Access and quality of early childhood education and care in Europe: an overview of policies and current situation

Accesso e qualità dell'educazione e cura della prima infanzia in Europa: una panoramica delle politiche e della situazione attuale

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ABSTRACT

European policy is moving from emphasising the need for childcare towards establishing every child's right to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). In practice, access to ECEC remains the main priority and the only policy aspect where a specific target has been agreed. This paper argues for the need for clearer guidance to promote quality ECEC. It proposes a composite indicator to monitor ECEC system integration based on: integrated governance, bachelor's degree for staff, educational guidance, and place guarantee. The analysis reveals a large variation regarding the degree of ECEC system integration in the European Union countries. During the last ten years, half of the EU Member States expanded children's legal rights to access ECEC. Yet, significant reforms improving ECEC system integration were scarce.

SINTESI

La politica europea sta passando dall'enfatizzare la necessità di assistenza all'infanzia all'affermazione del diritto di ogni bambino a un'educazione e cura della prima infanzia di qualità (ECEC). In pratica, l'accesso all'ECEC rimane la priorità principale e l'unico aspetto politico per cui è stato concordato un obiettivo specifico. Questo documento sostiene la necessità di orientamenti più chiari per promuovere l'ECEC di qualità. Propone un indicatore composito per monitorare l'integrazione del sistema ECEC basato su *governance* integrata, laurea per il personale, orientamento educativo e garanzia del posto. L'analisi rivela un'ampia variazione per quanto riguarda il grado di integrazione del sistema ECEC nei paesi dell'Unione europea. Negli ultimi dieci anni, metà degli Stati membri dell'UE ha ampliato i diritti legali dei bambini di accedere all'ECEC, anche se le riforme significative che hanno migliorato l'integrazione del sistema ECEC sono rimaste ridotte.

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[1] The opinions expressed are those of the author only and should not be considered as representative of the European Commission's official position.

Introduction

European policies view early childhood education and care (ECEC) as a children's right (EP, Council & EC, 2017), the foundation for lifelong learning (Council of the European Union, 2019) and as a means to encourage female employment (Council of the European Union, 1992; European Council, 2002).

During recent decades, ECEC has become one of the key areas when building a European education area. Focusing on the quantitative aspects of access, the agreed target for 2030 aims to increase participation in pre-primary education (Council of the European Union, 2021a). Moreover, there have been major developments in advocating for quality ECEC. With the European pillar of social rights declaring that «children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality» (EP, Council & EC, 2017), leaders of Member States endorsed a long-awaited agreement on what constitutes high quality ECEC (Council of the European Union, 2019). However, there remains a need to establish a measurable target in this field.

This paper proposes the concept of integrated ECEC systems as a way to monitor quality. There is increasing consensus that policy integration offers better opportunities for resource management, ensuring access and improving outcomes in terms of children's holistic development (Kaga et al., 2010; Moore & Fry, 2011; Cleveland & Colley, 2013; European Commission, 2011).

The first part of the paper presents a short overview of the European policy landmarks in the areas of childcare, services for young children, early education, pre-primary education or early childhood education and care – a variety of terms used for what this paper describes as ECEC. The second part explains the notion of quality as an integrated ECEC system. It briefly describes the ways to operationalise and monitor four core dimensions of ECEC quality: integrated governance; qualified staff; educational content and place guarantee.

Using Eurydice data on education policies, the paper provides an up-to-date overview of the ECEC system quality in 27 European Union countries (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019; 2020).

The analysis reveals the large variation regarding the degree of ECEC system integration in European Union countries. An assessment of the developments over the last ten years shows that most reforms focused on expanding place guarantee and fewer efforts aimed to improve the structural aspects of ECEC quality.

1. European policy: from access to childcare towards inclusive high quality ECEC

A European approach to ECEC is slowly emerging through numerous documents of different importance from the three intersecting EU policy areas: employment, children's rights and education. Although somewhat fragmented (as

criticised by Cohen & Korintus, 2016), the developments in the last three decades may well be seen as a remarkable success (Vandenbroeck, Urban & Peeters 2016). Indeed, after the initial focus on access to childcare for working women, recent EU initiatives define ECEC quality, strive for inclusion and establish the fundamental right to affordable ECEC.

The first EU policy statement in the area was the Council recommendation on childcare, adopted by the Council of Ministers in March 1992 with the aim of facilitating female employment and equal opportunities. This non-binding policy document recommended Member States «to enable women and men to reconcile their occupational, family and upbringing responsibilities arising from the care of children» (Council of the European Union, 1992). It put forward several areas of initiatives, principally focusing on childcare services, but also including proposals on greater flexibility for parents at the workplace and actions to encourage men to assume more responsibility for the upbringing of children. The recommendation stressed the importance of developing affordable, accessible and reliable care services «from the point of view of health and safety with a general upbringing and a pedagogical approach». Education was not mentioned.

The focus on the quantity of "childcare places" was firmly established in 2002 as part of the EU employment strategy. The presidency conclusions to the meeting in Barcelona in March 2002 encouraged Member States to «remove disincentives to female labour market participation» through «providing childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age» (European Council, 2002, 12). These quantitative targets were criticised for not referring to the quality of services (Children in Europe, 2008; Cohen & Korintus, 2016).

It is important to note that these initiatives emerging from the area of employment and gender equality use the term "childcare". The first explicit emphasis on "education" when addressing the needs of young children was noted in a communication on efficiency and equity in European education and training systems (European Commission, 2006). Based on increasing research evidence, the communication stated that «pre-primary education has the highest returns [of any form of education] in terms of the achievement and social adaptation of children». This document introduced pre-primary education into EU policies as a cost-effective means to reduce inequalities in education.

Pre-primary education was firmly placed in the centre of European education and training policies in the Council conclusions of 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020). One of the five agreed European benchmarks aimed that «by 2020, at least 95 % of children between 4 years old and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education» (Council of the European Union, 2009). Although quality early childhood education as a means to reduce educational disadvantage was explicitly mentioned in the conclusions, the ET 2020 European benchmark reiterated the Barcelona approach and maintained the narrow quantitative focus.

The emphasis on integrated early childhood education and care services and a notion that quality matters was put forward in the 2011 Council conclusions on early childhood education and care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow. The document established that «providing high quality ECEC is just as important as ensuring its availability and affordability» (Council of the European Union, 2011). Reiterating that ECEC is especially beneficial for disadvantaged children, the conclusions nevertheless invited the Member States to take measures to provide «generalised equitable access to ECEC». Most importantly, the Council opened the use of structural funds for ECEC and invited the European Commission to support the policy development in the field. Subsequently, the ECEC quality framework proposal came out in 2014 (European Union, 2014). It put forward a shared understanding of quality ECEC around five dimensions: access; workforce; curriculum; monitoring and evaluation; and governance and funding. Despite the take-up of the framework by several national governments and international organisations, the proposal had not been formally endorsed by the EU institutions before the launch of next large European initiatives in the field of social rights and education.

The most prominent EU document that established ECEC among the core social rights of European citizens came into force in 2017: one of the 20 key principles of the European pillar of social rights (EP, Council & EC, 2017) states that «children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality». This laid the ground for the Council's endorsement of the ECEC quality framework in 2019, in the form of the Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (Council of the European Union, 2019). Moreover, the pillar of social rights also established the children's right to protection from poverty. This led to the adoption of the first EU-level policy instrument that aims to address disadvantage and exclusion in childhood, namely the European child guarantee (Council of the European Union, 2021b). One of the main measures is the guarantee for free access to high quality ECEC for children in need.

Despite the important developments and agreements in the area of ECECquality, current European goals in the field of ECEC remain focused on participation. The strategic framework for 2021-2030 once again puts an emphasison access to ECEC. Continuing the tradition of Barcelona and the ET 2020benchmarks, Member States agreed on a target to achieve 96% for the participationof children between three years old and the starting age for compulsory primary education in ECEC (Council of the European Union, 2021a).

2. ECEC system integration as a measure of quality

Quality of ECEC is a multidimensional concept that is proving difficult to operationalise and measure. The first attempt to find an agreement on European

level was in 1996, when the so-called EC Childcare network[3] published "Quality Targets in Services for Young Children" (ECCN, 1996). The 40 targets proposed by the network were organised into nine areas: policy; finance; levels and types of services; education; staff child ratios; staff employment and training; environment and health; parents and community; and performance. Although widely cited in the research community, neither concept nor targets were formally adopted by the EU leaders.

The second attempt to establish a shared European model of ECEC quality was more successful. The working group on ECEC under the auspices of the European Commission (the Directorate General "Education and Culture" at the time), which met between 2012-2014, narrowed down the important quality aspects. They conceptualised the quality of ECEC systems along five dimensions: access; workforce; curriculum; monitoring and evaluation; as well as governance and funding (European Union, 2014). Recognising children as active participants in their own learning, the proposal also highlighted that parents' participation as partners of such services is essential if high-quality ECEC is to be delivered. The shortened version of the European ECEC quality framework was formally adopted in a Council recommendation (Council of the European Union, 2019).

Having agreed on the concept, there is a continuing search for a way to monitor ECEC quality and find a common European target. The experts and policy-makers who formulated the proposal for the ECEC quality framework recommended establishing a European benchmark on the quality of ECEC that would complement the quantitative access target (European Union, 2014). Their proposal however shifted the responsibility to find the definition of quality to national or regional level: «by 2020 at least 90% of ECEC provision is of good quality or better as measured by the national or regional criteria» (*Ibidem*, p. 13). Moreover, the numeric target of 90% implied the need to establish new data collection mechanisms at the level of ECEC setting.

To get an overview of quality in ECEC in various Member States, the European Commission turned to the existing sources of data on education systems, namely the Eurydice network. It was tasked to provide yearly data on structural characteristics of education systems that reflect certain core aspects of the ECEC quality framework. Since 2015, the European Commission's flagship annual publication on education and training in the European Union, the "Education and Training Monitor" (European Commission, 2021a), publishes several indicators on ECEC quality.

The Eurydice time-series on the selected ECEC quality aspects enabled the monitoring of the important policy developments in the Member States. However, this still provides a complex picture. In order to highlight the inter-connectedness of ECEC systems, the latest Eurydice Key Data on ECEC report put forward an

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[3] The full title: "European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile the Employment and Family Responsibilities of Men and Women. The activity of the network spanned over 1986-1996".

idea to look at policy integration as a way to capture quality (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019).

Concept	Indicator	Numerical value assigned
Integrated governance	Single ministry or top-level authority responsible	2: single ministry 1: partly/decentralised 0: different entities
Qualified staff	Bachelor degree (ISCED 6) required	2: for the entire ECEC phase 1: for staff working with children over age 3 0: lower than ISCED 6 qualification is required
Educational content	Curriculum framework or educational guidelines	2: integrated framework for the entire ECEC phase 1: different guidelines exist for settings working with younger and older children 0: no educational guidelines for the first phase of ECEC
Place guarantee	Universal legal entitlement to a place or compulsory ECEC	3: from an early age (6-18 months) 2: from 3 years of age 1: for the last 1-2 years of ECEC 0: no place guarantee

TABLE 1 – OPERATIONALISATION OF THE ECEC SYSTEM QUALITY DIMENSIONS

This article develops this idea further and proposes an overarching indicator on ECEC that includes both the legal framework enabling access and the policies that ensure quality. In order to get a meaningful indicator that reflects the variation between countries and allows monitoring policy developments over time, four dimensions are suggested: integrated governance, qualified staff, educational content, and place guarantee. These are the core structural aspects of ECEC quality that shape the way ECEC is experienced by children and their families. The quality of ECEC is therefore defined as:

- coherent set of rules and regulations;
- highly competent staff in charge of younger and older children;
- educational activities during the entire ECEC phase;
- entitlement to a place from an early age for every child.

Table 1 lists the concepts, their operationalisation in indicators, as well as numerical values assigned when pooling the information in an overarching ECEC system quality indicator. For assessing the situation in the EU-27 countries, data from the latest Eurydice "Structural indicators" are used (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020), complemented with contextual information from the latest Key Data on ECEC in Europe report (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019).

2.1. Integrated Governance

The organisation of ECEC provision and the rules that apply largely depend on the nature of its governance. One of the EC childcare network targets called national governments to nominate one department to take responsibility for implementing the ECEC policy (ECCN, 1996). Since then, there is an increasing consensus that consigning the responsibility for the entire ECEC phase to a single ministry or top-level authority may help promote coherent policies and ensure better quality services (Kaga et al., 2010).
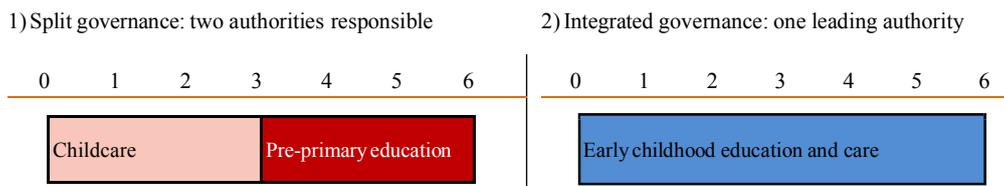

FIGURE 1 – THE MAIN TYPES OF ECEC GOVERNANCE

Currently, 14 out of 27 EU countries have an integrated system of governance under one ministry (see Table 3, countries with value 2 in the "integrated governance" column). In most of them, the ministry of education is the responsible authority. Authorities whose responsibilities include children's services or family affairs are in charge of the entire ECEC phase in three countries (Denmark, Germany and Ireland).

In 11 EU countries, the responsibility for ECEC is divided between two different ministries or other leading authorities (see Table 3, countries with value 0 in the "integrated governance" column). The ministry for education is usually responsible for the pre-primary education of children aged 3 and over, while the "childcare-type" provision for children under age 3 falls under the remit of another ministry or authority, usually one dealing with children or family affairs.

In federal or decentralised states, the responsibility for ECEC provision may either be shared between different levels of government, e.g. both the central and the regional governments act as the top-level authority in different areas, or the responsibility may be fully devolved, with sometimes a minimum coordination role for the central level and/or minimum requirements set. Germany, Spain, Italy and Austria therefore are considered in this paper as partially integrated. Italy is worth mentioning as it is currently in the process of establishing an integrated system for educational services for children from age 0 to 6 (law n. 107/2015). The regions are in charge of regulating ECEC public provision for children under the age of 3 (*nido d'infanzia* and *servizi educativi integrativi*), but the Ministry of Education, University and Research is responsible for developing this integrated system.

During the last ten years, there were very few reforms aiming to integrate ECEC governance. Two countries have managed to integrate the previous split governance under one ministry. In Luxembourg and Malta, the responsibility for services for younger children was recently transferred to the Ministry of Education in order to ensure greater policy coherence (in 2012 and 2017 respectively).

2.2. Highly qualified staff

ECEC quality for children largely depends on a highly skilled, motivated and valued workforce (Vandenbroeck, Urban & Peeters, 2016). The 2011 Communication from the Commission states that staff competencies are key to high quality ECEC (European Commission, 2011). This was further established in the ECEC quality framework as one of the five quality dimensions (European Union, 2014; Council of the European Union, 2019). Research evidence shows that better educated staff are more likely to provide high-quality pedagogy and stimulating learning environments (Litjens & Taguma, 2010).

Acknowledging the debates around the relationship between qualification and competence, as well as the huge variety in the way ECEC professions are regulated in Europe (Oberhuemer, 2005; Oberhuemer, Schreyer & Neuman, 2010; European Commission, 2021b), the model proposes to use the initial qualification requirements as a basis. A study on ECEC quality commissioned by the European Parliament (Buiskool & Lindeboom, 2013) highlighted that Member States should have at least some minimal qualification requirements for all ECEC staff to be able to ensure a basic quality level.

The indicator on highly qualified staff looks whether there is a requirement for at least one staff[4] member per group of children in ECEC to have at least a bachelor's[5] degree in the field of education.

Currently, 11 EU countries require that at least one of the team members caring for a group of children, regardless of age, is highly educated (see Table 3). In eight countries, a high qualification level is considered essential during the second phase of ECEC (pre-primary education), but not during the first phase (childcare or early childhood educational development). Seven countries have a lower than ISCED 6 qualification requirement (Czechia, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Austria, Romania and Slovakia). In Denmark, there are no top-level regulations on this matter, but statistics shows that most staff hold a bachelor's degree in pedagogy (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019, p. 73).

In recent years, several countries have introduced structural reforms concerning staff qualifications. However, not a single EU country managed to raise the minimum qualification requirement to ISCED 6 level. Ireland, Italy, Malta and Finland have raised or are in the process of raising the minimum qualification requirement for all or for a large proportion of staff working with children. In Ireland, a minimum qualification for childcare workers was introduced in 2016, corresponding to two years of vocational training (ISCED 4). Finland is raising the qualifications of assistants and aims that two thirds of staff should have a relevant bachelor's degree. Italy aims to introduce the requirement of a tertiary qualification in education sciences for educational staff in nursery services (for children under

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[4] ECEC staff refers here only to those professionals who have regular, daily, direct contact with children and whose duties involve education and care. The term ECEC staff does not include heads of ECEC settings.

[5] ISCED 6 qualification according to the ISCED 2011 classification, see UNESCO (2012).

age of 3 years). However, the reform is being postponed. Similarly, in Malta the requirement to have a bachelor's degree for staff working in kindergartens (for children from age 2 years and 9 months), although introduced in 2015/16, is not yet fully implemented.

2.3. Educational content

Children's development and learning is at the heart of quality of ECEC provision. At national level, policy-makers seek to influence the quality of educational processes taking place in ECEC settings by issuing a shared framework of guiding principles or curriculum (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2009; European Union, 2014; OECD, 2021).

The ECEC curriculum as defined in the quality framework (European Union, 2014) covers developmental care, formative interactions, learning experiences and supportive assessment. It promotes young children's personal and social development and their learning, as well as lays the foundations for their future life and citizenship.

Learning opportunities to be provided to young children can also be formulated as educational guidelines. Regulations on ECEC content and teaching approaches may be incorporated into legislation as part of an education programme, as a reference framework of skills, care and education plans, educational standards, and criteria for developing local curricula or practical guidelines for ECEC practitioners.

The top-level authorities in all European countries have issued official guidelines to ensure that settings have an intentional educational component. However, in around a third of EU countries educational guidelines apply only to settings for children aged 3 and over (see Table 3, countries with values 0 and 1 in the column "educational content"). In these countries, the split between "childcare-type" provision and "pre-primary education" remains. The framework is set down in separate documents for younger and older children and issued by different authorities in Belgium (French and Flemish Communities), France and Hungary (see Table 3, countries with value 0). In these countries, additional efforts might be needed to ensure continuity of children's learning experiences.

Increasingly, ECEC systems with split governance (see Figure 1) are introducing learning components in ECEC from the earliest age. During the last ten years, educational guidelines have been introduced for ECEC settings with younger children in Belgium (Flemish Community), France and Luxembourg. Currently, Italy and Portugal are in the process of drafting/adapting the educational guidelines for the ECEC provision for children under age of 3 years.

2.4. Place guarantee

Two policy measures that ensure universal access to ECEC can be distinguished: legal entitlement to a place and compulsory ECEC (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014;

2019). Each approach commits public authorities who are in charge of providing ECEC (usually local authorities) to guaranteeing a place. However, there are some important differences.

A legal entitlement is a right of a child and his/her family. In countries with a legal entitlement, children may attend ECEC, but families may choose other options. In contrast, in countries with compulsory ECEC, children have to attend ECEC for a defined number of hours and may be asked to justify absences or face disciplinary measures. Often, a certificate of completion of a compulsory ECEC programme is required to enter primary education.

Under the legal entitlement, public authorities have to guarantee a place for any child in the age-range covered whose parents request it and essentially to ensure that demand meets supply. In contrast, in countries where ECEC is compulsory, public authorities must guarantee a sufficient number of places for all children in the age range covered by the legal obligation. Compulsory ECEC is usually introduced for the last 1-2 years of ECEC with the aim to ensure that all children are prepared for compulsory primary education. The compulsory programme is either a few hours a day or corresponds to the length of a regular "school-day". In contrast, a legal entitlement is typically established as a measure to enable parents/guardians to work, or, recently, may be seen as a means to ensure every child's right to education. Therefore, legal entitlement often starts earlier, frequently around the time when ECEC becomes available (at the end of parental leave) or when ECEC structures become part of the country's education system (around the age of 3 years).

Almost all European countries guarantee a place in ECEC for the last year before the start of primary education. However, there is a large variation regarding the starting age of the universal place guarantee (see Table 2). Only seven EU Member States (Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden) guarantee a place in ECEC for each child from an early age (6-18 months). A place in publicly subsidised ECEC is guaranteed from the age of 3 years or a little earlier in Belgium, Czechia, Spain, France, Luxembourg, Hungary and Poland. Around a quarter of European education systems provide guaranteed places from age 4, 5 or 6 for the last 1-2 years of ECEC. Often, this provision is explicitly directed at preparation for primary education and is compulsory.

In 2019/2020, only five European countries (Ireland, Italy, Malta, Romania and Slovakia) had no legal framework to ensure a place guarantee in ECEC. Some of them have targeted entitlement for the children of parents who are working or studying (e.g. Malta), while others offer free universal pre-primary education programmes without a legal entitlement *de jure* (e.g. Ireland).

	BE fr	BE de	BE nl	BG	CZ	DK	DE	EE	IE	EL	ES	FR	HR	IT
Universal entitlement	2.5	3	2.5	-	3	0.5	1	1.5	-	-	3	-	-	-
Compulsory ECEC	(5)	(5)	(5)	5	5	-	-	-	-	4	-	3	6	-

	CY	LV	LT	LU	HU	MT	NL	AT	PL	PT	RO	SI	SK	FI	SE
Universal entitlement	-	1.5	-	3	-	-	-	-	3	4	-	0.9	-	0.8	1
Compulsory ECEC	4.7	5	6	4	3	-	5	5	6	-	-	-	-	6	6

TABLE 2 – THE STARTING AGE OF A UNIVERSAL PLACE GUARANTEE TO ECEC, 2019/2020[6]

Many European countries have recently been extending the right to ECEC (the cells with reforms are highlighted with grey shadow in the table). During the last ten years, ten countries (Belgium, Czechia, Greece, France, Croatia, Lithuania, Hungary, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden) have introduced or extended compulsory ECEC. Moreover, a legal entitlement to ECEC has been introduced or extended in Czechia, Germany, Latvia, Poland and Portugal.

2.5. Mapping the ECEC integration in the European Union countries

European countries can be placed on a continuum from integrated to split systems according to the four criteria linked to the quality dimensions previously discussed: integrated governance; qualified staff; educational content and place guarantee (see Table 1 and 3). Figure 1 shows the degree of system and policy coherence from integrated (dark green) to split (red).

Integrated (dark green): coordinated policies throughout the entire ECEC phase and universal place guarantee from an early age. This is the case in Estonia, Germany, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden. In these countries, the Ministry of Education is responsible for setting the rules and regulations for the entire phase of ECEC. The curriculum, educational programme or guidelines apply from an early age and at least one ECEC staff member must be highly qualified for every group of children.

"Somewhat integrated" (light green): Denmark, Croatia, Spain, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Latvia. In these countries, responsibility for ECEC falls under a single top-level authority, except for Spain where regions have a lot of autonomy in the governance. Educational content is formulated for the entire ECEC phase. Countries in this group either fall short of high requirements for staff or need to improve access conditions.

"Mid-way" (yellow): Belgium, Ireland, Malta, Romania, Hungary, Austria and France. This is a mixed group with countries falling short usually in two of the four criteria. None of these countries guarantee a place in ECEC from an early age.

"Somewhat split" (orange): Bulgaria, Greece, Poland and Portugal. In these countries, different ministries are responsible for younger and older children. There are no educational guidelines for working with younger children. These countries

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[6] Source: EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020. Note: Age in brackets indicates the situation from 2020 September. Shading indicates reforms since 2012 as well as planned reforms.

have a stronger focus on quality for the pre-primary stage of education, with high requirements for staff and guarantee to a place for the last year(s) of ECEC.

"Split" (red): Slovakia stands out as the only country with a complete split between childcare and early education, which is apparent in all analysed areas: split governance, low staff qualification requirements, no educational guidelines for younger children and no place guarantee. Czechia, Italy, Cyprus and the Netherlands are also assigned to this group despite certain signs of integration. For example, Italy is integrating its ECEC services for under- and over-3s, aiming to introduce an integrated educational approach and raising staff qualifications.
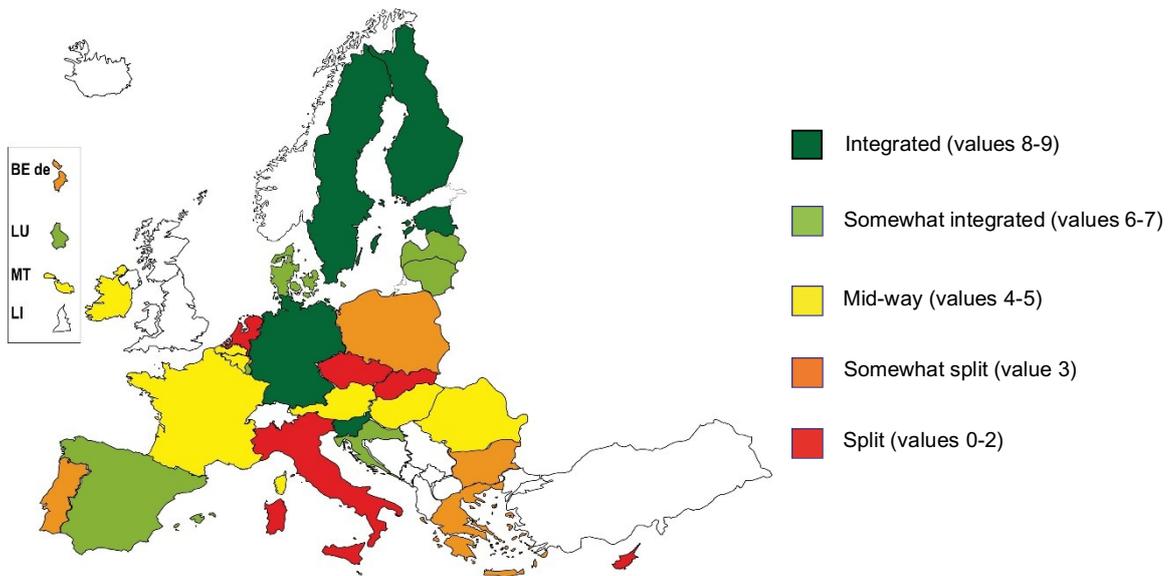

FIGURE 2 – DEGREE OF ECEC SYSTEM INTEGRATION, 2019/2020[7]

Conclusions

Over the past four decades, European policy rhetoric is moving from merely emphasising the need for childcare towards establishing quality ECEC systems. In practice, however, access to ECEC remains the main priority – and the only one with a specific, although modest, target defined. Having reached, on EU-27 average, the 2020 benchmark of 95% participation in ECEC of children over the age 4 years, the Member States agreed on a very similar target for 2030. The new goal is to reach 96% of participation rate in pre-primary education for children from the age of 3 years.

Unsurprisingly, the analysis of the reforms taking place during the last ten years reveals that European countries put a lot of effort into expanding the legal framework enabling access. Reflecting the targets that focus on the preparation for

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[7] Note: the breakdown of values by dimension see in Table 3.

school, one third of EU Member States recently introduced an obligation to attend the last year(s) of ECEC and several are planning such reforms in the near future. However, in line with the European pillar of social rights (EP, Council & EC, 2017), more effort should be directed at expanding the place guarantee to ECEC from an early age.

In addition, there remains a lot of work to be done in the area of quality ECEC. The recently adopted EU quality framework for ECEC (Council of the European Union, 2019) provides a shared understanding of what aspects are important. However, the document leaves a lot of space for interpretation regarding what exactly should be achieved. Significant policy reforms in the area of ECEC quality were scarce, partly due to rather complex visions on what should be achieved.

This paper proposes a comprehensive yet simple method to analyse ECEC quality. Instead of monitoring the outcome (e.g. participation rate), it recommends looking at input conditions (e.g. the laws that enable access). Qualitative indicators based on structural features of education systems enable informed analysis and may even hint at possible directions for policy reform.

However, operationalising and monitoring ECEC quality remains quite challenging due to its inherent multidimensionality. Instead of analysing distinct aspects one-by-one, the paper suggests a composite quality indicator based on the concept of ECEC system integration.

The composite qualitative indicator aims to provide an overview of the ECEC system quality. Each European country is placed on a continuum from integrated to split ECEC systems. This analysis reveals the quite different ECEC environments children in Europe face. Although coherence has been advocated in numerous European policy initiatives (European Commission, 2013; European Union, 2014), only five of the EU's 27 countries have fully integrated ECEC systems. Estonia, Germany, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden are the only countries that fulfil all four quality dimensions: integrated governance under one leading authority; staff holding a bachelor's degree in education in every group of children; coherent educational guidelines during the entire ECEC phase; and entitlement to a place from an early age for every child. All other EU Member States have one or several aspects to improve.

There is one more important finding to highlight. Despite continuous emphasis on the key role that staff plays when delivering high-quality education and care (Buiskool & Lindeboom, 2013; European Union, 2014; Council of the European Union, 2019; European Commission, 2021b), there is still no European consensus on what the minimum qualification should be. In one quarter of EU Member States, the lead practitioner having the main responsibility for daily activities of a group of children can be hired without a university degree. Some of them require only one year of vocational training (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019).

Significant investments are needed when raising the minimum qualification requirements – both in terms of training, but also in providing higher remuneration. Teacher salary differences across education levels are usually related to differences

in minimum qualification requirements (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021). These might be the main reasons for having no significant reforms in this field. A European agreement on minimum ECEC staff qualification requirements to ensure quality ECEC for all children might facilitate some long overdue national reforms.

The scarce developments in raising ECEC quality highlight the need for a more targeted approach and clearer guidance. Integration of ECEC systems and services around the child, firm establishment of children's rights to ECEC, agreement on the minimum qualification for ECEC staff are the next milestones to be achieved in Europe. Comprehensive monitoring of ECEC system integration – looking both at access and quality - might serve as an important driver for change.

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