence (Paradeise & Lichtenberger, 2001). The aim was for individuals to become more and more competitive and to be perpetually improving their professional practices. On the preschool side, there was an ever-increasing concern with the intensity of daily learning, which was supposed to justify the cost of preschool that was being increasingly questioned by certain politicians. In the 1995 curricula, the passages on psycho-emotional well-being are very much reduced. The aim was to turn preschool children into pupils, i.e. formal learners, and to maintain a didactic relationship with them. The 2002 and 2008 guidelines were to confirm the direction of change. The 2008 version even insists on the need for children to "control" their emotions, and to develop "moral" behaviour, contrary to the 1977 guidelines, which accepted children's deeply emotional character without seeking to change it.

The 2015 and 2021 guidelines mark a relative turning point, with psycho-affective themes returning in some passages. However, this return is only relative and does not call into question the many changes of recent decades, for example the need for assessment, the programming of learning, the importance of traditional school curricula (mathematics for example), preparation for primary school, etc.

## II. The decline of practices inspired by the New Education movement

Our survey showed that these schooling curricular developments in recent decades have had an impact on the ordinary practices and representations of preschool teachers. During our 2011-2013 survey, we were struck by the fact that the classic values of the New Education movement were not as widespread among today's preschool teachers as they once were. It is well documented that since the beginning of the 20th century they have been significantly influenced by the values and practices of the New Education movement (Maria Montessori, Ovide Decroly, Célestin Freinet, etc.). Antoine Prost observed in his 1981 book (Prost, 1981) that it was these values that united the body of French preschool teachers. A sort of decline in these values emerged from our survey. For Prost, these values were summed up in the expression "to learn without being constrained", through play or playful situations. In our interviews, these were not the key values to which today's teachers referred. For many, children should attend preschool whether they like it or not. If they do like it, fine; but if they don't, they should attend anyway. Several respondents also said that it was good for children to be introduced to this school constraint, which is part of life. We thus understand that the underlying vision of the preschool has changed significantly.

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These teachers seemed to consider it more as a place of initiation to the constraints of formal school than as a space where teachers seek to articulate the interests of children and learning (and to make learning interesting). A harsher view of pre-school might be said to prevail now.

> "M (teacher): We come to school to learn things and to work...
>
> I (investigator): and if they don't like it, for example?
>
> M: I tell them it's better if they like it, but hey, it's very difficult to do what you don't want to do and there are inevitably things you don't have, don't want to do but we have to do them anyway...
>
> E: so it has to be done... (Laughs)
>
> M: it's not necessarily pleasant... it's better if they're happy to be there, but there are things even if they don't want to, you have to! You have to brush your teeth, you have to wash, you have to eat, you have to come to school... that's it."
>
> (Isabelle, interview of 21.01.2009)

This also explains why the use of

| Artistic and manual activities in the corpus 1965-1970 | Artistic and manual activities in the corpus 2000-2010 |
|---|---|
| Pottery; ceramics; basket weaving; cut-outs; modelling; sewing; needlework and embroidery (placemats, snack bags, book covers); weaving; do-it-yourself; glueing; creation of decorated and painted key rings; glued seed charts; papier mâché; potato prints on fabric | Volume decoration of plastic bottles; glueing; chalks; stickers; creations from geometric shapes; caress, poke, scrape the paint |

*Figure 1.* Decline in diversity of artistic and manual activities between the reports of 1965-1970 and those of 2000-2010

teaching methods inspired by the New Education movement seems today to be left to teachers' discretion. Some use them, others do not. Inspectors no longer really expect to find such methods in use. It seems to us no coincidence that "worksheets" (a sheet of A4 paper) were disseminated in preschool establishments from the 1990s onwards, that is to say as the logic of schooling gained ground at the level of prescriptive texts. These worksheets, often found on the Internet, are supposed to practise a specific learning point (knowing how to write a particular letter, to work on a particular number, etc.). But they go hand in hand with a very traditional, if not austere, pedagogy, that diverges very significantly from the New Education tradition, with its emphasis on taking account of children's interests (learning through manipulation games, for example). In recent decades, many activities

have disappeared from the French preschool curriculum. If we take the example of art activities (Leroy, 2020b), we can see that today's activities aim to develop graphic ability or mathematical skills (rather than experimentation or creation). The activities of the 60s and 70s were much more varied, with ceramics, potato prints, embroidery, etc. All these activities have now disappeared, surely because their "schooling" benefit was uncertain.

Our observations of 2017-2018 revealed that Montessori practices had made a comeback in French preschools (Leroy & Lescouarch, 2019). Should this be seen as a return to "new education" values? It is not certain. Indeed, it seems that this return has not been accompanied by a break with the developments in practices and representations of recent decades. For example, the establishment of

Montessori practices is going hand in hand with a very strong evaluative follow-up. Similarly, it appears that this recourse to Montessori appears more as a pedagogical technique intended to produce great results in learning rather than as an ethics of the relationship between children and between adults and children, with the aim, for example, of creating a community or even political links between children. Célestin Freinet pursued this type of political objective more than Montessori. This is perhaps the reason why his approach is not so widely adopted today.

### III. Schooling logic and exclusion of the less well-off

During our surveys, we found that French preschool teachers set up learning situations earlier than in the past, and in new forms, closer to those used in primary schools. In the 1970s, some teachers' manuals advocated not putting a chair in the very young children's section (3 year olds). The learning challenges were much lower at the time, with a significant amount of free play in particular. Our inspection reports show that this did not pose a problem for the inspectors at the time. Today, from the start of the école maternelle (2 and 3 year olds), there are learning situations that rely heavily on children's academic autonomy. All of them have an activity that they are supposed to carry out fairly quickly and independently. This requires a great deal of concentration and organizational skills, which are unequally distributed, in particular by social origin.

In the current context, teachers are expected to keep detailed re-

> **" In truth, strong expectations of autonomy exist from the very start of kindergarten, which seem to favour the children most privileged academically as a product of their background.**

cords that can be seen by parents and inspectors. This productivist climate means that time is a scarce commodity and that teachers are too busy elsewhere to work with the least advanced children. Left to work almost independently, the children must carry out their activities gradually, step by step, using prior knowledge and resisting the distraction of their classmates. In truth, strong expectations of autonomy exist from the start of kinder-

garten, which seem to favour the children best endowed academically by their background. In our book "L'école maternelle de la performance enfantine" (Leroy, 2020a) as well as in an article (Leroy, 2020c), we described specific situations in which the weakest children in school found themselves excluded from ordinary activities on a daily basis due to being less "school ready" than their peers. In these cases, preschool not only does not reduce social inequalities, but it reinforces them, allowing the best-equipped pupils to perfect their already well-established academic skills. This is another very important and alarming deviation from certain early schooling contexts. These findings are all the more worrying as the "schoolification" of preschool has regularly been legitimized as being more effective in combating social inequalities.

It seems necessary here to defend a kind of Copernican revolution within the pedagogy. Currently, teachers seem to rely on pupils who are expected to be autonomous, and the usual classroom organization seems in a sense designed for them. It seems necessary to us to reverse this order of things, and to focus particularly on the weaker children, by asking ourselves if they benefit from daily activities. Are they adjusted to their current level? Do they allow them to progress to the maximum? This also requires teachers to reflect on

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their own role in the activities. Too great a distance from the weakest pupils in the class cannot be defended. They surely need more help, explanations, sometimes specific support (even if they should also be left alone sometimes). These pupils must be at the heart of daily pedagogical thinking.

## IV. The importance of psycho-affective analysis

Finally, it appears that the schooling logic can become established to the detriment of a relationship with children that we call "psycho-affective". In the 1960s and 70s and again in the 1980s, the prescriptive texts insisted on the fact that preschool teachers were also professionals in the psychological care of children. Advice was given, for example, on how to comfort a child who was experiencing grief.

Our observations showed us that the school climate could sometimes work against the psycho-affective care of children. Indeed, some preschool teachers have come to see themselves only as teachers. They do not pay attention to children's spontaneous sayings, hardly enter into dialogue with them on subjects other than school learning (for example during breaktime) and basically maintain a distant relationship with them, unwilling to listen to confidences or various remarks, which can also give rise to multiple learnings, or quite simply play an educational role to help them develop well by answering their many questions. We have seen situations where children are left to cry sometimes for a very long time, "waiting for it to pass".

> *"Next to Jason, a little girl has been crying for a long time (it's 8:55 a.m., she has been crying from the start [8:30 a.m.]). She will be anxious all morning. Him is engaged in his activity [pupils must recognize their first name]. It's not that he isn't concerned about her; he will tell me to have sympathy for her, to be attentive to her problems integrating into the class, and will call her a"fragile little thing"during an informal interview. But he does not abandon his activity in order to dedicate himself solely to consoling her, showing here that she is attached to her learning objectives. [Jason, 08.11.2012]*

The teacher then devotes himself to what he considers to be his main professional task, teaching school content with the other children (affectively autonomous). This type of situation seems to us to be very probably associated with significant adverse impacts on children's psychological development of children and their relationship to school.

Finally, as unpleasant as this reality is, there are also teachers who set up violent behaviour with children. Violent situations have existed in school for a long time (Merle, 2005). But we hypothesize that they could be reinforced in preschool by this schooling climate and these expectations of many results. Indeed, we had the opportunity to see very stressed teachers, who in turn stressed the children by imposing an intense learning climate. Physical signs of ill health among the children were then evident.

Among these teachers, violent behaviour sometimes existed; the slower children might be publicly humiliated or there might be aggressive physical gestures, such as grabbing a child violently by the shoulder or chin, when the teacher was overwhelmed. Humiliating punishments have been observed: a child

punished by being forced to wear just his underwear and sit with his head in his hands or a child left in his urine after a nap to punish him for not having gone to the toilet.

*"For Violette, a teacher with high academic standards, the climate of very high expectations leads to similar stressful situations, both for the pupils and for the teacher. "The GS [5 or 6 years old children] are almost all on the benches now. "I would be on the verge of murder!!" said the mistress to Garance which is not yet on a bench". This mistress also sometimes demonstrates physical violence, in at least three ways: "She pulls Jean's [emphasis] chin [...]"; "Alimatou can't do it, she circles before the teacher has even said which word to circle. The mistress corrects her, pointing this out to her. She taps on the head [emphasis added] of Alimatou: "I didn't say what we circle!" ; "The teacher notices that a student from the other half group has not gone to get his worksheet alone thinking about it alone: she takes him by the collar and drags him to the worksheets very very vigorously. (Violette, 05.22.2012). Under these conditions, I had the opportunity to observe that a student often seemed stressed in this class, having trouble getting organized or following the activities."She pulls Jean's chin, who seems lost, still with that anxious face. This child seems lost in the class and I have the feeling at this moment that the autonomy that is asked of him is too hard for him. (Violet, 05.22.2012)*

*Extract from: Leroy, G. (2020a). L'école maternelle de la performance enfantine, chapter 4.*

“ **Preschool establishments were supposed to be small, joyful communities, welded together and united by emotional bonds. Given the state of research on this period, it is not possible to know what was going on in reality. We do not wish to idealize this period retrospectively, but simply to indicate that there were norms that could be levers for other types of relationships with children and to give them legitimacy.**

Reading the inspection reports from the 1960s and 70s shows that at this time the norms around these psycho-affective issues were different. It was appreciated that there was a friendly, even joyful atmosphere between children, and between children and teacher. The emotional bonds between them were welcome. Preschool establishments were supposed to be small, joyful communities, welded together and united by emotional bonds. Given the state of research on this period, it is not possible to know what was going on in reality. We do not wish to idealize this period retrospectively, but simply to indicate that there were norms that could be levers for other types of relationships with children and to give them legitimacy.

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> **" One of the current challenges facing pre-school institutions today seems to be their (not always successful) attempts to combine different educational objectives, in particular, the psycho-affective and formal learning objectives.**

### Conclusion

To conclude, one of the current challenges facing pre-school institutions today seems to be their (not always successful) attempts to combine different educational objectives, in particular, the psycho-affective and formal learning objectives. We suggest the following avenues for being able to achieve this:

- The objectives of academic success must be adjusted to match the children's diversity, and take into account their specificities, that is to say their unequal preparedness for playing the role of pupil. The emphasis on early performance can reinforce social inequalities. This is not only an ineffective way of narrowing the gap between children of different abilities and backgrounds but is also psychologically damaging for those less academically prepared(often from popular social classes), which can lead to a loss of confidence in themselves and in education.

- Pursuing academic goals should not cause other, non-academic goals to be undervalued. Instilling confidence in children, paying attention to what they say, entering into dialogue with them on subjects they themselves bring up, allowing them to achieve things or have personal opinions, ensuring that they experience joyful moments, alone or in groups, that they have happy encounters with adults who can become stable figures and reference points, as well as with other children: all these objectives are not directly academic, but they are crucial. Furthermore, it may well be that they could also indirectly support more strictly educational purposes. Emotional well-being, or the ability to have a personal opinion, is also useful academically.

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# Hungary

Some regulatory elements of Hungarian pre-school education (ISCED 0.2) based on the quality framework
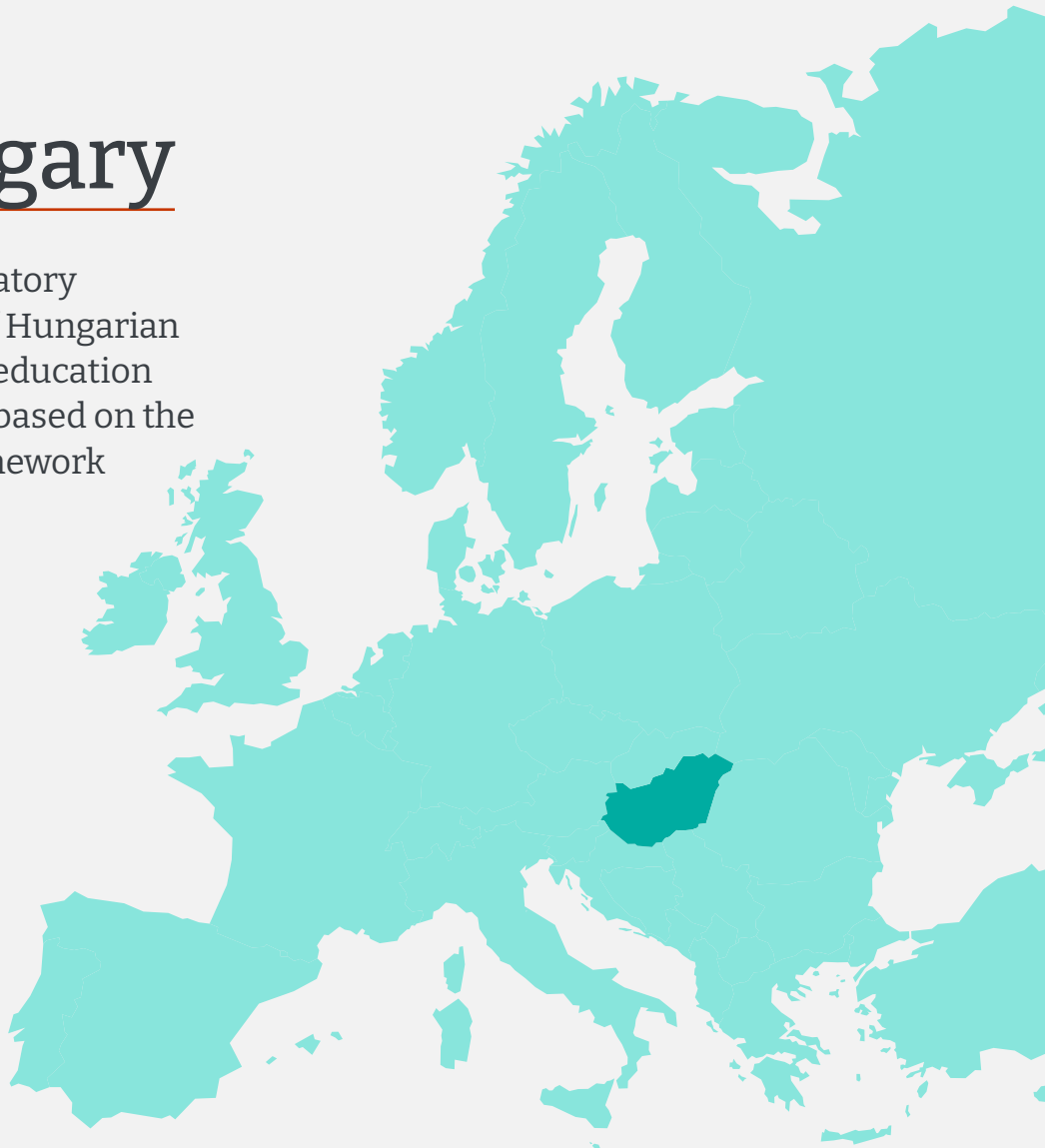


| 1 | Which department/ministry does ECEC sit under? | Ministry of the Interior |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | What programs/settings exist for children between the ages of 0-7? | Nursery (from 4 months to 3 years) Kindergarten 3 to 6 years |
| 3 | What percentage of children are in ECEC centers? | 96% of children aged 4 to 6 attend ECEC centres (2021) |
| 4 | Link to national/local curriculum for ECEC | Click here for the national curriculum |
| 5 | Who is responsible for inspecting/ monitoring of ECEC? | Ministry of the Interior |

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# Some regulatory elements of Hungarian pre-school education (ISCED 0.2) based on the quality framework

## ABSTRACT

Hungary has traditionally been committed to providing high-quality, child-centred early childhood education. The institutional system of early childhood education and care in Hungary is divided into two parts: nursery (ISCED 0.1) and kindergarten (ISCED 0.2). The Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (2019/C189/02) contains a quality framework whereby five key components have been identified: access to services, staff, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and governance and financing. The present study, which covers four dimensions, sheds light on the situation, recent measures, and expected challenges of some of the elements of this proposed quality framework in pre-school education in Hungary (ISCED 0.2). In Hungary, several elements defining pre-school education that represent quality have been subject to definitive regulation. These reinforce the preventative role of pre-school education and the associated responsibilities, while at the same time signalling challenges in making pre-school professions attractive and valued.

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## Introduction

As the location of the first kindergarten in central Europe, Hungary has a tradition of being committed to providing high-quality, child-centred early childhood education, complemented by comprehensive family policy measures. The institutional system of early childhood education and care in Hungary is divided into two parts: nursery (ISCED 0.1) and kindergarten (ISCED 0.2)

The Council Recommendation[1] of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (2019/C189/02) contains a quality framework whereby five key components have been identified: *access to services, staff, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and governance and financing.*

In Hungary, several elements defining pre-school education that represent quality have been subject to definitive regulation. The direction of these interventions can be identified by one of the five dimensions defined by the recommendation, which can be integrated into a framework. The recommendation states that each nation should develop its own framework in line with these foci. At the same time, there is a lot involved and many challenges to overcome in making the career of a kindergarten teacher in Hungary attractive[2], as well as in the further specification of kindergarten education as part of the national public education system.

This study presents a domestic regulatory element for kindergarten education (ISCED 0.2) related to the three elements of this proposed quality framework[3] (curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, access to services) which determines the provision of high-quality early childhood education. These include the revised *National Basic Programme for Pre-school Education* published in 2012 and adapted to the spirit of the times, and the *obligation to monitor a child's development*, making early diagnosis possible for all children. In Hungary, the introduction of compulsory kindergarten education from the age of 3 in 2015 was crucial. Thanks to professional, high-quality care, it can help the development of disadvantaged children in particular. As a model developed for the system-wide monitoring and evaluation of staff, the regulation of the supervision of kindergarten education has been in operation since 2016. In 2019, the National Assembly passed a minor amendment to the regulation concerning the duration of compulsory schooling, as well as the coordination of schooling in Hungary. This strengthened the role of the child[4] and of compulsory schooling in the transition from kindergarten to school.

In this article, two of these regulatory elements are presented in more detail, the *National Basic Programme of Kindergarten Education*, which functions as a curriculum, and *the mandatory requirement to monitor the development of the child* as a quality component in monitoring and evaluation. The remarkable innovation of the latter, the kindergarten module of eDia, will be briefly presented. This supports the Hungarian practice and was developed by the Educational Theory Research Group of the University of

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[1] COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (2019/C189/02)

[2] (17)

[3] (16)

[4] (12)

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Szeged and the Skills Development Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences

## 1. Framework of ECEC quality determinants

The Hungarian regulators of kindergarten education allow for a framework-like interpretation of the quality determinants of the council's report.

This study briefly describes some of these and looks at them in more detail in two dimensions: the issue of *"Curricula" (National Basic Programme for Kindergarten Education)* and "Monitoring and Evaluation", which relates to the domestic aspects of kindergarten education *(Monitoring Child Development).*

In order to elucidate the connections between these two framework elements and the other elements, we will briefly look at the regulatory environment of all five elements, without going into a detailed discussion.

### 1.1. Access to early childhood education and care[5]

According to the Hungarian basic law, every Hungarian citizen has the right to education. The basic law is the highest judicial level in Hungary and it is not possible to enact legislation that is contrary to its content. It forms the basis of Hungary's legal system (The Basic Law of Hungary, 2011). Hungary guarantees the right to education by expanding and generalising public education, through free and compulsory primary education made accessible to all, through higher education accessible to all according to their ability, and through financial support for those receiving education as defined by law.

### 1.2. Staff: training and working conditions of staff responsible for early childhood education and care

In Hungary, a role in early childhood education requires a specific qualification, both in nursery and kindergarten education. The training requirements of early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers are supplemented by a system of promotion (teacher career progression) and in-service training during the period of work. In kindergartens, the position of kindergarten teacher can be filled by someone with a (higher) kindergarten teacher qualification. The position of early childhood educator can also be filled by someone with a vocational qualification in higher and secondary education. The Public Education Act stipulates that the right and obligation of a teacher to participate in in-service teacher training requires ongoing training. The in-service training obligations of pre-school teachers are the same as those of teachers and educators, as well as of teachers working in other public education institutions. The obligation of the professional development of teachers in Hungary is set forth in a government decree. The decree defines two basic forms of teacher training, compulsory in-service training every seven years and in-service training for teachers.

### 1.3. Defining curricula

In the case of kindergarten education in Hungary, the curriculum refers to a two-level regulation whereby the first, central level is represented by the national basic programme of kindergarten education – the so-called kindergarten framework curriculum – and the second level is represented by the local pedagogical programmes of each kindergarten, which are local curricula that must be in line with the aims and tasks of central-level regulation.

### 1.4. Monitoring and evaluation

In 2015, the education management introduced a new structured network of institutions to serve as a management and control model to improve the quality of the Hungarian public education system and its efficiency, effectiveness, and equity indicators. As a result, like most other Member States of the European Union, Hungary has a Self-Assessment Manual (2021). This is a uniform, public set of criteria for regular self-assessment-based external professional audits and evaluations based on a system of

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[5] The concept of access is defined in the Public Education Act as disproportionate unencumbered access

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expectations and tools. This in turn forms part of the national pedagogical-professional audit (supervision) . This focus of this study is not on the experience of system-wide monitoring, but on the individual work of the kindergarten teacher and the practice of directly monitoring child development.

### 1.5. Governance and financing

At present, nursery and kindergarten education is managed by different government agencies. While the Ministry of Culture and Innovation is responsible for ensuring nursery care, kindergarten education belongs to the Ministry of the Interior as part of public education. Kindergartens can be maintained by several organisations in Hungary. Although most kindergartens are maintained by municipalities, the number of church nursery schools has also increased significantly in recent years. The Budget Act determines the type and amount of subsidies to be paid from the state budget to local governments in a given year, and this legislation also determines the procedure for using the subsidies.

The financing structure of the local governments maintaining the majority of kindergartens has changed, with the normative form of financing changing to task-based financing. All of this has a significant impact on the operation of kindergartens and schools (Kalmár, 2018).

### 2. Some elements of the quality framework

According to the council recommendation (2019), "a quality framework or equivalent document can be an effective factor in the proper regulation of early childhood education and care." There is no developed framework for early childhood education and care

> " Outlines the tasks of kindergarten life, the rules of organising kindergarten life, the forms of activities of kindergarten life, the tasks of kindergarten teachers, and the characteristics of development at the end of kindergarten education.

in Hungary. There are institution-specific framework regulators that function as curricula.

The purpose, task, content, and activities of kindergarten education are defined by the National Basic Programme of Kindergarten Education (hereinafter "the basic programme"), while those for nursery education are defined by the National Basic Programme of Nursery Education.

These regulators are constantly reviewed and amended to in order add content identified through the quality frameworks. The most basic regulatory element in kindergarten education is *the National Basic Programme of Kindergarten Education*.

### 2.1. National Basic Programme of Preschool Education

The basic programme applies to all Hungarian kindergartens. It provides a clear overview of children and kindergartens and outlines the tasks of kindergarten life, the rules of organising kindergarten life, the forms of activities of kindergarten life, the tasks of kindergarten teachers, and the characteristics of development at the end of kindergarten
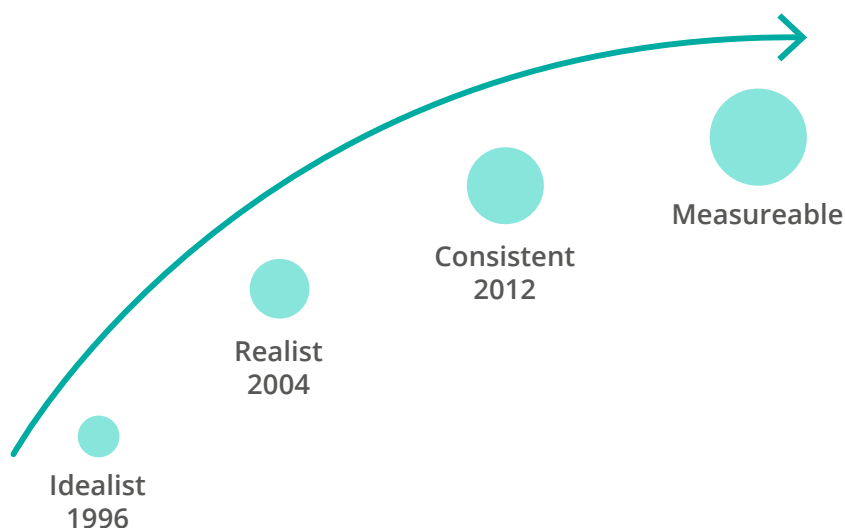
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*Figure 1. The history of the development of the basic programme*

education. The basic programme provides a level of professional quality mandated by way of a government decree that kindergartens must meet, adapted to their local environment. Adaptation to the local environment can be established by way of the kindergarten's institutional-level pedagogical programme.

The National Basic Program for Kindergarten Education, was written in 1996 and has been amended several times since then. As a government regulatory document, it prescribes high professional quality. Its content is in line with some of the quality criteria of the council report (e.g. child-centredness, preventative measures, the key role of the family). Other basic issues (monitoring, evaluation, children with special educational needs, supportive working conditions, etc.) are governed by other sectoral legislation. The identifiable nature of the basic principles of quality is a guarantee that European and domestic values are reflected in Hungarian kindergarten education in all the institutions that provide it. It is stated that "in addition to the professional autonomy of the individual institutions and the diversity of pre-school education, the general professional demands that society formulates in respect of kindergarten education for the harmonious development of the child shall prevail." (363/2012. (XII.17.) Government decree, 2021).

In addition, the basic programme is a key document for external professional audits and evaluations based on self-evaluation, and for national pedagogical-professional audits and supervision (Self-Assessment Manual, 2021). The professional basis of the study supervision is provided by way of the general pedagogical aspects, the value system of the National Basic Programme of Kindergarten Education, and the own value system of each institution (Introduction to 363/2012. (XII.17.) Government decree, 2021). We are at the end of the third stage in the history of the development of the basic programme, in which the institutions have gained at least two decades of experience in its implementation and have been involved in system-level monitoring and evaluation for several years (Figure 1).

The basic programme defines the principles of pedagogical work in kindergartens in Hungary, building on the traditions, values, national peculiarities of the history of Hungarian kindergarten education, the results of pedagogical and psychological research, and the internationally recognised practice of education. In defining the pedagogical principles of kindergarten education, it must be assumed that a) the child, as a developing person, is entitled to loving care and special protection; b) the upbringing of a child is primarily the right and duty of the family, in which kindergartens play a complementary role and sometimes

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> **❝All children receive an equally high-quality and loving education and that their existing disadvantages are reduced.**



**Figure 2.** *Compilation of documents defining the professional activity of a kindergarten teacher (Szent-Gály, 2018)*

work to compensate for disadvantages; (c) pre-school education should aim to promote the full development of the child's personality, while respecting human rights and the rights of the child; in such a way that all children have an equal opportunity to receive a quality education (Introduction to 363/2012. (XII.17.) Government decree, 2021).

According to the basic programme, different (e.g. innovative) pedagogical aspirations may appear in kindergarten education, as the basic programme ensures the enforcement of the pedagogical views, values, and methodological freedom of kindergarten teachers, and contains restrictions only for the protection of the child's interests.

The basic programme states that kindergarten education is child-centred and inclusive, and accordingly seeks to promote the development of a child's personality, ensuring that all children receive an equally high-quality and loving education and that their existing disadvantages are reduced. There is no room for any prejudice to unfold (363/2012. (XII.17.) Government decree, 2021).

The fund programme, which has gained stability in its current form, operates in an ever-changing legal environment. It is important that problems that arise in the operation of a high-quality early childhood care system are identified and that a collaborative solution is found. At present, we need to address

two major issues. One is the growing need for inclusive care for children with special educational needs, which we will not cover at this time. The other relates to the regulation of the outcome of kindergarten education, which is closely related to the institutional practice of monitoring child development.

## 2.2. New issues in output control

25 years ago, the nature of the framework of the basic programme marked a significant change compared to its predecessor, the Kindergarten Education Programme, which has been in force since 1989. This programme detailed the expectations for each age group and the levels of development to be achieved. Due to its decentralised nature, the basic programme records the characteristics of development as general output characteristics by the end of kindergarten. These are not standardised skill levels, but guidelines for a child's physical, mental, and social maturity.

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Although this approach to output control[7] provides considerable room to manoeuvre in interpreting the maturity to be reached by the end of pre-school, there is no measurable standardised expected value associated with the characteristics. An example from the normative text reads: "The intentional attention that forms the basis of learning appears, the content and scope of the attention gradually increases, and it becomes easier to share and transfer it." In other words, there is no age-related expected range (time interval) of intentional attention and the extent of attention in the framework regulation (also for other abilities).

Judging the appropriate development of skills is down to the competence of the kindergarten teacher. Where suitability for the school lifestyle is in doubt, the child will be examined by the pedagogical services and the necessary development intervention and/or a further year of pre-school education will be determined.

Consequently, the regulation of the output of kindergartens in Hungary provides freedom in terms of time and space for the development of skills at the child's own pace, but at the same time an important task of the kindergarten is to prepare for a school lifestyle. Adaptation to a school lifestyle is slow and is interpreted by the basic programme as a unique, specific maturation process of the child. At the end of pre-school, the child enters a process of slow transition from kindergarten to school in which he or she can gradually adapt to the requirements of school. (National Public Education Act, 2011, 8§).

Primarily, this psychological illustration of education, and the diverse pedagogical culture of the institutions is the reason for there not currently being any uniformly applicable measurement and evaluation system for certain abilities of children in kindergarten education. In the cases in question (e.g. maturity for a school lifestyle), the expert opinion of the pedagogical service that decides. In addition, however, monitoring the child's development is an important and mandatory task[8] which the parents should be regularly informed of.

If we look at the use of professional services, the demand for the operation of diagnostic measurements supporting output control is increasing.[9] Consequently, a significant proportion of kindergartens have developed or adapted some kind of measurement tool to test their suitability for the school lifestyle.

Until 2018, children could start school at the age of 6 or 7 to ensure that they had reached the required maturity, based on the opinion of the kindergarten. This changed slightly in 2019, as it appeared that many people abused this flexibility to the detriment of children. Now, in order for a child to remain in kindergarten after the age of 6, the parent must submit an application to the Education Office (National Public Education Act, 2011, 45§).

## 3. A basic criterion: monitoring children's development

The introduction of the above procedure has aroused interest in monitoring the development of the child's abilities and possible local pre-school practices for measurement and evaluation. The monitoring of children's abilities and the practices for the measurement and evaluation of kindergartens was brought to the forefront. In Hungarian practice, the two elements mentioned are separate from each other, because while the measurement of a kindergartener's abilities (through the use of diagnostic tests, criteria, or norm-oriented assessment forms, for example) is not mandatory, the monitoring and documentation of a child's development are.

This documentation contains: (1)

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[7] By output regulation, we mean the system of conditions laid down by law for all kindergartens, i.e. the content of the child's level of development in the transition from kindergarten to school.

[8] provided for in a ministerial decree

[9] Monitoring the Development of Pre-school Children, Budapest Pedagogical Education Centre, 2nd revised edition, 2019. 7.o

the child's developmental status; (2) the developmental process; (3) the direction of differentiated development; (4) the child's medical history; (5) the indicators of the child's intellectual, mental, social, and physical development; and (6) the findings of the kindergarten teacher and an expert committee, and interventions which support the child's development. This documentation also contains notes on informing the parents.

In Hungary, the monitoring of the development of kindergartners and the regular informing of parents are regulated by a ministerial decree (20/2012 (VIII.31.), so early diagnosis based on the observation and anamnesis of the kindergarten teacher may be possible for all children from the age of 3.

The pedagogical professional services carry out screening examinations focusing on the speech and language development of children between the age of 3 and 5. The focus of speech screening at the age of 3 is on language development (receptive and expressive language), while the focus of screening at the age of 5 is primarily on speech articulation as well as on prereading and prewriting/fine motoric skills. Based on the results of these screenings, further logopedic examinations should be performed as necessary, and further special educational, psychological, and medical examinations should be initiated (15/2013.(II.26.) EMMI rendelet 25.§(3)).

A few years ago, the former "personality development diary" evolved into a mandatory document for monitoring kindergartners' development, usually called a "Development Diary". A large number of kindergartens, in addition to this document, use a valid assessment tool for measuring kindergarteners'

cognitive, affective, and motoric skills. Ideally, the two are interrelated, and the measurement results support a developmental intervention.

The development diary contains four distinct threads: (1) results of the obligatory logopedic screening; (2) the results of the non-compulsory screenings and examinations of the pedagogical professional service (based on the initiative of the kindergarten teacher and/or the parents) – the proposed developmental method; (3) mandatory monitoring of kindergartens/kindergarten teachers following the regulation, developed using their methodology and/or the results of test-based assessments – proposed development; and (4) the content and results of the proposed improvements resulting from the above three condition surveys.

The complexity of the system requires effective co-operation between parents, kindergarten teachers, staff of the specialist services and, in the case of maturity for a school lifestyle, between the officials of the Educational Authority.

### 3.1 Rules and difficulties in the monitoring process
Although there is no common, mandatory method for documenting the development of kindergarteners, several sample documents are available which enable the creation and dissemination of innovative good practices, and allow for corrections, such as in the determination of the monitoring criteria.

The mandatory monitoring of kindergarteners' development also causes dilemmas for researchers dealing with early childhood assessment. The questions are caused by a lack

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of definitions for the concepts of school readiness and maturity for a school lifestyle. For example, there is no clarification on which components should be measured or whether certain components are more important than others. Phonological awareness, early mathematic skills, and thinking skills could be easily measured by way of tests, while in other areas the only appropriate solution is the subjective observation of kindergarten teachers. The measured and observed areas are not as distinctly separate as these few sentences may suggest, as each component of sociality (e.g. task performance) may be an important consideration in answering tasks.

> ❝The mandatory monitoring of kindergarteners' skills has opened up a new approach and new possibilities in the field of measurement evaluation.

The mandatory monitoring of kindergarteners' skills has opened up a new approach and new possibilities in the field of measurement evaluation.

A wide range of measuring instruments are available to teachers, and institutions can choose which ones to use. However, the recording of several tests requires special qualifications (e.g. a psychological certificate).

Presumably, the choice between subjective observation and a valid assessment method is because kindergarten teachers are conditioned for the full development of the child's personality, which is also reflected in the National Basic Programme of Pre-school Education. At the same time, a relevant criticism is the questioning of objectivity: "However, the question arises as to the accuracy with which the subjective diaries completed by a kindergarten teacher provide the standard and results of development." (Apró, 2013)

**3.2 First steps of assessment methods**
On average, a healthy child becomes fit for school around the age of 6. Development monitoring is intensified for children who have some kind of impairment. When making a later diagnosis, it is very important when and in what situation the teacher/service staff noticed the first signs. Development logs indicate the child's current stage based on the observation of their ability level. Follow-up involves continuous monitoring and is primarily suitable for making significant deviations visible and signalable in time. In most cases, a kindergarten teacher can note five skill levels: *emerging, basic level, close to average, above average, and outstanding*. One of the most commonly used templates includes a methodological recommendation and development suggestion for tracking ability development, which helps the kindergarten teacher select the child's ability level. From here, in essence, the ability of the kindergarten teacher to identify the child's ability level determines the level at which the child's particular ability is classified. The manifestations of the abilities are shaped by several factors (e.g. the circumstances and participants of the observation situation, the current stage of the child, the factors influencing the kindergarten teacher).

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In Hungarian practice, two models can be observed in relation to monitoring and measurement: one model states that the current state of children's development is recorded by way of prepared or adapted documentation every year and if, for example, there is a suspicion of partial disability or behaviour disorder, they shall inform the competent pedagogical professional service. Special education teachers and a psychologist of the mentioned institute then measure the child's skills and determine the necessary development. In the other model, the kindergarten performs both the measurement and the observation, and based on this then determines the necessary development and analyses the results.

### 3.3 Challenges in documentation management

Observations require extreme concentration from kindergarten teachers because, in the continuous presence and activities of 20 to 25 children, a certain ability level of a child must be identified.

It is important that the observational aspects are interpreted within the same framework and that the definitions of the concepts are accurate. This requires the regular collaboration, review, and ongoing training of kindergarten teachers. Apró (2003) has pointed out that although educators consider documentation to

be important, everyday administration imposes a significant burden on them. Overall, the "follow-up obligation" introduced 10 years ago also contributes to early diagnoses. Unfortunately, the number of children and students with special educational needs is increasing, and consequently the professional needs and workload of the pedagogical professional services are also increasing (Central Statistics Office,2022).10

In addition to the available human resources, quality care can also be supported by way of careful regulation. The provision related to compulsory schooling – according to which a child who stays in kindergarten at the request of a parent for an additional year – should involve special developmental activities for the reorganisation of the kindergarten, with the aim of ,increasing the quality of kindergarten education.

A well-designed, easy-to-use, and uniform measurement tool would be needed to monitor progress and measure school readiness skills.

The nature and complementary role of measurement as an activity tool is emphasised in particular because the basic values of Hungarian kindergarten education continue to be free play, movement, support for learning through activities, love and respect for the child, and supporting

the child's self-development.

The pre-school module of the eDia system developed by the MTA-SZTE Research Group on the Development of Competencies and the SZTE Centre for Research on Learning and Instruction is an innovative, online platform that provides methodological support for examining children's cognitive abilities, enabling it to complement development monitoring and function as a measurement tool in the transition between kindergarten and school.

### 4. The eDia system as a supporter of children's development/diagnosis

Numerous research findings indicate that children's development of school readiness skills plays a key role in their later school abilities. Therefore, it is advisable to start personalised development as early as possible, which requires appropriate feedback mechanisms: we need to identify a diverse picture about each child's abilities, see the differences between children, and have the right tools to examine their development. However, if children solve tasks on paper, and their school maturity skills are assessed in a face-to-face way, data collection could be a time-consuming and strenuous process for kindergarten teachers. Computer-based assessment can provide solutions to these problems.

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10 Number of children and pupils with special educational needs by type of disability  https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/okt/hu/okt0006.html (utolsó letöltés: 2022. 08. 23.)

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The main goal of the development of the eDia system (Csapó & Molnár, 2019) was to explore and to measure the abilities of children in grades 1 to 6. Students were measured via the online assessment system in the three main fields of education – mathematics, reading comprehension, and science – along three dimensions of knowledge (the internal/psychological, the disciplinary/content, and the social and cultural/application dimensions) (Csapó & Molnár, 2019). Educators received immediate and individual feedback on children that could be easily incorporated into the differentiated development methodology.

Seeing the advantages and objectivity of the system from 2014, it was possible to expand the system to kindergarteners. The development of the system facilitated a tablet-based testing format, allowing kindergarteners to solve play-based tasks using touch-screen devices. With the help of headphones, it was possible to test up to five children simultaneously. The system offered a faster, more playful testing method for kindergartens.

## 4.1. Using the eDia system in kindergarten

The organisation of the kindergartens in the sample came about during the work of the MTA-SZTE Research Group on the Development of Competencies and the SZTE Centre for Research on Learning and Instruction.

The tests of the School Readiness Measurement Toolkit provide a comprehensive assessment option. The tests are specifically designed to monitor the sensitive period of the kindergarten-school transition, proved to be a valid assessment tool in the last years of kindergarten and for ability structure, and their results are comparable. The tests of the School Readiness Measurement Toolkit were recorded by both the mentioned research groups, within the network of the Hungarian Educational Longitudinal Programme (HELP) and the partner school network of the SZTE Centre for Research on Learning and Instruction, with the participation of thousands of first graders.

### 4.1.1. The adaptation of a face-to-face test within an online system

The development of the computer-based school readiness test battery began with the adaptation of the face-to-face DIFER test (Nagy et. al., 2004) into an online environment (Csapó, Molnár & Nagy, 2014).

The DIFER test is one of the most common school readiness measuring instruments in Hungary, which aims to measure the ability of children aged 4 to 8. Consequently, as a measuring instrument, it appears that it can also be used for the pre-school age group. First, the tests were carried out among first graders in a primary school context. The online version included the speech sound discrimination sub-test, all four versions of the relational reasoning test, the elements of basic numeracy skills, and inductive and deductive reasoning tasks. During the kindergarten measurements, the abilities of 248 children were assessed. The results show that the speech sound discrimination and the relational reasoning sub-test are valid measurement tools in the kindergarten context.

### 4.1.2. The School Readiness Measurement Toolkit

The School Readiness Measurement Toolkit is a self-developed online assessment tool from the MTA-SZTE Research Group on the Development of Competencies and the SZTE Cen-

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*Figure 3.* Pámi, Pötyi and Hedgehog as motivation elements for children



*Figure 4.* A sample task for phoneme synthesis: I'll say a word, but listen carefully, because I will say it slowly, broken down into sounds! Which picture am I talking about? Click it! /b/-/a/-/l/-/l/
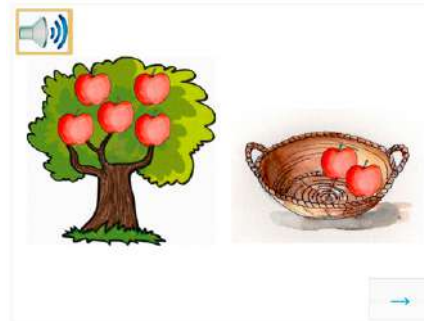
*Figure 5.* A sample task for elementary counting: There are now two apples in the basket. Drag enough apples into the basket to have a total of five in it!
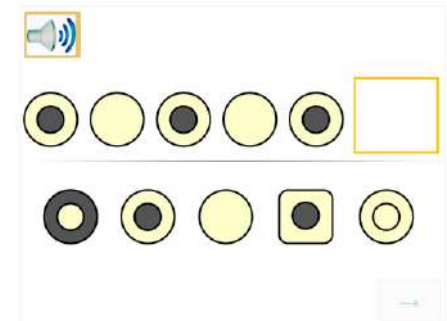
*Figure 6.* A sample task for figural series: Continue the pattern! Which image fits the yellow frame? Drag it there!

tre for Research on Learning and Instruction that is directly integrated in the eDia online interface. The test battery measures children's tablet-using skills, prereading skills, early numeracy skills, and inductive reasoning.

To improve children's motivation, the tasks were incorporated as part of stories. During the tests, children meet friendly characters like Pámi, Pötyi, and a small hedgehog. Children help them to collect the balloons that have been lost (Figure 3).

The tablet-using test and items give children the opportunity to practice the ICT skills that will be necessary for solving digital tasks (e.g. tapping/clicking, drag and drop, colouring items, or connecting items).

The prereading skills tasks contain phonological awareness tasks. During the development of language, syllable-level phonological awareness appears already at pre-school age. Certain sub-skills of phoneme awareness and the identification or differentiation of speech sounds also develop at this age. Accordingly, the focus of the tasks is on identifying the inner units of words and measuring phonological and phoneme awareness (Figure 4).

The assessment of early numeracy skills refers to the knowledge of the correct order of numbers, numerical operations with different quantities, and recognition of numbers and Arabic numerals. The test includes three sub-areas: elementary operation, elementary counting, and Arabic numerals and quantities (Figure 5).

During the induction process, children have to observe individual cases, compare the cases with their properties and their relationships with each other, and then create general rules during the process. Inductive reasoning is also closely related to learning potential, problem-solving, concept development, and scientific thinking. The assessment tool contains sequences, analogies, and classification tasks that contain figurative elements (Figure 6).

**4.2. Results and experiences**
A total of 472 children from 18 kindergartens participated in our first kindergarten measurements. The initial results show that all three

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cognitive measurement tests in the School Readiness Measurement Toolkit (prereading skills, early numeracy, and inductive reasoning sub-tests) are reliable and can be used separately and also together to measure children's abilities (Cronbach-α = .84-.94) (Kiss, Mokri, & Csapó, 2019; Pásztor, 2016; Rausch, 2018). On average, children perform above 80% on tablet-use tests, which demonstrates that touchscreen devices are easy for kindergarteners to use as well. Our calculations show that the relationship between cognitive measurement tests and tablet-use tests is negligible.

Following the initial results and experiences, seeing the positive reception and interest of kindergarten teachers, the research team expanded the availability of the tests. All tests in the School Readiness Measurement Toolkit are available to institutions once they have pre-registered and are free to use at any time of the year. The test results obtained from the system can be incorporated into pedagogical diagnostics. The two sub-tests of the DIFER test adapted to the online interface can also be used. The staff of our research groups are currently in contact with 248 kindergartens.

### 4.3. The kindergarten test module and direct developmental intervention
Based on the measurement procedures and in order to overcome the difficulties caused by the pandemic,

the research group's colleagues created the kindergarten test modules. In the case of the kindergarten test module, measurement and development tasks can be compiled following a simple e-mail registration. The tasks can be selected from a task bank that supports mathematical skills, prereading skills, and active knowledge of the outside world, which in the context of kindergartens refers to science.

> " Our initial results highlight that our online development tools can have a positive impact on children's ability levels,

In January 2022, a managed ten-week development process was launched with the participation of nearly 30 registered kindergartens nationwide, which was framed by pre-and post-intervention assessment. The developmental tasks and the related measurement tests map children's mathematical and reading skills. Our initial results highlight that our online development tools can have a positive impact on children's ability levels, while

well-designed computer-based development programmes with appropriate instructions and feedback can prevent skill gaps in prereading and early mathematical skills even at this early stage, without the presence of the kindergarten teacher.

### 5. Summary
The most important professional regulatory element in the Hungarian kindergarten system is the National Basic Programme of Pre-school Education. Throughout its development, at now at a stage where quality is to be raised and where dilemmas of measurability need to be overcome, the benefits of strong regulation are clear. For 25 years, the basic programme has provided stability and represented both European and domestic values.

Following the introduction of compulsory pre-school education from the age of 3, a review of the possibilities for regulating outcomes began, and several measures were taken in this regard. The focus of compulsory schooling at the age of 6 is on the obligatory monitoring of children's development and its quality-professional criteria.

The role and importance of diagnostic measurements have been strengthened which is also justified by the growing number of children with special educational needs.

A system that reduces the administrative burden on kindergarten

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> " The eDia online system thus provides a diagnostic and development procedure covering a complex cognitive area in the sensitive phase of the transition between kindergarten and school.

teachers and provides the same basis for interpretation would be best supported in monitoring the child's development and providing a non-mandatory measurement of these abilities.

At present, in addition to making kindergarten teaching more attractive as a career, our most important task is to consider other possibilities of outcome regulation, especially for marginalised groups, in order to support kindergarten measurements and gain experience. The valid School Readiness Measurement Toolkit, presented in the study and developed by Hungarian researchers, can be adapted for introduction at the reference level following a policy decision.

The eDia online system thus provides a diagnostic and development procedure covering a complex cognitive area in the sensitive phase of the transition between kindergarten and school. The system not only provides an objective measurement procedure but also facilitates teachers' work on diagnostics. Children solve tasks in a playful, colourful, and interactive environment during testing and development, their frustration decreases, their motivation increases, and they look forward to the next playful opportunity. The system not only tests pupils and helps them to develop along normal lines, but also measures children with developmental disorders or difficulties.

Kindergarten teachers need to have the same basis for interpretation in order for the measurement results to be comparable. This could be followed by the development of a kindergarten measurement environment based on the consensus of the group of participants and the domestic conditions.

The intention to regulate must be brought into line with system-level pedagogical-professional controls, part of which examined the measurement and evaluation system of the institution.

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# Ireland

Updating *Aistear* – Ireland's early childhood curriculum framework

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | **Which department/ministry does ECEC sit under?** | There are two main government departments involved in ECEC in Ireland: the Department of Education (DE) and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (formerly the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). |
| **2** | **What programs/settings exist for children between the ages of 0-7?** | The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) provides financial support to help parents with childcare costs. There are two types of childcare subsidy for children over 6 months of age: A universal subsidy for children under the age of 3, and an income-assessed subsidy for children up to the age of 15. It is means tested. The Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) is a universal two-year pre-school programme available to all children within the eligible age range. In Ireland, although the compulsory school age is six, many children aged four and most five-year-olds attend primary school (OECD, 2021). |
| **3** | **What percentage of children are in ECEC centers?** | 95% participate in the universal pre-school programme before starting primary school (DCEDIY, 2022). |
| **4** | **Link to national/local curriculum for ECEC** | Click here for the national curriculum |
| **5** | **Who is responsible for inspecting/ monitoring of ECEC?** | There are a number of different inspection processes that ECEC settings in Ireland must adhere to, some related to funding, some related to environmental health, but two in particular relate to curriculum and quality. These are Tusla Early Years Inspections and DE Early-Years Education Inspections, which help to ensure that early childhood settings deliver a high-quality curriculum which promotes children's holistic learning and development. In primary schools, inspections are also carried out by the Department of Education. |

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Mary Daly has a BA in Early Childhood Studies from University College Cork. In 2002, she completed her PhD with a focus on the emotional, social, moral, and spiritual development of the young child. In 2004, she published a book based on her findings.

Mary has worked in the area of early childhood care and education in Ireland for more than 20 years. She has been employed as an Education Officer with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) for a number of years. In this role, Mary has contributed to the development of *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009); the *Aistear Toolkit* and the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide (online resources to support good curriculum practice); and the Mo Scéal Reporting Templates, which help support children's transition from pre-school to primary school. In her current work, Mary is part of a team whose focus is on updating *Aistear* involving research and consultation with key stakeholders, including children.

## Jacqueline Fallon

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Jacqueline initially worked as a primary teacher, primarily with children aged 3 to 6. Her first involvement in curriculum development was in the mid-1990s with the development of the Early Start Curriculum Guidelines used in Department of Education pre-schools. She then worked as Development Officer in the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, co-authoring *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006)*. She was a member of the NCCA Board for Early Childhood and Primary throughout the development of *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009)*. Subsequently, she lectured on Early Childhood Education in initial teacher education, including providing CPD for teachers on play pedagogy. She completed a PhD at Trinity College Dublin and her doctoral research focused on teachers' beliefs about play pedagogy. Currently, she is a Director of Curriculum and Assessment with NCCA, leading teams and projects in the Early Childhood and Primary areas, including updating *Aistear*.

## Lorraine Farrell

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Lorraine has worked in early childhood education for almost 20 years. She has worked in a variety of areas including practice, management, training, and mentoring. More recently, Lorraine has held the position of National *Aistear* Development Officer with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Before moving into mentoring and subsequently curriculum development, she managed her own award-winning early childhood practice for 10 years. In her current work, Lorraine collaborates with a variety of government departments and agencies, along with early childhood practitioners and academics, to develop resources to support high-quality practice in early childhood settings across Ireland. Lorraine has a BA in Early Childhood Education and Care and an MA in Leadership and Advocacy in the Early Years.

# Updating *Aistear* – Ireland's early childhood curriculum framework

## ABSTRACT

*Aistear*, *the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) provides information for adults on planning for and providing high-quality, enjoyable and challenging experiences so that all children from birth to six years can grow and develop fully within loving relationships. This article will outline the NCCA's rationale and plans for updating *Aistear* to ensure that it continues to support high-quality curriculum experiences for babies, toddlers and young children.

The article begins with an outline of governance in the early childhood sector in Ireland, followed by details of the contents of *Aistear* with an outline of its contribution to quality development. It continues with the rationale for updating *Aistear*, including the main changes that have taken place since its publication in terms of national developments, policies and strategies related to early childhood. Critically, the focus of the update will be on changes in children's lived experiences, including those during the COVID pandemic. The article will conclude with the timeline for finalising *Aistear* in its updated form.

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## Introduction

In Ireland, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is updating _Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework_ (NCCA, 2009). _Aistear_ is the Irish word for journey and _Aistear_ itself is fundamental to children's lived experiences in Ireland. The aim of the updating process is to ensure that it continues to support high-quality curriculum experiences for children from birth to six years, as it has been doing since its publication by the NCCA in 2009.

The NCCA advises the Minister for Education on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools. This advice is developed through research, deliberation, consultation and our work with networks (NCCA, 2022). In 2001, the NCCA was asked to develop a curriculum framework for the early years and did so in partnership with the early childhood sector (Daly and Forster, 2009). This partnership involved a range of stakeholders including children, parents and practitioners. _Aistear_ was the result of this extensive engagement, and it is embedded in a complex early childhood sector, some aspects of which will be outlined in later sections.

This paper introduces the contents of _Aistear_; outlines its contribution to quality; provides some background on the context in which it is implemented; describes the rationale for updating it at this particular point; and provides details of the consultation taking place with stakeholders, including children, to inform developments.
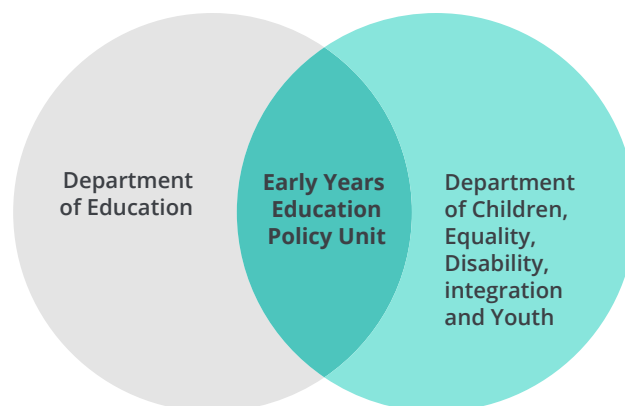


**Figure 1:** _Governance background_

## Background

As a starting point and a backdrop to this paper, it will be useful to the reader to appreciate that there are two main government departments involved in the early childhood sector in Ireland: the Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

## Department of Education

In addition to the Department of Education's role as the lead government department for curriculum development in Ireland, the department also leads in the areas of training, qualifications and quality assurance in the early childhood sector. This includes quality assurance of all further and higher education qualifications in early childhood education and care, which has ensured that _Aistear_ is a key focus in such programmes as a critical contribution to the professionalism of graduates (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2019). In addition, the Department of Education Inspectorate looks at the quality of provision under the ECCE Programme[1] and _Aistear_ is central to this inspection process

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[1] _The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme is a universal two-year pre-school programme available to all children within the eligible age range. Those providing the programme have to adhere to the principles of Aistear and Síolta._

(DES, 2018b). In acknowledgement of the connections in the work of both government departments referenced above, a specialist unit in the Department of Education, the Early Years Education Policy Unit, works with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to ensure that policy developments in the early childhood sector take place within an overall strategic policy framework for children. In addition, this unit is responsible for the implementation of *Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), 2006). *Síolta* is the Irish word for 'seeds' and its purpose is to define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in out-of-home settings for children from birth to the age of six. *Síolta* has 16 standards of quality, many of which are aligned with and support *Aistear*.

**Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth**

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is responsible for ensuring access for children and families to high quality and affordable Early Learning and Care and School-aged Childcare. Additionally, this department is responsible for a number of initiatives to develop the workforce and improve the quality of services, as well as for overseeing and reporting on the implementation of First 5 - A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 (Government of Ireland (GoI), 2018). First 5 is a broad-based and wide-ranging element of the early childhood landscape in Ireland and contributes to the rationale for updating *Aistear*, which will be dealt with in a later section. Arising from commitments in First 5, Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028[2] (GoI, 2021a) is designed to support progress towards a graduate-led workforce, along with minimum qualifications for childminders and those working in School-age Childcare, as a key contributor towards enhancing the quality of provision. The implementation of the workforce plan will be led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in collaboration with the Department of Education and other departments and agencies. Another important quality driver emanating from this department is the Partnership for the Public Good A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare: Report of the Expert Group to develop a new funding model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (GoI, 2021b). This report sets out a new funding model to support the quality of provision, including improved staff pay, and support for sustainability with increased public management of settings. A core aim of the report is to employ more graduate staff. In addition, the report proposes new universal and targeted measures to address the needs of children living in socio-economic disadvantaged conditions.

**Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework**

As noted earlier, in 2001 the Department of Education asked the NCCA to develop a curriculum framework and *Aistear* was the culmination of this work. *Aistear* is for all children from birth to the age of six and is predicated on a view of children as

> " *Aistear* is for all children from birth to the age of six and is predicated on a view of children as competent and confident learners.

competent and confident learners. It supports adults in the provision of appropriately challenging, motivating and enjoyable learning experiences within loving relationships.

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[2] *First 5 is a whole-of-government strategy to improve the lives of babies, young children and their families. It is a ten-year plan to help make sure all children have positive early experiences and get a great start in life.*

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Table 2: Aistear's themes

**Well-being**
This theme is about children being confident, happy and healthy.

**Identity and Belonging**
This theme promotes children developing a positive sense of who they are and feeling that they are valued and respected as part of a family and community.

**Communicating**
This theme encourages children to share their experiences, thoughts, ideas and feelings with others, with growing confidence and competence in a variety of ways, and for a variety of purposes.

**Exploring and Thinking**
This theme supports children to make sense of the things, places and people in their world by interacting with others, playing, investigating, questioning, and forming, testing and refining ideas.
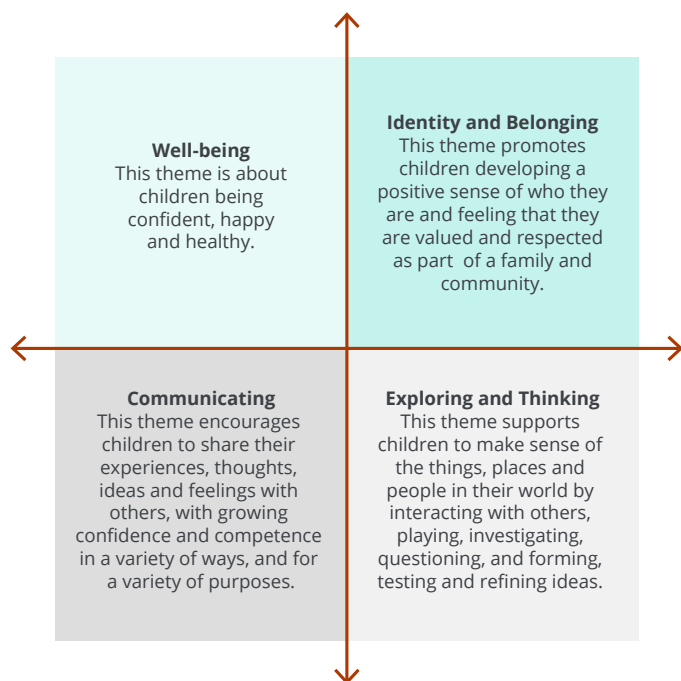
It can be used to support learning and development in early childhood settings. *Aistear* is underpinned by 12 principles which are presented by way of a short statement followed by a description of the principle from the child's perspective. The principles are set out in three groups as outlined in Table 1.

*Aistear* uses four broad themes to describe children's learning and development (see Table 2). The themes are presented using Aims and broad Learning Goals and are illustrated using sample learning opportunities (SLOs). The SLOs are presented in three overlapping age ranges - babies (birth to 18 months), toddlers (12 to 36 months) and young children (2 ½ to 6 years). Through the four themes, the focus of *Aistear* is on developing children's dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge and understanding.

*Aistear* also includes four sets of guidelines that describe good practice. These are:

- developing partnerships with parents and families
- interacting with children
- learning through play
- using assessment to support early learning and development.

Within these guidelines, a series of reflective prompts help adults to think about their pedagogy, while the sample learning experiences highlight key messages (NCCA, 2009).

**Contribution of *Aistear* to quality development**
Since 2009, many in the early childhood sector have embraced *Aistear* and used it as the basis for their curriculum development work (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2018a). Support for the sector in becoming familiar with and skilled in enacting *Aistear* has been gradual, and the absence of a clear

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> *"* Five key areas: holistic learning and development; partnership with parents; interactions; play and the learning environment; and assessment and documentation

implementation plan has meant it has never reached its full potential (French, 2013; Farrell, 2016; Walsh, 2016). The publication of *Aistear* in 2009 coincided with severe economic recession which resulted in limited resources for its implementation. However, there have been a limited number of small-scale initiatives to support the sector's engagement with *Aistear* (NCCA, 2013).

In the period following its publication, the NCCA undertook a small-scale project with settings participating in the ECCE programme to illustrate *Aistear*'s potential for supporting quality practice. This initiative, entitled *Aistear in Action*, was a partnership between the NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland (ECI), a national voluntary childcare organisation. It involved working with a small group of settings to promote positive change through the implementation of *Aistear*, and it provided the NCCA with examples of good practice to share on the website (Daly, Grogan-Ryan, Corbett and Connolly, 2014). Participants noted that the main impacts on quality related to five key areas: holistic learning and development; partnership with parents; interactions; play and the learning environment; and assessment and documentation (NCCA, 2013).

In Ireland, although the compulsory school age is six, many children aged four and most five-year-olds attend primary school (OECD, 2021). While pedagogy in primary school is guided by the Primary School Curriculum, *Aistear*'s Guidelines for Good Practice offer guidance for teachers, particularly on teaching and learning through play, a key factor in the quality of children's learning experiences. To promote this aspect of quality, from 2010 to 2019, the NCCA supported the Association of Teacher Education Centres Ireland's *Aistear Tutor Initiative* which focused on appropriate pedagogical approaches and interactive strategies for primary schools, drawing on *Aistear*'s guidelines and principles (Ui Chadhla, Forster and Hough, 2014).

Since that time and in more recent years, the OECD has noted increased expectations around quality in early childhood settings in Ireland as a result of the co-ordinated rollout and implementation of *Aistear* and *Síolta*:

> *Together they provide a strong basis for further action to embed a more comprehensive quality culture across the ECEC sector, one which addresses process aspects as well as structural aspects, and the quality of pedagogy and learning environments provided. (OECD, 2021, 90)*

As will be evident from later sections of this paper, there is considerable policy development underway in Ireland, the focus of which is on improving the quality of provision across the early childhood sector. However,

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*First 5* acknowledges that: *"Implementation of the national quality and curriculum Frameworks for ELC is inconsistent across services"* (GoI, 2018, 7). It also notes that the effective implementation of *Aistear* is broadly dependant on early childhood practitioners, recognising them as one of the main drivers of quality provision, reinforcing the importance of initial and ongoing training, continuing professional development (CPD) and mentoring support. *Nurturing Skills* (GoI, 2021a) sets out a series of actions to meet workforce-related targets and includes commitments on the national implementation of *Aistear* as central to the national quality agenda.

This contribution of *Aistear* is also evident in the inspection processes in Ireland, which form another important aspect of the quality agenda. There are a number of different inspection processes within the early childhood sector, some related to funding, some related to environmental health, but two in particular relate to curriculum. These are Tusla, the Child and Family Agency Early Years Inspections and the Department of Education's Early-Years Education Inspections, both of which help to ensure that early childhood settings deliver a high-quality curriculum that promotes children's holistic learning and development.

- **Tusla, the Child and Family Agency Early Years Inspectorate**
  Tusla, the Child and Family Agency offers a range of universal and targeted services including an inspectorate for early childhood settings for children from birth to the age of six using the Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF). *Aistear* is cited as one of the sources that has informed the QRF (DCYA, 2016a) and

the categories for inspection cover governance; health, welfare and development of the child; safety; and premises and facilities (Tusla, 2018).

- **Department of Education Early-Years Education Inspections**
  Early-Years Education Inspections (EYEIs) are carried out in settings participating in the ECCE Programme, all of which are also inspected by the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate. Inspections are structured using The Quality Framework for Early Years Education (DES, 2018b) with a focus on the quality of children's learning and development, and ensuring that *"provision is informed by Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework"* (DES, 2018b, 19). *First 5* includes a commitment to extend the education-focused inspections to services for children from birth to the age of three (GoI, 2018).

A review of early-years education-focused inspections from April 2016 to June 2017 (DES, 2018a) highlighted positive aspects of practice and also addressed key issues related to improvements needed to ensure progress towards high-quality provision, including those related to *Aistear*. The report acknowledges that 867 out of 4,227 (20.5%) settings contracted to deliver the ECCE Programme had not yet received basic training in *Aistear* (DES, 2018a).

**The national context and rationale for updating *Aistear* now**
This section considers the national context and includes policy and strategic developments that impact both *Aistear* and the quality

agenda in general and form part of the rationale for updating *Aistear*.

**The *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide (Practice Guide) and National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative (NSAI)**

The close connection between *Aistear* and *Síolta* is embedded at both policy and practice level, and this relationship is most evident in the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (Practice Guide) The Practice Guide is an online resource which supports the use of *Aistear* and *Síolta* together (NCCA, 2015) to enhance the quality of provision. It is part of the National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative (NSAI) which was established in 2016 to support the co-ordinated roll-out of *Aistear* and *Síolta*.

The Practice Guide includes videos of practice, practitioner and academic inputs, self-evaluation tools, action planning tools and print resources on a variety of topics. A key element of the Practice Guide is Curriculum Foundations which focuses on developing a curriculum based on the principles of *Aistear* and *Síolta*. There are also six pillars of practice which are:

- Parent partnerships
- Learning environment
- Play
- Interactions
- Planning and assessment
- Transitions

In addition to these resources, the Practice Guide hosts a dedicated space for self-directed continuous professional development (CPD) aimed at supporting early childhood practitioners in becoming familiar with some of the resources on the website. The publication of *Aistear* predates the development of the Practice Guide and now that aspects of *Aistear* have been illustrated and mediated through the Practice Guide resources, it is timely to review the support provided and to update it accordingly.

**Other key policy initiatives**

There has been significant policy development with an impact on the early childhood sector in Ireland over the past decade. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to address the full range of such developments, this section will reference those most pertinent to *Aistear*. As noted in the introduction, *First 5* (GoI, 2018) is a significant feature of the early childhood policy environment in Ireland and will continue to have impact in the coming years. It commits to an effective early childhood system for all children from birth to the age of five. Goal D states:

> Through the National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI), develop and implement a national plan for the phased, supported and simultaneous implementation of Síolta, the National Quality

> *Framework, and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, in all ELC settings for babies and young children, including making the application of these frameworks a contractual requirement of Department of Children and Youth Affairs funding schemes and give consideration to, over time, making adherence to the frameworks a statutory requirement. Over the lifetime of First 5, review Aistear and Síolta. (GoI, 2018, 157).*

Ten years ago, Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011- 2020 (DES, 2011) was published, and a new iteration is currently in development by the Department of Education. The literacy and numeracy strategy has a strong focus on *Aistear* and includes a number of actions for early childhood settings and the early years of primary schools, including the development of a process for the sharing of information between pre-schools and primary schools at the point of transition. The policy also called for the sections of the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) that apply to the first two years of school, where many children are under the age of six, to reflect more fully the principles and
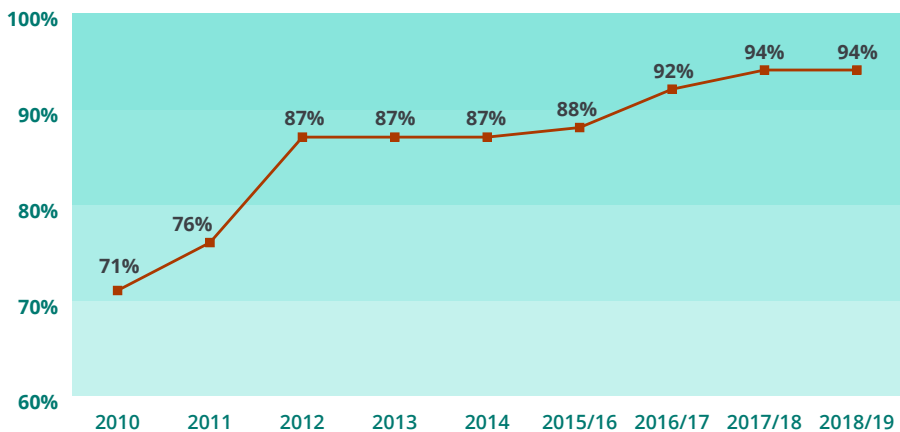
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*Figure 2: Percentage of staff who have an NFQ Level 5 qualification or above (from 2010 to 2018/19) (Pobal, 2019, 128)*

methodologies of *Aistear*. This has highlighted issues of connectivity and coherence in curriculum provision, a key element of the rationale for updating *Aistear* at this juncture. This issue is considered further in the section of this paper on curriculum and assessment. '[Education for Sustainability' The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) 2014 – 2020](#) (2014) and the allied [Education for Sustainable Development Action Plan Q4 2018 – Q4 2020](#) highlight the contribution that early childhood education can make towards a more sustainable future, a critical issue that warrants interrogation in the *Aistear* update to ensure that it supports young children's engagement with issues of sustainability.

**Early childhood workforce qualifications**

At the time of *Aistear*'s publication in 2009, there was no minimum qualification requirement for staff in early childhood settings. Shortly thereafter, a *Workforce Development Plan* (DES, 2010) was developed to help standardise training in the early childhood sector. Significant developments have been achieved over the past decade, with most of those working in the sector now having at least a Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)[3] level 5 qualification, as shown in Figure 2.

There has also been a considerable increase in the number of early childhood degree programmes, with 19 providers nationally (DES, 2019). This has resulted in a steady increase in the number of graduates working in the sector (GoI, 2021). However, a survey conducted in 2015 indicated that the level of preparedness in implementing *Aistear* was a significant gap identified by practitioners in both further and higher education programmes (DES, 2016). In 2019, in response to this finding, the *Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC)* Sector in Ireland stated a requirement that:

> *"...national practice Frameworks such as Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009) and Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2006) are incorporated in the knowledge element of initial professional education courses" (DES, 2019, 11).*

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[3] *QQI is responsible for the quality assurance of further and higher education and training in Ireland. This organisation is responsible for the development and review of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) which is a ten-level system used to describe qualifications in the Irish context. The NFQ is aligned with the European Qualification Framework and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area. (National Framework of Qualifications, 2022)*

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Significant developments have been achieved in early childhood workforce qualifications over the past decade, which has made a significant contribution to quality improvement. The update will consider the ways in which *Aistear* should reflect this changing professional profile and the interaction between *Aistear* and the ongoing professionalisation of the early childhood workforce.

**Stakeholders**
Initiatives by both the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Department of Education as set out above have led to an expansion of the stakeholder base in relation to *Aistear* since 2009 and there are now stakeholders such as Better Start National Early Years Quality Development[4], Department of Education Early Years Inspectors and providers of degree and training programmes that were not in existence when *Aistear* was developed. It is now timely to hear from these stakeholders on their experiences with *Aistear*, as well as reflecting with those that were involved in the development of *Aistear* in the years leading up to 2009.

**Curriculum and assessment developments**
The NCCA values synergy, consistency and continuity across its curriculum and assessment development work, and a number of NCCA developments contribute to the rationale for updating *Aistear*.

In 2020, the NCCA published a Draft Primary Curriculum Framework that sets out a vision for primary education (NCCA, 2020). The development of this document was informed by *Aistear*, with particular reference to its principles. The NCCA carried out an extensive consultation on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* and the findings from the consultation, while the finalised *Primary Curriculum Framework* will be particularly salient to the updating of *Aistear* to ensure curriculum and pedagogical continuity and progression for children.

Following on from the request in the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (DES, 2011) for transition information sharing, as referenced earlier, the NCCA developed reporting templates through an initiative with settings and schools. The templates, entitled Mo Scéal, which means *'My Story'* were designed to transfer information on children's learning and development between pre-schools and primary schools (NCCA, 2019; Daly and Grant, 2021). A renewed focus on the transition from pre-school to primary school and indeed all transitions will feature in the updated *Aistear*. Indeed, Objective 9 of *First 5* sets out a series of priorities related to transitions during the first five years of a child's life (GoI, 2018) and will merit further exploration in the update.

**Children's lived experiences**
Children and their lives are at the heart of *Aistear*, which celebrates early childhood as a time of being, and of enjoying and learning from

> " Children and their lives are at the heart of Aistear, which celebrates early childhood as a time of being, and of enjoying and learning from experiences as they unfold

experiences as they unfold (NCCA, 2009, 6). Since *Aistear* was published, Ireland has become more ethnically, socially, culturally and

[4] 'Better Start ... is a national initiative to promote and enhance inclusive high-quality Early Learning and Care ... for children from birth to six years of age in Ireland' (Better Start, n.d.) Better Start personnel make extensive use of the Practice Guide in their work with services

linguistically diverse[5] Census 2016 results show that Ireland's population was 4,761,865 at that time and the number of newcomer Irish recorded was 535,475. 612,018 Irish residents spoke a foreign language at home and Polish was the most common language, followed by French, Romanian and Lithuanian (CSO, 2019).

The range of languages spoken by children in early childhood settings has increased and it is now timely to consult with the sector on the degree to which *Aistear* helps them in supporting children for whom English is an additional language. Cultural sensitivity also requires attention; for example, the NCCA has begun work on Traveller culture and history for Ireland's ethnic minority (NCCA, 2018). A Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter was published in 2016 (DCYA, 2016b) followed by Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings in 2019 (GoI, 2019) and Leadership for INClusion training (LINC) (Leadership for Inclusion, 2022).[6] These correlate with the intention of the updating process to ensure that *Aistear* fully reflects children's lived experiences and is as inclusive and empowering as it can be for every child. In addition, the experiences of children during the COVID-19 pandemic and children coming to Ireland from war-torn areas such as Ukraine will be considered in the updating process.

This outline of national developments along with the changes in children's lived experiences illustrate the breadth of change since2009 and clearly shows why it is now timely to update *Aistear* and to re-affirm its relevance in this changed landscape to support quality curriculum provision for babies, toddlers and young children.

**Timeline and process**
The following section explores the phases and the timeline of the updating process. The key consideration of the updating process is that *Aistear* is fundamental to children's lived experiences in Ireland and has become the foundation of good practice in many settings. It is crucial that we nurture and develop *Aistear* into the future to ensure its continued relevance and impact in enhancing quality curriculum provision for our youngest children. Consideration is being given to *Aistear*'s strengths, as well as to identifying updates that would further enhance the framework. Updating *Aistear* will provide an important platform for collaboration, deliberation and research with stakeholders including children, parents, practitioners, researchers and interested parties in a process that will:

- underpin the view that babies, toddlers and young children and their lives are at the heart of *Aistear* and that this must be a starting point for all dialogue;

- focus on the context of babies, toddlers and young children's lives in the 21st century including, but not limited to, well-being, inclusion and voice;

- recognise the changes in the early childhood landscape including those emerging from the unique time during the COVID-19 pandemic; and

- provide an opportunity to reflect on the past while looking ahead to future opportunities for further enhancing the quality of curriculum provision for our youngest children's learning and development.

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[5] *Census 2016 results show that Ireland's population was 4,761,865 at that time and the number of newcomer Irish recorded was 535,475. 612,018 Irish residents spoke a foreign language at home and Polish was the most common language, followed by French, Romanian and Lithuanian (CSO, 2019).*

[6] *LINC is a Level 6 Special Purpose Award, which began in 2016. It is designed to support the inclusion of children with additional needs into early childhood settings. It highlights how Aistear enables early childhood practitioners to develop an inclusive curriculum (Leadership for Inclusion, 2022). This training model is particularly noteworthy in that it was the first training programme ever offered nationally through a blended model of online and face-to-face contact with all settings in the country.*

**Consultation**

The NCCA conducts extensive consultations with the aim of making sure that any person or organisation that wishes to share their views will be able to do so, and this is the case with the consultation for updating *Aistear*. The updating process will take place over two phases between 2021 and 2024. Consultation with stakeholders will be central in both phases. Phase 1 began in May 2021 and ended in April 2022. It involved extended engagement with the early childhood

> " The focus of the consultation is on supporting broad, far-reaching and inclusive awareness of and engagement in the updating of *Aistear*.

sector that mirrored the partnership approach taken in the original development of *Aistear* (Daly and Forster, 2009). The NCCA is committed to a consultation process that ensures that the knowledge and experience of the early childhood sector are brought to bear on any changes that are realised as a result of the updating process. The focus

of the consultation is on supporting broad, far-reaching and inclusive awareness of and engagement in the updating of *Aistear*. The consultation has been promoted in order to generate interest and engagement, and to encourage responses. Various communication tools have been used in order to build on prior communications work. Information on how to access and partake in questionnaires, written submissions and online focus groups has been widely shared by the NCCA through a variety of media. These include the NCCA website, traditional media channels, social media, published articles and targeted e-communications which were distributed to organisations, individuals and interest groups who expressed interest in the updating process. The dedicated Updating *Aistear* pages of the NCCA website provide all the information and associated materials/tools related to the process, including an information webinar on the principles and themes of *Aistear*, a short information video on the updating process, and a short background paper.

A variety of data collection methods was used in phase 1. There were two online questionnaires, one for those working in or involved in education, and one for parents/guardians. The interest in *Aistear* among parents/guardians and educators is very evident from the very high response rate, with more than 2,000 responses received.

A series of twelve online focus groups were held, aimed specifically at those working directly with babies, toddlers and young children, those in management and leadership roles, those involved in further and higher education and those in support and mentoring roles. Two events for parents and guardians were also held. These began in autumn of 2021 and continued into the spring of 2022. They were scheduled at various points of the day, including the morning, afternoon and evening, to ensure wide reach and accessibility for interested stakeholders. This is alongside an face-to-face consultation event aimed at stakeholders with an interest in the impact of policy developments on Updating *Aistear*.

The NCCA also invited written submissions from stakeholders, and a significant number have been received from a variety of organisations and individuals. Submissions to the consultation process will be published on the NCCA website in conjunction with a final consultation report. In the interests of inclusion, all relevant documentation is published in both English and Irish, Ireland's national language.

Since the NCCA's ground-breaking Portraiture study carried out with babies, toddlers and young children in 2007 (NCCA, 2007), the inclusion of child and student voice in matters that have an impact on their lives has become increasingly

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> **The central tenet of the updating process is that *Aistear* is fundamental to children's lived experiences in Ireland.**

prevalent in Ireland, and particularly so in the NCCA's work. The updating process continues this approach and a consultation with children under the age of six is being undertaken on behalf of the NCCA by a consortium of Maynooth University, Early Childhood Ireland, and Stranmillis University College, Belfast.

An audit of early years and primary curricula in eight jurisdictions (O'Donnell, 2018) has indicated that the four themes of *Aistear* remain broadly relevant and appropriate when compared with international ECCE curricula. However, 13 years on from its development, it is important to review the research base for the themes so as to reflect any advances made during that time. Therefore, a literature review is being undertaken on the NCCA's behalf by a team of researchers at Dublin City University. The focus of this will be on *Aistear*'s four themes and the review will highlight relevant research from the last decade to be considered in the update.

Armed with the findings from phase 1 of the consultation, the NCCA will develop proposals for an updated *Aistear*. These proposals will form the basis for phase 2 of the consultation process and here again the NCCA will gather feedback from stakeholders on those proposals to inform the finalisation of the updated *Aistear* at the end of 2024.

**Conclusion**

The NCCA has started a process to update *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009). This paper outlined the contents of *Aistear*, along with its contribution to the quality agenda in Ireland. It includes the context and rationale for Updating *Aistear* now, along with plans for the updating process. The central tenet of the updating process is that *Aistear* is fundamental to children's lived experiences in Ireland. The process provides a welcome opportunity to create new momentum and interest in *Aistear* as it is key to ensuring good quality curriculum experiences for babies, toddlers and young children in Ireland.

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# Kosovo

## Challenges facing the organisation and realisation of pre-school education in Kosovo

| 1 | Which department/ministry does ECEC sit under? | Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | What programs/settings exist for children between the ages of 0-7? | Kindergarten for children aged 0 to 6<br>Pre-primary classrooms affiliated with the school for children aged 5 to 6<br>Children can start primary school at age 6 |
| 3 | What percentage of children are in ECEC centers? | For children aged 0 to 5: 6.7%<br>For children aged 3 to 6: 36.4%<br>For children aged 5 to 6: 88.1% (2021) |
| 4 | Link to national/local curriculum for ECEC | |
| 5 | Who is responsible for inspecting/monitoring ECEC? | The monitoring/inspection of pre-school institutions and schools is carried out by the Education Inspectorate within MESTI. The monitoring/inspection of finances in pre-school institutions and schools is carried out by the relevant municipality |

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# Challenges facing the organisation and realisation of pre-school education in Kosovo

## ABSTRACT

Pre-school education in Kosovo has undergone a number of modifications in recent years. According to the existing legislation, pre-school education includes children aged 0 to 6 years old. However, this paper will only be focusing on pre-school education in Kosovo for children aged 3 to 6 specifically, and will present the country's achievements to date as well as the obstacles that this level of education, including all of its organisational entities, has faced. In addition to this, the legal and administrative framework, programmes, management, educators, their inclusion within pre-school education, and other areas of this sector will also be discussed in this paper. The quality analysis technique considers all stakeholders involved in this level of education, as well as the legislative framework and official documents currently in force.

The purpose of this analysis is to highlight the challenges Kosovo is facing in the organisation and implementation of its pre-school education for children aged three to six. Regarding the methodology employed for this study, a thorough review of official documents was carried out, as well as a summary of the existing research findings and recommendations on pre-school education in Kosovo, which were summarised, and through which, further recommendations are proposed.

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## ABSTRACT

The findings of this analysis point to a number of challenges in the organisation and implementation of pre-school education, including the need: to develop appropriate legal infrastructure for the level of pre-school education; for official documents; for the monitoring of quality in both private and state pre-school institutions; for central and local level cooperation; to increase and plan for pre-school education budgets; for greater involvement of children in pre-school education; to solve the lack of sufficient support staff for children with special needs; and for the professional development of the country's educators.

**Keywords:** pre-school/pre-primary education, educator, children, pre-school institution, inclusion.

### INTRODUCTION

This analysis summarises the issues in the planning and implementation of pre-school education in Kosovo, and provides an overview of the current situation facing this level of education. Our findings show the need for all local and central levels, families, schools, pre-school facilities, and other participants in this sector to implement further work together to ensure a higher quality of education provision. We live in a country where children are underrepresented in pre-school education. There are several factors affecting this high exclusion rate of children in pre-school education, such as: maternal unemployment (according to the KAS 2020 report employed 14.1% of women aged 15–65 years) (KSA, 2021); the small number of state kindergartens; the high cost of paying for private kindergartens; the parents' awareness of the importance of pre-school education, and so on. Efforts to make pre-primary education mandatory (for children aged 5 to 6) have not yet been successful, and many children continue to be denied access to institutional pre-school education.

There are minimal state-run pre-school institutions, and the number of private pre-school institutions continues to grow in major cities, including some that operate without a license. On top of this, both state and private institutions are few and far between in small

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> **"Pre-school education in Kosovo was introduced in September 1999, shortly after the war ended, a time in which children and educators returned to kindergartens.**

towns and rural areas. Community-based kindergartens, both state and private kindergartens, and pre-primary classes have been introduced in primary schools to create opportunities for more children to attend pre-school, which has thus increased the engagement of more children age 5 to 6 years old. However, children aged 0 to 5 are still underrepresented. The issues focused on in this analysis revolve around the stakeholders responsible for the smooth operation of the pre-school education on offer in Kosovo.

The Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation (MESTI) is responsible for: the legal regulation of the country's pre-school education; the drafting of educational policies; developing the pre-school curricula and standards; professional development of educators; the inspection of pre-school institutions and schools (through Education Inspectorates); educator licensing; and technical assistance to municipalities in the construction of pre-school institutions, among other duties. On the other hand, the international development partners such as UNICEF, Save the Children, Swiss Caritas, the World Bank, the European Union, and other non-governmental organisations continue to promote pre-school education with the goal of increasing access and enhancing quality.

The Municipal Directorate of Education (MED)

is legally responsible for: enforcing policies; establishing space for the construction of pre-school/ school facilities; financing staff; recruiting employees; and providing financial support for work materials.

In collaboration with the MED, MESTI, the educators and the administration of pre-school institutions/schools are collectively responsible for the progress and quality implementation of the country's pre-school education. Educators are those who put pre-school education into action. Recruiting educators requires a multi-step process. They can employ a variety of approaches considered appropriate depending on the age and interests of the children.

The findings of this analysis can be used as a reference for responsible stakeholders to promote pre-school education and overcome the problems that come with improving the situation in pre-school/pre-primary education in Kosovo at the central, local, institutional levels, and the level of the instructor.

### Organisation of pre-school education and implementation in the mesti framework

Pre-school education in Kosovo was introduced in September 1999, shortly after the war ended, a time in which children and educators. Who had been in the parallel system

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| International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) | Formal levels of pre-university education in Kosovo | Curriculum stages | | Core Curriculums |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ISCED 1 | Primary education (Grades I-V) | Primary education Grades III-V | Curriculum stage 2: Strengthening and orientation | Core Curriculum for pre-primary grade and grades I-V of primary education |
| ISCED 0 | Pre-primary grade (Ages 5-6) | Primary education Pre-primary grade and Grades I-II | Curriculum stage 1 Basic acquisition | The curriculum for pre-school education for children aged 0–5 is in the process of being drafted. |
| | Pre-school education | Ages 0–5 | Curriculum preparatory stage | |

**Table 1.** *Structure of pre-school education in Kosovo*

returned to kindergartens. UNMIK[1] Provisional Self-Government Regulations governed this level of education until 2006. Then, in 2006, the Kosovo Assembly approved Law No. 02 / L-52 on pre-school education for children aged 3 to 6 years old. While MESTI is working on drafting a new law on Early Childhood Education, the former law is still in force. MESTI is in charge of drafting the legal and administrative framework for education at all levels in Kosovo, including for pre-schools.

*The Administrative Instruction 19/2016 (2016) on the inclusion of children in pre-school institutions* regulates the inclusion of pre-school age children in education in Kosovo, stating that children aged 9 months to 6 years old may enrol in pre-school institutions.[2] According to the *Law on Pre-University Education in the Republic of Kosovo* – No. 04 / L-032 (2011), article 10,

[1] *UNMIK – United Nations Mission in Kosovo*

[2] *Children who have reached the age of 6 by September are required by the Law on Pre-University Education (2011) to enrol in the first grade of primary education. Before this age, children have the opportunity to attend pre-school education.*

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point 1 and 2 are defined as follows:

1.  Providing pre-school education for children under the age of five (5) forms phase 0 of the Kosovo Curriculum Framework – NQF, ISCED level 0[3], early care and education of children. This level includes children from the age of 9 months to 5 years (divided into 9 age groups, up to 3 years and then 3 to 5 years).

2.  Ensuring pre-primary class[4] for children over the age of five (5) is part of the 1st key phase of the NQF, level 0 of ISCED. (Kuvendi i Kosoves, 2011)

Pre-school education in Kosovo is voluntary and not compulsory education. The inclusion of children in pre-school education is among the lowest in the neighbouring countries in the region, based on the data provided by the Information Management System in Education – SMIA 2020/2021. In the school year 2020/21, the gross enrolment rate in the country's pre-school education for children aged 0 to 5 was 6.7% of all children enrolled in pre-school education, while the gross enrolment rate for children aged 3 to 6 years old was 36.4% and 88.1% for children aged 5 to 6 years old (MASHTI, 2021)

Given the high cost related to developing pre-school institutions, increasing both the number of educators in employment and the participation levels of children in school education are thus some of the main chal-

lenges facing institutions at the local level (the municipalities) as well as at the central level (MESTI). However, MESTI has allowed for the opening of private pre-school institutions, community-based centres, state/private institutions, and other alternatives to expand the number of children enrolled in pre-school institutions.

> " The inclusion of children in pre-school education is among the lowest in the neighbouring countries, based on the data provided by the Information Management System in Education – SMIA 2020/2021.

Several Administrative Instructions have been drafted in too, in order to regulate: the necessary standards for professional staff working in these institutions; (MASHTI, 2006) the number of children in educational groups; healthy nutrition in educational institutions; pre-university education and training; and the licensing of private pre-school institutions, among other factors. These include the drafted General Pre-school Education Standards for 3 to 6 year olds in Kosovo, (MASHTI, 2006), the Guidelines for Pre-school Facility Norms and Standards (MASHTI, 2018) and the Standards for Development and Learn-

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[3] *ISCED (the International Education Classification Standards) adopted by UNESCO at the General Conference, in its 29th session held in November 1997, and subsequently amended*

[4] *Pre-primary classes include pre-school education for children aged 5 to 6 within the primary school*

| Early Learning Development Standards for Children aged 0–6 | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Value** | | | **Principles** | | |
| - Individualism<br>- Autonomy<br>- Holistic child development<br>- Communication<br>- Creativity<br>- Respect and love for his/her country/identity<br>- Social competence (responsibility) | | | - Equity<br>- Overall development of the child's personality<br>- Cooperation between educational factors<br>- Interactive playing and learning<br>- Every child is willing to learn from birth<br>- Child as an active participant | | |
| **Development areas** | **Physical health and motor development** | **The development of language and communication** | **Emotional and social development** | **Cognitive and general knowledge development** | **Development of access to learning** |
| Sub-areas | – Development of basic motor skills (large muscles)<br><br>– Development of fine motor skills (small muscles)<br><br>– Development of sense-movement skills<br><br>– Physical health and self-care | – Listening and speaking<br><br>– Reading basics<br><br>– Writing basics | – Social development based on the child's interactions with his/her peers and adults<br><br>– Emotional development based on how the child develops a positive concept of themselves and their emotions | – Thinking and logic<br><br>– Science (nature and society)<br><br>– Expressing creativity<br><br>– Mathematical development | No sub-areas, there are only standards |
| Standards | Standards refer to statements based on the expected results regarding the behaviour of the child and their achievements across various areas of development and learning, by reflecting on what they should know and be able to do at certain stages. These standards are set for various developmental sub-areas which are the same and apply to the entire age group of children aged 0 to 6 years old. | | | | |
| Indicators | Standards refer to statements based on the expected results regarding the behaviour of the child and their achievements across various areas of development and learning, by reflecting on what they should know and be able to do at certain stages. These standards are set for various developmental sub-areas which are the same and apply to the entire age group of children aged 0 to 6 years old. | | | | |
| Learning activities | Learning activities refer to examples of simple activities that can be performed by all individuals who are close to the child. The development and implementation of these activities help to promote and ensure the child's achievement of the indicators. The examples provided in the learning activities can then also serve as guidelines or templates for other examples of activities that can be carried out, of which serve the same purpose. | | | | |

**Table 2.** *Early Childhood Development and Learning Standards Framework*

ing in Early Childhood for Children Aged 0 to 6 (2011), which apply to all educational institutions that work in early childhood education. MES-TI has also trained educators from the state pre-school institutions and pre-primary classes to implement them, while their implementation in private pre-school institutions and community-based centres is a work in progress. These standards serve as formulations that represent what children need to know and be able to do, and further explain the expectations for their behaviour and performance/achievements in several areas of development and learning.

The principal goal of the standards is to encourage the best possible development of each child, regardless of gender, individual characteristics, their family's socioeconomic status, orientation, or abilities, by always putting the best interests of the child first (MASHTI, 2011).

The Curriculum for Pre-school Education for Children Aged 3 to 6 was drafted in 2006, as a curriculum

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based on objectives. However, this curriculum is now outdated and does not meet the current needs of pre-school education, (MASHTI, 2006) namely because reforms in pre-university education in Kosovo introduced a competency-based curriculum, and the 2006 curriculum does not include the age group of children aged 0 to 3 years old. Yet, the drafting of the new curriculum based on competencies for pre-school education for children aged 0 to 5 also poses a challenge.

The Core Curriculum (2016) provides a competency-based curriculum that is being implemented in practice, but was only designed for the preparatory class (children aged 5) and for primary education in Kosovo. According to the research carried out by the Kosovo Pedagogical Institute (KPI, 2019), there have been shortcomings and difficulties in its implementation, and the study thus concluded with a recommendation to revise the Core Curriculum for the preparatory class and further draft a guide for its implementation in the preparatory class too (MASHTI, 2016). Pre-school education is implemented using a variety of approaches, including Step-by-Step, Education through Play, Majeutika, Montessori, and the Reggio Emilia Approach, which is now being piloted. These techniques have been adopted for use in the educational process with the help of numerous organisations that assist pre-school education.

MEST has also created and implemented the Distance Education Platform – Care, Development, and Early Childhood Education for ages 0 to 6, as a result of the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This platform has proven beneficial as it has greatly aided the successful implementation of distance learning and has been used, and is still being used, across the sector, by all involved in institutional pre-school education, such as the educators, parents, and children, as well as the children and parents whose children aren't enrolled in pre-school institutions. The challenge here, however, is the difficulty in using the technology among some educators and parents, and ensuring that all call access it, in order to continue this cooperation in educating children remotely.

**Inclusion of children aged 3 to 6 in pre-school education**
To align with international policies on achieving the Millennium Development Goals, MESTI has based its own development policies on the concept of Education For All, without distinction – an equal rights policy based on the understanding that "no person should be denied the right to education". MESTI defines *inclusion* as a principle in its *Law for Pre-University Education*, meaning that all children have the right to an education regardless of: gender; race; sexual orientation; physical, intellectual, or any other disability; skin colour; religion; or national,

ethnic, or social origin (Kuvendi i Kosoves, 2011).

The full legislation is based on this idea, but special articles focus on improving assistance for children with special needs, particularly articles 39–43, according to which MESTI strategies are designed. Administrative instructions, strategic plans, and other specific papers have also been produced to aid in the execution of the law based on the inclusion of children with special educational needs, and those with disabilities within the educational system (MASHTI, 2011). A number of children with special needs, specifically from the group of children with disabilities – whom are considered to belong to a more marginalised category, which is then further exacerbated when they belong to wider marginalised communities – are involved in the school system. In addition to mobilising for the importance of early childhood education.

According to the MESTI 2020/2021 statistics, 502 children with special needs were enrolled in regular institutions for children aged 0 to 6 (MASHTI, 2021), while there is no data on children with special needs outside of the education system as children are only assessed after the enrolment process in educational institutions. Furthermore, municipalities are exempt from 100% payment for children with special needs (KKP, Decision no.03-271), while 11 public pre-school institutions have

been transformed into "inclusive" institutions, with supportive educators whose task is specifically to support the children attending the relevant institution and make sure they are included (MESTI, 2021).

**Support staff for children with special needs in pre-school institutions**
Recently, a larger mobilisation in this area of education has been initiated – thanks to MESTI, 2022 was named the Year of Persons with Disabilities in Kosovo, and certain pre-school institutions are also beginning to employ assistants for children with specific educational needs. In addition to this, the Education Faculties have added the subject "Inclusive Education" to their curricula, with MESTI providing accredited programmes for inclusion for educators who working within the system.

Despite the fact that important local policies have been developed in accordance with education reform movements, their implementation in practice faces numerous challenges, including: the lack of an organised inter-institutional system for the identification and evaluation of the child from their early stages of life; a support system; statistical data on the total number of children with special educational needs; and a small number of state pre-school institutions that have hired supportive educators while other professional groups are understaffed, such as psychologist, speech therapist, physiotherapist, doctor, assistant (Reçica-Havolli, S & Mekolli, S, 2018).

To conclude, educators working in the pre-primary classes attached to the schools are not supported by anyone when it comes to ensuring the inclusion of children with special educational needs. The main issues revolve around the facts that: some of the educa-

tors in pre-school institutions do not develop individual plans for children with special needs who are enrolled in their classes; only a small number of educators have participated in inclusive training programmes; some pre-school and pre-primary institutions lack the necessary space and didactic tools and materials; some of the classrooms are overcrowded with children; some educators need greater awareness about inclusion; and some parents do not accept the special needs of their children, and so on (Gashi, Plakolli, Morina, & Reçica Havolli, 2021, pp. 255-258).

**The organisation and realisation of pre-school education within municipal education directorates**
In addition to MESTI, the municipalities share some of the responsibilities when it comes to overseeing pre-school education. *The Law on Pre-University Education* in Kosovo (Kuvendi i Kosoves, 2011) and *the Law on Education* in Kosovo Municipalities - No.03 / L-068 both regulate this (Kuvendi i Kosoves, 2008).

According to research conducted by the Kosovo Pedagogical Institute (2021), municipalities have shown progress in implementing laws, administrative instructions, regulations, development plans of institutions, and the like. In addition, their finances are successfully managed, budget increases have been awarded, and many projects have benefited from working closely with the parents, community representatives, MESTI, and local and international NGOs. As a result of this cooperation, the involvement of children aged 5 has increased in the following areas: pre-primary classes within schools; the inclusion of children with special needs in pre-school education; and in the regulation of the environment in the relevant institutions and pre-primary classes. There has

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also been progress in regard to improving the quality of educational work services and infrastructure in early childhood, according to the data recorded by the EMIS. With the increase of parents' trust in the system, the interest when it comes to enrolling their children in pre-school education has also increased (Gashi, Plakolli, Morina, & Reçica Havolli, 2021)

Despite the obstacles and challenges the sector has faced, equitable opportunities for all – including children with special needs – has been achieved through active engagement in training and close professional interactions with relevant parties. Although most pre-school institutions have a Municipal Assessment Team for children with special needs, and municipalities have provided the required support for all children that need it, the number of children with special needs actually attending pre-school institutions remains unsatisfactory.

The majority of educators have been trained in the implementation of the curriculum, and the network of cooperation connected to the new curricula has been deemed as satisfactory. The Administrative Instruction on healthy nutrition in pre-university educational and training institutions in Kosovo – which defines the role of Municipal Directorates of Education in its implementation and in this regard, in addition to carrying out numerous activities – regulates the nutrition of children in pre-school education. This has also been introduced to raise awareness and to promote health education and professional services in institutions, as well as the promotion of healthy eating.

Yet, even with these accomplishments, a number of challenges have been identified at the municipal level when it comes to the effective implementation of pre-school education. These issues primarily revolve around the difficulties faced in ensuring more children are enrolled in pre-school institutions, not being able to employ more educators, and lacking the capacity to build necessary and appropriate spaces for this level of education (Gashi & Plakolli, 2016). There are also challenges regarding management and educators at the pre-primary/pre-school level, such as: the small number of state pre-school institutions; the lack of inclusion of certain groups of children, especially those coming from minority communities; the high demand for child registration in cities; the small number of children in rural areas; the lack of textbooks and materials available; the lack of support for educators and assistants; the lack of psychologists, pedagogues and doctors; the lack of qualifications for educators working with the children aged 0 to 3 years old; the insufficient training of educators when it comes to the implementation of the curriculum (continuous organisation of educators' trainings and parents); the lack of knowledge about the use of technology (especially among older educators); difficulties faced in the educational institution-parent cooperation; mentoring issues; the management of staff with health problems; the lack of a budget; elderly and chronically ill staff; and the lack of didactic tools and playing corners for the involvement of children in joint activities, and so on (Gashi, Plakolli, Morina, & Reçica Havolli, 2021).

**Organisation and realisation of pre-school education in the framework for pre-school institutions**
In addition to educational policies, the administration of a pre-school institution is a

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critical and determining factor in the quality of the educational service on offer. According to the law, the administration of pre-school institutions must take the following responsibility: the planning, coordination, and supervision of the entire process relating to the implementation of pre-school education, both technically and professionally, as well as pedagogically. Furthermore, the management of said institutions are responsible for working with parents and other partners at the local (MED) and central (MESTI) level, while conducting internal evaluations of the institution's outcomes in every aspect of its implementation.

Several achievements and challenges at the level of the pre-school institutions have been reported, based on the findings of research done by the Kosovo Pedagogical Institute (2021), and these are primarily: Pre-school institution–MESTI cooperation; pre-school institution–MED cooperation; principal–educator cooperation; pre-school institution–parent cooperation; and the overall quality of education at the pre-school institution. Achievements to date include: the creation of better conditions in pre-school institutions; the implementation of joint projects; the organisation of educators' professional development; the inclusion of students in internships within the pre-school institution; the support for children whose families are in social schemes; and the inspection of the quality of the education provided.

The importance of pre-school education has been raised within pre-school institutions, as has the importance of: parental involvement in professional activities and their role on projects as a sponsor; parental assistance to children with special needs; cooperation

with a doctor for occasional visits; cooperation with a speech therapist for special cases; the cooperation with psychologists and addressing problems to the appropriate staff, and training for healthy nutrition of children.

The specifics of service in pre-school institutions are challenging courses: the lack of professional pre-school officers in municipalities to supervise pre-school institutions; the lack of adequate training for quality work; the lack of curricula for ages 0–5; the lack of appropriate or practical pedagogical documentation; and the lack of performance-based training for school principals and educators.

With the pandemic and the crises that followed, other challenges emerged in carrying out online work via the available platforms, including an inability to use the technology due to the instructors' own technological limitations and lack of computer literacy skills. Meanwhile, the main and ongoing difficulties are: the non-integration of private pre-school institutions; educators' lack of involvement in their professional development processes; MEST's indifference to private kindergarten IP (particularly in training); and the non-licensing of private pre-school institutions. The frequent change of governments in recent years has proved to be a challenge to the entire education system, resulting in policy changes that have impacted the operation and management of pre-school facilities.

**The role of educators in the organisation and implementation of pre-school education**
The work carried out by educators of children is a practice that best demonstrates how pre-school education functions in Kosovo, as well as the benefits and challenges of doing so,

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> **" The challenges in the carrying out their educational work are mainly seen in the planning of, and achieving quality in, pre-school education, as well as in adapting the contents along with the changes that occur in educational policies, and doing this in cooperation with parents and with the need for continuous monitoring and for receiving adequate training.**

which are described through the following findings.

The Faculty of Education is responsible for ensuring the preparation and qualification of educators in the Pre-school Education Programme, and this qualification is a requirement for employment. The Administrative Instruction 10/2018 (2018), for the norms regarding the professional staff of general education, defines the educator's work rate. The Pre-Primary Core Curriculum (2011) is a competency-based curriculum, and the aim of its implementation is to achieve a national unity of programme content, as well as the recording of all activities, results of competencies, and so on.

Because the 2006 Curriculum for Pre-school Education for Children Aged 3 to 6 does not meet the needs and interests of children, educators use the Standards of Development and Learning in Early Childhood for Children Aged 0 to 6 to guide their programme. According to research carried out by the Pedagogical Institute (2019), educators are overloaded with administrative work,

the topics of the teaching units in subject programmes are unsuitable for teachers, and it is arduous work as each teaching unit and activity requires them to prepare separate plans for the desired outcomes and competencies (Mehmeti et al., 2019)

The performance of the educators is usually monitored by the school principal, while in some situations, they are also monitored by the MED and the Education Inspectorate; nevertheless, there are also cases when no one is ever monitored. Working conditions in the institutions where they work, including facilities, classrooms, and the environment, are considered to be good, with just a relatively small number of educators stating that working conditions are insufficient.

The challenges in the carrying out their educational work are mainly seen in the planning of, and achieving quality in, pre-school education, as well as in adapting the contents along with the changes that occur in educational policies, and doing this in cooperation with parents and with the need for continuous monitoring

and for receiving adequate training. The needs of educators when it comes to their professional development are most clear when it comes to the training they receive in working with children with special needs, the use of technology, and for any additional training that supports the teaching philosophy of "the child in the centre" (Gashi, Plakolli, Morina, & Reçica Havolli, 2021, p. 265).

The planning and quality implementation of pre-school education in Kosovo, adapting content to changes in educational policy, collaborating with parents, the necessity for ongoing monitoring, and receiving adequate training are all challenges the sector faces in being able to provide sufficient educational activities. Educators' professional development requirements are addressed through trainings for children with special needs, the use of technology, and additional trainings that support the philosophy of "the child in the centre" (Gashi, Plakolli, Morina, & Reçica Havolli, 2021, p. 265).

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## Conclusion

The conclusions were drawn based on the summary of the analysis, which presented the current issues facing Kosovo's pre-school education, as follows:

- Despite efforts to increase the number of children enrolled in pre-school, participation remains low, particularly in rural regions, and children from minority groups are underrepresented.

- The Law on Pre-school Education was drafted in 2006 and no longer meets the needs of pre-school education in Kosovo; as a result, in anticipation of a new Law on Early Childhood, there are gaps in this level of education.

- The Core Curriculum, which includes the pre-primary class, has been prepared but is proving difficult to implement, while the 2006 Curriculum for Pre-school Education for Children Aged 3 to 6 is outdated and thus does not satisfy the requirements and interests of children, nor does it cover all age groups.

- The design of the online distance learning platform for pre-school education, which is also used by parents, is one of the current achievements within the sector, although the education system has also faced issues in using the technology, both by educators and parents.

- Although the law allows for the founding of private pre-schools, some have not been monitored for quality in regard to their operations, nor have they been substantiated by official paperwork, training, or other means.

- There are insufficient numbers of professional associates, support educators, and assistants working within the educational system in addition to the sector having a lack of general records of children with special needs in municipalities and few inter-institutional organisations to cooperate with in order to receive their support and help. Finally, the pre-school educators need training based on their requirements and needs, especially the PIA plan and in their approaches to working with children with special needs.

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**Recommendations**
*Recommendations for MESTI*

1. Increase the government's funding for pre-school education and expanding spaces and conditions to increase the number of children enrolled in these institutions.

2. Draft and approve the Early Childhood Law, as well as revising the pre-school and pre-primary curricula to make them more feasible to implement.

3. Implement continuous quality monitoring and evaluation in state and private pre-school institutions, pre-primary classes, and CBK where there is insufficient data on the quality of education provided in these institutions, as well as monitoring the operation of private pre-school institutions operating without a license.

4. Provide training according to the needs of educators for their professional development.

*Recommendations for MED*

1. Create conditions for the involvement of children from rural areas and children from minority groups in pre-school education.

2. Implement Municipal budget planning and a proposal for an increase in the budget for pre-school education.

3. Create settings for inclusive education by hiring professional associates, supportive educators, and assistants.

4. Identify and prepare for the inclusion and assistance of children with special needs in each municipality.

*Recommendations for the management of pre-school institutions*

1. Monitor the quality of performance by the management of such institutions.

2. Create opportunities for improving the conditions for children with special needs.

*Recommendations for educators*

1. Provide quality education for children and ensure a commitment to overcoming the challenges.

2. Design and implement individual education plans for children with special needs.
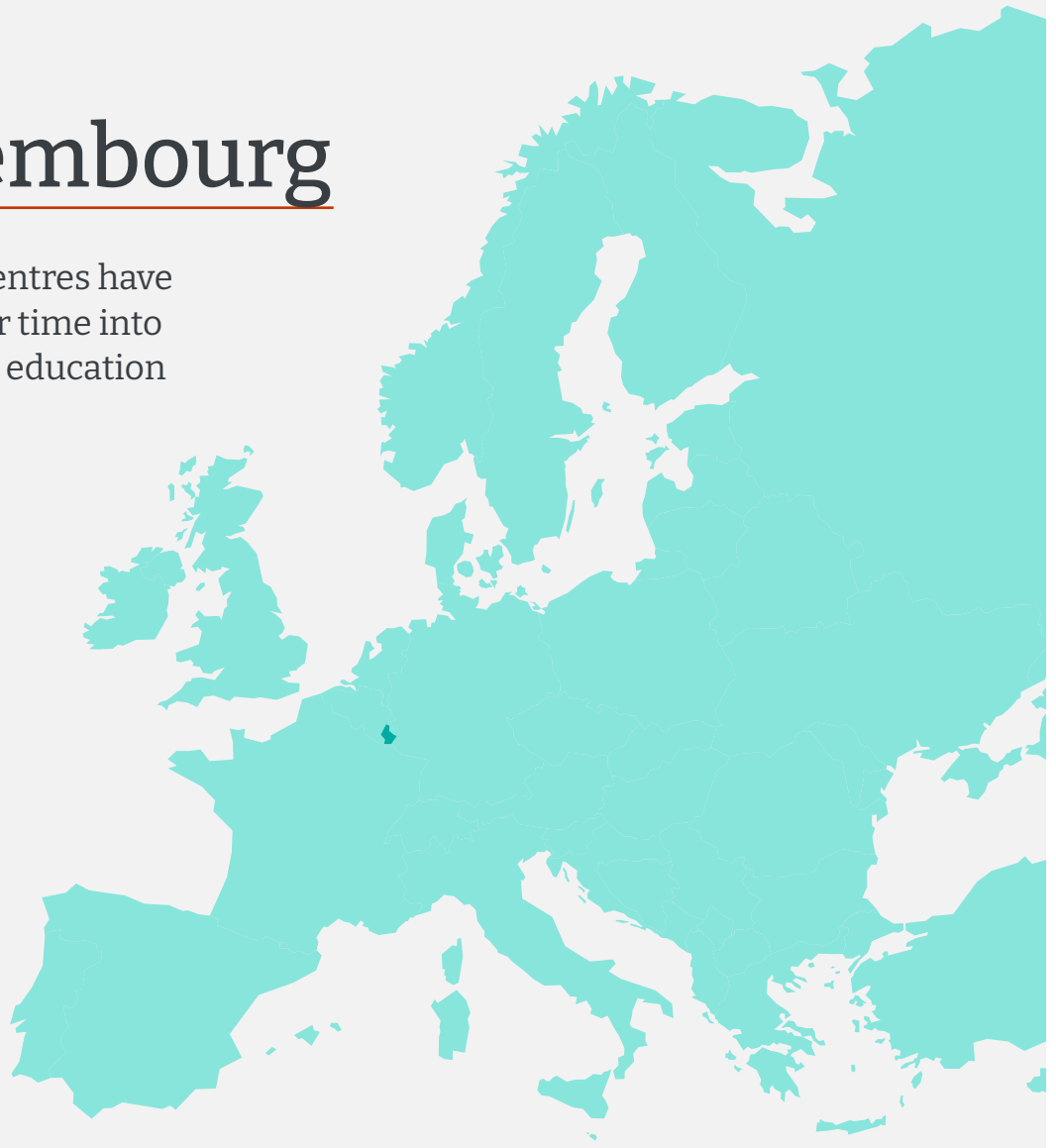
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# Luxembourg

Childcare centres have evolved over time into non-formal education facilities



| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | **Which department/ministry does ECEC sit under?** | Ministry of Education, Children and Youth. |
| **2** | **What programs/settings exist for children between the ages of 0-7?** | Multilingual education programme (ages 0 to 4) Early education (ages 3 to 4): optional, not mandatory Pre-school (ages 4 to 6) |
| **3** | **What percentage of children are in ECEC centers?** | The total population of children under the age of 12 residing in Luxembourg is estimated at 86,980. 49,035 of children in Luxembourg benefitted from the CSA in December 2020, i.e. 56.38% of the total resident population |
| **4** | **Link to national/local curriculum for ECEC** | Multilingual education for children up to 4 years of age National framework of non-formal education (ages 0 to 4/5 to 12) |
| **5** | **Who is responsible for inspecting/ monitoring of ECEC?** | • Ministry of Education, Children and Youth • National Youth Service – monitors process quality in the ECEC via regular inspections conducted by regional agents |

# AUTHORS

## Claude Bodeving

### *Counsellor*

Claude Bodeving (1965) completed a five-year master degree in Psychology at the University of Vienna in Austria. He has been employed at the National Youth Service, an administration within the Ministry of Education, Children and Youth, since 1998. His area of expertise covers the conceptualisation of non-formal education. He served as a member of the Council of Europe working groups on non-formal education for a number of years. He helped set up the quality framework that was then implemented in the childhood education and care services and youth centres of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. He co-ordinated the design of the national reference framework and has written several chapters on the principles and characteristics of non-formal education. Since 2020, he has carried out training courses on non-formal childhood and youth education for trainees on a regular basis.

## Dr. Annie Flore Made Mbe

### *Employee*

Annie Flore Made Mbe (PhD) began her career at the University of Luxembourg, where she completed her PhD on family language policies and multilingualism in 2016. In 2018, she joined the Department of Adult Learning, within the Ministry of Education, Children and Youth, where she worked as an assistant project co-ordinator on family learning. She currently works for the Department of Early Childhood Education, under the same ministry, and is engaged in projects related to early multilingualism and early childhood education and care. Her experience covers the area of family language policy, multilingual education, adult education and vocational training.

# Childcare centres have evolved over time into non-formal education facilities

## ABSTRACT

The fact that children are increasingly cared for out-of-home in the daytime is having an impact on the growing institutionalisation of the early phases of childhood. Since the implementation of the Youth Law in 2016, developing and promoting the quality of non-formal education in the early childhood sector in Luxembourg has been one of the government's priorities. A framework was introduced to set quality standards in order to harmonise childcare and educational practices and to ensure that education is inclusive and accessible for all. This chapter outlines the development of the non-formal education sector and highlights the mechanisms that have been put in place to develop quality. The national reference framework for instance, describes the fundamental educational objectives and the implementation of the plurilingual education programme. It also implies that the external follow-up is carried out by regional agents whose aim is to assess the written guidelines of the services and to provide long-term support for the progress of educational quality within these services.

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> ❝ The education and childcare sector in Luxembourg have undergone profound changes in the past fifteen years.

## 1. Introduction

The education and childcare sector in Luxembourg have undergone profound changes in the past fifteen years. These changes have been marked by a succession of State measures that have, on the one hand, favoured the quantitative and diversified expansion of childcare facilities, and on the other, focused on the introduction of a quality system, through the amendment of the Youth Law in 2016[1]. The Lisbon strategy (2000)[2] – which aimed to facilitate the reconciliation of family and professional life, and the encouragement of States to develop the number of day-care facilities for children – was a precursor to the development of childcare facilities and their diversification. Today, the vast majority of childcare facilities are subsidised by the State. The sector, however, also includes facilities run by private managers in the form of non-profit associations and public managers (municipal administrations), as well as private day-care. In Luxembourg, there are several types of facilities that cater for children from infancy to the age of 12. Thus, in terms of childcare provision, depending on the age of their children and their needs, resident and cross-border parents[3] have a wide choice of educational and childcare facilities, particularly in regard to educational and childcare services for school-aged children or young children including maisons relais, day care centres, crèches, mini-crèches (2018)[4] and family childcare.

This article will outline the measures introduced by the State that contributed significantly to the development of non-formal education in the Luxembourg context.

### 1.1 Evolution of institutional childcare in Luxembourg

In this section, we will discuss the evolution of institutional childcare in Luxembourg.

According to Achten and Bodeving (2017) the first childcare facilities in Luxembourg were founded in 1980. The aim of these private facilities, registered mainly as non-profit organisations, was to support disadvantaged families. In this context, access to these facilities for children was based exclusively on social criteria. In terms of funding, these facilities had agreements in place with the State, represented by the Ministry of Family and Integration. Subsequently, the succession of socio-economic and political orientations in Europe, and in particular the Lisbon Strategy (2000), created a new landscape for the child and the youth care sector in Luxembourg. In 2005, the creation

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[1] *Loi du 24 avril 2016 portant modifucation de la loi modifiée du 4 juillet 2008 sur la Jeunesse.*

[2] *https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm.*

[3] *with at least one parent working in Luxembourg*

[4] *Mémorial A : Règlement grand-ducal du 19 octobre 2018 concernant l'agrément à accorder aux gestionnaires des mini-crèches.*

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of the maisons relais pour enfants [5] (childcare centres) was launched with the goal of increasing opportunities for children to receive day care and to facilitate the insertion of parents into the labour market. This type of daycare facility comes under the responsibility of the municipalities and therefore promotes a new form of socialisation for children outside of their family and school environments. In addition, with a view to expanding the number of available childcare facilities and to meet the high demand for childcare for children aged 0 to 12, the law regulating the activity of parental assistance came into force in 2007, and allowed those concerned – subject to compliance with the prerequisites (level of study, linguistic knowledge, training, etc.) – to be granted the status of self-employed worker. To this end, people who have obtained the status of parental assistant (PA) may take care of up to 5 children (aged 0–12) in their home, not taking into account their own children.

The "Chèque service d'accueil" (CSA) [6] scheme, which came into force in 2009, has contributed greatly to the expansion of childcare facilities and is also a measuring tool used by State in order to promote access to non-formal education for all children and to reduce the cost of childcare for parents. The CSA is geared towards children aged 0 to 12 and, depending on their income and the child's rank in the sibling group, allows parents to benefit from reduced rates or even free childcare in educational and childcare facilities.

The State's contribution [7] to the cost of childcare varies according to the type of care the child receives (collective or parental assistant). This is provided in the form of financial aid, equalling up to a maximum of 60 hours of childcare per week.

According to Neumann (2018)[8], the CSA has been an important funding tool for pre-school and out-of-school care for children aged 0–12 since 2009. This tool has led to the number of places available tripling, and to parents using these services more and more. The introduction of the CSA should be seen as an important strategic decision that has enabled the quantitative expansion of the childcare sector. Indeed, since 2009, there has been an evolution in the number of approvals issued to education and childcare services and an increase in the number of available places, as shown on the graph below. In addition to this, the CSA has been associated with a notable increase in the quality of childcare facilities and has, since 2016, become a steering tool for the non-formal education sector.

In Luxembourg, a total of 59,891 pre-school and after-school care places were available in 2020. As far as education and care services are concerned, the number of places in the subsidised sector is significantly higher than in the private sector. Moreover, it can be seen that from 2009 to 2020, the number of places in the subsidised sector more than doubled. On the other hand, in the private sector, the number of places has increased more than fivefold. The number of places in the parental assistance sector increased steadily between 2009 and 2015 and then decreased slightly, but continuously, from 2016 to 2020 (Hekel & Lourèiro, 2021)[9]. This decrease can be partly explained by the implementation of the quality system, brought into force by the 2016 Youth Law which led to the withdrawal of accreditations, and partly by the desire of some parental assistants to stop practising this profession. However, in 2017,

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[5] Mémorial A : Règlement grand-ducal du 20 juillet 2005 concernant l'agrément à accorder aux gestionnaires de Maison relais pour enfants.

[6] childcare service voucher

[7] The scale of parental participation in the scheme can be found by clicking on
https://men.public.lu/dam-assets/fr/enfance/fr/02-cheque-service/bareme.pdf.

[8] Rapport national sur l'éducation au Luxembourg 2018. National report on education in Luxembourg 2018

[9] https://www.script.lu/sites/default/files/publications/2021-12/Rapport-national-sur-leducation-Luxembourg-2021.pdf

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the average weekly amount of time spent at childcare facilities for children aged 0 to 3 years was approximately 32 hours[10].

It is important to note that between 2016, when cross-border parents started to benefit from the CSA, and 2020, a total of 8,694 cross-border children benefited from a reduction in childcare costs. Overall, between 2009 and 2020, the budget devoted to education and childcare services in Luxembourg has seen a constant annual increase. Thus, the budget for 2020 is six times that of the 2009 budget. This increase is due to the State's commitment to ensuring educational quality and promoting access to non-formal education for all children. Moreover, as described in the recent OECD report (2022), the high financial contribution from the State demonstrates Luxembourg's ambitious character of, which has one of the most affordable early childhood education and care systems in the world, with free or subsidised access depending on the socio-economic situation of the family.

## 1.2 The paradigm shift in childcare as a focus of State measures

After the introduction of the Lisbon Strategy, the creation of childcare facilities was intended to promote the reconciliation of family and working life. As a result of this, as

[10] Rapport national sur l'éducation nationale Luxembourg 2021, P.41
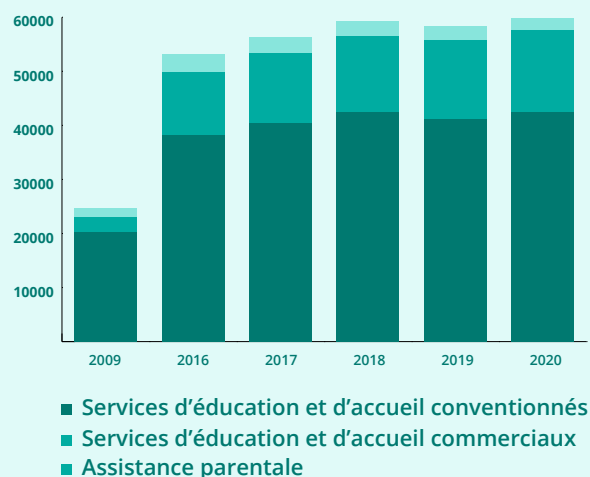
**Evolution of the number of places**



**Figure 1:** Source: Ministry of Education, Children and Youth Activity Report 2020

- ■ Services d'éducation et d'accueil conventionnés
- ■ Services d'éducation et d'accueil commerciaux
- ■ Assistance parentale

**Evolution of the number of children benefiting from the CSA**



■ Enfants résidents bénéficiants du CSA
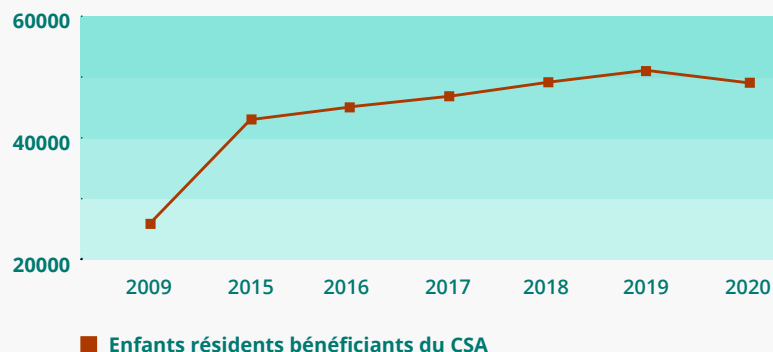
**Figure 2:** Source: Ministry of National Education, Children and Youth, 2020 Activity Report
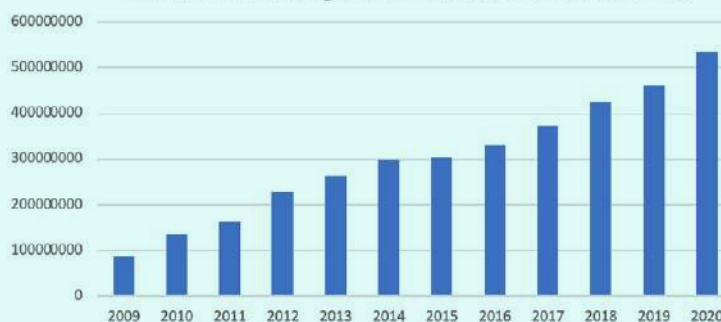


**Figure 3:** Source: Ministry of Education, Children and Youth, Activity Report 2020

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well as the 2016 law coming into force, the focus was no longer on female employment, but rather, child development. Thus, there was a shift from 'childhood care' (Honig, 2011) to 'childhood education' (Neu-

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mann, 2014). This, coming from the fact that children are increasingly being looked after outside of the family environment. The focus is therefore on developing the quality, structure and pedagogical concept

of the provision. The child is thus the focus of the policy. Indeed, this is a marked shift from a policy focused on the labour market to a policy focused on the child and their development. In 2016, this transition was confirmed by the Youth Act, which introduced non-formal education and developed the quality system. This law marks the beginning of the implementation of a reference framework for childcare in Luxembourg, with a particular emphasis on educational quality. In this context, childcare services became education and care services. In 2013, education and care services were placed under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, Children and Youth and the pedagogical reference framework to which childcare facilities must conform to was also gradually developed. This reference framework not only allows for the harmonisation of educational practices within the ECEC sector, but also sets out the conditions that ASPs must meet in order to be eligible for State subsidies through the childcare service voucher.

An overview of State measures for children shows that over time, measures have progressed from those focused on the promotion of women's work to a vision focused on the development of the child, which is materialised by the combination of a pedagogical concept, multilingual education and the establishment of a quality system, monitored in the

field by the National Youth Service (SNJ) and carried out by regional agents.

The following paragraphs will explain the pedagogical elements of Luxembourg's childcare.

## 2. Non-formal education in childcare

### 2.1. Promoting access to non-formal education and equal opportunities for all children

Luxembourg's special status as a multilingual country and its multilingual education system (Luxembourgish, German and French) encouraged the implementation of the multilingual education programme in 2017 for children aged 1 to 4 years attending a collective childcare facility. This governmental programme encourages children to come into contact with Luxembourgish and French and aims to promote early language development and the enhancement of the children's family languages in order to give everyone "the best possible start in life and school"[11]. Thus, given the linguistic proximity between Luxembourgish and German and the official and social status of French in Luxembourg society, there is an intrinsic link between the early learning of school languages and pupils' performance at school insofar as, being "exposed from a very early age to both Luxembourgish and French, [meaning

[11] https://men.public.lu/fr/enfance/05-plurilingue.html

that] the child has more opportunities and more time to enjoy listening to and expressing [themselves] in these two languages – and to become accustomed to them before going to school"[12]. In the same vein, the multilingual education programme is an important component of early childhood education, which aligns with the State's policy of equal opportunities, inclusion and diversity in that all children (aged 1–4), regardless of their parents' income, can benefit from 20 hours of quality childcare per week, free of charge, for 46 weeks a year.

In order to ensure the quality of multilingual education in day care, a pedagogical representative is appointed as part of the pedagogical team, in order to guarantee the implementation and continuity of the plurilingual education programme. All pedagogical representatives have to follow a specific training programme totalling 30 hours organised by the National Youth Service (SNJ). In addition, each member of the educational staff has to partake in regular in-service training on multilingual education. This training allows them to specialise in language acquisition for very young children. Similarly, collaboration with parents and networking with schools, libraries, associations and other practitioners is an important aspect of the promotion of childhood education, as through these synergies the State seeks to maximise the exposure of children to other educational structures and reinforce the image of their being 'social and cultural beings '.[13] Finally, in order to monitor the quality system, activities are monitored and evaluated in the field by regional agents working in all regions of the country.

In the same vein, in order to promote access to non-formal education and equal opportunities for all, from September 2022, the State will make a more significant contribution to the cost of out-of-school care facilities for children attending a collective childcare facility or those being looked after by a parental assistant. Specifically, children subject to compulsory schooling will benefit from free meals and partially free childcare. This measure implemented by the State aims, on the one side, to reduce inequalities between household incomes, and to ensure the overall development of young children on the other, by focusing on the development of individual skills, social skills, cognitive skills, technical skills and methodological skills, in the hope of considerably reducing the skills gap that can sometimes exist between children who attend out-of-school care facilities, potentially due to financial reasons, and their peers who attend regularly.

## 2.2. The concept of non-formal education

With the amendment of the law of 2016 ("amended Youth Law"), the term "non-formal education" was officially introduced to refer to pedagogical work in day care for children and in youth work ("youth houses"). Within the framework of a holistic approach to education – which takes into account formal education, non-formal education and informal education (i.e. the acquisition of knowledge and skills through everyday experiences and without learning being organised by an educational structure) – non-formal education is defined as educational work "which is organised outside the formal school system, which is aimed at a defined target group and which pursues specific educational objectives" (UNESCO 1998).

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[12] https://men.public.lu/fr/enfance/05-plurilingue.html

[13] *Cadre de référence national sur l'éducation non formelle des enfants et des jeunes, Edition 2021. p. 17-18.*

In the Luxembourg context, this type of non-formal education generally takes place in educational work in childcare and education services such as maison relais, crèches, mini-care centres and through parental assistants.

In general, the notion of education includes both a right to autonomy and a right to take responsibility in society. In Luxembourg, the concrete implementation of this non-formal education is at the centre of current pedagogical discussions and the resulting requirements, for example for the design of space and the work of pedagogues, are being increasingly adapted to the age of the children (the reference framework on non-formal education is divided into three age categories: early childhood, school age and youth). This adaptation is considered essential when it comes to supporting children's self-learning processes, which is not to be confused with 'learning by oneself', rather, the child's desire to explore and curiosity to learn is actively encouraged by educational staff. At the same time, self-learning means that children's interests and needs are considered and that non-formal education relies very little on predefined learning objectives, but instead on the child's own processes, starting from birth and throughout their individual learning paths. Certain pedagogical principles are considered to be "characteristics of non-formal education" and are given special attention in the con-

text of external monitoring. These characteristics do not, of course, take place exclusively in education and care services, but together they distinguish the field of non-formal education as a specific place of education (see SNJ 2021). The characteristics of non-formal education as defined in the framework include:

- Discovery learning: a variety of opportunities to try and experiment.
- Process-oriented learning: no time limits or pressure to perform.
- Learning in partnership: cooperation and regular exchanges between children.
- Participation: involvement of children in decisions.
- Relationship work: pedagogues create a climate of trust, caring and open communication.

While these characteristics appear at first as theoretical models of thought, they are nevertheless very concrete in their practical implementation and help trigger developmental processes, such as the that of the "children's participation" which is weighted and realised differently in education and care services, both conceptually and in its direct implementation: "Many situations in everyday life lend them-

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selves to giving children a voice. Depending on their age, even the youngest children can be involved in decision-making processes and be allowed to express their interests. In this way, children confront themselves and their social environment: the decision-making power of third parties decreases

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> " The national reference framework on non-formal education also contains concrete guidelines for the implementation of various pedagogical approaches.

and self-determination increases. (Service national de la jeunesse 2021, p. 28).

## 2.3. The national reference framework

All of the above-mentioned reflections have been introduced by the national framework on non-formal education in Luxembourg, which is addressed to parental assistants, childcare services and youth centres. In addition to the pedagogical principles, the framework also includes themes on which the structures must emphasize in their educational practices. There are seven fields of action:

- Emotions and social relations
- Values, participation and democracy
- Language, communication and media
- Creativity, art and culture
- Movement, body awareness and health
- Natural sciences and technology
- Transitions

These fields of action are not seen as learning objectives, but rather, in addition to the targeted activities, they exist primarily as a way of creating the necessary framework conditions (e.g., the design of the space) so that children can explore these areas and make their first experiences and discoveries (cf. SNJ 2022a). While these fields of action thus describe the "what" to be learned or explored, the "how" remains decisive, depending on the pedagogical attitude of the educators: how to promote an education of children that places the competent child with his or her own rights in the foreground.

As the role of a pedagogue is that of someone who guides a child's education, they are thus subject to a self-learning approach of the children and at the same time to a co-construction approach of education. Childcare can only be "really implemented in a developmentally supportive way if there is a continuous reflection on one's own (educational) biography, a reflection on the educational work as well as the willingness to learn throughout life and to develop personally" (Krenz, 2018).

The national reference framework on non-formal education also contains concrete guidelines for the implementation of various pedagogical approaches. For example, guidelines for the development of a written concept, validated by the ministry, are part of the national frame of reference, as are guidelines for the development of a logbook that provides for regular description and reflection on the educational activities and networking of the institution.

For early childhood, separate guidelines describe the implementation of plurilingual education and include:

- The creation of a stimulating environment for languages,
- Familiarisation and playful contact with the Luxembourgish and French languages of education according to the individual needs of the children,
- Valuing and supporting the children's family languages.

## 2.4. Quality assurance of educational work

An obligation in the framework of quality assurance for non-formal education services is the realisation of a written concept ("general concept

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of action") which must contain the following elements:

- A pedagogical component describing the basic pedagogical objectives and principles at local or regional level,
- The implementation of the fields of action,
- Self-evaluation measures,
- The plan for further training of staff.

This obligation is included as a measure to verify the implementation of the national frame of reference. The same applies to the regular updating of a "logbook" by each education and care service, which is intended to assess the conformity of educational achievements to the indications of the written concept. In addition, each service must produce a framework concept describing the implementation of the plurilingual education programme in everyday life (SNJ 2018). At the national level, the implementation of the multilingual education programme is accompanied by a specific scientific council. The quality framework is monitored by specially trained officers of the National Youth Service ('regional officers') who:

- Compare pedagogical practices with the pedagogical concepts,
- Check compliance with the provisions for the ongoing training of staff,
- Support the quality development process,
- Make proposals for quality development.

On the basis of this external evaluation, the education and day care services receive a written report at least once a year, which contains both an analysis of the implementation of non-formal education and proposals for quality development. Possible sanctioning possibilities are linked to the childcare service voucher system. From 2022 onwards, the quality controls carried out by the Ministry and the SNJ will be divided into six areas:

1. The qualification and continuous training of educational staff ('quality of guidance')
2. The relationship between educational staff and children ('quality of interaction')
3. The educational offer of the care and education service, e.g. the diversity of the offer ("quality of the child's experiences")
4. The design of the spaces, e.g. the play materials and the atmosphere of the rooms ("quality of the design of the spaces and materials")
5. Cooperation with parents ("quality of partnership with parents")
6. Constant critical control of one's own work (internal quality management).

Regional officers analyse and highlight the strengths and weaknesses of a service and one of their objectives is to encourage self-reflection, meaning, to help the structures to position themselves in relation to the pedagogical requirements of the reference framework. In order to encourage continuous development, a recently introduced scheme allows educational staff to participate in free in-service training. Given the fact that it is essential that

managers and educational staff are convinced of the need for continuous development of the services provided and thus of the importance of innovation and openness of processes, the use of self-evaluation methods is actively supported by the national reference framework (National Youth Service, 2022b).

### 3. Conclusion

The article has discussed the evolution of the childcare sector in Luxembourg. Since 2019, the expansion of the offer and the financial support provided through the childcare service voucher have both led to an adjustment in the objectives of childcare, and pedagogical considerations have since become increasingly important. With the introduction of several quality assurance measures, the monitoring of pedagogical quality in education and childcare services has, since 2016, received special attention. The national reference framework on non-formal education, validated by a national commission, describes the basic principles and pedagogical implementation and is regularly linked to the educational practices offered in the facilities. The concept of non-formal education places particular emphasis on a child-centred approach, such as on considering the interests and well-being of the child and on encouraging their enjoyment of discovery.

As this shift from childcare to non-formal education implies a rethinking of the pedagogical work, in addition to reflecting on the role of pedagogues, the future of this sector should include the continuation of close cooperation with schools (e.g. in relation to 'plurilingual education') and ensuring that parents can be more involved in pedagogical reflections. In

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addition, a particular challenge could be to take children's views into account and involve them more, to consider their wishes, interests and proposals for change as an integral part of the quality development process.

Finally, the development of quality measures, including the national reference framework, must always be centred on the overall goal of the child's well-being and should be assessed with this objective in mind.

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# Montenegro

## Dimensions of the pre-school curriculum in Montenegro – advantages and challenges

| 1 | Which department/ministry does ECEC sit under? | Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | What programs/settings exist for children between the ages of 0-7? | Pre-school for children aged 0 to 6.<br>Primary school starts at the age of 6. |
| 3 | What percentage of children are in ECEC centers? | In the 2019/2020 school year, the total coverage of pre-school children (aged 0 to 6) in Montenegro came to about 52%.<br>The amount of children attending centres was significantly lower for children up to 3 years of age attending crèche (about 37%) while the number of children attending ECEC centres aged 3 to 6 was significantly higher (around 77%). |
| 4 | Link to national/local curriculum for ECEC | The primary programme consists of:<br>a) The Care and Education Programme for Children Under Three Years, issued in 2011<br>b) The Programme for the Areas of Activity in Pre-school Education for Age Groups Three to Six, issued in 2004 and revised in 2011<br>c) The Brief Programme for Pre-schools – Working with Children About to Enrol in Primary School, issued in 2011<br>d) The Three-Hour Pre-school Educational Programme, issued in 2011<br>e) The Programme for English Language, issued in 2004 and revised in 2016<br>The revision of the programmes for children aged 0 to 3 and 3 to 6, and the programme for English as a second language are ongoing.<br>**Click here for the national curriculum** |
| 5 | Who is responsible for inspecting/monitoring of ECEC? | The Bureau for Education Services monitors the quality of the education process and Education Inspection controls the implementation of the legislative framework. |

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Tatjana Novović works as a professor of pre-school and family pedagogy at the University of Montenegro. In her thirty-year-long career, she has worked as a kindergarten psychologist, an education inspector and an advisor for early childhood and pre-school education. She coordinated the preschool education reform in Montenegro, which was launched in 2000 by the Ministry of Education. She designed and conducted a number of seminars for preschool teachers accredited by the Bureau for Education Services of Montenegro, which were then included in the catalogue of teacher training programmes. She participated in and was a speaker at many domestic and international conferences on pre-school and early childhood development and learning. She is the author of numerous papers and articles published in national and international journals, addressing various pedagogical topics, predominantly those related to pre-school education. From 2012 to 2014, she worked as a coordinator for the Evaluation of Reform of Preschool Education in Montenegro research project.

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Nataša Golubović has worked as an educational supervisor for the Bureau for Education Services of Montenegro since 2017. Nataša previously worked as a high school professor, a pedagogue, an assistant director and a director of a preschool institution. In 2016, the pre-school institution she managed received the highest national recognition in the field of education. She also participated in the reform of pre-school education in Montenegro. She has served as a member of the General Education Council, a curriculum developer, the co-author of the Strategy for Early and Preschool Education and a member of the commission for drafting the law on pre-school education. Throughout her career, she has attended numerous professional development events and provided training and counselling to pre-school teachers, pedagogues and psychologists. She has been involved in a number of projects such as the Inclusion of children with special needs; the Environmental Project; and the Roma Education Initiative.

# Dimensions of the pre-school curriculum in Montenegro – advantages and challenges

## ABSTRACT

The leading theoretical-scientific paradigms, pedagogical-psychological theories of learning, and the dominant models of the child/childhood constitute the foundation of which all concepts for pre-school programmes are based on. The adopted concepts for the programme are designed through various filters, such as: traditional models of work in educational practice; the affirmed best interests of the child; and the teachers' experiences.

After decades of behaviourally-oriented and didactically-specific structured practice, an open and humanistic-oriented programme has been implemented in the Montenegrin pre-school context since 2000. The transition to a new paradigm meant the transformation of the entire pre-school environment, as well as that of internal and external factors of influence, including the children, teachers, families, the wider community, and other stakeholders.

After two decades of experience implementing the current curricula, we have examined the opinions of pre-school teachers from Montenegrin pre-school institutions on the quality of and

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challenges in the implementation of the new programme. We have applied a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, i.e. a questionnaire (of 260 respondents) and interviews (focus groups) with pre-school teachers from the three Montenegrin regions. The results indicate a high level of understanding of the concept and the efficient implementation of the programme in practice, as well as some contradictory attitudes about the quality of the current pre-school environment.

**Keywords:** curriculum, child, open system, pre-school teacher, process

### Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, the research interests of scientists, experts, and practitioners were all intensely focused on the early developmental potential of childhood, from various disciplinary perspectives. The results of extensive and serious research studies unequivocally indicated the significant capabilities of the child when encouraged and complemented by the carefully organised attention of parents and other adults. According to Vygotsky: "What is main and most important in child development happens in the first years, and even in the first months of life. Subsequent development, taken as a whole, is not worth as much an act of this drama, which is largely filled with content" (1983, p. 195).

As regards the quality of the pre-school system

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in general, there are many different perspectives of this complex, ambiguous construct that to discuss. By trying to bring together different dimensions of quality within the pre-school context, we can conditionally make a recognisable distinction between measurable, 'tangible' structural benchmarks and, conversely, procedural, contextual–formative descriptors of the unique processes of the

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educational environment (Novović, 2018).

The structural quality aspects of the pre-school context refer to the pedagogical norms relating to the number of children, the number of pre-school teachers, and other participants directly or indirectly involved in the educational practices, as well as the conditions of the infrastructure for the kindergarten environment. Considering aspects of the pedagogical process across 17 pre-school institutions, the research project "Self-evaluation of Pre-school Education: Quality Evaluation" by Ljubica Marjanovič Umek et al. (according to Kovač Šebart and Hočevar 2014, p. 543) emphasises three key components of the structural, 'indirect' and procedural components, as well as a respective series of indicators across different areas.

In the Jan Peeters Report (2016) on the quality of pre-school education, the qualitative EU framework for early childhood education (ECE) provided the basis for the defining key indicators used to analyse the current situation in our country and the surrounding countries. The quality criteria for assessing the pre-school context were: accessibility, human resources, the curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and the methods of financing the pre-school institutions.

The foundation for the **process in ensuring quality of the pre-school environment** is based on the curriculum, as it functions as a meeting point of the programme and the relational and interactive activities carried out by the institution, as well as serving as a kind of dynamic 'game' in which children, teachers, and other participants in kindergarten life participate.

In this paper, we discuss the key dimensions of the theoretical and scientific concept that forms the basis for the curriculum and the quality of pre-school education in Montenegro, and highlight how the curriculum, the official programme concept, and the methods for the quality assessment are used in pre-school education. We will also review the Strategy of *Early and Pre-school Education in Montenegro 2021–2025*, and list the activities that have been introduced as a result of the Strategy, of which the implementation has already been initiated. Through our survey, the respondents – the practitioners – also reflected on the particular dimensions of quality, and their opinion was taken into account in the implementation of a series of activities.

## 1. Curricula in the pre-school environment

We can find several frameworks for criteria in the basis of choices made within the pre-school programme and its fundamental concepts, with the key criteria being: the **theoretical and scientific paradigms, pedagogical-psychological theories of learning, and the dominant models of the child/childhood.** However, all of the three basic determinants are insufficient, in the sense of being able to lead the programme as a whole, and in particular, being able to implement the curriculum specific, contextual situations. After being officially adopted, the prescribed model inevitably passed through various contextual filters, such as traditionally adopted exemplary models of work in educational practice, culturally adopted values and the best interests of the child, as well as individual-implicit theories of practitioners on desirable pedagogical practice.

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Under the auspices of the **behavioural, theoretical, and scientific concepts**, we find traditional programmes to be linearly arranged, with a detailed didactic structure aimed at the transmission and memorisation of knowledge, with an obvious emphasis on the cognitive domain of child development (Petrović-Sočo, 2013). The effects of such work are, as a rule, assessed through visible/measurable indicators of certain children's achievements and skills. This approach to educational practice seems clear, predictable, and structurally sound, so it is not surprising that it has survived for such a long time in different educational environments, even in our Montenegrin context. Nevertheless, although such a precisely-structured programme and the rigid planning of the educational process seems predictable and comfortable, the practice is always more demanding and multi-faceted. This is especially so in regard to the pre-school environment, as the pre-school teacher is obligated to plan the contents of the programme by months and days, and then prepare and methodically adjust the selected activities according to an imaginary, average child. At the same time, there are always unique dynamics in the educational group, given that each consists of unique participants – both children and adults. In a very structured temporal and spatial organisation of the educational process, teachers turn to transmissible learning strategies, according to the predictable 'pedagogy' focused on the 'average child' (Novović, Mićanović, 2019). The role of a pre-school teacher is that of being dominant, a leader, and a disseminator of information, while a child is given the position of being a receptive listener in the expected hierarchical 'pedagogical order'. A desirable, didactically-oriented environment within these institutions has thus been carefully planned, with children divided into age-specific groups and subjected to the established 'regime' of the day (regardless of the context and situational circumstances). Given such firmly established frameworks for these educational environments and their predominantly one-way communication – from a teacher/pre-school teacher to the child – this specific model of which the curriculum was once based on is, in the scientific literature, referred to as 'engineering' (Stenhouse, 1975) or 'technological' (Elliot, 1998). Contrary to the closed, didactic and strictly organised conception of the programme, modern trends within scientific findings of children's needs and rights (Convention on the Rights of the Child), their potential, changes in pedagogical perceptions and concepts have led to the revision of such curriculum models. For the current model, that of now following a humanistic, developmental concept of upbringing and education, a more holistic approach has been taken in regard to how practitioners think about the child and their environment. This includes a focus on the integration of content from various different fields, and on the partnership/team relationship between children and adults. The new child-oriented programme, and its rough guidelines, enables pre-school teachers to create a more flexible environment, adapted to the needs of the children, parents, other participants, and their unique situational circumstances (Petrović-Sočo, 2013).

## 1.1 The programme in Montenegro – a starting point for designing a new learning environment

In the Montenegrin educational system, a humanistic, goal-oriented programme has been in use for the last two decades. The uniquely conceived reference framework for the programme was operationalised through four primary and two special education programmes.

For the children of crèche age in the **Care Programme (2011)**, specific guidance was given to pre-school teachers on how to organise a responsive learning environment, categorised by age across all developmental domains (physical, socio-emotional, intellectual development, sensory sensitivity and perception, music-rhythmic and communication development) in addition to guidelines on how to choose the appropriate activities

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and teaching tools to support the children, taking into account their differences and specificities. The programme is further structured into ten more specific sections. The overall goal of the programme is outlined out at the top of the guidelines. Following that, the specific, long-term objectives are set for each developmental domain.

The **Programme for Areas of Activity (2011)** highlights the overall objectives of the pre-school education, focusing on cognitive, motor, and affective development, and has been designed from the perspective of the child (Matijević 2010, p. 396). It is divided into seven areas of activity (physical and health activities; language activities; logical-mathematical activities; social interactions and exploring the world; activities of understanding and mastering the environment; art and music activities) (*Programme for Areas of Activity*... 2011, p. 9). For each of these areas, more detailed objectives have been set, which have also been divided into three segments, implying three universal spheres of child development and upbringing, those of: self-discovery and self-mastery; the cultivation of relationships and the development of own knowledge about others; and discovering the world and developing knowledge about it.

The proposed activities were then organised into three separate, coherent units: practical life activities (daily life activities), specific activities (relevant to the nature of the field/area), and the complex activities that combine different areas. This model is open to adaptation depending on the particular educational context and is 'suitable' for the diversity of its participants; however, it is up to the pre-school teachers to ensure it is usable by all participants. The discussed programmes underline the importance of the children's proactive participation in a continuous, permeable, developmental relationship within the context that supports their right to participate, to act autonomously, and the development of a participatory attitude among all those involved.

Finally, the special programmes, Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development are an integral component and a kind of supplement to the *Programme for Areas of Activity* (2011), while also functioning as part of a unique package of sustainable development and entrepreneurial learning programmes for all educational stages in Montenegro. These programmes complement a set of general objectives and guidelines for pre-school children and consist of modern, life-long learning competencies.

### 1.2 The programme in action – thematic planning

In pre-school institutions in Montenegro, pre-school teachers implement the official programme through the thematic planning of the programme objectives, through its principles of: democracy and pluralism, programme openness, equal opportunities, balance, horizontal and vertical integration, cooperation with family and community, team planning, and critical evaluation *(Programme for Areas of Activity*...2011, p. 6). They also start from the developmental and chronological age of the children/groups, current events, the children's interests, proposals from the parents and discussions within the team (ibid., p. 42). In the process of achieving the programme objectives within the thematic units, it is necessary to take into account the correlation between the different *areas*

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*of activity* and between the various development domains (Novović et al. 2015, p. 71). In the process of developing and elaborating on the topics, the pre-school teachers begin with the objectives that will help the children discover/get to know themselves, master practical life activities, through which they will then acquire habits, and further develop skills necessary for achieving independence and solving real-life problems (*Programme for Areas of Activity…* 2011, p.7). At the same time, the practitioners have the autonomy to select the topics, materials, instruments, type of play activities, and contents, and these are predominantly guided by the children's needs, contextual aspects, team judgments, and experience, etc. The level of achievement gained through the projected objectives, specifically looking at the children's progress – monitored through the collection of the children's works and projects in their portfolios – can highlight the success of the pre-school teachers. Through continuous group discourse, both within the kindergarten team and with those outside of it,

such as the parents, the pre-school teachers select the topics, discuss the implemented activities, mark the current challenges in practice and plan the next steps, but more appropriately such that progress can be achieved. In so doing, they combine the programme objectives with the contextual requirements, and the demands of both the children and adults, as well as being able to individualise the activities by taking into account the balance between the different types of work being implemented and their difficulty levels (Mićanović and Novović 2015, p. 905). The main goal of the current pre-school programme in Montenegro is to affirm the understanding of the child as a thinker, who 'learns by working', who has the right to choose and act, following their interests, and who is not conditioned by external requirements and prescribed contents.

## 2. The capacity of the network of pre-school institutions in Montenegro

At present in Montenegro, there are 52 pre-school institutions (21

public and 31 private) with a network of 158 educational units and 790 age-determined groups. In the 2021/2022 school year, 23,008 children were enrolled in pre-school. Of the total number of all children enrolled in pre-school, 47.7% are girls (10,986) and 52.3% are boys (12,022). When compared to the 2020/2021 school year, the data show a 7.9% increase. Of the total number of children in pre-school, 96.1% are enrolled in public institutions. The average number of children per group in public pre-school institutions is 31, and in private the average is 11. Of the total number of employees in pre-school institutions, 47.5% are pre-school teachers (Statistical Office of Montenegro, 2022).

### 2.1 Organisation of daily life in kindergarten as a quality dimension

When we look at the quality of work within each pre-school institution, we cannot just consider the official programme, but we must also look at all dimensions of its actual implementation in practice. The

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> " The key areas for quality control of the pre-school institutions are: (1) upbringing and education, (2) the pre-school institution's management and leadership, (3) the ethos of the institutions, (4) children's development and progress, and (5) the resources of pre-school institutions.

daily organisation of life at the kindergarten includes arranging the environment for play and learning, and the actual implementation of the programme through various forms of interaction between children and adults, in addition to its common rituals, such as eating, regulating hygienic habits and needs, and daily rest. The schedule of daily activities and rituals in pre-school institutions substantially illustrates the culture of living the curriculum in practice. If we talk about the application of the open curriculum in practice, it is evident in the flexible organisation of life within a pre-school institution. In the Montenegrin pre-school system, the predictable organisation of space, time, and rituals is carried out according to the established scheme, which then leads on to hidden support of a "culture of pre-defined restrictions" (Elliott 1998, p. 135). The children are in age-homogenised groups. They do not have the right to decide whether they want to sleep at the prescribed time, to eat, or to be outside their groups, either in play or in learning. The overcapacity of pre-schools in the central and coastal regions of Montenegro significantly complicates the position and rights of children to have the appropriate space, free play, variety of interactional activities, active involvement of parents, availability of teaching aids, and individualised planning (Novović 2017).

Thus, the combination of the above elements in regard to the organisation of pre-school life indicates an implicit collision between: the declared concept of focusing on the children's authentic needs; the strong messages coming from the professional and cultural heritage behind the system that gives it its power; and the decision making of the adults, and primarily the pre-school teachers.

**3. The mechanisms for quality control of the pre-school practice**

From 2021, the revised *Methodology for ensuring and improving the quality of the educational process in pre-school institutions, schools, education centres, adult education institutions, and student dormitories* (hereinafter Methodology) has been applied in the evaluation of the educational process of the pre-school institution. This document defines key areas, standard requirements and indicators, quality assessment methods, and quality assessment procedures. The key areas for the pre-school institutions are: (1) upbringing and education, (2) the pre-school institution's management and leadership, (3) the ethos of the institutions, (4) children's development and progress, and (5) the resources of pre-school institutions. The requirements of the quality standards can be understood as statements about quality practice or conditions in which it can be achieved. The indicators, represented as definitions, are used to measure the achievement of the standard. The evaluation process includes determining the extent to which the indicators describing

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the standard are present. The degree to which the indicators are present is assessed by looking at the frequency and quality of their representation in practice, the documentation, and other data sources.

A team of educational supervisors collected, analysed and processed all of the data related to the subject of evaluation and assessed the quality of educational work provided by the institution. Quality assessment is performed by applying the adopted assessment scale, with four levels of achievement: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, successful, and very successful.

*The Methodology* was applied in 28 institutions in 2021. After reviewing the findings of the evaluation of individual pre-school institutions, it was possible to identify certain challenges in regard to the comprehensiveness of the applied instrument. Thus, the innovation of the mentioned *Methodology* is still in progress, relying on the supervisors' experiences, and comparative indicators from the surrounding countries (Slovenia and Serbia).

Through continuous monitoring and evaluation of the educational process, and the use of various instruments (questionnaires for parents, checklists, various types of narrative and anecdotal notes, observation protocols, process videos, etc.), as well as when filling out pedagogical documentation and work diaries, pre-school teachers have the opportunity to reflect on their practice. In addition to this aspect, they also try to review and harmonise their perspectives with those of the children and other participants, to improve their plans and pedagogical procedures, all while keeping the ultimate goal at the forefront – the welfare of the child.

## 4. Strategic framework for innovations in pre-school education in Montenegro for the period 2021–2025

*The Strategy for Early and Pre-school Education in Montenegro* for the period 2021–2025 was officially adopted in 2021. The basis for this document came from an analysis of the current situation in pre-school education and a long-term vision to provide access to pre-school education to all children in Montenegro, to ensure they have the best possible start in life, and as a prerequisite for the development of all their potentials.

Strategic goal:

> *Creating equal opportunities for the early development of all children in Montenegro by strengthening the accessibility, quality, and fairness of pre-school education.*

This strategic goal is implemented through three operational objectives that provide the foundation for all of the measures and activities proposed for the period 2021–2025, which should lead to improved accessibility, quality, and fairness of the pre-school education on offer:

> *Operational objective 1: Expand the pre-schools*

By 2025, increase the overall number of pre-school aged children involved in pre-school education programmes and provide total coverage for 60% of children in Montenegro, with 30% coverage of children under the age of 3 and 90% for children aged 3 to 6 years old.

Modernise the existing Plan and Programme for Pre-school Education following the latest scientific findings and best international practices that will lead to the overall development of each child's potential and improve the quality assurance system in line with the EU framework for high-quality pre-school education, through to 2025.

> *Operational objective 3: Improving early childhood development among vulnerable groups*

By 2025, improve the existing system for supporting early childhood development among vulnerable groups by providing support to parents, and increase the involvement of children in such groups in quality pre-school programmes in order to improve the Early Development Index (EDI) of children from the poorest families from 76 to 85[1] (Strategy of *Early and Pre-school Education* in Montenegro for the *Period* 2021–2025, p. 21)

### 4.1 Improving and ensuring the quality of pre-school education in Montenegro
One of the priority goals of the *Strategy* is to improve the quality of pre-school education. This could be achieved by: reducing class sizes; designing and implementing the revised programme; harmonising the existing professional development system with the EU framework; improving the content and practice of the pre-school teachers' initial education; improving the existing quality assurance system; strengthening support for parents and families; revising the work regime; and improving the quality of nutrition, as well as the activities used in the transition from kindergarten to primary school.

### 4.1.1 Reducing class size (1)
The analysis of the current situation showed that in many public pre-school institutions, the average class size is much larger than that which is recommended as pedagogically normative. In this regard, it is necessary to ensure that the number of children in each group adheres to pedagogical standards. One of the possible solutions for this could be to expand the capacity of pre-school institutions, which has been achieved to some extent in the last few years.

In addition, another possibility is to further rationalise the educational process by reorganising the way in which pre-school institutions operate. Reducing the class size will demand an increase in the number of pre-school teachers. Hiring new teachers, pedagogues and psychologists requires a detailed analysis of the current situation, comes with its own restrictions and opportunities, and would need the formulation of a realistic plan to be able to actually increase the number of employees working in each institution.

### 4.1.2 Development and implementation of an updated Plan and Programme (2)
The analysis of the current situation regarding the methods used and the functionality of the pre-school institutions pointed out certain challenges and possible directions to

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[1] *The early development of children depends primarily on the family environment, meaning both the extent to which parents apply developmentally stimulating practices and the extent to which the children are involved in high-quality pre-school programmes. When it comes to children from vulnerable groups, the EDI also depends on the extent to which families and children receive adequate support through healthcare and social services.*

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take in improving the quality of pre-school education, such that children in Montenegro are provided with conditions that are more desirable when it comes to encouraging early progress and learning. It is necessary to harmonise the existing quality of pre-school education with the EU framework for high-quality pre-school education, such that children in Montenegro have the same chances for the early development of their potential as their peers in other EU countries. Finally, in the previous period, a couple of specific, innovative programmes were developed (interactive services, three-hour programmes) and the pre-school institutions have been encouraged to develop special programmes that respond to the needs of the children and parents. Diversification of the programme is required in order to successfully democratise the pre-school system and ensure the right of each child and their parents to choose the educational content that best suit their needs.

In line with contextual changes, research results, and the latest scientific findings in the field of early development and learning, it is necessary to innovate the current curriculum, following the best interests of the children. Taking into account the humanistic-developmental and socio-constructivist model, the new programme should be an improved version of the previous concept, and serve as a framework for the

planning of topics and projects in practice within the pre-school institutions. The open nature of this programme enables practitioners to develop context-appropriate topics and projects in an autonomous, creative way, implementing them through appropriate research, as well as flexible and culturally-suitable activities. At the same time, the preschool institution 'lives' in a changing context and these external and internal determinants should be carefully observed and functionally incorporated into the kindergarten environment (Slunjski, 2016).

The Strategy action plan stipulates that the Bureau for Education Services should provide adequate support to all Montenegrin pre-school institutions in the process of implementing the new programme during the school year 2022/2023 and 2023/2024.

## 5. Dimensions of pre-school practice from the point of view of pre-school teachers

In order to get a more thorough understanding of the dimensions of quality, the aspects of insufficiency, and the more expedient directions for development of the programme, the team tasked with drafting a new document conducted a survey across the entire community of pre-school teachers working in Montenegrin pre-schools. The questionnaire – designed by members of the team (including the author of this paper) and based

> " We focused on the following topics: quality, suitability, sustainability of the programme, professional development of pre-school teachers, working conditions, and forms of cooperation between teachers and parents.

on the revision of pre-school programmes – was sent to pre-school teachers in all Montenegrin pre-school institutions via Google Drive in January of 2022. 260 respondents answered the survey questions. We categorised the answers according to selected topics, all of which describe the quality of the pre-school system from the point of view of our respondents. After having established the thematic classifications, we compiled the particularly interesting answers we received from the three focus groups, each of which consisted of seven pre-school teachers. Through this, we focused on the following topics: quality, suitability, sustainability of the programme, professional de-

velopment of pre-school teachers, working conditions, and forms of cooperation between teachers and parents.

## 5.1 Dimensions of the pre-school curriculum and the role of pre-school teachers

### 5.1.1 Quality of the Programme from the teachers' perspectives

When asked about the extent to which the current programme was useful, most of the respondents (247 of them) answered positively.

In analysing the separate components of the programme (objectives, areas, types of activities, didactic-methodical instructions), the results showed that the respondents answered very similarly, choosing predominantly affirmative options for each of the offered segments, that of being either completely and very useful etc. There were no extremely negative answers. As there were no differences between these responses and those of the interviewed respondents, we combined the answers, all of which support the overall picture of the quality, operability, and effectiveness of the current programmes. The answers given to the question "What would you rate as particularly good in the Programme for the Areas of Activitiy (from 3 to 6 years)?" were quite consistent.

By analysing the content of the answers as a valid "research technique for concluding systematically identified specific characteristics of the text" (Manić, 2017), the positive dimensions of the programme were pinpointed. Specifically, the answers evidenced that: the objectives are comprehensive and clear, the areas of activity are comprehensive and, in addition to the activities and principles, the didactic-methodical instructions are also useful. The respondents assessed the opportunity to create a plan based on the children's interests as very useful.

The most common answers to the question "What is missing in the programme?" were: more recommended activities; lack of help in activities with the local community and in organising more frequent visits out in nature for the children; recommended literature; clearer and more specific objectives; various practical examples; and more practical instructions for working with children with special needs.

In practice, the thematic-integrative planning and development part of the current programme is particularly dominant. We also assessed what pre-school teachers think about "the future" programme.

In the future, teachers 'see' the indicative, flexible principle of planning as the most appropriate form of planning, but they also mention project planning as another efficient and effective model.

As this humanistic-interactionist paradigm has been applied in Montenegro for almost two decades already, the planning process has been adapted to the "open approach" and involves the thematic connection of different concepts, adapted to the pre-school context. As expected, the surveyed teachers answered that they mostly plan according to theme (88.8%). Other respondents cited a few other "sources", i.e. methods of planning, complementary to the thematic approach. By combining the answers from the questionnaire and the focus group discussions, we can conclude that pre-school teachers have largely accepted and fully adopted a flexible, humanistic-developmental curriculum of an integrative nature.

### 5.1.2 The role and place of teachers in pre-school practices

When it comes to assessing the quality of the pre-school environment, we combined structural and process variables and discovered that the pre-school teacher is at the centre of all dimensions, functioning as a key architect of the educational atmosphere within the kindergarten. Working under the understanding that they must prioritise the role of the child and ensure constant reciprocity and interaction in the lively, dynamic environment of the pre-school institution, the role of the pre-school teacher is thus complex and requires a particularly complex set of skills. If the teachers aim to achieve all of these

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lifelong skills required for working with children, they should enter the workplace with these skills, strive to further improve them and use them. Interestingly, the perception of the practitioners in regard to the type, quality, and model of professional development provided, significantly correlates with the way in which they perceive the programme or curriculum.

When asked about desirable models of professional development, a majority of pre-school teachers chose the option of one-day seminars (66.9%). It is also very encouraging to see that 41.5% of respondents prefer thematic reflective sessions with fellow teachers, pedagogues, and psychologists in their institution, which is a prerequisite for the gradual transition of 'ownership' of the practice to actors themselves as well as a departure from the linear pedagogical-didactic strategy of work prescribed from 'the outside'.

When asked about skills they thought they were lacking, the pre-school teachers mentioned a few more areas they felt could be improved, namely: managing their professional development; record-keeping; working with children with disabilities and involving professionals in this (assistants are useful but untrained); knowledge of musical instruments; the English language; digital competencies; working with gifted children; creating a learning community; and cooperation with the local community. Clarke-Stewart (1991) highlighted the fact that the parents themselves don't think too much about the long-term effects of early childhood development, but are predominantly interested in ensuring the best environment for the education of their children, essentially referring to the role of pre-school teachers.

Taking into account that cooperation with family is an integral part of the curriculum being properly implemented in pre-school, there has been doubt among its practitioners of their obligation to continuously strive to improve this element. However, the new concept initiated much more intensive and diverse cooperation between the two systems – the family and the institution.

The results of the survey, the analysis of the content of current programmes, the review of the latest research findings, and the comparative analysis of the most successful programmes in the region and beyond (Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Finland, UK, New Zealand), have all provided the basis for the updated curriculum model for pre-schools in Montenegro.

### 5.1.3 Development directions of pre-school education in Montenegro

One of the main objectives in the coming period for the field of pre-school education in Montenegro is to improve the existing quality assurance system. The *Strategy* anticipates the integration of the mechanisms of the existing quality assurance system (Montenegrin Education Information System – MEIS, school portal, pedagogical supervision, fairs of innovative practices, etc.) alongside the development of new mechanisms (centres of excellence, training rooms, pre-school teacher-mentors, etc.). The new single and efficient system will enable regular quality monitoring at the level of the entire pre-school system and the level of the individual pre-school institutions. The plan for the system is to focus on advisory work and quality improvement, and not on administrative control. In this regard, the goal is to modernise the system of pedagogical supervision.

The next goal is to strengthen the support it offers for parents and families. The analysis of the current situation indicates that there is a need to provide more support to parents, based on the positive experiences of having implemented the *Parenting for Lifelong Health* programme. Support should be provided to all parents. Somewhat more attention should also be paid to parents whose children do not attend the pre-schools. This could be achieved through short programmes implemented by pre-school institutions as well as through media content aimed at parents and children. The experience gained during the COVID-19 pandemic will be useful in planning these activities.

The partnership programmes intended for parents should also be applicable to foster families.

Establishing a more flexible work regime in pre-schools is one of the key activities outlined in the plan. In order to provide for a more flexible organisation of work, in accordance with the open, humanistically-oriented programme, it will be necessary to find the optimal distribution of the entire work process, while respecting the individual needs, differences in interests, knowledge, and affinities of the children. According to one of the teachers interviewed for the study, it would be "impossible to change the rhythm of daily activities as long as the class size exceeds that of the norm and the number of employees remains the same".

Ways in which to optimise the time-space dynamics could include: free activities; parental involvement; additional outdoor activities; additional space (workrooms) for practical activities; introducing as much didactic material as possible to suit everyone's interests; projects that would direct those interests; new working methods; and places of implementation (outside and inside). Moreover, pre-schoolers should be allowed to choose whether or not they want to sleep during the day.

These requirements require a highly competent, autonomous pre-school teacher, who observes, monitors, documents and plans the educational process, with continuous respect for the particular context of which they work. As a result, the Strategy chose to emphasise the requirement to improve the professional skills of all pre-school teachers during their own education and for the continuous professional development of practitioners, in accordance with the EU framework.

Special attention should be paid to planning the activities for the transition from the family and pre-school environment to primary school. Pre-school teachers create portfolios that contain information about each child's progress.

A quality portfolio enables the systematic monitoring of a child's development throughout their time in kindergarten and ensures continuity when moving from one age group to another, as well as when enrolling in school. "A well-made portfolio, which the parent submits upon enrolment in primary school, contains information that is more useful for school staff in the process of adapting the curriculum than the maturity tests for starting school are. In order to ensure the quality of this resource, especially in the transition from kindergarten to primary school, it is necessary to: (a) improve the skills of pre-school teachers in their monitoring of early childhood development and recording of relevant information in the portfolio; (b) improve cooperation between kindergartens, primary schools and parents in the process of preparing and implementing the transition programme; and (c) ensure better cooperation between pre-school institutions and the centres for social work and healthcare institutions in the case of children from vulnerable groups." (Strategy p. 35)

Increasing the number of children from vulnerable groups attending ECEC centres as well as their integration into pre-school education programmes is one of the most important activities outlined in plan for the coming period. Improvement of the inter-sectoral cooperation between the pre-school

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institutions and centres for social work, as well as the healthcare system, has been put forward. In this regard, the main aim is to improve the support provided to parents from vulnerable groups.

The expansion and enhancement of interactive services are also included in the Strategy plans. These services have been established across 17 municipalities throughout Montenegro in the previous period and have made pre-school education more accessible to children living in remote settlements.

The working group responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Strategy of Early and Pre-school Education in Montenegro 2021–2025 will be composed of representatives of the institutions identified through activities within the Action Plan (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare) and the NGO sector.

The findings of the evaluation will determine further areas of improvement in early and pre-school education.

**Conclusion**
In this paper, we discussed several topical issues in the field of pre-school education, primarily in Montenegro but also beyond the Montenegrin school system. Experience tells us that theory and practice are inevitably intertwined. It is impossible to discuss the key dimensions of the theoretical-sci-

> " Increasing the number of children from vulnerable groups attending ECEC centres as well as their integration into pre-school education programmes is one of the most important activities outlined in plan for the coming period.

entific concept providing the foundation for the curriculum, the quality of pre-school education in Montenegro, the curriculum itself, the programme concept, and ways to determine the quality of pre-school education without exchanging such experiences in this field with our neighbouring countries. We also discussed the results of the survey and the interviews with pre-school teachers in Montenegro. Finally, we have highlighted the outcome of the analysis of work currently carried out in Montenegrin pre-school institutions according to the *Methodology* applied by the supervisors of the Bureau for Education Services and, singled out the key guidelines required to improve the quality of pre-school education, according to the newly adopted *Strategy of Early and Pre-school Education in Montenegro for 2021–2025*.

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# Netherlands

## Challenges involved in working with young children

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|---|---|---|
| **1** | **Which department/ministry does ECEC sit under?** | Ministry of Education, Culture and Science & Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment |
| **2** | **What programs/settings exist for children between the ages of 0-7?** | There are several early childhood programmes available that can be used in early childhood settings. All programmes have their own characteristics that are better or less suited to a particular setting. The choice of programme often depends on the school policy and culture, and on the team's vision of working with young children. |
| **3** | **What percentage of children are in ECEC centers?** | Early childhood education (VVE) is part of the educational disadvantage policy (OAB). The aim of early childhood education is to give children at risk of educational disadvantage (due to characteristics of their environment) a better start in group 3 (Grade 1) of primary school.<br>Pre-school education (VE) is aimed at children aged 2.5 to 4 with a (risk of) educational disadvantage. A pre-school facility, such as a pre-school or daycare centre, provides pre-school education. Early childhood education is for promoting educational opportunities for target group children in groups 1 and 2 (K1 and K2) of primary school.<br>In 2021: 823,000 children went to childcare<br>• 57,900 toddlers are covered by the municipal target group definition as at 2021<br>• 89 percent of these children were reached according to the municipal target group definition<br>• In 2021: 342,519 children aged 4 to 6 attended primary schools (K1 and K2)<br>• At schools with early childhood education, the reach of the target group is 100 percent |
| **4** | **Link to national/local curriculum for ECEC** | There is no nationally established curriculum to be used by all early childhood institutions. |
| **5** | **Who is responsible for inspecting/ monitoring of ECEC?** | The Community Health Service (GGD) and the Education Inspectorate are both responsible for inspecting the quality of early childhood education in the childcare centers.<br>The Education Inspectorate is also responsible for inspecting the quality of pre-school education at primary schools.<br>The finances of early childhood education (2 to 6 years) is monitored by the municipalities. |

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# Challenges involved in working with young children

## ABSTRACT

Pedagogical staff and teachers are professionals who provide education in childcare and preschool groups. They face an important task as they have to give all children a good start to their school career. There is no national curriculum but there are only attainment targets in the Netherlands. SLO developed a framework for early childhood education (2 – 7 years). Professionals can use this framework as a tool for developing their own learning objectives. To achieve this, they have to face five challenges: Working together from a shared vision (challenge 1); Responding appropriately to children's development (challenge 2); Maintaining dialogue (challenge 3); Formulating learning objectives and developing well-reasoned activities within meaningful themes (challenge 4); Optimal learning opportunities for all children (challenge 5). In this chapter, we discuss these five challenges, provide tools and guidelines and describe some good practices from the Netherlands.

**Professional is here taken to mean:** a pedagogical worker or teacher for Group 1 and/or 2. In some situations we use educators instead professionals, when the situation is directly related to upbringing children.

## Introduction

At the time a child is born, it has already undergone a complex process of development, and this development then continues throughout its life. The process is reflected in changes in the body. It is also reflected in the way a person behaves, moves, talks and the way a person enters into and maintains social contacts. It all takes place in an environment that involves interaction between the child and this environment. It might seem as if physical development happens by itself and that the environment only exerts an influence in terms of behaviour and social relationships. But this is not the case. Research has shown that the influence of the physical and social environment does indeed have an influence on the development of the brain and hence on the overall development of a human being (Leseman, 2002). The richer and more stimulating the environment, the more opportunities the child receives to experience its own latent possibilities and to use these in interaction with its environment. This strongly promotes the child's development. Moreover, the child itself will construct its environment so as to gain maximum benefit from it. So, predisposition and environment, and the interaction between them, are responsible for ongoing development. In this chapter we set out the implications of this for the curriculum for young children (toddlers and pre-schoolers) on the basis of five challenges.

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## Three widespread visions on education for young children:

### Experience-based

In experienced-based education, children have everything they need to development. They are given plenty of space to discover, to gain experience and to find their own learning path. The starting point for this development is the children's own experiences, not a fixed programme, curriculum or educational content. The professional ensures a rich playing and learning environment and uses goals as a guide.

### Programme-based

In programme-based education it is assumed that children's development can be shaped. Here, knowledge is seen as an offering that can divided up into smaller portions, with the content as the key element. An analysis leads to formulation of a path along which the children are guided in an almost systematic manner towards the goals. The key feature of this vision is that children have little or no input in the choice of what is offered. "The source of development lies in the content of the curriculum, not in the needs and the environment of the pupil" (van Oers, 2005). Institutions for early childhood education that work on the basis of this vision generally employ a programme or textbook.

### Development-based

Development-based education can be said to be midway between the experience-based and programme-based approaches. The source of development is interaction. In contrast to the other two approaches, interaction (and play) with young children is a precondition for initiating and maintaining the development. The child's attention and interests and the activities are the motor of development. Through interaction with the child, the professional ensures that they can connect with the child's proximal development. Goals serve to maintain the professional's focus on children's development and on this basis they ensure an appropriate and well-reasoned offering.

## Curricular Spider Web for the Young Child

"The core of a curriculum generally relates to the goals and content of learning. Changes in this core usually imply changes in other elements of the curriculum as well. One way of visualising these various aspects in a coherent way is the curricular spider web." (Van den Akker, 2003). Each aspect of the spider web matches a curriculum-related question.

- **RATIONALE** – For what purpose do young children play and learn?

- **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES** - Towards which goals do young children play and learn?

- **LEARNING CONTENT** - What are they learning?

- **PLAYING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES** - How are they learning?

- **THE ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL**- How is the professional facilitating the playing and learning of young children?

- **MATERIALS AND RESOURCES** - With what are young children playing and learning?

- **GROUPING** – With whom do young children play and learn?

- **LOCATION** - Where are young children playing and learning?

- **TIME** - When are young children playing and learning?

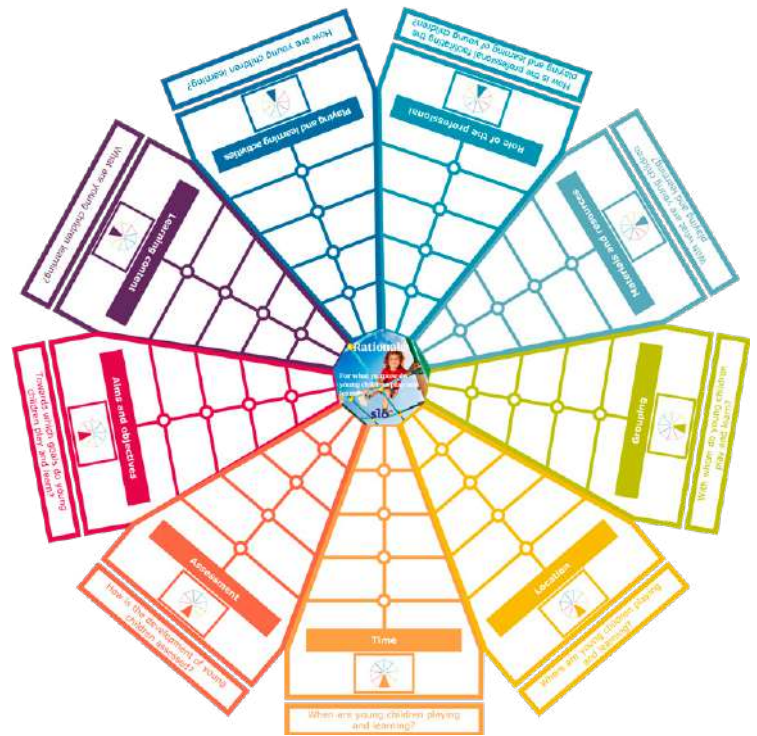- **ASSESSMENT** - How is the development of young children assessed?



**Figure 1.** *Curricular Spider Web for the Young Child*

**Challenge 1: Working together from a shared vision**
A vision of development is the starting point for designing proposals for education and teaching (Knoster, 1991). Institutions for early childhood education also need to formulate a vision regarding the development of young children, and this vision must be supported and shared by all involved professionals. This vision forms the basis for providing education to young children. Generally, the Netherlands has three distinct visions on education for young children: experience-based, programme-based and development-based education (see text box 1). Institutions for early childhood education frequently uses elements from these visions to shape and implement their own vision. A certain degree of overlap is often present, but there are also major differences. This creates room for discussion: sometimes about diffuse, implicit common-sense opinions about good education, sometimes about clearly formulated educational philosophies.

**Forming a vision with the curriculum spider web**
Education and teaching must closely match the development of the young child. A clear and shared vision on how education and teaching can be in line with

the young child's development is a precondition for optimum provision of play and learning facilities. Many professionals feel the need for more a concrete rendering of their school's or institution's vision, towards a more specific vision of early childhood education. One way of visualising these various aspects in a coherent way is SLO's curriculum spider web (see text box 2).

The centre and threads of the spider web refer to ten aspects of a curriculum. The central and connecting element in the curriculum spider web is the rationale or vision. All other curriculum aspects are connected to the rationale. Ideally, these are also connected to each other, hence creating consistency and coherence. The metaphor of the spider web underlines the vulnerable nature of a curriculum. Spider webs are flexible to some extent, but they are in danger of tearing if a thread is pulled to hard and exclusively without the other threads moving as well.

When forming a rationale, each of these curriculum aspects need to be given its own content; under no circumstances should these be in conflict with each other. This means careful consideration of questions such as: Do the chosen learning goals genuinely match the formulated basic rationale? Does the chosen learning content match the learning goals? Do the chosen play and learning materials match the content? This process of vision formation is

"**Content cards provide great freedom for activities, lesson materials and intended learning pupil behaviour.**

a team process. Within the commitment of all team members to the rationale there is a risk of confusion and resistance, and this can have consequences for the matching of the play and learning content. In conjunction with this curriculum spider web SLO has developed a game that lets a team work together to 'build' a rationale. This vision game reveals similarities and differences in vision within the team and it compiles input for a shared rationale for educating young children.

**Challenge 2: Responding appropriately to development**
The goal of early childhood education is to promote children's broad development. This is sometimes also referred to as 'the development of competence'. In this case the goal of working with young children becomes 'support and stimulate the continued development of the competence of the children'.

We can see the status of the child's development by the way that the child handles itself, its contacts with others and the situation in which it lives. Through observation the professional sees whether a child's competence is increasing. Does it understand what is happening? And is this understanding increas-

ing? Does it enjoy play? Is it willing to explore its surroundings? Can it make simple plans?

Children's development comes about through a complex interaction predisposition and environment. A child develops in this environment if it is 'addressed' in terms of what it needs. This requires sensitive and responsive behaviour by the professional. A child will increasingly draw benefit from this environment: it will pick up more from its surroundings, will grow ever better at recognising for itself 'what can be learned' and is able to find its way in its environment. One could say a child grows along with this environment. Assuming that there is an open and unimpeded interaction between the child and the (good) environment, the toddler will flourish in the toddler environment, the pre-schooler in the pre-school environment and the children of Grade 1 and 2 in their environment.

**Pedagogical and didactical principles**
We apply the following principle with regard to the development of children. Development takes place through interaction between predisposition and environment, and both these aspects are responsible

for progress in development. The interaction has a number of qualitative characteristics. Children want to be together with people, they want to belong. They seek contact and maintain this contact. Children want to get to know their environment. They feel the need to assign meaning to their own existence and to the world in which they live. Children express this through their great curiosity and a lot of activity. Children want to be autonomous, which means that they want to be the owner of their own developmental and learning processes. They only share productively in relationships and meaningful events if they are able to participate actively in these. This is in line with the three basic needs of children as formulated by Luc Stevens (1997): relationship (I am valued by others), autonomy (I can carry out tasks by myself) and competency (I have faith in my own abilities). This also makes children more aware of their own learning process.

Children can develop if a number of conditions are met. In order to undergo development a child needs child educators with whom it has a secure relationship. This is achieved when the educator senses and understands (sensitivity) what a child needs at a certain moment and hence provides this (responsivity). So, they need a relationship in which they are well cared for, in which others recognise their needs and meet these. Furthermore, a child requires a rich environment in which it can experiment as it desires and can share its experiences with important other persons, such as the professional and the other children from the group. They need to be given space to explore and discover their world. Also, they need to be able to share their resulting discoveries, fears, joys and possible disappointments with another person who accepts their feelings and helps them to make these experiences clear to themselves. It is also important that children experience a certain degree of continuity in the possibilities for entering into relationships, for discovering their environment and for developing initiatives. This also means that their educators agree with each other about important issues in upbringing and education.

All these conditions can be summed up with the term 'security'. Children need to attach themselves to people who can give them this sense of security. This gives them the freedom to go on a journey of discovery without being left in the lurch by the professional, and then to return with new experiences to an environment in which these experiences can be shared (Jongerius & Beernink, 1993). Various theories of developmental psychology and pedagogy support the importance of treating children in sensitive responsivity way. This attitude and the skills of the professional have a positive effect on the children, resulting in exploratory behaviour, an eagerness to learn, good collaboration with others and a good attitude to work. Stability and continuity in these pedagogical preconditions increases the children's sense of security and forms a good basis for the developmental progress. Professionals working with young children frequently asks themself: how can I encourage this child in its development? Here they keep various goals in mind: both developmental aims and goals regarding the content-related learning pathways.

**Systematic action**
Planning actions is a little like a game: if you do this, then I will do that. When planning, professionals respond to what children find, or might possibly find, interesting and compelling. They take the initiative to provide something new. The planned activities always contain something the children will find challenging: 'You can also do this using what you already know' – and also – 'This is something completely new'. The children take up the challenge at their own level and prompted by their own motivation of working and playing with what is offered. The implementation of the plan is also a game between the professional and the children: what can we together do with these 'good ideas' that form the activities? Are children allowed to remain the 'owner' of their playing and learning processes? This can be done be following the plan presented by the professional, if children apply

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themselves enthusiastically and in their own way. But it can also mean that the children come up with good play ideas for themselves and the professional supports these children in their own plans; here professionals must be willing to drop their own plan in favour of the children's one.

**Observation: What do you look at?**
Responding to development taking place in children requires observation and monitoring of each child (Van der Linde & Klein Tank, 2014). By watching, asking and listening you can gather information on this. Observation has two basic variants: professionals observe while working with the children, or they observe while temporarily taking up a position outside the group. In the first case professionals form part of the children playing environment. They watch and listen to children while working and playing with them. In a situation like this they can explore boundaries: by engaging in play they can elicit certain behaviour. For instance: can a child already make reference to colours and particular forms in a puzzle in order to combine these pieces into a whole? Or: does it already makes a plan for itself when playing at, for instance, the sand table? They can also ask questions to find out what a child is thinking or feeling. For instance: 'Oh, you thought it was already time to eat some fruit? Was that why you went and sat at the big table?' Here professionals have the various points on an observation list in their head, so to speak, and they use these observation points to watch the child.

Sometimes it is better to create a little space and to observe the children from a distance. For instance, if professionals have serious concerns about the development of a child,

## Observation instruments

Professionals must be able to form a picture of the progress being made in the children's development. They need this in order for their daily planned activities to match and to stimulate the development of the children. Their daily planned activities include, among other things, observing the children and reflecting on their own behaviour. They can systematically make entries in the observation list at regular intervals and so create an overall impression of the children. They carry out all these activities on the basis of their own professionalism.

In the Netherlands, various observation instruments are available for tracking, recording and also stimulating the development of toddlers and pre-schoolers. These observation instruments can help professionals to make responsible choices when offering content to young children. This offered content should be suitable both for children with a development deficit and for children who are ahead in their developments. Since 2013, SLO has been charting which content-related objectives occur in widely used child monitoring systems aimed at young children. This work is done on behalf of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. In these analyses, SLO focusses on the goals for language, early numeracy and mathematics, social-emotional and physical education. In this way SLO aims to provide an objective picture of the systems. Each report comprises three sections. In the first section the publisher provides a response to the conducted analysis and the analysis report. The second section is an objective description of the observation instrument. The third section reproduces the analysis results in tabular form, possibly with an explanation of the analysis results.

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or if they are not yet familiar with the observation list they use. In such a case they can grant themselves a time-out to observe in a calm manner. As such moments, however, the group needs support from another professional.

The information provided through observation can be recorded in various ways. The things that professionals see spontaneously can be noted down in their digital logbook or group notebook. Another option is to make a file including all children in which items can be compiled and notes can be entered that provide information in some way about their development. Equipped with all this information, professionals can make statements about the developmental progress of children. And creating the playing and learning environment that meets the children's needs. In this way the environment makes an optimum contribution to the child's development.

**Challenge 3: Maintaining dialogue**
Children do not develop 'spontaneously'. Their development comes about through the interaction between them and the environment in which they grow up. This includes mutual interaction between children and interaction between the child and adults. Educators and professionals can encourage and guide the development by ensuring pedagogical preconditions in which the interaction takes place, as well as a rich environment in which children can acquire a wide range of experiences. The dialogue between the child and the professional, and also between the children themselves, is of crucial importance here.

**The professional as mediator**
In the child's journey of discovery, professionals play a very important role. They are

> " **Observation instruments can help professionals to make responsible choices when offering content to young children.**

close to the children and simultaneously are already fully established in the world that the children are discovering. They listen to what children say and through their behaviour see what aspects of their environment they are able to grasp. Professionals are able to speak the 'common language' and know the meaning of things and situations: the meaning as perceived by grown-ups, and which the children need to learn little by little. One could say they mediate between the world of the young child and the world of the grown-ups: they listen to children's language and provide them language, they value the children's views of things and at the same time let them discover that there are also other, more general meanings. In other words: the professional mediates between the language of children and the common language, and mediates between the meaning assigned to things by the children and the general meaning that is valid in a certain culture. The most important developmental task is the development of assigning meaning to things and situations. Here, language as instrument plays an important role, as well as the competency to imagine things (Jongerius & Beernink, 1993).

**Interaction skills**
Interaction skills is a frequently cited term in Dutch early childhood education. First, this refers to how professionals interact with the

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children, but it also refers to guiding the interactions between children. Here, respect for the autonomy of a child plays an important role. How well do professionals respond to the signals given by a toddler or pre-schooler? It also involves 'talking and explaining' when providing education or teaching. The mutual interaction between professionals is another issue that should not be forgotten. Particularly in the context of an ongoing development and learning path, it is crucial that communication takes place between the pedagogical staff of the pre-school institution and the teachers of Kindergarten, or between the colleagues of Kindergarten and Grade 1.

**Challenge 4: Formulating learning objectives and developing well-reasoned activities within meaningful themes**
Theme-based work originates in toddler and pre-school groups (K1 and K2), as well as in Grade 1. The educationalist Ovide Decroly introduced themes into teaching at the end of the 19th century. He felt that education should match the interests of children and so he developed the idea of working with themes, which he also called centres of interest. This brought offered education into relationship with the theme. Decroly worked with themes that corresponded to the fundamental needs of children, such as food, health, clothing, protection and the need to cooperate and play. Besides Decroly, other educationalists such as Ligthart, Dewey and Vygotsky pointed to the importance of theme-based work (Rietveld-van Wingerden, 2019).

Theme-based work, the thematising approach and a well-reasoned educational offering are all closely interlinked. For instance, theme-based work without a well-reasoned education offering has little to no significance for children and will hence contribute less to their development and learning. The activities in a theme without a well-reasoned offering will tend to be as coherent as loose sand. Working with a theme on a well-reasoned basis is a dynamic process between children and the professional. This process is called the 'thematising approach'.

**Choosing a theme and an activating title**
A theme can be regarded as an entirety of coherent activities, in which both children and professionals combine knowledge and skills with socio-cultural activities. This definition is based on statements by Vygotsky (Jansen-Vos, 2010), who argued that the development of children is strongly influenced by the socio-cultural world in which they grow up. Children are interested in and curious about the world around them. Hence, they are intrinsically motivated to play in relation to and to work on the content of a theme. Vygotsky's

## " Education an teaching must closely match the development of the young child.

thinking and research have been of huge value to the contemporary view of working with a theme in early childhood education.

A well-reasoned choice of a theme stimulates the children's motivation to get to grips with what they encounter. But it is not only the choice of theme that is important: the title you give a theme also influences its success. Often one tends to choose overly broad

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themes. This sometimes renders the theme less interesting to children, and it is harder to implement for the professional. Hence, it is important to think carefully about the title. In this way the theme is rendered both smaller and more active and it becomes livelier for the children. A title such as 'The chicken lays eggs' appeals more to the imagination than 'Children's Farm'. The exciting title 'Let's make a new bed for Little Bear' provides direct inspiration for adding theme-specific materials to role plays, the (play) corners and other activities. These materials can include things like a measuring rod with marked measuring units, a clock with opening hours of the hardware store and folders from the hardware store. Other themes that appeal to young children are things like: doing the shopping together, cooking food and eating it together, going on a journey or 'my bike is broken'. These are all situations closely related to the world as children experience it. The thematising approach creates coherence between the goals addressed within the theme. By focusing here on a limited number of goals that match the children's developmental level one can create more depth in the activities. It is important that professionals regularly ask themselves: how can I continue to challenge children to think, use their imagination, investigate and develop? In addition to the goals involved in the various activities, there is of course also space for an activity with no special goal apart from simply being fun and creating enjoyment for the children.

**Joint owners of the theme**

Theme-based work transforms into the thematising approach in contemporary education when the children and the professional become joint owners of the theme. In this way professionals connect their aims with the meanings assigned to the theme by the children. Or as Pompert (2003) puts it: "Thematising is about facilitating and building a 'stream' of meaningful activities for both children and their professional with respect to an inspiring theme, guided by input and questions from the children." By working with a theme in a well-reasoned way, whereby the professional and the children together explore a theme, set goals, shape the education offering and give the theme an exciting title, the children become co-owners of the theme's content. This process is guided by the input and questions from the children, which in turn stimulates their involvement and curiosity.

Many early childhood education facilities do already work in a theme-based way, but that does not automatically mean they take a thematising approach. The thematising approach plays an important role for an institution in compiling its own education offering. Here, there is a subtle balance between intentional and incidental education. Intentional education relates to subjects and issues that are intentionally presented, while incidental education relates to subjects and issues that are presented by the children or by circumstances. The thematising approach must above all provide space for the latter. Has it just snowed, for instance? Then go outdoors with the children and set your earlier plans aside.

## The storyline approach and the thematising approach

Picture books occupy an important role in the education of young children. Hence a picture book is also highly suitable as the starting point for a theme. Stories make it possible to raise and focus on issues that we believe it is important for children to learn. The storyline approach is a special form of the thematising approach in which stories take centre stage; or more briefly 'learning by telling stories' (Van der Linde, 2020). By using the storyline approach the professional ensures that learning becomes meaningful for children and that they learn in an active way. It makes a strong appeal to the children's sense of involvement. In this way the professional can use the natural curiosity of each child to tell a story together with them.

The storyline approach is characterised by key terms such as: imagination, sense of wonder, meaningful, coherence, context, motivating source of inspiration. The professional makes a start, establishes the guiding thread and invites the children to add their own ideas in order to complete the story. This serves to encourage children's ownership of their own process of learning and development. One fine example of a suitable picture book is *Wild Will* by Ingrid & Dieter Schubert.

### Challenge 5: Optimal learning opportunities for all children

Education and teaching are about helping children to build and structure their lives. Their lives take place in a complicated world. This is why we need to give space to this complicated world in early childhood education, so that children acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for them to develop into competent human beings.

### Good education and the role of professionals

Professionals carefully consider the content of education they provide and the goals that they want to achieve with this content. In the reflections that follow their observations they look at their education practices from different perspectives, varying from planning to goals and content. It can be seen that play and work in all their varieties are important for, and contribute to, the development of children.

When planning and designing early childhood education, one also needs to devote attention to the multicultural society. Initially this can be translated into measures that a school takes for facilitating the school careers of immigrant children. With regard to early childhood education, when designing curriculum content, this certainly includes giving attention to children's language backgrounds and to an intercultural approach to world-orientation and faith-based issues. Furthermore, children may be unfamiliar with particular toys, with books, with digital devices, or with Dutch patterns of interaction between adults and children. All these aspects require concrete implementation in childcare centres and in pre-schooler groups. For the children of Dutch parents it means, irrespective of whether children from other cultures attend the school, that they gain experience with a pluralistic society. With respect to early childhood facilities this can be translated as a criterion for the planning and design of the teaching-learning process.

Professionals and children each have their own responsibilities in the teaching-learning

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process. The professional gives the children the degree and type of responsibility they are able to handle. In this way the children experience play and learning as something that truly belongs to them. They become more independent, know what they want and what their task is. The professional applies an approach that matches the way children learn. In general terms: from play to playful learning, then towards learning based on self-set tasks and finally to learning based on tasks set by others. The professional tracks the progress in the children's development of competencies. In order to stimulate the children's development, the professional can utilise content cards. These cards set out the content in general terms, in the form of content-related objectives (see text box 6).

**A curriculum for the young child**
Currently, more and more institutions for early childhood education are designing their own curriculum. By doing so, they want to ensure that children can develop optimally and are engaged in the process. Working with the content-related objectives also helps to make well-considered choices in early childhood education for compiling a coherent and varied education offering. Challenging activities stimulate a sense of curiosity and involvement among

> **" All over the world there is great interest in issues regarding the education of young children.**

children. They use their textbooks more flexibly and loosely in order to better match the zone of proximal development of their pupils. This is not always easy, because in order to do so, professionals require knowledge about education content, goal-based working and the thematising approach. Moreover, they need to have insight into developmental paths of children. At the other hand, this is what makes working with young children such an inspiring enterprise. Goal-based working is an integral part of many areas of education for young children. For instance, goals are key for choosing a theme, putting together a well-reasoned education offering and for monitoring children in their development. Goals are key to a good-quality curriculum with activities that stimulate children to develop optimally.

The above shows that professionals in early childhood education need to make many content-related choices. They choose the subjects the children will work on and need to ensure responsible learning content and implementation of these. The most important criterion in these choices is that children actually progress in daily life, the life in

which they will participate in ever more areas. A curriculum that sets out goals and content can help professionals to make these choices.

**To conclude**
All over the world there is great interest in issues regarding the education of young children. In many industrialised countries this interest can be explained by the fact that, because of parents or guardians are occupied by day-time jobs, children are entrusted to educators at childcare centres who are 'strangers'. So, they seek an environment for their children in which they are given the love and attention that they need in order to grow up.

This interest can also be explained by research on the development of children which shows that early and targeted stimulation and encouragement of children has an effect on the quality of their development. A targeted policy in the field of early childhood education fits in with the wish to prevent, at an early stage, any delayed development in children. A vision and rationale on development is the starting point for formulating proposals for education. On the basis of this vision one can work towards

goals, content and implementation. The basic principle is that children have the urge and possibility to develop by themselves, and that this development can only take place in interaction with professionals and the environment. For young children, the aim is to develop the content-related aspect of the curriculum along the lines of subject areas and education areas, with development of competences as goal. Activities are organised around themes which are enriched from various school disciplines. The education offering is characterised by coherence, meaningful contexts, ownership of learning processes and active participation in assignment of meaning. Use is made of concrete materials as well as situations that are recognisable and concrete for children. Play is encouraged. Professionals take a systematic approach and create space for both planned and spontaneously occurring playing and learning situations. The storyline approach is a suitable form for educating young children. This initiates the step towards the thematising approach, which in turn contributes to continuity in an ongoing learning and development pathway from pre-school and Kindergarten to primary school.

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# Norway

The road towards
a new Norwegian
Kindergarten



| 1 | Which department/ministry does ECEC sit under? | The Ministry of Education and Research |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | What programs/settings exist for children between the ages of 0-7? | Kindergarten ("barnehage") for children aged 0 to 5. Primary school starts at age 6. |
| 3 | What percentage of children are in ECEC centers? | 93.4% of children between ages 1 to 5 attend ECEC centres (2021) |
| 4 | Link to national/local curriculum for ECEC | Click here for the national curriculum |
| 5 | Who is responsible for inspecting/monitoring of ECEC? | Municipalities conduct the monitoring of ECEC centres, but the inspection of finances for private kindergartens is carried out at the national level. |

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Hilde Danielsen Research is a professor at NORCE and associate professor at NLA University College Bergen. Hilde held a coordinating role in the evaluation of the implementation of the 2017 framework plan reform. Hilde did her Ph.d in Cultural studies in 2006 at the University of Bergen, writing about families and diversity. She has published extensively about gender roles and gender equality.  Hilde is concerned with the formation of new citizens, diversity and social inequality, the latest years participating in research projects regarding kindergartens, child poverty and parenting cultures.

## Siw Ellen Jakobsen

*Science journalist*

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# The road towards a new Norwegian Kindergarten

## ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, Norwegian kindergartens have transformed from only being available to some children, to being something all children from the age of one have the right to. To achieve this, Norway introduced an initiative called the Kindergarten Promotion Reform.

Parallel with the extensive expansion of the country's early education and care sector, awareness of the importance of having high quality early childhood education and care also increased. The issues no longer revolve around just having enough places. In 2017, Norway adopted a new Framework Plan for Kindergartens. The focus of this article is on the process of drafting this document and on the results of an evaluation of how the current framework plan has been implemented. The general finding of this is that the Framework Plan for Kindergartens in Norway is now a familiar and comprehensive document. The plan has gained broad support from the early childhood education care sector.

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## Introduction

In 1990, only 35 per cent of all children in Norway aged between one and five attended a kindergarten. By 2021, this had increased to 93 per cent. That same year, the number of one-year-olds in kindergarten totalled 79 per cent. These figures illustrate the extent of the development seen in Norwegian kindergartens over the last few decades. (All figures sourced from Statistics Norway.)

In the early 2000s, there was unanimous agreement across the Norwegian political spectrum to provide all children aged one to five with the opportunity to attend kindergarten; this initiative has come to be known as the Kindergarten Promotion Reform. In this reform, private owners were assigned an important role. Around 50 per cent of all children currently attend a private kindergarten, with the other 50 per cent attending a municipality-owned kindergarten (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2021). Both sides of the sector are funded by the state.

In this article, we'll take a closer look at how the large-scale expansion and reforms of kindergartens in Norway also led to changes in how the kindergartens operate, specifically in regard to their content and quality. In Norway, enhancing quality of early childhood education and care is vital in ensuring that children can thrive and have the opportunity to play, learn and develop.

The first section of this article will briefly outline Norwegian and Nordic policies on early childhood education and care. We will then outline how the proposal for a new Framework Plan for Kindergartens in Norway was met with criticism and objections during its extensive consultation period. The final version
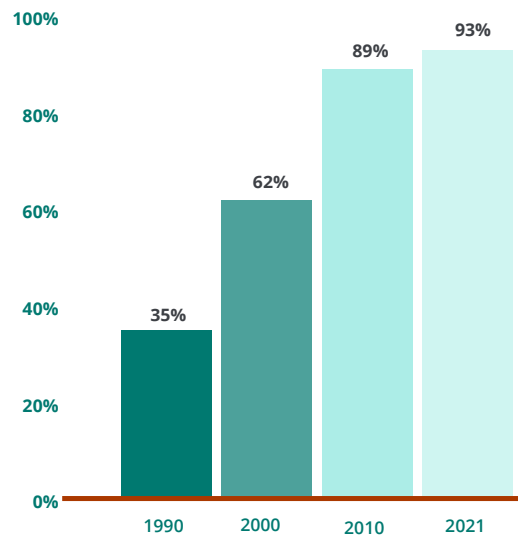


***Figure 1:*** *The proportion of children ages 1-5 who attend kindergarten in Norway. Source: StatBank Norway*

was better received. You will also be able to read about how this engagement with the new framework plan meant that there was a considerable level of interest and participation when the plan was eventually implemented.

## Framework Plan for Kindergartens

Norway's first *Framework Plan for Kindergartens* was adopted in 1996. It would later be revised twice – first in 2006 and again in 2017. The Framework Plan for Kindergartens defines the content and duties of the kindergarten. It provides guidelines as to how the kindergarten's owners, head teachers, pedagogic leaders, and all of the staff should work to ensure the children receive high quality education and care. The framework plan is therefore a core governing document for ensuring quality in all kindergartens. It also provides the child's guardians with information about how the

> **The Framework Plan for Kindergartens defines the content and duties of the kindergarten. It provides guidelines as to how the kindergarten's owners, head teachers, pedagogic leaders, and all of the staff should work to ensure the children receive high quality education and care.**

kindergarten is run, and their options when it comes to contributing and participating. The framework plan is a part of the Norwegian legislation that all kindergartens must adhere to.

This article will first focus on the process of drafting the Framework Plan for Kindergartens currently in force, which was introduced in 2017. We will also present the initial results of a broad evaluation of how the framework plan has been implemented. This is currently being carried out by a research group at NORCE - Norwegian Research Centre. The main topic is how the most recent version of the framework plan has been adopted by the kindergarten sector (Homme et al., 2021).

**Childhood has an intrinsic value**

The first Kindergarten Act was introduced in Norway in 1975. It served as a milestone in the history of the Norwegian early childhood education and care sector. From that point on, kindergartens were promoted and prioritized (Korsvold, 2020). In 1995, the act was amended. This amendment came about as a result of major developments in the sector. There was a call to clarify the duties of the kindergarten in regard to children, their guardians and society as a whole. The purpose of the act was to *"safeguard children's*

*opportunities for good development and activity in close understanding and collaboration with the home"* (The Kindergarten Act, 1995).

When this act came into force in 1996, a new decision was made that paved way for a new framework plan to be drafted, this time including the content and responsibilities of the kindergarten.

*The Kindergarten Act* explicitly states that childhood has an intrinsic value and that kindergartens must have a holistic approach when it comes to the development of the child. The kindergartens must, in collaboration and close understanding with the home, safeguard the children's need for care and play, and promote learning and building as a basis for an all-round development.

Both the Kindergarten Act and the Framework Plan for Kindergartens were influenced by *the Nordic pre-school tradition.* A fundamental aspect of this model is that care, play, formation and learning must be understood in relation to one another (Giæver & Tkachenko, 2020). The Kindergarten Act also established that *"Kindergartens shall build on fundamental values in the Christian and humanist traditions such as respect for human dignity and nature, freedom*

*of thought, compassion, forgiveness, equality and solidarity. Kindergartens shall also build on values which exist in various religions and world views and which are entrenched in human rights law."*

Other important values emphasised in the Framework Plan are that the kindergarten must "meet the child's need for care, security, belongingness and respect and enabling the children to participate in and contribute to the community are important values that shall be reflected in kindergarten. Kindergartens shall promote democracy, diversity and mutual respect, equality, sustainable development, life skills and good health".

In addition to this, with special rights extending to those of indigenous peoples, Norway has a particular responsibility to safeguard Sami children's rights and their guardians' interests. Sami children in kindergarten shall be supported in preserving and developing their language, sami tradition and culture, irrespective of where in Norway they live. The content of the kindergarten provision for Sami children outside of the Sami region must be adapted to the children's Sami background. All kindergartens in Norway must contribute to ensuring that children learn how the Sami are Norway's indigenous people and learn about Sami culture. This is enshrined in both the Norwegian Constitution and the ILO Convention, to which Norway has acceded.

## The kindergarten as part of the educational system

Norway's first Framework Plan for Kindergartens, introduced in 1996, outlined the advantages of children attending kindergarten. A positive childhood, basic competencies, knowledge, skills and attitudes were included in this description.

At the turn of the century, more political attention was directed at the early childhood sector, specifically through the aforementioned *Kindergarten Promotion Reform.* A large-scale development of kindergartens was thus set in motion. This *Kindergarten Promotion Reform* was then followed by a review of the legal measures pertaining to the sector, and growing attention around the content and quality of Norway's kindergartens.

In 2006, a new Kindergarten Act came into force. The aim of the new act was to improve conditions such that the kindergarten could provide better care and a good educational component. In order to create unity and cohesion within schooling in Norway, kindergartens were formally integrated into the education system. In the 2005 change of government, responsibility for kindergartens was transferred from the Ministry of Children and Families to the Ministry of Education and Research. The Minister of Education and Research at the time, Øystein Djupedal, stated that *"the kindergarten will now become a part of lifelong learning, it will become a part of our education provision, from kindergarten to PhD"* (Berge, 2017).

A new Framework Plan for Kindergartens came into force in 2006. It was smaller in scope than the first, and yet still broad and vague in its wording (Østrem et al., 2009).

## " a sector that had seen significant and rapid developments,

### OECD recommendations

The OECD's report on *Norwegian kindergarten policies Early Childhood Education and Care Policy Review NORWAY* was published in 2015. The report paints a picture of a sector that had seen significant and rapid developments, not least in regard to its large-scale expansion of the number of kindergarten places now available across the country (Engel et al., 2015).

The OECD also highlighted a number of areas in need of improvement. For instance, the report noted that it would be necessary to work on developing professional skills across the entirety of the Norwegian kindergarten sector. The report

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further recommended introducing a staffing norm and minimum qualifications for all employees involved in direct pedagogical work with children. The staffing norm was later rolled out in 2018. The norm states that there must be at least one member of staff working for every three children under the age of three, and one member of staff for every six children aged three and over (The Kindergarten Act, 2005). In addition to this, the report stressed that the monitoring of kindergartens had not been defined to the extent necessary, and that the roles of the different stakeholders within the sector were not adequately clarified either.

In Norway, briefings and proposals submitted to parliament by the government, generally known as white papers, are called *Reports to the Storting.* In these reports, future policies and amendments are put forward. In Report to the Storting no. 19 (2015–2016) *Time for play and learning,* it was revealed that (1) not all children in Norway experienced a safe and inclusive care and learning environment in kindergarten. (2) There were major variations in pedagogical provision. (3) Many children lacked adequate Norwegian language skills when starting school. (4) The provision for children with special needs and requirements was not good enough. (5) In addition, it was noted that the transfer from kindergarten to school could be better. In this report, the government presented several of the main challenges that needed to be overcome in order to: develop the country's kindergarten sector, ensure it is of high quality, and reduce differences in quality between kindergartens. The government offered a series of suggestions for inclusion in a new Framework Plan for Kindergartens. One of its core objectives was to guarantee that the content of the framework plan would be more clearly defined. It should provide clear guidance on how kindergartens should be run, thus ensuring that the kindergarten sector would be in a better position to fulfil its social mission.

## Development of a new framework plan

While Report to the Storting no. 19 (2015–2016) was being compiled, work to prepare a new framework plan was also set in motion. There had been calls for a framework plan that could act as a good educational resource, as well as a clear governing document for the sector.

At this point in time, a lot of attention was being directed at the fact that the quality of kindergartens varied depending on where in the country one lived. This was linked to the major expansion of kindergartens years earlier. It was therefore important to formulate a framework plan that could contribute to levelling up quality among kindergartens, and thus ensure the child's right to high quality kindergarten services. The work in revising the plan meant formulating a framework plan that was more clearly defined than the existing act, and that could go on to be used as a more distinct governing tool and as a positive resource for those working in the sector, both at the level of the kindergarten owners, as well as by the kindergarten itself.

The task of writing the new framework plan fell to the Ministry of Education and Research, which had also been given overall responsibility for Norway's kindergarten sector. The ministry established its own reference group that would contribute to the work.

## Criticism from the sector

When a draft of the new framework plan was presented in 2016, many of those involved in the sector were invited to put forward suggestions. This included county governors, municipalities, colleges and universities. On top of these, advocacy groups for employees, guardians, and kindergarten owners, as well as organisations representing minority groups and indigenous peoples were also asked to contribute. All in all, the ministry received around 600 responses. 15 consultation meetings were held across the country, attracting almost 4,000 attendees. These resulted in a diverse range of feedback.

During the consultation process, certain parts of the draft for the

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new framework plan were met with significant opposition. One such component that received strong opposition was the proposal to introduce language testing and individual learning objectives for kindergarten-aged children. Others wanted the role of play in the kindergarten to be further reinforced, others wanted to protect the kindergarten teachers' freedom to choose their own method. Many felt that the draft limited the kindergartens' local room for manoeuvre, specifically regarding their professional and educational work.

In addition to the critical feedback, a large number of kindergarten employees also mobilised in what became known as the *Kindergarten Uprising*. Among this group, the proposal to introduce language testing and learning objectives had generated the strongest reactions. The uprising was concerned with preserving the Nordic kindergarten tradition, in which the role of play and the intrinsic value of childhood are understood as central concepts. The result of this powerful mobilisation meant that a majority of Norway's Members of Parliament backed the demands of the protest group leading the

## "Following the revision, play, fun and happiness were given much stronger emphasis.

*Kindergarten Uprising*. Consequently, the protestors were listened to. In the final formulation of the framework plan, the provision to enforce a language norm was removed, and play was further emphasised as a core activity within the kindergarten.

Following the revision, play, fun and happiness were given much stronger emphasis. In light of the emphasis on play, learning and care, the final draft of the framework plan (2017) ended up including many of the same objectives for these areas as were outlined in the previous plans. The intention for this was to ensure that the intrinsic value of childhood was safeguarded.

However, it was still asserted that kindergartens must work more with language. The reasoning behind this was that having a good grasp of language was important for children to be able to actually participate in play and be a part of the community. In addition to underlining the work on language, it was stressed that the kindergarten must focus more on preventing, stopping and dealing with bullying. The same applied to work on diversity, health and the transition from kindergarten to school. Attention was further directed towards the youngest children as well, as many more were now attending Norwegian kindergartens.

Overall, the new framework plan was more concise and clear. The previous framework plans had been far more wordy and broader in their scope.

One of the aims of the current Framework Plan for Kindergartens (2017) was to level up the quality of all Norwegian kindergartens. By improving the clarity of the framework plan, it can then be used to a greater extent as a governing tool and work resources for kindergartens, for both owners and staff.

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In comparison to the previous framework plans, one substantial change can be seen in the fact that the new one is much clearer regarding the responsibilities of the kindergarten. The role of the employees has been clarified. The wording has shifted from what they should do, to what they *must* do.

Clearer obligations, roles and tasks can be achieved by clarifying who is responsible for what in the kindergarten. The framework plan further describes what tasks the head teachers, kindergarten owners and pedagogical leaders are responsible for.

**The rights of the Sami are reinforced**
In the 2017 framework plan, efforts to promote Sami-related content were further bolstered. A separate plan was developed in order to translate this work into results in both Norwegian and Sami kindergartens. The framework plan states that:

> *"Kindergartens shall highlight Sami culture and help to ensure that the children develop respect for and solidarity with the diversity of Sami culture." It continues to note that the "staff shall introduce the children to Sami culture and the Sami way of life and link the Sami perspective to important dates and everyday life, art and culture and culinary traditions."*

For Sami kindergartens and kindergartens with their own Sami department, the framework plan provides the following guidance:

> *"Sami kindergartens shall promote the children's Sami language skills, strengthen their Sami identity, and promote Sami values, culture and*

> *traditions" and "Sami history and cultural expressions such as duodji, joik and storytelling shall form part of the kindergarten content, adapted to reflect the children's age and stage of development."*

**Considerable interest and support**
The draft of the new Framework Plan for Kindergartens in Norway also garnered significant engagement and debate. This meant that when the final plan was published, it was received with a great deal of interest.

The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training is responsible for bringing into effect statutory national policies within the kindergarten sector. As a result, the Directorate took on a central role in the implementation of the new plan. As soon as the framework plan was presented, the Directorate began work on disseminating this information to the kindergartens. One of the aspects of this initiative was to send out printed versions of the plan to all employees working in kindergartens across Norway. This printed version was provided in both of the written Norwegian languages (Bokmål and Nynorsk), the three Sami languages and in English. To complement this, a new webpage was also added to the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training's own website, containing support materials.

Since 2018, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training has worked on evaluating how and the extent to which the introduction of the new framework plan has changed the work carried out in kindergartens, and which will continue to be evaluated through to 2023. A research group at NORCE has been tasked with conducting the evaluation. This was set up as a major research

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> "Since 2018, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training has worked on evaluating how and the extent to which the introduction of the new framework plan has changed the work carried out in kindergartens, and which will continue to be evaluated through to 2023.

project over the five-year period. It is the first time in Norway that the introduction of a new Framework Plan for Kindergartens has been monitored to such an extent (NORCE, 2022). Through this, the national authorities will be able to understand how the plan has been received and how it is understood and used in practice, by those working in and outside of the kindergarten. The research questions guiding the surveys are as follows:

- How do the central stakeholder interpret the objectives and intentions of the revised framework plan, and what are their experiences of the implementation process?

- How do the parties work on different levels in order to implement the framework plan?

- How do the central parties and kindergartens carry out their work so that they can include and safeguard the rights of the Sami people, as is set out in the framework plan?

- How do the central parties and kindergartens facilitate and ensure the transfer of the child through the different levels of education, internally within the kindergarten, and from the kindergarten to the school?

Two national, quantitative surveys were carried out. The first – *the Municipality Survey* – was sent out to all municipalities. The municipalities function as the local kindergarten authorities in Norway. The second – *the Head teacher survey* – was aimed at kindergarten head teachers for the 2019/2020 academic year. Both surveys will be replicated in 2022. The quantitative analyses will provide the evaluation with representative overviews of the general conditions in the municipalities and among the kindergarten head teachers, when it comes to their

implementation of the framework plan.

*The Kindergarten Study* is the most comprehensive part of the evaluation project, as it comprises of 19 kindergarten case studies. In this project, key focus of the researchers is to find out how the kindergartens interpret and use the framework plan in their day-to-day work.

The researchers also conducted a *Policy Study*. The aim of this was to understand the relationship between the different levels of the kindergarten sector, specifically looking at the kindergarten as a multi-level system.

Although the evaluation will not be complete before 2023, a preliminary report for the project was published in 2021, which contains a selection of the findings to date (Homme et al., 2021). A separate sub-report on the parents' evaluations was published that same year (Rydland & Christensen, 2021).

Thus far, the main conclusion is that those who work in the kindergarten – the head teachers, kindergarten teachers, skilled workers and assistants – hold a positive attitude of the framework plan. They made significant efforts in implementing the plan within the kindergartens themselves, especially in its first year. The kindergarten employees generally see the new framework plan as a continuation and clarification of the

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previous plans, rather than feeling that it includes any major changes in content. However, some did note that new areas have been added to the plan. The employees also report that the framework plan is now a clearer governing tool. All are familiar with the framework plan and have used it in their work. The evaluation shows, for example, that 89 per cent of head teachers included in the study have confirmed that they have utilised the support materials provided by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training to help with their work in implementing the plan within the kindergartens. This support material is available on the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training's website.

**A framework plan that has become easier to use**

The employees are satisfied with the fact that the framework plan (2017) has become much clearer in regard to what they *must* do rather than just guiding them on what they *should* do. They conveyed that this was a sign that the work they do is being taken more seriously and that the skilled labour required to work with children has been promoted through this framework plan. According to the researchers, the staff experience to a far greater extent now that the work they do is important to society.

The researchers also pointed out that the kindergarten employees are particularly pleased with the fact that they still have room for their own professional judgements. The findings show that all groups of staff reported that the current plan is more accessible and easier to use than the previous plans. This

> " The employees are satisfied with the fact that the framework plan (2017) has become much clearer in regard to what they *must* do rather than just guiding them on what they *should* do.

has been attributed to the plan's layout and its simple language. It is short and concise, and is easy to fit in one's bag or keep in front of them on the office desk. However, there is considerable variation in how actively the kindergarten employees use the framework in their day-to-day work. This varies depending on whether the framework plan is being used actively in the planning of their work, or if it is mostly used to legitimise their own

practices retroactively. Some head teachers more than others seem to be more focused on ensuring that the framework plan is a living document and an important work tool for all kindergarten employees. However, others seemed more concerned with ensuring that the plan is first and foremost instilled in the kindergartens through the work they carry out as head teachers and pedagogical leaders.

The head teachers and pedagogical leaders have taken on a vital role in the work required to bring the framework plan to life. A majority of the head teachers noted that the work in implementing the framework plan has to a great extent characterised the day-to-day life of the kindergarten. They have paid significant attention to ensuring that the overall message of the plan has been received by all employees. Yet, the head teachers do not grant equal priority to all subject areas laid out in the framework plan. When a clear variation exists regarding the choice of which areas of the plan to prioritise, this can often be traced back to the initiatives of the municipality or the state.

The evaluation has shown that the municipalities, as owners of the public kindergartens, report that they have had their responsibility and role within the sector enforced. This means that they now have more opportunities to intervene in the work of the kindergartens than

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they had before. It is the municipalities that carry out the supervision of both municipal and private kindergartens. A number of them noted certain challenges relating to conducting such supervision of the kindergartens, mainly as a result of the framework plan. The researchers who were tasked with evaluating the framework plan believe that the supervision of kindergartens is still not sufficiently defined, and that the roles of the various parties involved in this have not been adequately clarified.

### Sami rights

The owners, head teachers and kindergarten employees alike state that the framework plan has given the Sami content and their obligations toward the Sami people more attention. Many note, however, that they do not have sufficient competence in this area.

In Sami kindergartens specifically, the staff experience that, despite the considerable engagement, it is more of a challenge to work with the Sami language than it is with the Sami culture. This can mainly be attributed to a lack of resources. Indeed, it is rather difficult to find competent kindergarten teachers who are adept in the Sami language in Norway.

### Conclusion

In this article, we have taken a closer look at how the large-scale expansion of the provision of kindergarten services in Norway led to changes in how the kindergartens operate, specifically in regard to their content and quality. Norwegian kindergartens have transformed from only being available to select groups of children, to being something all children from the age of one have the right to. The article also examines the process surrounding the design of the new framework plan for kindergartens (2017), which garnered a huge level of commitment and interest in the Norwegian kindergarten sector. Finally, the article looks at the findings from the evaluation of the implementation of the framework plan for kindergartens.

The evaluation shows that the framework plan is well-known in kindergartens and serves as a comprehensive document that is supported by various stakeholders involved in the kindergarten sector. The values outlined within the plan are widely accepted, both in and outside the sector. Furthermore, the evaluation shows that staff and owners are satisfied with the fact that the framework plan is now much clearer on what they *must* do and no longer just gives guidance as to what they *should* do.

At the same time, there are some challenges. For instance, some stakeholders point out that it is still difficult to conduct supervision on the basis of the framework plan. Norway also has the largest indigenous Sami population in the world, and the Sami have certain rights as an indigenous people. The evaluation shows that although owners, head teachers and kindergarten staff alike experience that this framework plan has given Sami content more attention, many staff members feel they have too little expertise in this area.

Finally, the evaluation shows how the framework plan affects the day-to-day running of kindergartens. Head teachers have emphasized that the message of the plan has been received by all members of staff. Personnel convey that the framework plan is a useful peda-

> ❝The framework plan affects the day-to-day running of kindergartens.

gogical tool that gives them considerable room for manoeuvre. This serves as a good starting point for future work.

Here you can find the framework plan for kindergartens in both English and Norwegian.

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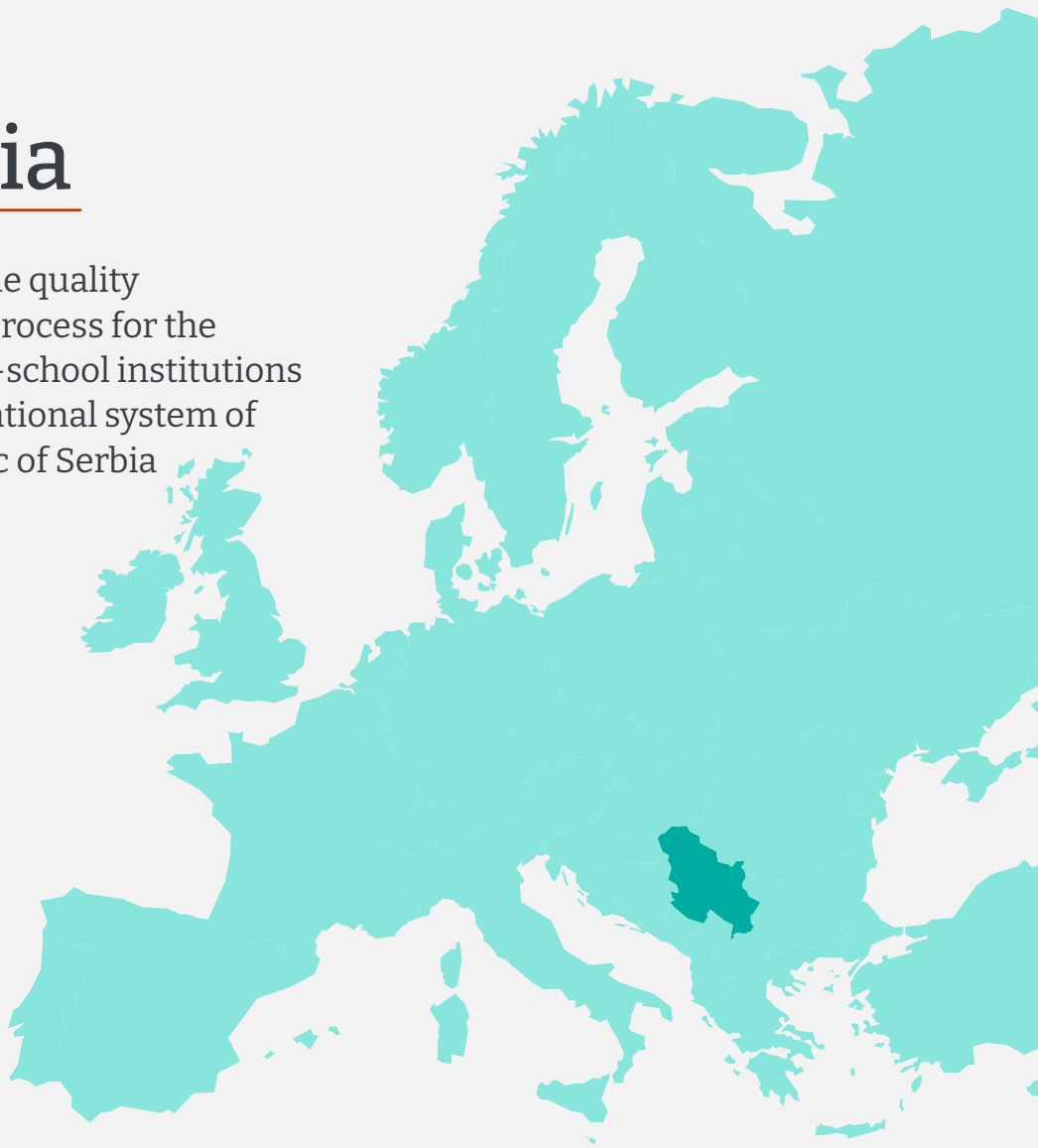Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (2021). Antall barnehager [Number of kindergar-

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# Serbia

Review of the quality assurance process for the work in pre-school institutions in the educational system of the Republic of Serbia



| 1 | Which department/ministry does ECEC sit under? | Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | What programs/settings exist for children between the ages of 0-7? | Early childhood educational development (ECED) programmes: from age 6 months to 3 years old; Kindergarten: aged 3 to 6 years old One year preschool programme: aged 6 to 7 Primary school: Children must be aged between 6.5 and 7.5 years old on 1st September of the year they are to start school. |
| 3 | What percentage of children are in ECEC centers? | 1) 55.5% coverage of children from 6 months to 6.5 years 2) 96.4% coverage of children on the compulsory preschool programme |
| 4 | Link to national/local curriculum for ECEC | Click here for the national curriculum |
| 5 | Who is responsible for inspecting/monitoring of ECEC? | Responsibility for inspecting/monitoring ECEC is held by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development. |

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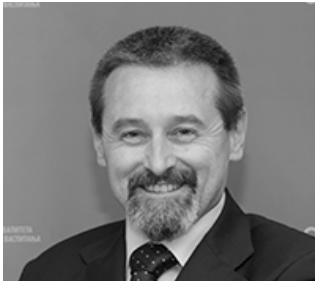## Dr Branislav Randjelovic

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# Review of the quality assurance process for the work in pre-school institutions in the educational system of the Republic of Serbia

## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we present the concept of quality assurance in pre-school institutions in the Republic of Serbia. Quality assurance and evaluation of pre-school institutions is achieved through the process of external evaluation and self-evaluation. Both processes are regulated by law (Rulebook: Standards of quality of work of institutions (2018), Rulebook: Evaluation of quality of work of institutions (2019)).

In the second part of this paper, we present an evaluation procedure of pre-school institutions and the process of self-evaluation, developed and implemented on an appropriate sample in 2019, through the project "Inclusive pre-school education". This project is being implemented in Serbia by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MoESTD – Serbia) with the support of the World Bank and resulted in appropriate conclusions being made regarding the process of self-evaluation, as well as a better understanding of the current situation in pre-school institutions in the Republic of Serbia. Thus, the educational system of the Republic of Serbia received suitable guidelines and a direction to take, in order to improve the quality of the nation's pre-school education.

**Keywords:** pre-school education, quality assurance, evaluation, self-evaluation.

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper, we focus on the state of pre-school education in the Republic of Serbia and the quality assurance system in place for this sector. Pre-school education is the first level in the educational system in the Republic of Serbia, representing the basis for the development of key educational competencies and thus ensuring the continuity of one's education and lifelong learning. Considering the fact that the first Serbian pre-school institution opened in Subotica in 1844 and the first Serbian kindergarten followed in Vršac in 1881, the development of pre-school education in our country has clearly had a long tradition. Today, every municipality has its own pre-school institution, which usually includes several kindergartens. Pre-school education institutions are financed by either: the state budget, the budget of the local governments or other legal and private entities. Children up to 3 years of age attend nurseries within the Pre-school institution (PI), while children aged 3 to 5.5 attend kindergartens. One year before starting primary school, children attend a compulsory and free four-hour Preparatory Pre-school Programme (PPP) for nine months.

The Law on Pre-school Education (2010) brought about an important change – it envisions equal rights and access to pre-school education for every child, with children from vulnerable groups having priority when it comes to enrolment. The strategy for 2030 for the development and improvement of education in the Republic of Serbia continues the work on the goal set in the previous strategy for the coverage of the provision of pre-school education – that of ensuring the enrolment of 75% of all children aged 3 to 5. Current data shows that only about 50% of this age group attend pre-school education. This rate is significantly lower among some of the vulnerable groups, such as Roma children or children with disabilities. The analysis of the current situation shows that there is insufficient awareness among citizens about the educational significance of pre-school education, mainly as it is still considered as more of a "childcare system" for children of pre-school age, rather than as part of the wider education system.

The main goals of pre-school education are to: support the overall development and well-being of pre-school children, complement the educational function of the family, further education and inclusion in the community, develop the child's potential as a prerequisite for further growth and contribute to progress within society.

- Full-day care – from 9 to 12 hours a day
- Half-day care and preparatory pre-school programme – 4 hours a day
- Half-day care – up to 6 hours a day
- Half-day care – up to 6 hours a day, up to three times a week
- Several days continuous care – longer than 24 hours, where children take part in excursions and recreational classes that are organized in preschool institution. In some preschool institutions, this also will include overnight stays for some children

The preparatory pre-school programme is intended for children in the year before they

start school. It has been a mandatory component of the Republic of Serbia education system since the 2006/2007 school year, and it lasts for 4 hours a day for at least 9 months. The programme is provided in pre-school institutions and in primary schools and is free of charge.

Since 2018, new basics for the programme of pre-school education, called Years of Rising, has been successively introduced in all of the country's pre-school institutions. The basics consist of a unique conceptual framework for the development of educational programmes for children, from kindergarten to school. They aim to support the welfare of the child and their overall development and emphasise:

- The importance of relationships as a motivating factor in child development and learning
- The importance of space, as an inspiring, stimulating and provocative learning environment
- The importance of play, as a way for a child to access activities, creatively process and expand their experiences, build their identity and relationships, and acquire new knowledge and important life skills
- An integrated approach to learning, through developing topics/projects

with the children. In this way, children are encouraged to engage in certain topics and projects that are meaningful and challenging for them to explore. An integrated approach to learning and development is based on the connected experience of what the child does and experiences in situations that are meaningful to him, and not through separate contents and individual activities related to individual educational areas or aspects of development

- Co-operation with the family and the local community

This article will first explore key issues in quality assurance and evaluation in Serbian pre-schools. Then, we will go into further detail about a study on external evaluation, conducted in 2020. Special attention in this paper is paid to the practice of self-evaluation in pre-school institutions as self-evaluation encourages the improvement of one's own work and also puts the employee in an active role in the work and development of the institution. We will describe the methods, summarise the results, and discuss the key findings of the study. Finally, we will conclude with a discussion on the process of improving the quality of pre-school education.

## 2. Background

Quality assurance for the work carried out by these institutions is regulated by Article 49 of the Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System ("Official Gazette of RS", no. 88 / 2017-3, 27 / 2018-3, other laws, 27 / 2018-22, etc.) and implies external evaluation of the institutions' quality of work and self-evaluation. Both processes are strictly defined and legally regulated through appropriate bylaws. The first is the Rulebook: Standards of quality of work of institutions (2018), and the second is the Rulebook: Evaluation of quality of work of institutions (2019). The former defines four basic areas of quality in pre-school institutions, covering: educational work, support for children and families, professional learning community, and management and organisation. These areas are broken down into 64 indicators that elaborate the assessment criteria for the quality of work. The final document regulates the bodies within the institution and defines the procedures for: monitoring the implementation of educational programmes, other forms of educational work, the basics and criteria for self-evaluation and general evaluation, the content and manner of publishing results of self-evaluation, and the quality of work.

The first external evaluation of the quality of work carried out by pre-school institutions began in 2013. In accordance with the bylaws, the

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| Area | Standard | |
|---|---|---|
| Educational work | standard_1_1 | The physical environment encourages children's learning and development. |
| | standard _1_2 | The social environment encourages children's learning and development. |
| | standard _1_3 | Planning and programming of educational work is in the function of supporting children's learning and development. |
| Supporting children and families | standard _2_1 | The institution is a safe and secure environment. |
| | standard _2_2 | The institution respects diversity, and respects the rights and needs of children and families. |
| | standard _2_3 | The institution cooperates with the family and the local community. |
| Professional learning community | standard _3_1 | The institution encourages professional communication. |
| | standard _3_2 | The institution cultivates a climate of trust and togetherness. |
| | standard _3_3 | A culture of self-evaluation is developing in the institution. |
| | standard _3_4 | The institution is a place of continuous change, learning and development. |
| | standard _3_5 | The institution represents professional public action and activism in the community. |
| Management and organisation | standard _4_1 | Planning the work of the institution is in the function of its development. |
| | standard _4_2 | The organisation of the work of the institution is efficient and effective. |
| | standard _4_3 | The management of the director is in the function of improving the work of the institution. |
| | standard _4_4 | The leadership of the director enables the development of the institution. |

*Table 1.* Areas and standards for evaluating the quality of work of pre-school institutions

evaluation results are presented annually, and then a comprehensive presentation of the results prepared in the form of a report is published following completion of the first evaluation cycle, after four years of implementation in the pre-school institutions. The evaluation reports are available on the website of the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation (www.ceo.gov.rs) in the section related to the evaluation of the quality of work of institutions.

## 2.1. External evaluation

Evaluation of the quality of work carried out by such institutions is based on certain quality standards. Standards and indicators that describe quality practices form a quality framework that covers all aspects of life and work in pre-school. Areas of quality contain a number of standards that refer to statements of quality practice or the conditions in which they can be achieved. Standards are described by indicators in the form of operational definitions, describing the minimal requirements for the standard to be achieved, and that can be used to assess whether or not, and to what extent, the institution has been successful. These standards and indicators are not isolated statements, but are systematically integrated to describe the picture of quality in certain areas of life and work within the institution. External evaluation procedures anticipate that after each evaluation cycle, standards and indicators are revised, and the entire external evaluation system is continuously improved. *The new Rulebook: Standards of quality of work of institutions* ("Official Gazette of RS – Education Gazette", No. 14 of August 2, 2018) defines 4 areas, divided into 15 standards and 64 indicators, for quality to be assessed.

External evaluation is initiated from the system level and concerns the verification and direction of the institution's work. It is undertaken to: ensure that the pre-school institution achieves its educational goals, ensure accessibility and equality in education and meets the needs of its users. It is therefore aimed at obtaining data that should answer several questions, and above all whether: the results meet the requirements of the education system, the invested resources are used adequately, and users are satisfied with the service. The process of external evaluation of pre-school institutions is carried out by educational advisors from the Ministry, and if necessary, representatives of the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation. External evaluators have mastered the mandatory training programme and use a unique package of instruments. This ensures uniformity and quality of processes and products, as well as objectivity and reliability of an assessment that can evaluate the quality of work of the institution. In addition, these regulations specify the requirements for communication with institutions and deadlines, which ensures transparency of the procedure and publicity of the work of external evaluators. After the

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evaluation, the team of evaluators prepares a report on the external evaluation of the pre-school institution. This report contains a quantitative component (assessment of the general quality of the work of the institution and an assessment of the achievement of the levels of each standard), as well as a narrative component (description of the established factual situation by area). The institution has the right to object to the external evaluation procedure, but not to the evaluation itself. In the period leading up to the next external evaluation, the pre-school institution must implement an action plan for improvement, based on the results of the previous external evaluation.

## 2.2. Self-evaluation

Unlike the external evaluation, self-evaluation is a procedure conducted within the pre-school institution. It should lead to improvements within the institution and motivation to ensure a higher quality of work "from within" thus putting the institution in a particularly active role. The practice of self-evaluation in our educational system is not new; in fact, it formally dates back to 2005 in schools, and 2006 in pre-school institutions but informally, this tradition can be traced back even earlier, as many employees in the education sector have long worked to improve their own practices based on self-insight. *The Rulebook on competence standards of professional associates in pre-school institutions and their professional development* ("Official Gazette of RS - Education Gazette", No. 3/21), provides one of the starting points for the process of self-evaluation. Defining the standard of competencies of a 'professional associate' creates preconditions for being able to work on developing the quality of pre-school education through coordinated action on a wider scale within the education system as a whole, as well as within the pre-school institution and the individual plan for professional development for the professional associate themselves, specifically when it comes to developing defined competencies. The competences of the professional associate are divided into the following skill areas:

1. Strategic (development) planning and monitoring of pre-school practice
2. Co-operation and togetherness
3. Development of reflective practice in the pre-school
4. Development of quality in a real programme
5. Own professional activity and professional development

Self-evaluation is a process carried out by the institution that provides the education provision. It is a process that puts the institution in an active role and leads to a strengthening of its activities, by encouraging the improvement of quality from within. In the process of self-evaluation, the professional associate must answer three key questions: How good is our institution and each kindergarten individually? How do we know that? What needs to be done to make it even better? There is a basic philosophy that states that those who participate in the life and work of the kindergarten are best able to answer questions on how good their kindergarten is and what needs to be done to make it even better.

The data obtained through the self-evaluation and external evaluation processes enable a redefining of the development plan of the pre-school institution, which contains

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methods and procedures for achieving short-term and long-term goals, as well as monitoring and evaluating implementation.

In order to achieve the best results, it is necessary that all involved in these processes "speak the same language". This means using the same evaluation criteria that all participants in the evaluation are familiar with, that being the use of uniform standards for the processes of self-evaluation and external evaluation for pre-school institutions.

The ultimate purpose of the professional's self-evaluation is for children to receive the highest quality care, nutrition, preventive health measures, social protection and education. The process of self-evaluation makes sense only when it benefits the children, but it is also advantageous in that it contributes to the well-being of employees, by encouraging good practice, supporting them in recognising their own skills and expertise, and by enabling them to learn together and develop professionally. This is only possible in a constant process of reviewing the quality of their own practice and planning further work based on the results of that review. Reflective practice and the exchange of experiences among colleagues is important for joint learning that can then lead to further development and the formation of a professional learning community.

### 3. Method
The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development is responsible for the implementation of the "Inclusive Pre-school Education" project, which will be completed by the end of 2022. The overall goal of the project is to improve the accessibility, quality and equity of the country's pre-school educa-

tion, especially for children from vulnerable social groups. The methodology of external evaluation was chosen for the project, in order to monitor the achievement of the development goal in the context of quality. In order to support the full implementation of

> " The overall goal of the project is to improve the accessibility, quality and equity of the country's pre-school education, especially for children from vulnerable social groups.

the revised system of monitoring and evaluating of the quality of work of pre-school institutions, it was necessary to define statements that describe the achievement of indicators at levels 2 and 4 and to create auxiliary instruments for assessing the performance of said indicators. In the process of external evaluation, the level of achievement for each standard is determined, with levels 1 and 2 indicating an unfulfilled standard, and levels 3 and 4 confirming an achieved standard. The quality standards for pre-school institutions are set so that they meet the new requirements of the Year of Rising programme. During 2020, an external evaluation of 25% of pre-school institutions in the Republic of Serbia was conducted.

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> " The work of pre-school institutions is evaluated in relation to the achievement of 15 standards, divided into 4 areas: educational work, support for children and families, professional learning community and management and organisation.

### 3.1. Sample

The final sample consisted of 25 institutions (15.43% of the total number of state pre-school institutions). Within the selected institutions, licensed evaluators: evaluated 190 facilities; surveyed 1,645 parents and 1,099 educators; and conducted several interviews in each facility with employees and management of the pre-schools, and with representatives from the local communities. The number of interviewees varied from facility to facility, primarily depending on the size of the facility.

As a basis for stratification, we used the region, the type of settlement (urban–rural area) and the size of the institution (determined by the number of employees and the extent to which the institution will be involved in training). The region, type of settlement and size of the institution are included in the stratification in order to sample areas of different levels of development and thus increase representativeness.

### 3.2. Instruments

The Standards Assessment Instrument is the main instrument used by evaluators in assessing the quality of work provided by the pre-school and consists of 64 indicators,

divided across 4 areas. For each of the indicators, descriptions for the 2nd and 4th level (from below average to excellent) of achievement of the indicators have been additionally developed in order to increase the objectivity and validity of the assessment. Thus, when the Standard Assessment Instrument is referred to in this text, we are referring to a list of 64 indicators for which a rating is given by a licensed evaluator on a scale of 1 to 4 (with detailed descriptions for levels 2 and 4).

In addition to the basic instrument, several smaller subscales have been created for parents and employees which will serve as auxiliary instruments for licensed evaluators to assess the performance of individual indicators. These additional subscales will be referred to below as ancillary instruments.

As a third aid, a guide for interviews and focus groups with parents, pre-school staff and local community representatives has also been developed. The guide was created to assess several indicators where the need to use such techniques was identified (interviews, focus groups, etc.) in order to gain a more complete insight into: the degree of

realisation of the indicators and the perspective of various actors (parents, employees, local community representatives).

### 3.3. The course of research and method for data processing

The achievement of the indicators was assessed in relation to the descriptions of levels 2 and 4 provided in the instrument itself, alongside each of the indicators. The scores for the indicators were assigned as follows:

- Indicator is graded with 4 only if all items listed in the description of that level have been met

- Indicator is graded with 3 if all items liste in the description of level 2 and only some listed in the description of level 4 are met

- Indicator is graded with 2 if all or almost all items from the level 2 description have been met

- Indicator is graded with 1 where none of the items have been met or only a part of the items from the description of level 2 have been met

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| | Average | Standard deviation | Sample |
|---|---|---|---|
| Area 1: Educational work | 2.527 | 0.505 | 190 |
| Area 2: Supporting children and families | 2.419 | 0.434 | 190 |
| Area 3: Professional learning community | 2.298 | 0.472 | 190 |
| Area 4: Management and organisation | 2.492 | 0.467 | 190 |

*Table 2.* Average values for the standard grades, for all 4 given areas

According to the existing system of external evaluation, the work of pre-school institutions is evaluated in relation to the achievement of 15 standards, divided into 4 areas: educational work (3 standards), support for children and families (3 standards), professional learning community (5 standards) and management and organisation (4 standards). In order to detect potential strengths and weaknesses of the pre-school education system, we tested differences regarding the degree to which the different standards in different areas had been fulfilled, using a one-factor analysis of variance for repeated measurements.

## 4. Results

When testing the differences between the areas, the analysis showed that there are, in fact, significant differences (F = 33.072; df = 3.567; p <0.01; η2 = 0.149). Based on Shidak's subsequent tests, significant differences were detected between the third area and the other areas, and slightly smaller differences between the first two areas. In Table 11 and Figure 3 we can see the extent of the differences, in that the highest level of achievement is in the first area (educational work), and the lowest is in the third (professional learning community). The level to which the institutions achieved quality in the second (support for children and families) and fourth (management and organisation) areas therefore ranked in the middle, but were closer to the first than the third. The extent of the difference can be considered high as η2 exceeds the value of 0.14, but given that this is close to the limit, we can say that it ranks in the "medium to highly pronounced category". Thus, the lowest ranking area in terms of the level to which the standards have been achieved is the area of the *professional learning community*, and the differences are relatively great. In this area, the requirements defined by the new Standards of Competences for the profession of educator and their professional development are largely recognised, such as reflective practice, professional learning community, activism, professional public action and the like. So, the result in this area shows that in their future development, pre-school institutions should focus strengthening the professional learning community as this is an area where there is most scope and need for improvement.

When testing the differences between individual standards, the analysis also presented significant differences (F = 60.756; df = 14.2646; p <0.01; η2 = 0.243). Based on Shidak's subsequent tests, significant differences were detected between the 4 groups of standards. In Table 2 and Figure 1 we can see that the differences in level of achievements are minimal:
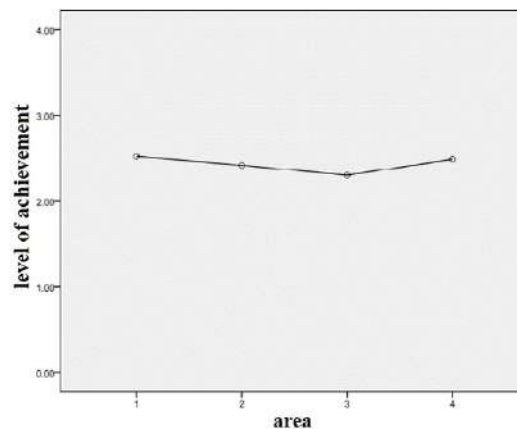


*Figure 1.* Graph showing the average values of the grades for the standards for all 4 areas

The highest level of achievement was in standard 2 from the first area (1.2. Social environment encourages learning and development of children) and standard 4 from area 4 (4.4. Leadership of the director enables the development of the institution). Given that indicator 1.2. refers primarily to interactions and building relationships of trust and cooperation between children and adults, it is expected to rank highly. Apart from the evaluator's direct insight into the educational practice, fellow educators and parents are usually very satisfied with the attitude of educators towards the children. They confirm this in their statements:

- Good relations between children are nurtured
- Positive relations are nurtured in all groups
- Children come to the kindergarten with enthusiasm
- The attitude of educators towards children is good
- Educators work hard and are dedicated to children
- Good relations between children are nurtured and friendship continues outside the kindergarten
- The atmosphere is pleasant and professional
- It is recognised that relations between employees are extremely good
- They work as a team
- They cooperate, plan together

Standard 4.4. which refers to the leadership activities of directors, supports the notion that the directors are recognised as bearers of change and development. In addition to this, the evaluators agree that most directors – with their various approaches and professional attitudes – significantly influence the atmosphere in the team, as well as the fact that they are key when it comes to connecting the institution with other local institutions in order to ensure the welfare of the children. Several examples from the interviews carried out with the employees and parents support this:

> *Management and organisation is an area that educators view positively. They decide to work in teams according to their affinities. They are involved in the project in the same way. They are also satisfied with the director's digital equipment and professional development. The director is the one who initiates, motivates through praise, awards trips, and participates in professional gatherings. The director contributed with their engagement to make the municipality more open and provide stronger support to the pre-school institution.*

These, however, were followed by several standards with a slightly lower level of achievement, namely those of: standard 1 in area 1 (1.1. Physical environment encourages learning and development of children), standard 1 in area 2 (2.1. The institution is a safe and secure environment), standard 2 in area 2 (2.2. The institution respects diversity, respects the rights and needs of children and families), standard 2 in area 3 (3.2. The institution cultivates climate of trust and togetherness), standard 5 in area 3 (3.5. The institution represents professional public

| Area standard | | Average | Standard deviation | Sample |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| standard _1_1 | The physical environment encourages children's learning and development | 2.4557 | 0.60627 | 190 |
| standard _1_2 | The social environment encourages children's learning and development | 2.7925 | 0.51718 | 190 |
| standard _1_3 | Planning and programming of educational work is in the function of supporting children's learning and development | 2.3339 | 0.51930 | 190 |
| standard _2_1 | The institution is a safe and secure environment | 2.5360 | 0.55389 | 190 |
| standard _2_2 | The institution respects diversity, respects the rights and needs of children and families | 2.4614 | 0.45400 | 190 |
| standard _2_3 | The institution cooperates with the family and the local community | 2.2616 | 0.46144 | 190 |
| standard _3_1 | The institution encourages professional communication | 2.3102 | 0.49115 | 190 |
| standard _3_2 | The institution cultivates a climate of trust and togetherness | 2.4189 | 0.51146 | 190 |
| standard _3_3 | A culture of self-evaluation is developing in the institution | 2.0260 | 0.58058 | 190 |
| standard _3_4 | The institution is a place of continuous change, learning and development | 2.2582 | 0.58336 | 190 |
| standard _3_5 | The institution represents professional public action and activism in the community | 2.4811 | 0.51179 | 190 |
| standard _4_1 | Planning the work of the institution is in the function of its development | 2.3156 | 0.51978 | 190 |
| standard _4_2 | The organisation of the work of the institution is efficient and effective | 2.4989 | 0.49370 | 190 |
| standard _4_3 | The management of the director is in the function of improving the work of the institution | 2.4474 | 0.50808 | 190 |
| standard _4_4 | The leadership of the director enables the development of the institution | 2.7075 | 0.59267 | 190 |

*Table 3.*
*Average values of the level of achievement for 15 standards*

action and activism in community), standard 2 from area 4 (4.2. Organisation of the work of the institution is efficient and effective) and standard 3 from area 4 (4.3. Management of the director is in the function of improving the work of the institution). The standards noted above relate to safety and security, respect for diversity, the climate within the institution, and concerns regarding aspects of kindergarten life that have been recognised in recent years as priorities of educational institutions.

From the interviews with the parents, it was understood that most of them have confidence in the educators – for example, they consider them competent in successfully resolving conflicts between the children. Since the evaluations of these standards are based on the theoretical average – around 2.5 – we can say that their level of achievement is mediocre, meaning that they contain approximately the same number of positive and negative evaluations. There is, therefore, certainly room for improvement in these areas, regarding everything from encouraging more meaningful parental involvement to introducing activities that support socio-emotional learning and development.

The third group consists of standards of even lower achievement, namely standard 3 from area 1 (1.3. Planning and programming of educational work is in the function of support the children's learning and development), standard 3 from area 2 (2.3. Institution cooperates with family and the local community), standard 1 from area 3 (3.1. Institution encourages professional communication), standard 4 from area 3 (4.3. Institution is a place of continuous change, learning and development), and standard 1 from area 4 (4.1. Planning the work of the institution is in the function of its development). Standards related to the planning of different areas show us that *planning* itself is still not accepted as an important mechanism for supporting children's development and improving work, but rather as an imposed obligation often approached formally. Consulting with the children, and encouraging parental initiative and involvement in planning is still not a common practice in kindergartens. In addition, in relation to the cooperation with parents and the local community, it is clear that there is a lack of stronger support for parents' initiatives and minimal use of existing resources in the local environment.

The lowest level of achievement can be seen in standard 3 from area 3 (3.3. A culture of self-evaluation is developing in the institution).
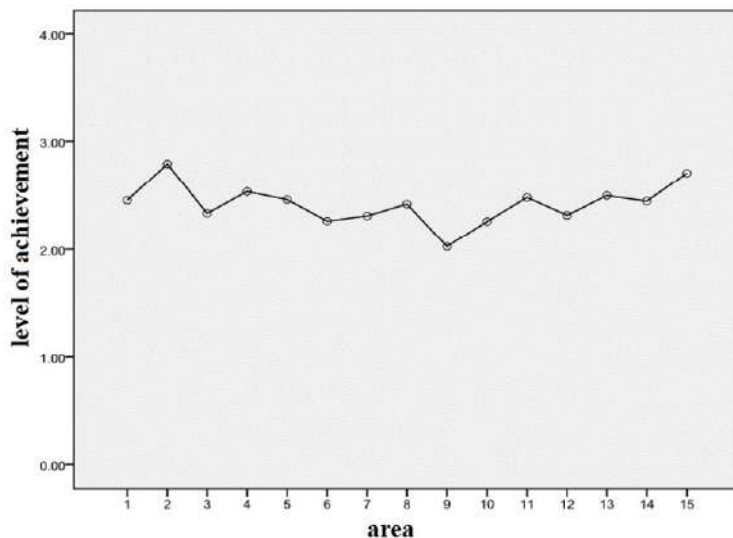
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**Figure 2:** *Graph showing the average values of the level of achievement of 15 standards*

This data tells us that the culture of self-evaluation has not yet taken root in kindergartens, and that this is usually approached formally, without insight into the importance of self-evaluation when it comes to the development and improvement of the quality of the institution as a whole. In order to make the institution a place of continuous learning, improvement and development, areas that need special attention are therefore: reviewing and reflecting on one's own practices, the culture of dialogue, the exchange of experiences, constructive communication as a basis for critical review, and the recognition of one's own strengths and weaknesses as a starting point for being able to develop a plan to improve the quality of work.

The extent of the difference can be considered quite high in this case, as η2 exceeds the value of 0.14 (η2 = 0.243). The standard ranking at the lowest grade, meaning the lowest level of achievement, is therefore standard 3 from area 3 (A culture of self-evaluation is developing in the institution), and the highest level of achievement is seen in both standard 2 from area 1 (The social environment encourages children's learning and development) and standard 4 from area 4 (The leadership of the director enables the development of the institution).

If we look at the lowest ranking standards in more detail (those that ranked in the lower two groups), we can see that these are mostly standards related to: support for learning and development, professional communication and cooperation with the family and local community, and the development of self-evaluation culture. In light of this, we can thus draw the conclusion that these areas should be worked on in order to further improve the quality of work carried out by pre-school institutions.

## 5. Discussion

The level of achievement of the standards differed from area to area, with the highest level of achievement in the first area (educational work), and the lowest in the third (professional learning community). The second (support for children and families) and the fourth area (management and organisation) ranked between the first and the third in terms of the level of achievement of their standards, but measured somewhat closer to the first:

1. Area 1: Educational work: 2.527

2. Area 2: Supporting children and families: 2.419

3. Area 3: Professional learning community: 2.298

4. Area 4: Management and organisation: 2.492

When it comes to differences between individual standards – meaning the difference measured in the level of achievement– four categories have been singled out. It is shown that the lowest level of achievement was reported in standard 3 from area 3 (The institution develops a culture of self-evaluation), and the highest level of achievement was seen in both standard 2 from area 1 (Social environment encourages learning

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and child development) and standard 4 from area 4 (Leadership of directors enables the development of the institution). In general, the lowest ranking standards relate to development support, communication (professional and family) and evaluation, and work should be done to further improve the quality of pre-school work in these contexts.

Significant differences were observed between the regions, but only for the assessments of evaluators and educators, who gave mostly lower grades to facilities from Southeast Serbia, and higher grades to facilities from Vojvodina and Belgrade. In addition to this, the evaluators gave higher grades to the facilities in urban settlements, while the educators gave higher grades in the opposite direction, grading facilities in rural settlements higher. When it comes to the phase in which the institution becomes obliged to implement the new programme concept, and when it receives support in the process, evaluators gave the lowest marks to facilities planned for the third phase of project involvement[1], and parents gave slightly lower marks to facilities planned for the second phase. Yet, educators gave higher marks to facilities from the second phase than to others. Here, as well as with the type of settlement, a slightly different tendency presents itself in the assessments of educators, compared to the assessments of the evaluators and parents. Evaluators have systematically given higher ratings to facilities that represent the core of change, which is somewhat expected.

The results obtained show the level of quality being provided in the work of pre-school institutions in Serbia at the beginning of the project and that the instruments created for this purpose show very good or even excellent psychometric characteristics. Based on these findings, it will be possible to: monitor the realisation of the project's development goal, evaluate the degree to which quality has been achieved in the implementation of the project activities, and provide guidelines for improving the quality of work carried out in pre-school institutions.

## 6. Conclusion

Quality assurance in education should maintain or improve the quality of teaching provided by utilising the evaluation process. While quality assurance is an aspiration, evaluation is a process that ensures the ongoing achievements and improvement of the quality of education.

The general picture of quality is reflected in the outcomes of the process of assessing quality across individual areas. It has been observed that the institutions have not been successful enough in the aspects related to individualisation, the adjustment of work and monitoring of progress, in other words, their formative assessment. The work climate and social relations were the most positively assessed, through the quality of ethos. One gets the impression that the valued pre-school institutions are characterised by respect for the rights of the children and adults, support and promotion of quality educational work and a pleasant ambience.

All presented and interpreted results of external evaluations, referring to those conducted at pre-school institutions, can be used as data to form the basis of which development can be planned. At the level of the system as well as that of the school administrations, the advantages and disadvantages of the work of educational institutions are considered, thus providing the starting point in designing different types of support. At the institutional level, there are quantitative indicators (levels of achievement of individual standards) and qualitative assessments (narrative reports on the assessment of the work of the institution) which serve as the basis for action planning in all four areas of quality or only in those areas that require positive change.

[1]Four phases of project implementation were planned so that different institutions underwent training at other times and successively had an obligation to apply the new concept in their working practices with the children.

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# Slovenia

Ensuring high quality pre-school education by redesigning the national pre-school curriculum in Slovenia

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | **Which department/ministry does ECEC sit under?** | Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia. |
| **2** | **What programs/settings exist for children between the ages of 0-7?** | Pre-school education is provided in kindergartens ("vrtci"). This is organised within a single system for all children aged 1 to 6 and/or until they start their basic education aged 6 (single system of primary and lower secondary education). |
| **3** | **What percentage of children are in ECEC centers?** | In the 2020/21 school year, 82.5% of children aged 1 to 5 attended preschool education – 93.7 % were aged 4 to 5 and 67% were aged 1 to 3. |
| **4** | **Link to national/local curriculum for ECEC** | Click here for the national curriculum |
| **5** | **Who is responsible for inspecting/ monitoring of ECEC?** | External and internal quality assurance is conducted. The regulation of activities regarding management and education is supervised by the school inspectorate. Kindergartens must carry out regular self-evaluations. They must then report this to their own governing bodies. |

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Nives Zore works as head of the Department for Pre-school Education at the National Education Institute of the Republic of Slovenia (NEIS). She graduated from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ljubljana in 1989. Since 1994, she has been employed at the NEIS as a consultant for pre-school education. She was a coordinator on the development project Reconceptualization of Time in Kindergarten. She is the author of the Child and Computer in Kindergarten handbook. She was involved in the gradual introduction of the first pre-school curriculum in Slovenia (1999–2002) and in the project Network of Mentor Kindergartens, within which the introduction of the curriculum continued. She is a co-author of various manuals in the field of preschool education. Nives participated in the preparation of starting points for the renewal of the curriculum for kindergartens and is now involved in the process of updating the curriculum for kindergartens.

# Ensuring high quality pre-school education by redesigning the national pre-school curriculum in Slovenia

## ABSTRACT

In this chapter we outline: the organisation of pre-school education in Slovenia, continuous professional development for teachers, and reasons for the current renewal of the national pre-school curriculum. The national Kindergarten Curriculum (1999) forms the foundation for professional work in kindergartens in Slovenia. It consists of the basic elements of a modern curriculum and enables educators to plan a process-developmental and learning-targeted strategy for educational work in different learning areas. It also includes other conditions and obstacles for the realisation of the curriculum's objectives, including the hidden curriculum. When we talk about the hidden curriculum, we are talking about the "other" of the curriculum, all that is taken for granted and uncritically accepted in the pedagogical situation. It is therefore essential to raise awareness of the hidden curriculum, which should contribute to greater transparency in all that happens in kindergartens and contributes to the actual realisation of fundamental human right.

However, rapid changes in society and recent theoretical knowledge about early learning dictate the review and modernisation of the curriculum. Some of the key data – such as the high number of toddlers in kindergartens, the increase in the share of children of foreign nationalities enrolled in the Slovenian education system, the increase in the number of children with risk factors, the increase in issues regarding school delays, etc. – require a particularly well thought-out process of updating the curriculum for kindergartens.

## Organisation of pre-school education in Slovenia

### General aspects
The pre-school education sector in Slovenia is part of the wider system of education and comes under the supervision of the ministry responsible for education. Pre-school education is not compulsory and is aimed at children aged 11 months to six years old, the latter of which is starting age for compulsory school entry. It is up to the parents to decide whether to enrol their child in kindergarten or not.

Pre-school education is provided through both state and private kindergartens. State kindergartens are set up by local communities in line with the needs of the local population.

Full-day pre-school programmes provide six to nine hours of childcare per day. They are usually delivered in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon or in shifts, such as one week in the morning, the next in the afternoon. A child may not stay in the kindergarten for more than 9 hours per day. Most children attend full-day pre-school programmes. Children usually remain and receive pre-school education and care in the same institution until they start their compulsory basic schooling.

Education and care in Slovenian kindergartens is provided in two age groups: the first group being for children aged 1 to 3 years old, and the second group for children aged 3 to 6. The pre-school system is an organisationally coherent system, which is available to all children prior to entering the primary school system, includes the educational and care component and provides continuity between pre-school and their compulsory basic school education. All public kindergartens and private kindergartens are obligated to provide and implement the principles, to pursue objectives and apply the guidelines of the national preschool curriculum: the Kindergarten Curriculum (1999).

The vast majority of children attended public kindergartens (94.5%). Very small number of kindergartens in Slovenia offer alternative programmes for pre-school education. Some of them follow special pedagogical principles, for example those of Montessori and Waldorf, while others implement their own programmes, the majority of which focus on Christian content, or foreign languages and sports. However, most of the private kindergartens do also follow the national Kindergarten Curriculum (1999). There are no experimental kindergartens in Slovenia. Most Slovenian kindergartens take part in various projects at different levels. They participate in many international, national and local projects in order to enrich their educational provision and to develop their own pedagogical practice.

### Participation in Slovenian kindergartens
Participation in Slovenian kindergartens has been on the rise in recent years. Over the last decade the number of children in Slovenian kindergartens has increased by 13.5%. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (Statistical Information. Pre-school education 2021), the number of children in Slovenia who attended kindergarten in the school year 2020/21 was reported at: 82.5% of children aged one to five, 67% of toddlers aged one and two, and 93.7% of children aged four and five/from the age of four to the age of school entry

Over the last ten years, the largest increase in participation has been among the one and two year olds, with an increase of around 17%. However, a comparison of the share of Slovenian toddlers enrolled in kindergartens with toddlers in other EU countries (Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe, 2019) shows that Slovenia has a significantly higher share of toddlers aged up to three than the EU average (34%) and a slightly lower share of children aged from four up to the reach school entry age (the EU average is 95.4%).

### The Kindergarten Curriculum
The Kindergarten Curriculum (1999) is a national document, intended for the use of pre-school teachers

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and their assistants, headmasters, education counsellors and other educational staff. It is a document that, together with professional literature and handbooks for pre-school teachers, enables professional planning and ensures the quality of pre-school education.

The term "curriculum" was introduced to refer to education in kindergartens in Slovenia 23 years ago, as it is conceptually broader and more comprehensive than the that of a "programme". This also shifts the focus from the content to the education process itself. The central focus of the curriculum was on greater democratisation of life and work in the kindergarten, through:

- Respect for equal opportunities and respect for diversity
- Greater scope for individuality, difference and choice, as opposed to group routines
- Respect for privacy and intimacy
- Raising awareness and tackling the hidden curriculum and routines
- Reconceptualising space and time in kindergarten

Slovenia has an integrated curriculum framework and national guidelines covering the entire pre-school period, from the age of 11 months to six years. The national pre-school curriculum is based on a developmental approach.

### The main components of the Kindergarten Curriculum

The Kindergarten Curriculum embraces the fundamental principles and goals of pre-school education and follows the research findings of which indicate that children understand and view the world as a whole, and that they develop and learn in active interaction with their social and physical environment.

By implementing all sixteen principles of the written curriculum in practice – in particular the principle of the development-process approach, the principle of evaluation and the principle of active learning – we want to achieve the most efficient match between the curriculum and the child's characteristics and interests. The main components of Slovenian preschool curriculum are curriculum goals, the principles, the fields of activity and a section on children in kindergarten, covering:

- The development and learning in the preschool period
- Rest and sleep, eating, and other everyday activities as elements of the curriculum, including the hidden curriculum
- Interpersonal relationships among children, between children and adults in kindergartens social learning
- Space as an element of curriculum
- Cooperation with parents

Each field of activity – including movement, language, the arts, society, science and mathematics – contains global and specific objectives, examples of activities and the role of adults in said activities. Only examples of activities in each of the six fields are designed separately for the two different age groups (ages 1–3 and 3–6) so that educators can bring the curriculum closer to the developmental

needs of the children. Interdisciplinary learning based on topics such as ethics, health care, safety and traffic education are also integrated into all areas of activity.

Although the Kindergarten Curriculum provides some examples of specific practices and suggestions for implementation, teachers still have a certain level of flexibility to use other approaches as well.

**The planning of educational work: Implementation/ executive curriculum**

The planning of educational work in the kindergarten represents a pillar of support in the workplace and ensures the diversity and balance of an adequate offer of activities, or a so-called *balanced curriculum* – for all children. The planning should go above and beyond routine, while also allowing for improvisation. It must lead teachers to think about their work with the children and give them the opportunity to monitor the development, learning and progress of each child, as well as their own professional work.

The principles of critical evaluation, the development-process approach and active learning require that the pre-school teacher observes the development and learning of each child and uses the information gained from such observations for the planning and implementation of goals, activities, the educational process and individualisation. Ob-

" Pre-school teachers schedule the activities according to: the age of children, the start of the school day, the time at which the children arrive and leave the kindergarten, meal times, planned activities and the needs of the children. The daily programme combines both planned and spontaneous activities, and it is supposed to cover all learning areas in a balanced manner.

servation is thus the most common method of following the development, learning, needs and interests of each child.

In accordance with the national pre-school curriculum, each implementation of the curriculum for each group is unique, unrepeatable work that is the result of a combination of planning, interactions between all involved, and reflections and evaluations of all of the educational processes within said group of children. Through a balanced planning of the goals for all areas of activity, and the planning and carrying out of activities for all learning areas outlined in the curriculum, a pre-school teacher provides children the opportunity to learn and acquire different experiences, competences and knowledge in a developmentally

appropriate way. The duration of planned activities and the order of activities are not prescribed in the national pre-school curriculum. They are flexible and may be adapted to the circumstances. Pre-school teachers schedule the activities according to: the age of children, the start of the school day, the time at which the children arrive and leave the kindergarten, meal times, planned activities and the needs of the children. The daily programme combines both planned and spontaneous activities, and it is supposed to cover all learning areas in a balanced manner.

**Raising awareness of the hidden curriculum**

Most European countries provide between 20 and 29 hours of pre-school education per week. Only a handful of countries offer full-time

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> "It is in the routine activities in kindergarten that the hidden curriculum can be most strongly enforced. It is the ordinary daily routine, the daily routine that is repeated every day, every week, every month, which is at the same time a repetitive and ubiquitous routine, usually involving reckless and automated adult actions and disciplinary commands and rules.

kindergarten opening hours, which cover the full working week of parents and thus a full-day pre-school programme, namely Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia and Norway (Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe, 2019). Toddlers and children in Slovenian kindergartens are also provided with meals and rest during the full-day programme (9 hours per day), which requires careful professional reflection on daily routines and the hidden curriculum.

It is in the routine activities in kindergarten that the hidden curriculum can be most strongly enforced. It is the ordinary daily routine, the daily routine that is repeated every day, every week, every month, which is at the same time a repetitive and ubiquitous routine, usually involving reckless and automated adult actions and disciplinary commands and rules.

The hidden curriculum includes many elements of educational influence on the child that are not defined anywhere, but which are often more effective in the form of indirect education than the direct educational activities defined in the written curriculum.

The democratisation of the kindergarten curriculum, based on respect for human rights, also implies the systematic loosening and removal of barriers associated with the hidden curriculum, which must be sought not only in the content and activities of pre-school education in kindergartens, but also in other elements of the pre-school curriculum.

According to Jackson and Apple, the hidden curriculum is a feature of the kindergarten or school as an institution that teaches children to be uncritical, obedient, passive, resigned, etc., by adapting them to institutional life itself, by subjecting them to a variety of rules and orders, including those that are meaningless or professionally ill-considered.

In fact, it is the qualities of children that are used by the institution as an institution (Jakson, 1990), and not pre-school education with its

educational mission and curriculum. Nor should the hidden curriculum be understood in the sense of something necessarily negative. It should be understood as the disclosure of something that has been generally ignored within the institution, but which is very important for the very truth of preschools as institutions.

### The importance of developing the ECEC curricula

Researchers and education policy makers agree that we need to consider the development of early childhood curricula as a powerful tool for improving the quality of pre-school education as well as the quality of pedagogical service and teaching methods. The curricula represents a third of the five key dimensions of the quality framework in pre-primary education, alongside access, workforce/professionals, evaluation and monitoring, and governance and funding (Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014; Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early

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Childhood Education and Care Systems (2019/C 189/02)).

The curriculum is recognised as a powerful tool for improving well-being, development and learning experiences for children. The broad pedagogical framework also sets out principles to support the development of children with educational and training practices that match the children's interests, needs and potential. Two key statements about the quality of the pre-school curriculum stand out: (Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014):

- The curriculum should be based on pedagogical goals, values and approaches which enable children to reach their full potential of their emotional, cognitive and physical development and well-being in a holistic way.

- A curriculum which requires staff to collaborate with children, colleagues and parents and to reflect on their own practice with a view to improving it and so working even more for the benefit of and support for each individual child.

There are many relevant issues to think about. For example, is a curriculum with defined elements, such as the role of adults, learning objectives, learning areas and so on, sufficiently useful for the current situation, as well as the education of tomorrow? Does it adequately emphasise and support children's curiosity, imagination, creativity, critical thinking, communication, and resilience? Does it teach them to respect and value the ideas, perspectives and values of others by valuing themselves first? Does it emphasise a balance between 'soft' and 'hard' skills? Does it promote the competences they need now and in the future when they join the labour market, one of which we cannot predict? And so on. The Council's recommendation to the Member States on the pre-primary curriculum is that they should improve the development and design of pre-primary curricula to meet children's needs for well-being and the provision of appropriate educational experiences.

In many countries where pre-school curricula were adopted around the same time as ours, that being in the 1990s, their curricula have already been updated. For example, Finland adopted its first pre-school curriculum in 2000 and updated it in 2018 (which then entered into force on 1 July 2018). Norway updated its 1995 pre-school curriculum in 2017; Sweden adopted its first curriculum in 1998 and updated it in 2018; Denmark adopted its first curriculum in 2004 and updated it in 2016; Iceland adopted its first curriculum in 1999 and updated it in 2011; in the United Kingdom, the first curriculum was adopted in 2008, and was updated for the first time in 2012, then 2014, and again in 2017; New Zealand adopted its first pre-primary curriculum in 1996 and updated it in 2017.

The social, economic and environmental challenges we are currently facing are great, especially given the acceleration of globalisation and rapid technological development.

"The social, economic and environmental challenges we are currently facing are great, especially given the acceleration of globalisation and rapid technological development.

This naturally raises the question of whether our pre-school curriculum still provides an adequate and sufficiently solid basis for 'preparing' the current generation of children for the future, in ways that are consistent with pedagogical knowledge

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about how preschool children learn and what matters most to them.

Ongoing curriculum development is thus important when it comes to identifying and ensuring its compatibility with scientific knowledge regarding how children learn, how interests are formed, how we differ and so on, while also adapting to changes in society. Child-centred pedagogical approaches can better support the children's holistic development, complement their learning strategies and promote their cognitive and non-cognitive development by more systematically reinforcing experiential learning, play and social interactions.

The curriculum is a tool that can provide a coherent framework for early childhood education. It sets age-appropriate learning objectives, while allowing educators to adapt their approach to the individual needs of each child. It also provides guidelines for organising a high-quality learning environment, with appropriate availability of books and other printed materials to support children's early literacy development. An effective curriculum promotes the integration of migrants and other vulnerable groups by promoting diversity, equality and linguistic awareness.

**The renewal of the national pre-school curriculum in Slovenia**
The process of renovating the kindergarten curriculum started three years ago, with the preparation of two expert documents at NEIS. One of them compiled the findings of the NEIS on: the use of the curriculum in practice, our direct work with kindergartens, in the context of different development projects, advisory services and other forms of cooperation. In the second, we have provided

an overview of: the EU, OECD and UNESCO recommendations, a review of professional publications, relevant research and their findings for ensuring high quality in ECEC, and a review of selected foreign early childhood curricula.

This was followed by the appointment of an expert group for the revision of the kindergarten curriculum, which consisted of university professors, a representative of the Ministry of Education, consultants for ECEC from the NEIS and representatives of practitioners. This expert group prepared a questionnaire on the kindergarten curriculum, which was implemented in January 2020. A report was prepared analysing the responses to the questionnaire on the kindergarten curriculum and the findings.

This was followed by the development of a comprehensive working document for the reform of the kindergarten curriculum, in which we covered all the key aspects that are important for quality pre-school education and a quality pre-school curriculum, supported by relevant data for pre-school education and findings from key research projects. At the same time, expert discussions on curriculum renewal were also held with kindergarten head teachers.

Another expert group was then appointed at the NEIS to prepare the starting points for the renewal of the kindergarten curriculum. The task of this expert group was to draw up the starting points for the Renewal of the Kindergarten Curriculum and to define in them the purpose, and the systemic and conceptual rationale for the renewal, as well as the objectives and principles of the renewal, and to propose the structure of the

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updated Kindergarten Curriculum. The expert group was composed of a tripartite group of ECEC experts: representatives of faculties, early childhood education consultants from the NEIS and representatives of practitioners, kindergarten educators and head teachers. A total of 19 members were appointed to the expert group. In November 2021, the NEIS presented a draft document of the starting points for the Renewal of the Kindergarten Curriculum to the Expert Council of the Republic of Slovenia for General Education, which is the highest expert body in the country for deciding on professional matters in the field of general education. In February 2022, the Slovenian Council of Experts on General Education adopted the proposal of the starting points for the Renewal of the Kindergarten Curriculum, which means that the modernisation of the kindergarten curriculum must be carried out in accordance with the proposals and solutions as set out in these starting points.

The purpose of the reform of the kindergarten curriculum is to: empower kindergarten children and kindergarten practitioners with the skills relevant for them to face current and future challenges, by including them in a meaningful way in the kindergarten curriculum; update the structure and content of the kindergarten curriculum in a meaningful way, while maintaining the openness and flexibility of the

kindergarten curriculum in the full-day programme and in developing a proposal for a curriculum for half-day and shorter programmes; strengthen the role of process-development planning in pedagogical work with children in kindergartens, emphasising individualisation, the importance of realising an inclusive learning environment, with

## "Emphasis on equal opportunities and diverse ways of learning.

emphasis on equal opportunities and diverse ways of learning.

We highlight below some of the findings from the analysis of the practitioners' responses to the Kindergarten Curriculum Questionnaire (2020) and the seven key areas we identified in the NEIS Working Paper for the Renewal of the Kindergarten Curriculum (2021).

### Kindergarten Curriculum Questionnaire

The Questionnaire for practitioners, which we conducted in January 2020, was designed to take into account as far as possible the views on the pre-school curriculum of all groups of kindergarten profes-

sionals, their experiences and suggestions on the relevance of the objectives, principles, content and the appropriateness of the overall curriculum document for the updating of the curriculum. It was structured along the lines of the existing Kindergarten Curriculum, which means that the questions were designed to examine the chapters of the curriculum, following its table of contents. Two questions referred to topics that are not specified in the curriculum, namely: Transitions within the kindergarten and to school and Quality of early childhood education in the kindergarten.

When asked which chapters should be included in the general part of the curriculum document, 86.6% of all respondents thought that the chapter "Development and Learning of Toddlers and Children in Early Childhood" should be included, while 66.9% of all respondents thought that the chapter "Quality of Pre-school Education in Kindergarten" should be included, 66.1% of respondents thought that the chapter "Principles of Pre-school Education in Kindergarten" should be included, and 65.8% of respondents thought that the chapter "Collaboration with Parents" should be included. Less than half of the respondents (49.5%) would include a "Transitions within the Pre-school and to School" chapter.

When asked whether they would add any new principles to those

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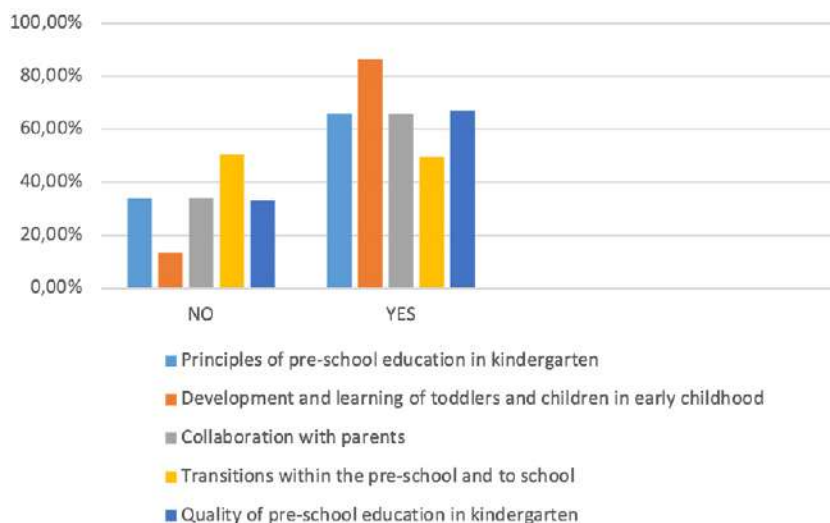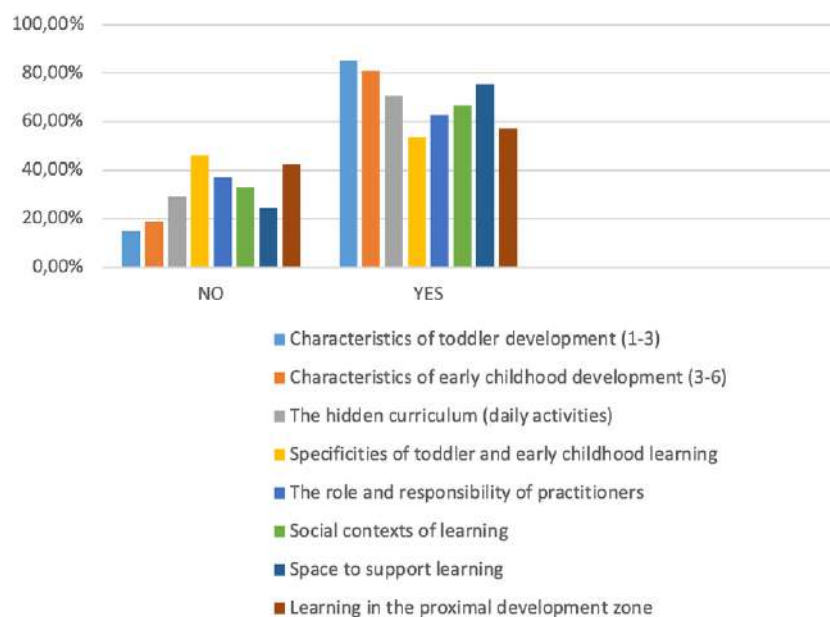**Figure 1:** *Which chapters should be included in the general part of the curriculum document?*

Legend:
- Principles of pre-school education in kindergarten
- Development and learning of toddlers and children in early childhood
- Collaboration with parents
- Transitions within the pre-school and to school
- Quality of pre-school education in kindergarten



**Figure 2:** *Content to be included in the chapter on children's development and learning in kindergarten*

Legend:
- Characteristics of toddler development (1-3)
- Characteristics of early childhood development (3-6)
- The hidden curriculum (daily activities)
- Specificities of toddler and early childhood learning
- The role and responsibility of practitioners
- Social contexts of learning
- Space to support learning
- Learning in the proximal development zone

already written in the Kindergarten Curriculum (1999), 90.9% of respondents said they would not.

When asked which topics they thought should be included in the chapter on "Early Childhood Development and Learning", eight topics were suggested, as shown in the table and bar chart below. The largest percentage of all respondents (85.2%), would include 'characteristics of toddler development (ages 1–3)' in this chapter, while 81% would include 'characteristics of early childhood development (ages 3–6)'. 75.6% would include 'the hidden curriculum (daily activities)', 70.8% would include 'the specificities of toddlers and young children's learning', 66.9% would include 'the role and responsibility of practitioners', and 62.9% would include 'social contexts of learning (e.g. play, shared reading)'. 57.4% would include 'space to support learning', and only 53.8% would include 'learning in the proximal development zone'.

The analysis of the questionnaire showed that a high proportion of respondents agree with the proposed structure and chapters of the curriculum document. 73.7% of all respondents did not want the general section of the document to contain any other content, and 78.1% of all respondents did not want to add another chapter to the curriculum document. However, 90.4% of all respondents agreed to

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add a new chapter in the document on the "Quality of Early Childhood Education in the Kindergarten", which we proposed in the questionnaire. When asked whether they would like to see certain topics specifically highlighted in the "Transitions within Kindergarten and to School section", 70.2% of respondents answered 'no' while only 29.8% of all respondents answered 'yes'.

We can thus conclude that the respondents do not want a radical change in the structure and content of the curriculum document, which is evident both from the results of their answers to the closed, and from the content reported in the open questions.

**Aspects of the curriculum that NEIS considers in need of updating**
Based on a review of relevant theory findings and research on the impact of kindergartens on children's development and learning, as well as findings from monitoring the implementation of the kindergarten curriculum, the NEIS has prepared a comprehensive working paper on the redesign of the kindergarten curriculum, identifying key aspects of the curriculum that need to be updated. The proposed aspects/content strands for the update do not conceptually change the baseline document, but merely complement the concept of childhood and early childhood education with more recent concepts based on interdisciplinary integration of knowledge on children's early development and learning, and which emphasise that infants, toddlers and children are mentally, linguistically and socially more competent than the developmental milestones of maturity. Furthermore, the proposed content strands only complement the baseline document in those aspects of the content which, in our view, are not sufficiently defined or which are missing. We proposed the following content strands for updating the curriculum:

1. The competent child: complementing the concept of childhood and early childhood education

2. The first age group: the visibility of infants and toddlers in the curriculum

3. Language in the kindergarten: promoting speech and language and emergent literacy

4. Multilingualism and multiculturalism in kindergarten

5. Quality in kindergarten: monitoring and evaluation

6. Promoting digital competences and media literacy

7. Sustainable development in the pre-school curriculum

These are broader content strands, which also take into account the other important aspects of ECEC identified through the monitoring of the curriculum implementation in Slovenian kindergartens (e.g. cooperation with parents, supportive learning environment).

**Starting points for the Renewal of the Kindergarten Curriculum**
The starting points for the Renewal of the Kindergarten Curriculum (2022) was prepared by the members of the expert group appointed by the NEIS. The expert group consisted of experts from faculties and kindergarten practice and senior consultants for pre-school education from within the NEIS.

In the starting points for the updating of the Kindergarten Curriculum, the expert group: defined the purpose of the Renewal of the Kindergarten Curriculum, provided the systemic and conceptual rationale for the renewal (which is supported by the findings of some of the relevant research on the impact of kindergarten on toddlers' and children's development and learning), identified the objectives and principles for the renewal, proposed the structure of the updated document and set out the action plan for the renewal.

The expert group have outlined five key systemic reasons for reforming the kindergarten curriculum. The first relates to the number of hours that pre-school programmes/curricula in other countries provide

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> " Reports from kindergartens also indicate that there is still an upward trend in the proportion of children with risk factors and children with special needs, which calls for a thorough professional reflection on this important aspect of ECEC as well.

for pre-school children. We found that most European countries provide between 20 and 29 hours of weekly curricula for pre-school children. This means that kindergarten opening hours, which cover the parents' full working week and thus a full-day pre-school programme, are available in only a handful of countries, namely: Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia and Norway (Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe, 2019). The full-day pre-school programme in Slovenian kindergartens also includes meals and rest (sleep) for toddlers and children, which requires careful consideration of their routines and the hidden curriculum, which should also be adequately defined in the curriculum document.

Another reason relates to the increasing proportion of children of all ages enrolled in kindergartens in Slovenia, similar to most European countries. This has been increasing significantly over the last decades, especially for children in the first age group, as can be seen from the data presented in the section "Participation in Slovenian Kindergartens". As Slovenia has a common kindergarten for children of all ages and, consequently, a common national curriculum document, we need to pay more and closer attention to the first age group when updating the curriculum.

The proportion of children of foreign nationals enrolled in Slovenian kindergartens is also increasing. Data shows that the share of foreign children in kindergartens has increased from 4.6% in 2016 to 6.3% in 2021 (SiStat, 2021). Most of the children of foreign nationals enrolled in kindergartens come from neighbouring countries, namely Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia (SURS 2020/2021). In the light of the above data, it is necessary to reflect on how to integrate the professional doctrine of the necessity of including the teaching of children coming from different na-

tional backgrounds in their mother tongue, and of preserving their identity in the renewed curriculum.

The data on the proportion of children with special needs in kindergarten is also interesting. Data from the statistics office show that the proportion of children with special needs in pre-school is increasing. By 2017, there was an upward trend, with 1.30% of children with special needs enrolled in kindergarten in 2005 and 2.16% in 2017. Reports from kindergartens also indicate that there is still an upward trend in the proportion of children with risk factors and children with special needs, which calls for a thorough professional reflection on this important aspect of ECEC as well.

At a systemic and substantive level, another figure to be highlighted is the rising rate of deferrals for school-age children. In 2011/12, the proportion of school-age children not enrolled in school was 5.3%, while this figure is 12.3% for 2020/21. From a curriculum perspective, appropriate solutions must be found and must allow for the smoothest possible transition between kindergarten and school.

In the starting points for the Renewal of the Kindergarten Curriculum, we also set out the conceptual rationale for curriculum renewal, which is based on recent theoretical findings on toddlers' and children's development and learning, and on

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research findings on the impact of kindergarten as pre-school institution on toddlers' and children's development and learning. The members of the curriculum committees who will write the texts for the updated curriculum document will need to take the following into account in the drafting process (starting points for the Renewal of the Kindergarten 2022, p. 8-11):

- Toddlers and children in early childhood are different from older children and adolescents in all areas of development

- There are significant individual differences in development and learning

- The great variability in the development and learning of toddlers and children is related to the child's disposition, special needs, gender, socio-economic and cultural factors relating to the family, and ethnic background

- All areas of development (movement, thinking, speech, emotional, social and moral development) are interrelated and have a reciprocal relationship

- Early developmental periods are particularly vulnerable to negative environmental influences, deficits in the family and/or the nursery environment

- Children's development takes place along a developmental continuum

- Developmental changes are not directly related to the chronological age of toddlers and children (interactions between dispositions, environmental factors and the child's own activity can all impact this)

- There is a relatively high degree of stability and predictability in individual development

- Children's development and learning should be promoted within the area of proximate development

- The importance of social constructivism, which adds a social dimension to learning (early social interactions, social relationships, empathy, cooperative learning, etc.)

- The role of speech (internal and social, or speech in support of thinking and speech in the communicative function) and other forms of symbolic expression are particularly important

- Ensuring the emotional security of toddlers/children is a prerequisite for social integration, cooperation, and learning

- Play, especially symbolic play, shared reading between adults and children, children's creative expression, storytelling and talking are the predominant social contexts for toddler's and children's development and learning

- Neuroscience findings, in particular on early sensitive periods in development and learning

- The image of the competent child and the child as a capable individual: the need for a different educational methodology

In the starting points for the Renewal of the Kindergarten Curriculum, we have also identified 14 renewal objectives that the members of the curriculum committees will have to follow in their work, and which must be visible in the renewed kindergarten curriculum.

The seven principles for the reform of the kindergarten curriculum must also be followed, namely:

1. The principle of equal opportunities and of curricula being attuned to changes in society and the world and in the lives of children and families

2. The principle of the professional validity of the curriculum

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3. The principle of comparison with contemporary early childhood education curricula in other countries

4. The principle of process-oriented planning of educational work, ongoing monitoring and the autonomy and professional responsibility of the kindergarten

5. The principle of continuous and high-quality integration and cooperation with parents and cooperation with the local environment, the school and other institutions

6. The principle of integrating cross-curricular activities into the curriculum

7. The principle of professional support for the introduction of the renewed curriculum

At the time of writing this article, we have developed criteria for the selection of external contributors to the curriculum review bodies, namely consisting of university experts in different fields, including: early childhood pedagogy, developmental psychology, educational theory, sociology, philosophy, etc., who are engaged in scientific research in the conceptual area of ECEC and kindergarten practice, as well as for ECEC practitioners.

In accordance with the NEIS Action Plan for the Renewal of the Kindergarten Curriculum, the Curriculum Commissions will start work on the renewal of the document as soon as the members have been appointed. According to the action plan, the preparation and adoption of the revised curriculum document will be followed by its introduction into kin-dergarten practice and evaluation.

**The importance of providing continual professional development for pre-school practitioners in ECEC quality assurance**

By organising and implementing various forms of continuous professional development and cooperation – such as study meetings, seminars, consultancy services, development tasks and projects, joint preparation of expert documents, etc. – the NEIS is thus working towards the professionalisation of kindergarten professionals, which is key to ensuring a higher level of quality in ECEC. We encourage practitioners in the field to reflect on how to fulfil their professional role in supporting children and families, how to enhance the quality of interactions between them and children, and how to plan, implement and monitor the curriculum in order to fully take into account children's needs in terms of their well-being, learning and development. We work together to raise awareness and deepen the complex knowledge, skills and competences needed to understand children's development and to understand early childhood pedagogy. We are strongly committed to supporting educators in their work and the challenges they face when working with children and their families by providing various forms of continual professional development. Together, we recognise that the work of ECEC practitioners has a long-term impact on children and also on their success in further education. This makes it all the more important that practitioners are involved in such challenging tasks as the reform of the national curriculum.

Kindergarten practitioners are also always involved in the various working groups for the preparation of proposals for documents, projects, and other initiatives. In the process

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> **"Kindergarten practitioners are also always involved in the various working groups.**

of updating the pre-school curriculum, they were involved in both of the previous working/expert groups. They will also be involved in all curriculum committees in the development of the renewed pre-school curriculum, as we are aware that their direct knowledge and experience from kindergarten practice is invaluable.

As mentioned earlier, we also developed a curriculum questionnaire for them in order to take their knowledge and opinions into account as far as is possible.

At the beginning of each school year, we organise study groups/meetings for them, in which we inform them of all the new developments in the field of ECEC and key content highlights. We raise awareness among pre-school practitioners about their own practice with examples of practice that support professionals' reflection on their own work. Since 2015, the content of the study meetings has focused on formative assessment and in-

clusion in the broadest sense, and on understanding why and how it is important to ensure quality in executing the curriculum. As an example, here are some of the highlights of the study meetings we've held for pre-school practitioners in recent years:

- In 2015/2016, we wanted to empower practitioners to support children's optimal development and to work with children from immigrant families and children from vulnerable groups

- In 2016/2017, we continued with the content of formative assessment of children in kindergartens in terms of their inclusion and active role

- In 2017/2018, we highlighted the fundamental aspiration of an inclusive kindergarten, the participation and development of each individual to the maximum extent possible

- In 2018/2019, we stressed the importance of the appropriate transfer of the findings of formative monitoring to plan and create a stimulating and safe environment to support children in their social and emotional development

- In 2019/2020, the main focus was to reflect on how to ensure the quality of every child's day-to-day stay and well-being in kindergarten (presentation of the EU quality framework for kindergartens of 2014 and the Council Recommendation on high quality ECEC systems of 2019, and an introduction to the 7 principles of learning from the OECD Guidelines for Innovative Learning Environments for the 21st Century of 2012)

- In 2020/2021, we continued with the content of learning in modern times – highlighting the role of adults, the importance of relational competence and dialogue, and the importance of learning by exploring

- In 2021/2022, we wanted to empower practitioners in the meaningful and safe use of digital technology and the effective use of digital technology in documenting children's learning and progress

Thus, the content of this year's study meetings for kindergarten practitioners (to be held August–October 2022) will be aimed at presenting the current content changes and the rationale for the reform of

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the kindergarten curriculum, as well as the link between the curriculum and the quality implementation curriculum, with examples from kindergarten practice. Selected examples from kindergarten practice will highlight the importance of language awareness in relation to multilingualism and multiculturalism, the meaning of sustainable development in kindergarten, children's health and well-being, and planning a quality curriculum for young children aged 1–3.

**Conclusion**

Our aim was to present the role of NEIS and the ways in which we support the system in ensuring and maintaining high quality pre-school education in Slovenia. In particular, we highlighted the current process of curriculum renewal for kindergartens and the importance of providing continuous professional development for practitioners in the sector. We strive to keep practitioners up-to-date with new developments in ECEC brought about by recent research findings on how children learn. We keep them up-to-date on how to plan and implement a high quality curriculum and how to support children appropriately in their development, learning and play. We support them in developing their own practice and help them to share examples of practice. And last but not least, because we are aware of the impact of a quality pre-school curriculum on curriculum implementation, we will work hard to develop a quality renewed curriculum for kindergartens together with pre-school experts and practitioners.

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# Sweden

Systematic quality work –
one way to improve quality

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | **Which department/ministry does ECEC sit under?** | The National Agency for Education |
| **2** | **What programs/settings exist for children between the ages of 0-7?** | Open pre-schools are available for guardians together with their children from 0 years. Pre-school (förskola) is for children aged 1 to 5. Pedagogical care is for children aged 1 to 12. Pre-school class starts at the age of 6. |
| **3** | **What percentage of children are in ECEC centers?** | 86% of children aged 1 to 5 attend ECEC centres (2021). |
| **4** | **Link to national/local curriculum for ECEC** | Click here for the national curriculum |
| **5** | **Who is responsible for inspecting/ monitoring of ECEC?** | The Swedish School Inspectorate is responsible for the supervision of municipalities and quality assurance regarding pre-schools. Each municipality is responsible for the supervision of independent pre-schools located in that municipality. |

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Adrian got his Bachelor of Education for Pre-School from Karlstad University in 2010.  After graduating, he worked as a pre-school teacher until he started working with pre-school development in one of the municipalities in the Stockholm region. The focus of his development project was human rights and democracy.  In 2017 he began working with the national programmes for school development at the Swedish National Agency for Education. There he focused on pre-school issues related to topics such as gender equality, systematic quality work, teaching, and special education in a pre-school environment.  He also worked with the implementation of the recently revised curriculum.

Adrian now works as a director of education at the Pre-school and School Unit of the agency. His work is related to pre-school education and includes the development of the pre-school curriculum.

# Systematic quality work – one way to improve quality

## ABSTRACT

The goals of the Swedish pre-school curriculum specify the direction of education, the quality of the development expected in that education, and how it contributes to each child's development and learning. To improve quality in pre-schools, work needs to be carried out systematically and at different levels.

The focus of the Swedish contribution to the 2022 CIDREE Yearbook is on systematic quality work and how it can help to improve quality. The article includes descriptions of systematic quality work and chapter 2.6 of the pre-school curriculum, "Follow-up, evaluation and development" (Skolverket, 2019). It will also present the responsibilities of pre-school organisations, headteachers, pre-school teachers, and other staff in the systematic quality work. Furthermore, the text describes how some pre-school organisations put their systematic quality work into practice.

## Introduction

Every child has the right to equity and high quality in their pre-school education. Therefore, it is essential that this quality is evaluated. By working repeatedly and systematically to develop the education they provide, pre-schools can improve quality. The aim of this article is to shed light on systematic quality work as a means to promote the development of pre-school education across Europe.

The article will begin with a brief background on pre-schools in Sweden. The paper will then go on to provide an insight into the Swedish Education Act and the pre-school curriculum's regulations regarding the development of quality in pre-school education. Finally, the article will have a look at how pre-school organisations put their systematic quality work into practice. This examination will question whether their work corresponds with the regulations' intentions and whether they face challenges in their systematic quality work.

## Pre-school in Sweden

Swedish pre-schools are voluntary, and children must be at least one year old to start attending pre-school. In the autumn, when the child turns six, they begin pre-school class. In 2021, there were slightly more than 513,000 children enrolled in pre-school, which is equivalent to 86% of children aged one to five. In children aged four and five, enrolment was even higher, at more than 95%. By 2021, there were 9,450 pre-school units in Sweden[1] (Skolverket, 2022a).

There are 525 hours provided free of charge

> " Every child has the right to equity and high quality in their pre-school education. Therefore, it is essential that this quality is evaluated. By working repeatedly and systematically to develop the education they provide, pre-schools can improve quality.

each year from the autumn term of the year in which the child turns three. This corresponds to three hours per day. Any time in addition to these three hours is chargeable. The fee is determined by the parents' income. Today, all municipalities use a capped fee system, whereby there is an upper limit for how high the fee can be, based on the family's income (Skolverket, 2022c).

All pre-schools have a legal obligation to adhere to the Swedish Education Act, the pre-school curriculum, and other steering documents[2]. Pre-school headteachers have certain responsibilities, and they act as the pedagogical leader of the pre-school. Teaching is led by a pre-school teacher, and other staff members, such as childminders, also facilitate the children's development and learning. In 2021, just over 40% of pre-school staff were pre-school teachers, although the percentage of pre-school teachers varies around the country (Skolverket, 2022a). However, it

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[1]70% of the pre-school organisations are municipalities, and the rest are organisations of independent pre-schools.

[2]In this article, "steering document" is used as a term for regulations related to pre-school, such as the Swedish Education Act and the pre-school curriculum.

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**"** Pre-school is the first step on the ladder of the Swedish school system for many children. The first pre-school curriculum was adopted in 1998, and it has since been revised three times: in 2010, 2016 and most recently in 2018.

is important to point out that there is a long tradition of working teams and collaboration in Swedish pre-schools. In a well-functioning working team, the different roles complement each other. Pre-school pedagogy is another aspect of Swedish pre-school with a long history. It has a holistic view of children's development and learning, where play, learning and care are integrated (Sheridan, 2011). Pre-school pedagogy is clearly visible in the pre-school curriculum, which now will be presented in more detail.

**The pre-school curriculum describes the aim of education**
Pre-school is the first step on the ladder of the Swedish school system for many children. The first pre-school curriculum was adopted in 1998, and it has since been revised three times: in 2010, 2016 and most recently in 2018. The pre-school curriculum is based on the Swedish Education Act as well as other statutory regulations and international conventions. It explains the purpose of

pre-school education and is divided into two chapters. The first outlines the fundamental values and the tasks of the pre-school:

> *… the purpose of education in the preschool is to ensure that children acquire and develop knowledge and values. It should promote all children's development and learning, and a life-long desire to learn. Education should also convey and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based (Skolverket, 2019, p. 5).*

The curriculum also states that the pre-school should reflect children's rights in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child[3] (Skolverket, 2019). In all actions concerning children, the pre-school should consider their best interests. Children also have the right to participate in and have influence over their education, and they should be made aware of their rights.

Furthermore, its focus is on the tasks of the pre-school. Education should be based on a holistic view where *care, development and learning* should be seen as a whole. Pre-school education is the start of life-long learning and should be enjoyable, secure and rich in learning opportunities for all children. This part of the curriculum also describes different aspects related to children's learning, such as interaction and the environment. It also states that children should be able to vary their activities during the day, both indoors and outdoors. Furthermore, it describes what the education should offer in different areas, such as play, language and mathematics (Skolverket, 2019).

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[3] *The UN convention of the Rights of the Child was incorporated into Swedish law on 1 January 2020.*

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The second chapter outlines goals and guidelines. The goals of the Swedish pre-school curriculum specify the direction of education, the quality of the development expected in that education, and how it contributes to each child's development and learning (Skolverket, 2019). The goals and guidelines relate to eight areas:

- norms and values
- care, development and learning
- participation and influence of the child
- pre-school and home
- transfer and collaboration
- follow-up, evaluation and development
- responsibilities of pre-school teachers in teaching
- the headteacher's responsibilities

It is important to stress that the goals in the curriculum target the pre-schools, not the children. The curriculum does not state learning objectives for the children, but the pre-school must provide each child with opportunities to develop in certain areas. For example:

**The preschool should provide each child with the conditions to develop**

- ... curiosity, creativity [sic] and a desire to play and learn, ...
- an interest in the written language and an understanding of symbols and how they are used to convey messages, ...
- both the Swedish language and the

national minority languages, if the child belongs to a national minority,

- both the Swedish language and their mother tongue, if the child has a mother tongue other than Swedish,
- Swedish sign language, if the child has impaired hearing, is deaf or needs sign language for other reasons, ...
- an ability to discern, express, investigate [sic] and use mathematical concepts and their interrelationships, ... (Skolverket, 2019, pp. 14-15)

The guidelines consist of two parts; the first part "...specify the responsibility of preschool teachers for ensuring that teaching takes place in accordance with the goals set out in the curriculum" (Skolverket, 2019, p. 13). The second part specifies the tasks of everyone in the team.

**Quality in the pre-school**
Quality in pre-school education can be defined in different ways. Dr. Sven Persson at Malmö University wrote an overview of knowledge on pre-school equity in 2015. The compilation was commissioned by the Swedish Research Council and includes definitions and indicators of equity in pre-school. Persson (2015) states that; "One conclusion ... is that the pedagogical relationship between preschool staff and children are most important to children's learning and development in the short and long term" (p. 9). This means that quality is determined by interaction with the children. Therefore, the core of quality relates to how pre-school staff integrate, communicate, and understand each child. Furthermore, it is related to how

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pre-school staff encourage children in their learning, understand children's potential and act to make the children active in their own learning (Persson, 2015). The Swedish National Agency for Education defines quality as a generic term that describes how well the organisation

- fulfils the national goals;

- responds to national requirements and guidelines;

- fulfils other goals, requirements and guidelines that are compatible with national objectives, conditions, and standards; and

- is characterised by an ambition for renewal and constant progress based on the preconditions of education (Skolverket, 2015).

A high-quality[4] pre-school supports each child's development and learning. A pre-school's potential to support each child is affected by a variety of interacting factors, such as:

- the staff's academic background and their competence;

- the ratio of pre-school teachers to children;

- the pre-school staff's opportunities for skills development;

- the pre-school environment supporting pedagogical work, such as by facilitating play, varying learning activities, and providing opportunities for both activity and rest; and

- child group size and the ratio of pre-school staff to children (Skolverket, 2015).

By working systematically towards fulfilling the objectives of the steering documents, pre-schools can develop the quality of their activities.

**Systematic quality work is regulated in the Swedish Education Act**

The Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010:800) stipulates that every pre-school organisation should plan, follow up on and develop the education systematically and continuously. This should also be carried out in each pre-school unit and be combined with adherence to the regulations regarding systematic quality work in the curriculum. Furthermore, the Swedish National Agency for Education has published general advice regarding systematic quality work.

Pre-school organisations' quality work should be based on results essential for evaluation and development, such as results from the pre-schools within the organisation. A significant task for the pre-school

organisation is to ensure that their own and their pre-school units' quality work is based on the Swedish Education Act, the pre-school curriculum, and other regulations (Skolverket, 2015).

The headteacher of a pre-school unit is responsible for its quality work (SFS 2010:800). Within given constraints, the headteacher has special responsibility for:

- planning, following up, evaluating [sic] and developing the education systematically and continuously, thereby promoting the increased achievement of goals,

- carrying out systematic work on quality together with preschool teachers, childminders and other staff, as well as providing children's guardians with opportunities to participate in work on quality,

- including work on gender equality in [sic] systematic work on quality,

- the preschool's work on active measures against discrimination and abusive treatment being carried out and documented continuously, (Skolverket, 2019 p. 21)

The headteacher needs to clarify

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[4] In this article, quality is used in accordance with the definition of the Swedish National Agency for Education.

how the systematic quality work should be carried out and have routines for this work. The work needs to be carried out in accordance with the curriculum. Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010:800) stipulates that pre-school teachers and other members of the working team need to participate in the pre-school's systematic quality work. In other words, contributing to systematic quality work is a joint responsibility. In order to contribute to this work, the pre-school staff need to gain insights into the conditions each child requires in order to develop and learn. Therefore, they need to know the children well. This includes knowledge about:

- each child's interests, experiences and knowledge;
- each child's participation in activities related to different goal areas;
- how each child's knowledge develops; and
- when each child finds the pre-school to be interesting, enjoyable, and meaningful (Skolverket, 2019).

The pre-school curriculum (2019) states that children's development and learning need to be followed, documented, and analysed on an ongoing basis. Knowledge about the children's development and learning is the basis for the evaluation of the pre-school's quality. In order to gain this knowledge, all members of the working team must contribute. When the members of the working team share their experiences, they can see how the pre-school provides children with opportunities to develop and learn, and how children's knowledge develops. Having access to documentation is important as it provides a means to identify factors that are not immediately visible. Furthermore, it may support analysis in a deeper sense as well as support the monitoring of change over time.

The analysis is important when evaluating pre-school education. "The purpose of evaluation is to acquire knowledge of how the quality of the preschool, i.e. its organisation, content [sic] and implementation can be developed so that each child is given the best possible conditions for development and learning" (Skolverket, 2019, p. 19).

The findings are used to identify critical areas for quality improvement, such as the organisation of the pre-school, content in teaching and how the education is delivered (Skolverket, 2015). In the chapter of the curriculum "Follow-up, evaluate and develop", there are guidelines that specify the tasks of pre-school teachers and the members of the working team. Pre-school teachers are responsible for:

- each child's development and learning being continuously and systematically followed, documented [sic] and analysed so that it is possible to evaluate how the preschool provides opportunities for children to develop and learn in accordance with the goals of the curriculum,
- documentation, follow-up, evaluation [sic] and analysis covering how the goals of the curriculum are integrated with each other and form a whole in the education (Skolverket, 2019, p. 19).

Pre-school teachers also have a responsibility to critically examine the evaluation methods the pre-school uses to ensure that they are

in accordance with the curriculum's fundamental values and intentions (Skolverket, 2019). Other members of the working team should also participate in the work on following up on, evaluating and developing the pre-school education. For example, they should follow up on and evaluate whether "children have the opportunity to exert an influence over the education" (Skolverket, 2019, p. 20). Children as well as their guardians should also be involved in systematic quality work.

## Systematic quality work

Functional quality work is a key factor in promoting every child's development and learning. The purpose of the systematic quality work is to visualise what the pre-school organisation or the pre-school unit does, why they do it and what the outcome is. The aim is to make quality and equity visible at the pre-school organisation level or pre-school unit level. By planning, following up on, analysing, documenting, and developing their work, they can create and share knowledge about their education and what is required for successful work (Skolverket, 2022b).

This article presents a model for systematic quality work. Examples based on the Swedish Education Act and the pre-school curriculum will be used. However, the model for systematic quality work can also be used in other countries with different settings.

## Systematic quality work in practice

Successful systematic quality work demands four things: *participation; that headteachers lead and plan; documentation;* and *dialogue*. *Participation* means that all stakeholders need to be involved: the pre-school organisation, the headteacher, the pre-school teachers, other members of the working team, and children and guardians. Furthermore, that the *headteacher leads and plans* the systematic quality work of the pre-school unit includes having routines for this work. Additionally, *documentation* of the education and teaching activities is used in the systematic quality work in order to identify outcomes. There is also a need to document the process in order to see if the work is being carried out as planned. Last but not least, *dialogue* is essential.

It can encourage different members of the working team to contribute their views on teaching activities. Dialogue with children can be used to perceive the connection between practice and theory, and dialogue between headteachers and staff can reveal the causes of results and goal fulfilment. All in all, dialogue can broaden the picture and clarify the connections between a pre-school's prerequisites, realisation and goal fulfilment (Skolverket, 2022b).

The process of improving the quality of the education is a constant work in progress, best described as a wheel with different phases. The phases are divided into four questions: Where are we?, Where are we going?, How do we do it?, and How did it turn out?.



How did it turn out? → Where are we? → Where are we going? → How do we do it?

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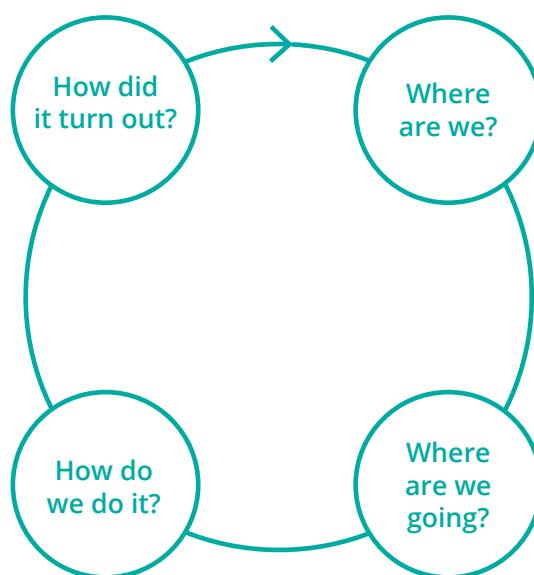
### Where are we?

The process of systematic quality work starts with the phase Where are we? The goal of this phase is to demonstrate how the education responds to the goals of the steering documents prior to making any quality improvements. Once the starting point is clear, it is possible to later evaluate what changes the development have led to. This phase ends when the question Where are we? can be answered with a description of the current situation. The description should include follow-ups of results and goal fulfilment, and the pre-school's preconditions and resources.

Documentation from teaching activities, observations, child interviews, guardian surveys, or statistics can all be used to provide information about results and goal fulfilment. Such information can include:

- how control systems, management and the distribution of responsibilities are organised;
- group size and composition;
- qualifications and skills among pre-school staff; and
- how the pre-school's rooms and the surrounding environment are used (Skolverket, 2022b).

Sometimes, there are variables that the pre-school organisations or pre-school head teachers cannot influence. However, it is important to describe them because they can be significant for the results.

Results, goal fulfilment and preconditions are put together to describe the starting point for systematic quality work without analysing the outcome (Skolverket, 2022b). The next phase in the systematic quality work is Where are we going?

#### Example from a pre-school unit

The pre-school wants to investigate how they work with democracy. Therefore, they have chosen to look at how they provide children with the conditions to develop "an interest in and an ability to express thoughts and opinions so that they can influence their situation" (Skolverket, 2019 p. 17). They use documentation from teaching activities, observations, and child interviews to describe how the pre-school contributes to goal fulfilment.

### Where are we going?

In the next phase, the information gathered is analysed in relation to the curriculum and other steering documents.

Systematic quality work differs between the different roles of pre-school organisation, headteacher, pre-school teacher and other staff. At the same time, it is important that everyone involved in the systematic quality work has a mutual understanding and interpretation of the national curriculum and other steering documents (Skolverket, 2022b). Before analysis starts, it can therefore be meaningful to have collegial discussions based on the curriculum. Examples of questions to discuss could be:

- According to the Swedish Education Act and the pre-school curriculum, what are the tasks of the pre-school and what are the overall goals?

- What knowledge and values should the pre-school focus on so that children have the greatest opportunity to develop?

**Analysis**

The analysis should produce credible assumptions about how the activities address national goals. Furthermore, it should identify what factors have affected quality. The analysis should also provide a picture of how the quality of the pre-school can be improved. To do so, the analysis needs to answer the questions Where are we in our work? What factors had an impact on the results? and What do we need to change to improve quality?

The analysis can be described in different steps; firstly to compare, secondly to interpret and explain, and thirdly to problematise and critically review (Skolverket, 2022b).

**Compare**

The first step in the analysis is comparison. This includes finding differences, patterns and tendencies resulting in conclusions about causes and how these aspects relate to each other (Skolverket, 2022b). These questions can be helpful:

- Can we recognise variation between different groups? For example, girls and boys, the academic backgrounds of guardians or children's different linguistic backgrounds.
- Have the children's views of the pre-school changed over time?

**Interpret and explain**

To understand how quality can be improved, it is necessary to find and identify factors that can explain the results (Skolverket, 2022b). It is important to get a broad overview of possible explanations. Therefore, everyone needs to contribute. Here are some questions that can be used to facilitate the dialogue:

- What did we do in the teaching situation? What was missing?
- How did organisation, working methods, pedagogical content, attitudes, and expectations influence the outcome and goal fulfilment?
- What research and experience can we use to broaden the analysis and obtain new knowledge?

**Problematise and critically review**

Finally, there is a need to problematise and critically review the assumptions that the analysis has led to. At this stage, the basis of the conclusions is examined: is it possible to strengthen the conclusions by suggesting other arguments, or is there a need for further investigation? It is important to identify how the assumptions relate to relevant research, and how research can be used to problematise them (Skolverket, 2022b).

**Evaluate the current situation**

The Where are we going? phase requires the formulation of a problem based on assumptions about its causes. Research and other experience related to the problem can be used to identify areas for development and to determine which activities should be prioritised. The aim of the activities should be to increase goal fulfilment. Since the curriculum goals target the pre-school, not the children, it is the pre-school that should optimise its results.

Furthermore, there is a need to formulate

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goals for the future in order to develop education systematically and consistently. The analysis and priority areas for development are collated to form a comprehensive evaluation of the current situation. Plans for change should be based on the current situation (Skolverket, 2022b).

**Example from a pre-school unit**
In the documentation, the working team notices that in the art room the children with high verbal communication skills, as opposed to children with low verbal communication skills, more frequently request specific materials. They try to find explanations in their documentation and notice that the desired materials are on high shelves and that it is not easy for the children to see by themselves. Therefore, the children need to have developed their language enough to ask for the materials.

The working team finds that in the art room, the children do not have the same influence over their situation.

## How do we do it?

The How do we do it? phase includes how the new activities should be conducted. The plan should be based on a recent evaluation of the current situation. Planning could include the following perspectives:

- a clearly formulated aim
- how the activity should be carried through

- resources that are needed now and later on
- research and proven experience
- how the activity should be followed up on and evaluated

The next step is the realisation of the activity. As the activity is being carried out, it is beneficial to look back and summarise the work so far. Doing so is one way of ensuring that the activity continues to strive towards its goals and intentions. Documentation of reflections, difficulties, and adjustments collected over time is equally important for the evaluation (Skolverket, 2022b).

**Example from a pre-school unit**
The pre-school's goal is to provide children with low verbal communication skills opportunities to participate more and have more influence over their situation. The working teams decide to make changes in the art room environment so that these children can influence their situation to a greater degree. They store the materials at eye level for the children and put up pictures to illustrate what the different boxes contain.

## How did it turn out?

The last phase of the systematic quality work is How did it turn out? In this phase, the outcomes should be compared with the national goals, the aims of the completed activities, and the expected results. By doing this, pre-schools can see how well their activities target the national goals (Skolverket, 2022b).

The quality wheel then starts all over again with the first question, Where are we?

**Systematic quality work in practice**
In 2021, the Swedish National Agency for Education published a report about pre-school and pre-school organisations' systematic quality work. The data in the report is based on surveys[5] and interviews with pre-school organisations (Skolverket, 2021). The report can help us to understand how pre-school organisations put the systematic quality work into practice. However, in this article, we will only look at some of the results.

**Structure of systematic quality work**
The pre-school organisations emphasise the importance of the structure of systematic quality work. Respondents say that the structure should clarify:

- what should be evaluated;
- how often the evaluation should be done;
- what the evaluation should be based on;
- what methods should be used; and
- how responsibilities are distributed

Most of the pre-school organisations follow-up on the education at least twice a year. It is worth noting that a high number of pre-school organisations do this just once a year, and a small number of pre-school organisations do this less than once a year or do not know how often the pre-school education is to be followed up on (Skolverket, 2021).

**Pre-school organisations use different methods to collect data**
The pre-school organisations use different methods to collect data on the quality of the pre-school. Documentation from pedagogical activities, surveys of guardians and dialogue between pre-school organisations and their pre-schools are the three most common methods. It is worth noting that some pre-school organisations are small and can have a close connection with the day-to-day operation of the pre-school. For example, the head-teacher can also be a pre-school teacher and a member of the working team. This means that information about quality can be collected in more informal ways (Skolverket, 2021).

The focus of dialogue is frequently on activities and work processes rather than goal fulfilment (Skolverket, 2020). There is a causal relationship between these two because the activities and work process will affect the pre-school's goal fulfilment, but the types of questions investigated can affect the outcome. The risk of focusing too much on questions such as *What did you do in the woods? What material are you going to use?* rather than *In what way did the children show interest in the activity? What kind of questions did they ask?* is that the focus of the dialogue is solely on what they did and never on how the pre-school contributed to the children's development and learning.

Some pre-schools have a hard time documenting children's development and learning in relation to the goals of the curriculum, and the reflection over and analysis of the results. Still, many pre-school organisations try to implement efforts to better follow up

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[5] *The survey was a sample survey with a response rate of 68%. To compensates for the loss, the answers have been weighted. The interview was conducted with representatives from six pre-school organisations.*

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on and evaluate the pre-school education using the aims in the national curriculum. In interviews with pre-school organisations there are examples of headteachers trying to find ways to assess the goal fulfilment of the education without raising concern among the staff about assessing individual children. In the report, there is a clear view that the pre-school does not benefit from being incorporated into a system based on the needs of the elementary school (Skolverket, 2021).

### Analysis

Both pre-school organisations and pre-school headteachers have a responsibility to analyse how the pre-school's prerequisites and work processes affect the results and the goal fulfilment (SFS 2010:800). The report shows the strengths that pre-schools and pre-school organisations see in their systematic quality work:

- The analysis is carried out with the participation of all members of staff.
- The organisation has common routines for analysis (Skolverket, 2021).

This can be adopted by others to develop the quality of the pre-school education.

In the analysis, the pre-school organisations compare the data in various ways. The most common is to make comparisons over time. Furthermore, they compare their own pre-schools with other pre-school organisations or municipalities. They also compare different pre-schools units with each other. One of the ten organisations declares that no comparison is made (Skolverket, 2021).

Challenges also seem to exist when it comes to conducting the analysis at a pre-school organisation level. A rather high number of the respondents assess their need for development as 'very high' or 'fairly high' in four areas:

- analysis of the results[6]
- analysis of the conducted activities[7]
- development of measures/initiatives/ activities based on the analysis,[8] and
- their evaluation of the current situation[9] (Skolverket, 2021)

One problem seems to be that data from the pre-schools is inadequate in that the analyses do not indicate how the pre-schools contribute to the children's development and learning, and in the analyses, they often miss out on reflecting on goal fulfilment (Skolverket, 2021).

### Conclusion from the report

The report shows that most of the pre-school organisations carry out systematic quality work. However, a rather high number of pre-school organisations do not follow up on the education more than once a year, or do not know how often (Skolverket, 2021). It is questionable whether once a year or less can be considered as "systematic" and "continuous" as required under the Swedish Education Act.

The pre-school organisations need to collect data on the pre-school units' results in order to evaluate and develop the quality of the pre-school (SFS 2010:800). A significant number of pre-school organisations collect data from their pedagogical work (Skolverket, 2021).

[6] *41% of the pre-school organisations answered "to a very high extent" or "to a fairly high extent"*

[7] *36% of the pre-school organisations answered "to a very high extent" or "to a fairly high extent"*

[8] *32% of the pre-school organisations answered "to a very high extent" or "to a fairly high extent"*

[9] *29% of the pre-school organisations answered "to a very high extent" or "to a fairly high extent"*

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> **Analyses are necessary in order to understand how well pre-schools target curriculum goals and what factors influence their achievements. Therefore, the analysis is an important part in the process of developing the quality of the pre-school.**

Sometimes, this can be used to describe processes and work methods rather than goal fulfilment. In other cases, the focus of the data is solely on some of the goals from the curriculum (Skolverket, 2020). Investigating the same goals year after year can give the pre-school organisations an insight into development over time. At the same time, this means that there is a risk that some areas are never investigated. The result of this could be that the pre-school organisations lack the development knowledge needed to improve the quality of the pre-school.

Most of the pre-school organisations collect data by surveying of guardians. It is important that guardians can participate in the development of the pre-school, but at the same time they often do not have knowledge about the national goals of the pre-school (Skolverket, 2020). There is a risk that the evaluation is based on how satisfied they are, rather than how well the education targets the curriculum. As a result, pre-school organisations that place a high value on survey results may receive insufficient information about the quality of the pre-school. Regardless of which data is used, it is crucial to point out that it needs to suit its purpose.

Analyses are necessary in order to understand how well pre-schools target curriculum goals and what factors influence their achievements. Therefore, the analysis is an important part in the process of developing the quality of the pre-school. At the same time, the report shows that many pre-school organisations identify this as being difficult (Skolverket, 2021). One explanation could be that the pre-school should assess what they did to support each child's development and learning. For example, the pre-school setting, the interaction between children and staff, and the content of teaching. This means that they need to look at how their own practice contributed to greater knowledge and values for the children. Another explanation of this can be that the pre-school teachers do not have enough time for evaluation, or that there is a low number of pre-school teachers in the pre-school unit. Furthermore, a lack of analytical models or methods could be another explanation (Skolverket, 2021).

## Conclusions

This article sought to demonstrate how Sweden regulates the work of improving quality within pre-school education. Regulations in the Swedish Education Act and the curriculum, as well as the different responsibilities throughout the pre-school system, such as pre-school organisations and pre-school head-teachers, are presented. Furthermore, systematic quality work is described as a process.

The article also provides an insight into how systematic quality work functions in practice. Even if the pre-school organisations see challenges in their systematic quality work, it is important to point out that all the pre-school organisations must have well-functioning structures and methods for systemic quality work based on their needs (Skolverket, 2021). The Swedish National Agency for Education provides various types of support for systematic quality work. Some of the efforts have a more general approach and can therefore be used by any pre-school organisation or headteacher. The agency also offers targeted support for pre-school organisations in greater need of quality development efforts. This support is based on the needs of the relevant organisations.

The model presented in this article can be seen as an example of how systematic work to improve quality in pre-school education can be conducted. Hopefully, the article can contribute to the development of pre-school education throughout Europe.

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# Switzerland

Improving quality in
Swiss day-care centres

| 1 | Which department/ministry does ECEC sit under? | There is no specific department/ministry responsible for ECEC on the national or local level. The tasks are distributed among various actors on national and/or local level. That is why no one really feels responsible for its overall implementation. |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | What programs/settings exist for children between the ages of 0-7? | Kindergarten (mandatory) for children from the age of 4, as part of the school system<br>Daycare centres for children from 3 months old to usually 4; some provide ECEC for children up to 6.<br>Daycare families for children from 3 months up to the age of 12<br>Playgroups usually from the age of 2.5 to 4 |
| 3 | What percentage of children are in ECEC centers? | Around 30% attend daycare centres |
| 4 | Link to national/local curriculum for ECEC | Click here for the national curriculum |
| 5 | Who is responsible for inspecting/ monitoring of ECEC? | The local authorities. |

## AUTHORS

Annika Butters

*Scientific Assistant and holds responsibility for further education and practical projects*

**ECEC**

Annika Butters has been working in the field of early childhood for 20 years. After completing her studies in Education and Psychology, she went on to work for several years in vocational training and education. In this capacity, she made a significant contribution to the development of higher vocational education in operation at the time. Her enthusiasm for the topic of early childhood education and care led her to the Marie Meierhofer Institute in 2016. Since then, she has been working there as a consulter, project manager and education officer. Thematically, she has covered the diverse topics of early childhood education and care. One of her main areas of focus is quality in early childhood services. Within the framework of the quality initiative in the canton of Zurich, she has provided guidance to many daycare centres through their process of quality development. The transfer of theory and knowledge into practice to create good developmental conditions for young children is one of her central concern.

Arna Villiger

*Scientific Assistant*

Arna Villiger graduated from the Zurich University of Teacher Education with a degree in Primary Education. She then obtained a master's degree in "Early Childhood Studies" from the Thurgau University of Teacher Education and the University of Constance. She immersed herself in the topics of early help and prevention for families under stress.

Her work first took her to the primary school sector, where she worked as a school teacher for grades 1 - 3. After completing her master's degree, she worked in research, looking into the effectiveness of prevention programs, and in the joint project between kibesuisse, QualiKita and the MMI, the "Quality Initiative in Family Complementary early childhood education and care in the Canton of Zurich", where she worked as project co-ordinator. At the MMI, Arna Villiger works in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and is mainly responsible for the further development and implementation of the learning stories-approach, and for the network "Bildungsort Kita".

# Improving quality in Swiss day-care centres

## ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Switzerland, in line with the focus of this year's CIDREE yearbook. The first part gives an overview of the situation in Switzerland. The "Quality Initiative in the Canton of Zurich" is then presented, a project that aimed to introduce and/or improve "quality for the child's well-being" in the field of ECEC. Based on the findings from this project, nine success factors for developing high quality in day-care centres were identified and are explained in the conclusion.

## State of early childhood education and care in Switzerland

In many ways, Switzerland is an island in Europe, and this is also the case for the field of ECEC – Switzerland differs from neighbouring countries in fundamental aspects[1]. There are to date no mandatory curricula or quality criteria for pre-primary education beyond structural requirements, despite the existence since 2012 of a national reference document for Switzerland (Wustmann and Simoni, 2012/2016; see Appendix: ECEC Framework). It is not mandatory to adhere to it and the educational goals it sets out, however. To receive an operating license, nurseries submit a curriculum, but there are no specific criteria for it. How its content and implementation are monitored is different in each canton. Some cantons strive to emphasise quality in ECEC. For instance, since 2020, nurseries in the Canton of Zurich must submit a programme outlining the implementation and monitoring of quality (§ 6 d V TaK). This is only a start, still far from a nationwide uniform and binding solution. Nevertheless, national solutions are possible (at least within each language region), as primary schools show; from 2015 to 2020, a national curriculum

(Lehrplan 21) was gradually introduced, establishing for example the same length of compulsory schooling in all Swiss-German cantons or regions. In this curriculum, the two years of kindergarten became part of the school system and compulsory for all children from the age of four. Primary schools are now

> " There are to date no mandatory curricula or quality criteria for pre-primary education beyond structural requirements.

based on a common skills-oriented curriculum, which covers all eleven compulsory school years (D-EDK, 2022). This is a novelty for the education sector in federalist Switzerland.

In Switzerland, pre-primary education[2] is still considered by large segments of society and politics a family or private matter. This atti-

tude, and the federal system, complicate political efforts in favour of early childhood. However, there are signs of a paradigm shift. Current economic calculations show that more investment in early childhood would be economically advantageous in Switzerland (e.g. quantitative expansion of care, the improvement of quality, and support for socially disadvantaged families; cf. BAK Study, BAK Economics, 2020). Moreover, Switzerland signed the SDG 4.2 in 2015; by 2023 the country must thereby "ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education." Yet with less than ten years to achieve this goal, it is likely that there will be a need to catch up in certain areas.

Though quality has mostly escaped the attention of decision makers, an incentive programme for the creation of additional childcare places was established in 2003 for an initial period of four years, which has been extended several times and should run until 2024, to ensure the transition to a long-term solution. Such an initiative was submitted and should, if approved, be introduced by 2024 at the latest (EDI, 2022). Access to childcare

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[1] For example, no legal entitlement to, and optional use of private or state nurseries between the ages of three months and four years (cf. Stamm, 2009). Obligatory kindergarten (part of primary school) in the fifth year of life. Children attend nursery 2-3 days a week (approx. 8-10h/day), which leads to changing group compositions each day. Only 0.2% of GDP (as of 2013) is spent on ECEC in Switzerland, which puts the country well behind its neighbours (cf. Stern et al. 2019).

[2] Pre-school includes children from 0 to 4 years old.

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places has improved considerably in the last few years thanks to the government's incentive programme, however it remains patchy. The availability of places in day-care centres in Switzerland greatly varies from city to city (approx. 140-680 places / 1000 children; BFS 2020). We can assume that there are fewer places in smaller municipalities[3] especially, as indicated by a current study from the Canton of Zurich. One third of the municipalities in Zurich are unable to provide additional childcare, though this affects only five percent of all children and their families in the canton (Blöchliger et al., 2020). We estimate this number to be significantly higher in other cantons, but there is no comprehensive national monitoring so far.

The limited use of pre-primary education services is not only due to insufficient availability but also to their costs. More than eleven percent of families do not use childcare in Switzerland because it is too expensive. And the costs of care are mostly covered by the parents (Blöchliger, et al., 2020; Gachet & Zumbühl, 2021; Stern et al., 2015).

Due to limited financial resources and the lack of specialised personnel, institutions often rely on untrained staff. Legal requirements vary. The Canton of Zurich requires two people per twelve children (or eight babies under 18 months), of which only one must be trained. Other cantons have similar requirements. In many other countries, professionals working in nurseries must have a tertiary or university degree, but in German-speaking Switzerland nursery staff most commonly have basic vocational training. Over half of them have no (formal) training (e.g. apprentices and interns; cf. Blöchliger et al. 2020). Moreover, they lack time, for example for the educational planning of the daily routine (Augsburger, Buser & Grob-Menges, 2018) or for team discussions.

There are few studies on quality in day-care centres in Switzerland. Wustmann Seiler, Frei & Simoni (2019) show that, on average, the quality of education is only just sufficient. This pertains to the rating of overall "education quality" as well as specifically to the "learning environment" and "key educational tasks." Quality is sufficient to good only in the field of "educational interactions". These results are not surprising given the adverse structures in areas crucial for quality (cf. Viernickel et al. 2015).

These findings demonstrate that SDG 4.2 has in many places not yet been achieved or is developing heterogeneously. In the report "In favour of an early childhood policy" ([Für eine Politik der frühen Kindheit](#))

commissioned by the Swiss UNESCO Commission in 2019, four fields of action crucial to the implementation of the SDG 4.2 are identified: (1) Ensure services for all, (2) Cooperate and network, (3) Ensure and improve quality, and (4) Funding.

There are hardly any effective initiatives by political (federal, cantonal and municipal) representatives for the improvement of quality in ECEC services, certainly also owing to the federalist structures in Switzerland. Thus, high-quality education, as defined by scientific findings, is too often not achieved (kibesuisse, 2020). Yet good quality is not a "nice to have" but essential to the well-being and protection of children and of great value for their development (Balthasar & Kaplan, 2019; Schwab Cammarano & Stern, 2020). Three important organisations in the field of early childhood in Switzerland, the Swiss Childcare Organisation (kibesuisse), QualiKita and the Marie Meierhofer Children's Institute (MMI), launched the "Quality initiative in early childhood education and care in the Canton of Zurich"[4] . The aim is to boost quality management in nurseries and childminder organisations.

**Quality Initiative in the Canton of Zurich**
To achieve the greatest possible impact, the Quality Initiative engaged

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with various fields. A shared definition of quality in early childhood education and care was developed, and published in the "Commitment to children's well-being" (Selbstverpflichtung zum Wohl von Kindern), based on scientifically founded statements of principles: the ECEC Framework (see Appendix: ECEC Framework) and QualiKita (see Appendix: QualiKita). This understanding of quality provided the groundwork for all the services and goals of the initiative.

Even if, ultimately, nurseries and childminder organisations are responsible for the implementation and management of quality, rigid and outdated structures in municipalities make its introduction and implementation very difficult. To encourage and support municipalities in creating favourable conditions, "Advice for municipalities" (Empfehlungen für die Gemeinden) was elaborated, which aims to develop incentive systems (such as financial support) based on criteria promoting quality. Such incentives enable nurseries and childminder organisations to improve their quality management and fund it, at least in part. This is still only possible with the full commitment of those involved, in view of institutions' lack of finances.

It is therefore not surprising that many nurseries and childminder organisations still function without a plan for quality management.

**A. Core Module**
High quality in early childhood day-care services

• Overview of the reference documents, the ECEC Framework and QualiKita-Standard

*1-2 hours online*

**B. Introductory Module**
High quality in early childhood day-care services

• Shared understanding of quality based on the ECEC Framework

• Commitment to children's well-being

• Procedure of the initiative

*Approx. 1 day on-site*

**C. Specialisation**
Groundwork for quality*

• Critical understanding of quality based on the ECEC Framework and QualiKita standards

Quality improvement: process and tools*

• Understanding that quality improvement is a process and using appropriate tools to achieve it

Team quality management*

• In a team, planning, implementing and monitoring the constant process of quality management, based on the QualiKita quality development plan.

*2-3 days online*
*\* Participants specialise in one or two topics, depending on their prior knowledge.*

**D. Facilitation**

• Support of the nursery heads and personnel in the development of a shared understanding of quality and in planning and implementing durable quality management

• Individual and team support
*2-4 appointments of 2 hours per day-care centre*

**E. Final Module**

• Reflection on the process in the context of the initiative

*1-2 hours online*

**Figure 1:** *Implementation steps*

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Yet, the new regulation on day-care centres, which requires organisations to submit a plan to monitor quality in the implementation and development of their paedagogical concept, came into force in the Canton of Zurich on 1st August 2020 (§ 6 d V TaK).

The initiative aimed to enable day-care centres[5] to enter or develop a process of quality management. Based on the "Commitment to children's well-being", the ECEC Framework and QualiKita sources, a set of measures was developed for day-care centres. It consisted of training courses, independent study on digital platforms, on-site teaching and facilitation of the process (cf. Figure 1).

**Facilitation** lies at the heart of the Quality Initiative. More than 160 nursery heads and their teams were assisted by facilitators for a year or two. Each institution was entitled to eight hours of management and staff coaching. This mostly took place online during the Covid-19 pandemic, which the heads readily adapted to. A regular exchange was quickly established, which is not easily achieved in the hectic day-to-day of nurseries. The challenges posed by Covid in day-care centres were frequently discussed. The importance of monitoring quality, which is different from improving quality, became clear in the pandemic. Things taken for granted shifted from one day to the next: for example, singing in a circle had to be replaced, the use of and interactions with masks had to be practised, and communication with parents had to be rearranged. All this without compromising the child's well-being.

Despite these challenges, individualised facilitation led to progress in various areas. Though the starting points and steps of the process differed, the focus on high quality in the interest of children's well-being was shared. It was crucial to cooperate with the nursery staff, engaging with their preoccupations open-mindedly, as obvious as this sounds, so that they could engage with the process, which sometimes caused them anxiety. Developments ranging from small institutional changes, such as introducing regular staff meetings, to receiving the external QualiKita certification were possible thanks to the facilitation, which provided security and guidance[6].

**Success factors for achieving high quality in day-care centres**

Here are nine success factors to achieve high quality in day-care centres, based on the experiences and findings of the Quality Initiative and the implementation of its set of measures, in particular the facilitation carried out with nursery heads and their staff.

**Quality requires a scientific foundation and a systematic approach**

To ensure high-quality early childhood care, there must be a **shared understanding of quality in favour of children's well-being** (1). At the root of the initiative was each organisation's attempt at defining quality in the context of their individual commitment to it. This established orientation for the process. Quality is not a "nice to have" but a prerequisite for children's well-being and development.

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[5] *The subproject for childminder organisations was excluded from funding, so could only be implemented rudimentarily (the QualiKita quality managements plan was adapted for childminders and their professional bodies).*
[6] *A QualiKita certification was not the aim of the Quality Initiative, though individual nurseries who aimed for certification received appropriate guidance from the facilitators. Nevertheless, the QualiKita-Standard and quality development plan served as foundation and guidance in the process.*

All nursery heads therefore signed the "Commitment to children's well-being." They were trained to understand the significance of quality from a child's perspective, and the adults' responsibility to ensure it. The nursery direction was thus made more aware of themes they were already familiar with. However, their implementation in everyday life sometimes led to uncertainties.

To ensure systematic quality management, there must be a **scientific foundation and tools (2).** Existing documents and mechanisms – the "Framework for early childhood education and care in Switzerland" and the "QualiKita-Standard" – were explicitly used from the beginning. They were the groundwork for training and facilitation. Thanks to these explicit foundations, managers of day-care centres were able to learn quickly and efficiently. It is disappointing that some local representatives responsible for certifying organisations still recommend setting and using individual quality standards and tools. More information and further training are necessary.

Along with essential foundations, **explicit management** is necessary to ensure high quality (3). Even in committed and QualiKita-certified organisations, work towards improving quality is rarely included in annual planning. Yet even small steps such as integrating quality in the annual plan had a great impact. It was important to use existing meeting arrangements, if possible, as this led to a sense of calm and security in the nursery heads' quality management. It was crucial for them to take over responsibility because "the directors of the facility or of the education and care services are particularly important in planning and monitoring, or so-called qual-
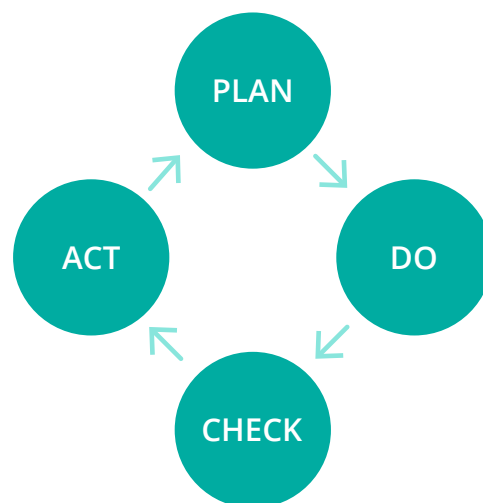


*Figure 2: Quality Cycle*

ity management" (Wustmann & Simoni, 2016, p.64).

It is essential to understand that quality management consists of **circular recurring processes** (4). The common quality cycle (Figure 2), the basis of the QualiKita quality development plan, served as guideline.

This cycle was made apparent in the facilitation process. Systematically following these straight-forwards steps gave the day-care centre teams security and guidance.

A **written plan defining quality** is necessary to stay committed to quality improvement work (5). This plan sets out a definition of quality and of the foundations used, and explains how quality is introduced, monitored, assessed and enforced. This ensures commitment and focus.

Many nurseries have been assisted successfully in drafting such a plan. It was helpful for directors to use existing sources and engage

with facilitators rather than working alone. In this way, nursery heads were able to quickly draft a reliable and practical quality plan for their establishments.

**High quality requires exchange and clarity**

To ensure constant work towards a high-quality daily routine, there must be **time for regular exchange and reflection within the team** (6). Once the principles and procedures have been established, resources are needed to implement them. It takes space, time and commitment to implement quality management.

It became apparent that day-care centres with regular meeting times introduced quality management more efficiently. This was most evident in nurseries focused on education, that follow programmes such as Learning Stories or infans (www. bildungsort-kita.ch), which emphasise regular exchange.

It is crucial to have an evaluation after each cycle to decide which elements should be maintained and continued and which abandoned. It was observed that this approach was new to the directors and staff of day-care centres.

It is important to note here that lack of time and meeting arrangements hinder the development of quality enormously. It is untenable that meetings and further training generally take place in the evenings, all too often at the end of a twelve-hour day or at weekends.

Quality management requires a **clear focus and binding goals** (7). The cyclical model of quality management implies both foresight and focus. In this process, small steps are usually more productive.

Day-care centres generally undertook far too much. One of the facilitators' tasks was to demonstrate to nursery heads and staff that without focus, they inevitably get overwhelmed and reach a standstill. Choosing a specific topic was crucial to the process. Nurseries dealt with very different topics, from changes in eating habits due to Covid, to the attentive observation of children, to mindful interactions among the staff. Accepting the fact that there are always many important topics to address belonged to the process.

**Quality improvement depends on everyone involved**

Improving quality in organisations must occur at **all levels** (8): at the societal and organisational levels, as well as in the planning and actions of employees and teams. This complexity makes quality management demanding for those responsible because they have to initiate processes and keep them going, but not alone. It is important to involve employees and teams in quality management. Nursery heads were not always aware of this. They were also often hesitant about the practi-cal implementation, so were assisted for example in the fine planning of meetings and in involving their staff using the latter's resources and skills.

Finally, **structural conditions**, such as having enough staff or getting financial support from municipalities, are crucial for quality (9). For this reason, municipalities were involved at the end of the process. With the help of professionals in the field, a brochure was made, and workshops offered to show the extent of possible intervention by municipalities and calculate the costs of this. The authorities, politicians and society must take responsibility for the well-being of young children as well as for personnel working with them. They must also create conditions that facilitate quality work.

**Conclusion**

It was impressive to see how committed nursery heads and their teams were to the Quality Initiative launched by three institutions specialised in early childhood in Switzerland. The initiative showed in an exemplary way that every nursery, regardless of size, structure or experience, can successfully engage in quality management. It was once again made clear that directors of day-care centres play a key role in quality management – they are the linchpin. They encourage projects, sustain them and give them direction and focus – this is not an easy task under the given circumstances.

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There were many other previously identified challenges besides Covid, in particular staff absences and quick turnover that sometimes hindered the process. It is now all the more important to demand and adhere to quality based on solid foundations and a binding plan – independently of individuals – in day-care centres. Quality must be acknowledged and supported by the community. Everyone, i.e. the authorities, politicians and society, has the duty to ensure that quality in favour children's well-being does not become empty words in the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

It is very clear that there is a need in Switzerland for a coordinated early childhood policy at the federal, cantonal and municipal

> **❝It was once again made clear that directors of day-care centres play a key role in quality management – they are the linchpin.**

levels. There is however still a lack of social awareness. Yet the important political fields of action, mentioned in the introduction, were highlighted by the UNESCO Commission in 2019 (UNESCO, 2019): (1) Services for all, (2) Cooperate and network, (3) Ensure and improve quality, and (4) Funding. But there are still obstacles to overcome in all four areas. Responsibility for early childhood is passed around federal departments (e.g. social affairs, health and education) and between state, cantons and municipalities. All too often, there is no coordination, nor are there clear responsibilities. Moreover, the project nature of many initiatives complicates the implementation of effective structures. There is also a lack of awareness, as stated previously, of the fact that giving children and their families a good start to life is a crucial societal duty.

In recent years, there have been signs of – tentative – change. After the introduction of a two-week paternity leave in 2021, a parental leave in addition to the fourteen-week maternity leave is now being discussed. A popular initiative by the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland has opened debate about the sometimes challenging working conditions in day-care centres and the high costs of childcare for parents. Moreover, the state funding programme mentioned in the introduction, that has existed since 2003 to financially support the development and expansion of nurseries, is to be revised by 2024, which will hopefully encourage quality in favour of children's well-being. It is to be hoped that these developments will continue and eventually lead to a coordinated, socially accepted early childhood policy.

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**Appendix: QualiKita**

The branch association kibesuisse and the Jacobs Foundation together launched a quality label in 2013 for Swiss day-care centres. The label "QualiKita" "establishes a national standard for the first time, that (1) assesses all areas with a focus on quality education, (2) helps constant quality improvement in individual organisations, (3) ensures transparency towards parents and authorities, and the (national) comparability of nurseries, (4) raises awareness in society, politics and the economy of quality in day care-centres" (QualiKita, 2019, p.3). The standard is based on scientific research, developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Education at the University of Fribourg and "elaborated with a broad-based commission of experts in science, administration and in the field" (QualiKita, 2019, p.3). The standard was developed further five years after its launch. The QualiKita-Standard is aligned with the second national reference document for quality in early childhood, the Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care in Switzerland (see Appendix: ECEC Framework). The QualiKita-Standard is based on a dynamic understanding of quality and therefore emphasises the improvement of quality to ensure its sustainability (QualiKita, 2019).

QualiKita's model for quality education places the child at the centre and consists of eight fields essential for quality improvement in nurseries. The first four fields focus on a dynamic approach: (1) Activities to develop, support and learn, (2) Relationships and interactions, (3) Inclusion and participation, (4) Parent involvement and cooperation with families. The other four focus on structural aspects: (5) Safety, health and equipment, (6) Staff and qualifications, (7) Management and administration, (8) Institutional framework and rules. These fields of quality improvement are then subdivided into requirements for and specific attributes of quality.

**Eight fields of quality improvement**

1. *Activities to develop, support and learn*
2. *Relationships and interactions*
3. *Inclusion and participation*
4. *Parent involvement and cooperation with families*
5. *Safety, health and equipment*
6. *Staff and qualifications*
7. *Management and administration*
8. *Institutional framework and rules*

QualiKita does not make assertions on the quality of the institutional project, which enables nurseries to produce an individualised educational plan (QualiKita, 2019). A QualiKita certification is optional in Switzerland. Their teaching aids are available free of charge to all day-care centres even without a certification and can be used, for instance, for a self-evaluation.

**Appendix: ECEC Framework**

In 2009 the "Foundational study for early childhood education in Switzerland" published by the Swiss UNESCO Commission stated that early childhood in Switzerland had some catching up to do. "Back then there was no overall guidance for the improvement and monitoring of quality early childhood education and care. The framework for ECEC in Switzerland helps to fill this gap and to encourage debate about educational principles and ideas" (Wustmann Seiler & Simoni, 2017, p.9).

Children and their needs and rights are at the centre of the framework. There are three parts to high-quality early childhood education and care, what it entails and how it is implemented: the foundation, guiding principles and educational action.

The foundation explains the importance of education and care for child development. From birth, the child is considered active, curious and competent, and playing as central to learning. Educational processes are co-constructive in inter-personal exchanges. All children are unique and equal. *"Children discover the world. Spurred on by their curiosity. Attentively accompanied by us"* (Wustmann Seiler & Simoni, 2016).

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Based on this foundation, there are six guiding principles for living and working with children:

- Physical and psychological well-being: a contented child is able to be curious and active.

- Communication: children acquire a multi-faceted picture of themselves and the world through contact with others.

- Participation and belonging: every child wants to feel welcome and to participate from birth.

- Empowerment: children's experience of how people react to them and to their behaviour has an impact on their self-image.

- Inclusion and tolerance of diversity: every child needs a place in society.

- Holistic perspective: small children learn with all their senses, guided by their interests and prior experiences.

The third part describes educational action. The observation of children, documentation and reflection are central to this. They are essential for stimulating educational processes, creating learning environments, nurturing educational partnerships with the parents and facilitating transitions. Finally, education in everyday life involves constant planning and monitoring, which implies explicit and systematic quality management (Wustmann Seiler & Simoni, 2016).

" Based on this foundation, there are six guiding principles for living and working with children.

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**Further reading**

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