

# Inclusive Early Childhood Education

An analysis of 32 European examples



**EUROPEAN AGENCY**  
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



# **INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

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**European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education**



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Full version</b>
Agency:	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
ECCE:	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECE:	Early Childhood Education
ECERS-E:	Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Extension
ECTS:	European Credit Transfer System
EQF:	European Qualifications Framework
EU:	European Union
ICP:	Inclusive Classroom Profile
ICT:	Information and Communication Technology
IECE:	Inclusive Early Childhood Education
IEP:	Individual Education Plan
OECD:	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA:	Programme for International Student Assessment
SCQF:	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SEN:	Special Educational Needs
UEMA:	Pre-Primary Education Unit for Children with Autism (French: <i>Unité d'Enseignement Maternelle Autisme</i> )
UK:	United Kingdom
UNCRPD:	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities







## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is part of the three-year Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE) project run by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) from 2015 to 2017. The project aims to identify, analyse and subsequently promote the main characteristics of quality inclusive pre-primary education for all children from three years of age to the start of primary education.

This report presents the results of a qualitative analysis of 32 descriptions of examples of IECE provisions across Europe. The descriptions were submitted to the project in August 2015. The findings represent European practitioners' perceptions of and practices for IECE.

An inductive thematic data analysis method was used, in that themes or issues were initially derived from reading the descriptions. This inductive process was, however, also intertwined with relevant theory, particularly the Agency's 'ultimate vision for inclusive education systems' that:

*... ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers (European Agency, 2015, p. 1).*

In total, 25 subthemes were identified. These were organised into a new **Ecosystem Model of Inclusive Early Childhood Education**, which is also presented in a comprehensive diagram (Figure 1). Two major perspectives previously used in describing the quality of ECE settings inspired this new model. These are the Outcome-Process-Structure model and the Ecological Systems model. The subthemes were subsequently grouped into **five main themes**:

- **Theme 1:** The first main and central theme is 'Child belongingness, engagement and learning', often generally understood as active participation. This participation is regarded as both the **main outcome** and process of IECE.
- **Theme 2:** Five **major processes** involving the child's direct experience in the IECE setting enable this central outcome and process. These processes are:
  - Positive interaction with adults and peers
  - Involvement in play and other daily activities
  - A child-centred approach
  - Personalised assessment for learning
  - Accommodations, adaptations and support.
- **Theme 3:** These processes are in turn supported by **structural factors**, consisting of the physical, social, cultural and educational environment. These factors may



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operate at different ecological levels. **Some operate within the ECE setting** and include:

- A warm welcome for every child and family
  - Family involvement within the ECE setting.
  - A holistic curriculum designed for all children’s needs
  - An environment designed for all children
  - Staff who are appropriately qualified for IECE
  - A culturally-responsive social and physical environment
  - Inclusive leadership committed to respect and engagement for all individuals
  - Collaboration and shared responsibility among all stakeholders.
- **Theme 4:** Inclusive processes experienced by the child are also influenced by more distant **structural factors in the community** surrounding the ECE setting. These include:
    - Collaboration between the ECE setting and the children’s families
    - Relevant in-service training for ECE staff
    - Wider community commitment and support for serving all children
    - Inter-disciplinary and inter-agency co-operation of services from outside the ECE setting that serve the children in the pre-school
    - Organising smooth transitions between home and the ECE setting.
  - **Theme 5:** Finally, the analysis found a number of **structural factors operating at the macro-system level**. These factors were not in direct contact with the ECE setting. However, they still influenced inclusive processes in the setting. They are:
    - A rights-based approach to ECE
    - Provision of mainstream ECE access for all
    - Setting up regional/national standards for a holistic IECE curriculum
    - Availability of initial education for teachers and other staff for IECE
    - Good governance and funding systems for IECE
    - Procedures for regular monitoring and evaluation.

This overview of the ecosystem of outcomes, processes and structures for IECE is presented in the *Results* chapter. Five evidence-based chapters, dedicated to each



of the five main themes, follow this. Each chapter presents a brief description of each of the outcome, process or structural factors within each main theme. These are accompanied by one to five quotations from each of the 32 example descriptions. The quotations illustrate and provide concrete evidence of what constitutes quality outcomes, processes and structures that are prevalent across Europe.

The quotations were chosen both to reflect the different types of IECE concepts and practices, and to reflect the variety of countries and cultures where they occur. They are intended to stimulate inclusive developments in research, policy and practice in Europe and internationally.

Finally, the *Conclusion* highlights the added value that this analysis contributes to IECE research, policy and practice. **Four new insights** are addressed:

1. The development of the new Ecosystem Model of IECE, inspired by two previous major models, should clarify the understanding of the issues related to quality ECE.
2. The analysis shows how, within an inclusive perspective, IECE's primary goal is best conceived as that of ensuring quality outcomes for all children in terms of participation. This is described here as belongingness, engagement and learning.
3. The analysis shines a new light on the major processes in which children are directly involved and which most influence each child's participation and learning. These need to be a major focus of any intervention to improve ECE quality.
4. The analysis clarifies the structural factors needed to support the development of more inclusive ECE settings. It also shows how these factors are related to local and national policies and practices. Situating the structures at the ECE setting, community and regional/national levels is important in leveraging them to bring about the changes needed to enable each child to participate and learn.



## INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the context within which the IECE examples from all over Europe were collected and analysed.

This report is part of the three-year Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE) project run by the Agency from 2015 to 2017. The project aims to identify, analyse and subsequently promote the main characteristics of quality inclusive pre-primary education for all children from three years of age to the start of primary education.

The project focuses on the structures and processes that can ensure a systemic approach to providing high-quality IECE. Such IECE effectively meets the academic and social learning needs of all the children from the pre-primary setting's local community.

The literature reviews by the European Commission (2014) and the OECD (2015) inform the project. It aims to study how the quality principles identified are addressed in the current ECE provisions across Europe (please refer to Bartolo et al., 2016). Moreover, the project focuses on inclusiveness as the main factor that permeates the five quality principles identified by the European Commission. These are:

- **Access to quality ECE for all children.** From the project's perspective, this refers to facilitating access for all children in the community. In particular, it concerns the most vulnerable children. This includes those with disabilities and SEN, immigrants, newcomers and other at-risk children and their families.
- **Workforce quality.** This principle calls for appropriately trained staff with access to continuing training and adequate working conditions. It also calls for appropriate leadership and support staff inside and outside the pre-primary setting. Adequate resources, positive parent collaboration and positive inter-disciplinary and inter-agency collaboration are also necessary.
- **Quality curriculum/content.** This principle underlines the need for a holistic and flexible curriculum and for pedagogy that promote child wellbeing. These promote learning in all aspects of development – cognitive, social, language, emotional, physical, aesthetic and spiritual. They meaningfully and actively engage children in a safe but open and stimulating environment.
- **Evaluation and monitoring.** This refers to monitoring children's development and learning, and to evaluating the ECE provision's effectiveness in meeting established quality standards. These standards ensure a quality learning environment for all children.



- **Governance and funding.** This principle considers the accountable use of public funding and leadership models to ensure that quality ECE service is available to all children. It focuses on enabling each child's holistic growth and learning.

Over the three years, the project will produce:

- A literature and policy review presenting the project conceptual framework, including a review of international and European research literature and policy papers on IECE
- Individual country reports on policy and practice in IECE for all children at the national level
- Detailed individual case study visit reports on eight IECE settings in eight different countries
- A self-assessment/self-reflection tool for IECE settings as support for IECE practitioners
- A project synthesis report, based on evidence from all project activities. It will highlight key issues and factors which facilitate quality IECE. The report will describe the project's added value for IECE research, policy and practice at national and international levels.

This analysis of practitioners' perceptions of and practices for IECE across Europe is an additional and unanticipated project output. It arose from recognition of the value added to the project by 32 descriptions of examples of IECE provision in 28 European countries. These were submitted to the project in response to a call in August 2015 for examples of IECE. The project team studied them in detail during 2016. Agency member countries were asked to provide a clear description of the provision they were recommending. They were asked to illustrate how the provision meets the following criteria:

- Pre-primary provision including the age group from three years to the start of primary schooling
- Accessible for all children in the locality
- An inclusive setting that provides support as part of the regular activities, promoting each child's participation and engagement
- Provision that is subject to national pre-primary education standards/regulations
- A holistic curriculum that promotes all aspects of children's development and learning, including physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional development



- A skilled workforce with opportunities for continuing professional development
- Provision that engages families as partners
- A working partnership with health, social and other agencies
- Leaders who promote inclusive education and care
- Active self-evaluation to inform improvement.

The project plan was to visit eight examples, but the response was overwhelming. Twenty-eight countries submitted 32 proposals (four countries proposed two examples each). These ranged in length from around 1,000 to 4,000 words.

Moreover, the descriptions in the proposals contained highly relevant data on how the different proponents perceived IECE processes. This was the project's first data from practitioners and their advisers across Europe. Therefore, while only eight examples could be visited, all the data in the 32 descriptions is seen as a valuable resource for answering the project question: *How do European ECE practitioners perceive inclusion and how are they trying to make their provision more inclusive?*

The next chapter presents an overview of all the themes identified. The evidence for each of the main themes is then presented in the following five chapters. Within each chapter, there are different sections for each subtheme with two or more relevant quotations. Some subthemes are also broken down further into more specific issues. These issues are often indicated by bold type within the relevant paragraphs. Researchers and others who require more detail about each theme and subtheme can access all 32 examples on the project website:

[www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/inclusive-early-childhood-education](http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/inclusive-early-childhood-education)



## RESULTS: AN ECOSYSTEM OF SUPPORT FOR INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

This chapter presents an overview of the main themes and subthemes identified. Twenty-five subthemes were identified. These were organised into five main themes within the new Ecosystem Model of IECE.

### The Ecosystem Model of Inclusive Early Childhood Education

(Please refer to Figure 1).

The Outcome-Process-Structure and Ecological Systems perspectives have inspired the Ecosystem Model of IECE.


The most widely-used model for describing quality in ECE is the Outcome-Process-Structure model (European Commission, 2014; OECD, 2015). In this model, the *outcomes* are the visible effects on the child resulting from their interaction with the ECE setting's social and physical environments. The child's direct interactions within the ECE setting constitute the ECE *processes* (Pianta et al., 2009). These processes are framed by the *structures* within and around the ECE setting.

Said model was combined with the other major relevant model on child development: the Ecological Systems model. This considers the complex evolving influences on children arising from their interactions and interrelations between themselves and all the surrounding systems – micro, meso, exo and macro – in which they function and grow (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

Both of these perspectives inspired the model presented in this analysis (please refer to Figure 1). It thus enables a more complete understanding of what constitutes quality in IECE. It can be described in the following five parts:

1. IECE's main **outcome** or goal and the measure of quality is each child's level of participation in the setting's social and learning experiences. Participation is understood as 'attendance' and 'involvement' ('experience of participation while attending') (Imms et al., 2016, p. 36). This is regarded as both an outcome and a process of inclusive education. Both quality of life and learning are presumably enhanced if each child's optimal, positive participation is ensured (Imms & Granlund, 2014).

Measures of achievement are often the main tools for evaluating education systems (e.g. PISA). However, educators concerned with social justice and equal opportunities point to active participation by all as the primary measure of success (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Recently, there has been emphasis on ensuring that disadvantaged groups acquire the necessary skills for lifelong learning. This highlights that 'Education and training systems across the EU



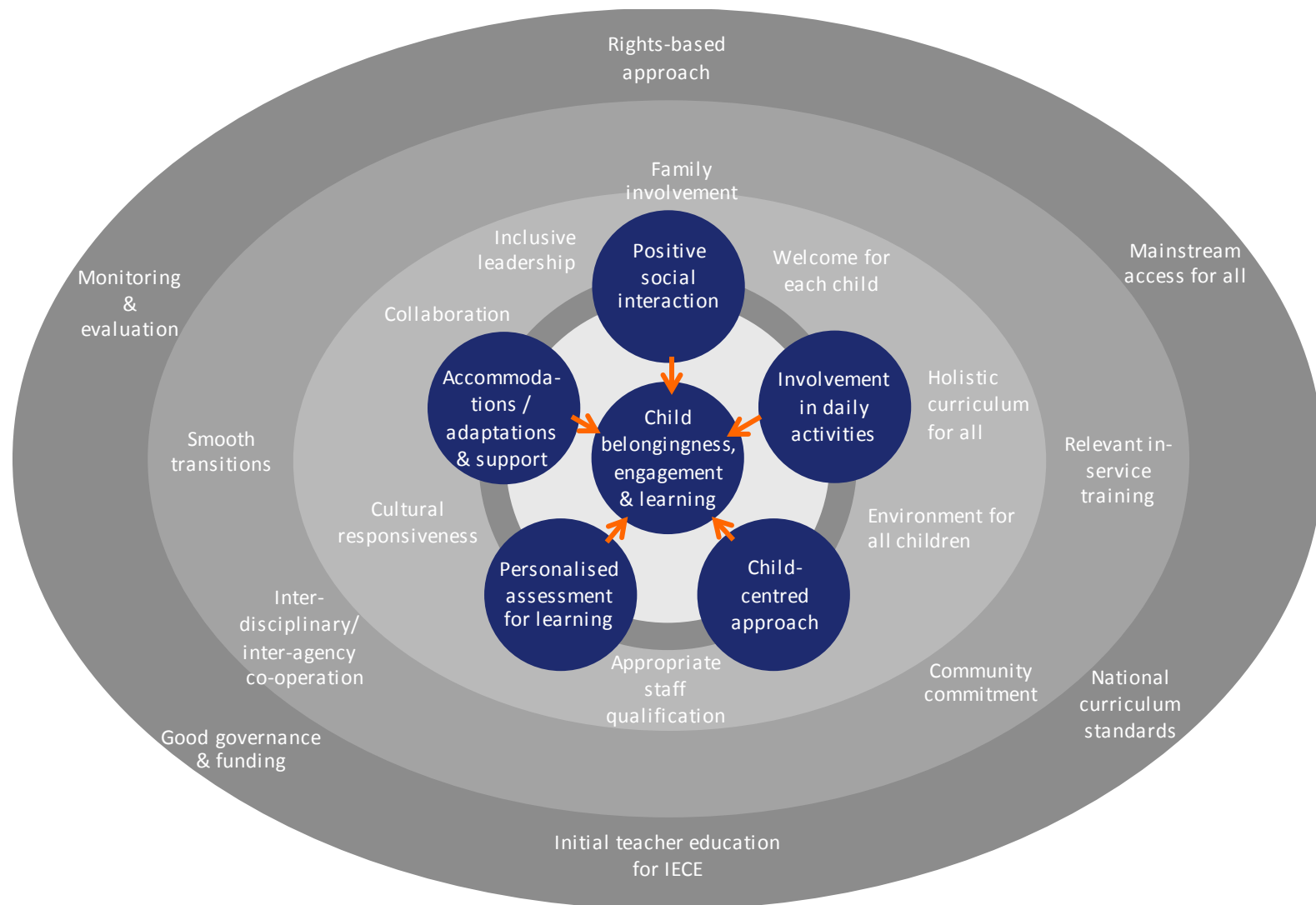
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need to ensure both equity and excellence’ (Council of the European Union, 2010, p. 3) and that ‘Inclusion is about ... presence, participation and achievement’ (Ainscow, 2016, p. 147; please also refer to Flecha, 2015).

However, these references also underline that ‘achievement’ is not simply about test scores. In the model, therefore, the term ‘learning’ is preferred to ‘achievement’. This is because ‘learning’ refers to the child’s personal progress in the different and wider domains of development.

2. The main **processes** are closely linked to participation in the IECE setting (regarded here as the micro-system). The child can experience these processes when attending the various subsystems of interaction. These include social interaction with adults and peers, instruction, play and other activities and everyday routines. Within the ecosystem perspective, these experiences of engagement are part of ‘proximal processes’ (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 819).
3. The child’s participation is enabled through the surrounding inclusive **structures** that consist of the physical, social, cultural and educational environment, such as the ECE staff’s qualifications. These surrounding structural factors may not directly affect the quality of children’s outcomes. Instead, ‘structural quality directly affected process quality, and process quality in turn influenced children’s outcomes’ (Cassidy et al., 2005, p. 508; Pianta et al., 2009). This third group of influences includes **structures that operate at the micro-system level** (within the IECE setting).
4. What happens in the IECE setting is also influenced by **structural factors at the meso-system level**, coming from the community where the IECE setting is located. An example is the support services provided from outside the school.
5. What happens in the IECE setting is also influenced by more distant **structural factors at the macro-system level** (at wider regional or national levels). These include the development of national curriculum standards for ECE.





**Figure 1. The Ecosystem Model of Inclusive Early Childhood Education**



## Diagrammatic representation of the Ecosystem Model of IECE

Figure 1 shows the five parts of IECE in concentric rings that contain all the different themes identified in the example descriptions:

- The first ring is the central circle, representing the outcomes for the child.
  - The second ring is the chain of circles, with processes that the child engages in directly.
  - The third ring contains the supportive structural factors within the IECE setting.
  - The fourth ring represents the structural factors that surround the school within the community.
  - The fifth ring (the outer one) encloses the structural factors at regional and national level.
1. The central circle contains the **first main theme**, representing the main **outcomes** of inclusion: ‘Child belongingness, engagement and learning’. The examples often described these outcomes as the IECE settings’ main goals, particularly under the umbrella concept of child participation.
  2. The chain of five circles surrounding the central circle contains the **second main theme**. This consists of the **processes** that enable each child’s participation through positive engagement and interaction within the IECE setting, namely:
    - Positive social interaction with adults and peers
    - Involvement in play, other activities and daily routines
    - A child-centred approach
    - Personalised assessment for learning as part of the instructional interaction process
    - Accommodations, adaptations and supports as needed for each child’s active engagement at any time.
  3. The third ring represents the **third main theme**, consisting of the supportive **structural factors within the IECE environment**. These are regarded as enabling the inclusive interaction processes mentioned in the second ring. They are:
    - A warm welcome for every child and family
    - Family involvement (*Note: This subtheme is placed half in the third ring and half in the fourth ring. This is because parents were sometimes involved in procedures within the IECE setting, such as curricular planning,*



implementation and assessment. However, the pre-school often interacted with the parents as another agency in the community outside the ECE setting. It is therefore also part of the factors inside the fourth ring).

- A curriculum designed for all children's needs
  - An environment designed for all children
  - Staff who are appropriately qualified for IECE
  - Cultural responsiveness of the setting
  - Inclusive leadership committed to respect and engagement for all individuals
  - Collaboration and shared responsibility among all stakeholders.
4. The fourth ring contains the **fourth main theme**, namely the ***additional structural factors***. They influence what happens within the IECE setting, but operate from outside it:
- Interaction between the IECE setting and the families
  - Continuing staff in-service training
  - Commitment by the community around the pre-school to the quality education of all children
  - Inter-agency and inter-disciplinary co-operation of services outside the ECE setting that also serve the setting
  - Organising smooth transitions between home and the ECE setting, and between the ECE setting and compulsory education institutions.
5. Finally, the outermost ring contains the **fifth main theme**, representing ***structural factors that also affect the IECE setting***. These, however, come from national levels of policy and practice:
- A rights-based approach to ECE
  - Provision of mainstream access to ECE for all
  - Setting up regional/national standards for a holistic IECE curriculum
  - Availability of initial education for teachers and other IECE staff
  - Good governance and funding
  - Procedures for regular monitoring and evaluation of IECE settings.



The next five chapters describe all these subthemes in more detail, with one main theme per chapter. Within each chapter, there is a brief description of the main theme and each of its subthemes. These are substantiated with a selection of relevant quotations. The subthemes for each section are discussed in the order of the above lists. Some subthemes are further expanded through more detailed descriptions and quotations that illustrate different aspects of that theme. These use bold type to indicate the aspect being addressed.



## THEME 1: MAIN *OUTCOMES*: CHILD BELONGINGNESS, ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING

Many examples stated that the long-term aim for all children – whatever their characteristics – was their inclusion and participation in society as active citizens. This entailed three long-term aims:

- to enable all children to belong to their peer group in the early years;
- to ensure children are actively engaged in social and learning activities;
- to enable all children to acquire the skills necessary to participate constructively in education and society, with any support required.

This idea of preparing children for citizenship was most explicitly described in the German example. Here, the stated goal was to ensure children's 'involvement and participation' which was linked 'to the right of people to be involved in decisions concerning their own lives':

*Offering children a variety of possibilities to reach decisions concerning their lives in the day-care centre is thus self-evident for us. This is reflected both in the individual interaction with the child, but also in the structural design of the kindergarten's routine. Opportunities are thus planned on a daily basis in which the children can decide for themselves, what, with whom, for how long and where they want to play, or even with voting processes within the group. The current situation is discussed within the framework of the daily meeting of the individual groups. Suggestions and complaints are incorporated; joint plans are made, voted on and decided. Over the course of their time in kindergarten, in this way the children have the possibility to gain experience with democratic processes. (Germany)*

Within this kindergarten curriculum, for instance, the children decided on lunch options. Three children made three possible lunch choices which the whole group then voted on for the final choice. The importance of preparing children for wider democratic citizenship was also explicitly explained:

*Everyday activity and social interaction with other people, adults and children, the co-construction of life practice, language and knowledge are the central elements of this educational process. This in no way excludes the use of learning programmes. Education and upbringing in our day-care facility are successful when we are able to provide the children and their parents with a solid foundation from which they can face the challenges of the future with a spirit of optimism and confidence. (Germany)*



Other examples expressed this wide conception of the goal of pre-primary education as preparation for active participation in society:

*Múlaborg's curriculum has five main aims: ... 5. to strengthen children's general development and thus prepare them for life and the future in a responsible way. ... With the support of parents, staff develop an environment where all children are active participants. (Iceland)*

*The presence of these new educational agents in schools has also brought them closer to the concerns about education which affect every sector in our society and allowed them to give more adequate and appropriate responses to the reality of our learners, giving priority to learning for life as a basic competence in education and to lifelong learning for the adults involved. (Spain)*

*Staff are aware that children's learning needs to be interconnected with life and with ordinary situations close to children's understanding. Understanding play and interaction creates opportunities for meaningful learning for all children. (Slovakia)*



## THEME 2: QUALITY PROCESSES IN IECE

While aiming towards future active citizenship, all the examples described *processes* within the IECE setting. These processes ensure the children's sense of belonging in the IECE setting and enable their active engagement and learning. Five processes were identified:

- Promoting social inclusion and belonging through staff-child and child-peer interaction and relationships
- Promoting the child's participation and active engagement in learning and daily activities
- Engaging children through a child-centred approach
- Using personalised, flexible and formative assessment for learning
- Providing relevant accommodations, adaptations and support wherever needed to ensure each child can engage positively in learning and social activities.

### **Enabling 'positive social interaction' and relationships for all children**


The examples show an endeavour to enable every child – whatever their characteristics – to become full members of the learning community, pre-school and peer group. Inclusion was not merely intended to enhance everyone's cognitive skills. It was also aimed at creating a supportive learning community where everyone belonged and enjoyed relationships both with the staff and with peers.

### ***Focus on inclusive teacher-child relationships***

One important way for children to feel they belong to the peer group and pre-school is through the teacher's recognition of each and every child. Inclusive teachers seek to build a positive interpersonal relationship and interaction with each child:

*Security is another central aspect of early childhood development. A good, stable bond in turn forms the basis for developing a sense of security. ... We see the establishment of a viable bond with the individual children in their group, and then releasing them from this bond with a view to their development and the change to school life, as one of the most important tasks for the professionals in our institution. (Germany)*

*An attempt is made ... to introduce all children to each other and promote friendships through games with simple rules, which can be demonstrated by the teacher (so that language is less of a barrier). Games like football, which are well known to all children, allow the development of strong relationships, bonding and socialising. In addition, teachers always participate in these games*



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*in an effort to minimise the distance between themselves and the children.  
(Cyprus)*

*... all children, with their diverse support needs, receive an individual education plan. The child's support measures are planned to suit the group's activities so that they are easy to implement within the group and highlight participation and the child's social inclusion. (Finland)*

### **Focus on inclusive peer relationships**

Many more examples referred to attempts to enable all children to relate effectively to their peers as a sign of inclusion:

*Children have the moral right to grow up together, learn from each other and with each other regardless of their intellectual or physical condition ... The methods and techniques used in the pre-school aim to achieve this goal and to enable all the children to learn academic and social skills with their peers.  
(Iceland)*

*The children work in groups or pairs and are taught to encourage each other during their work, they share materials and learn to appreciate one another's work. ... At the end of the year there is an activity that aims to remind the children of their experiences together throughout the year and a final party, with the participation of parents, to consolidate the relationships created between children and adults. (Italy)*

*The aim of this pilot experience is to try a new form of inclusion for children with special needs in a mainstream classroom, giving them the opportunity to develop social skills through relationships with their peers and differentiated and personalised teaching. (Switzerland)*

*It is very important to recognise and develop a child's strengths and to show these strengths to peers. Playing together and learning together enable ... the creation of mixed-age groups as an optimal organisational formula to include children with special educational needs in their peer groups. (Poland)*

*Before the opening of the UEMA, children in the other classes in the school were given information so they could understand the needs of their classmates. ... The implementation of the programme in mainstream schools also allows other children to gradually adapt to the specific needs of their schoolmates, to get to know them and to communicate and interact with them. (France)*





... the Framework for ECE which includes five educational areas: ...

- *Interpersonal: the child and others, supporting interpersonal relationships between children and with adults, facilitating the acquisition, cultivation and respect of the rules of living together;*
- *Socio-cultural: the child and society, with focus on learning about the place where they live, catering for the sense of belonging, learning about cultural diversity, the acquisition of cultural values and society norms.*  
(Czech Republic)

### **Ensuring active child ‘involvement in daily activities’**

Another major inclusive process promoted by many examples was child participation and active engagement in the ECE setting’s daily activities. This inclusive endeavour was illustrated through descriptions of how staff sought each child’s active engagement in learning and social activities:

*Children with SEN are included in daily activities, such as learning and play activities, group meals and outdoor activities. ... [They] are included in all daily activities.* (Norway)

*In the school, the active engagement of learners in the teaching and learning process is the order of the day. Hands-on activities stimulate the children’s imaginations and help them to learn by doing while having fun. If a child fails to reach a desired goal, different methods are devised by the class teacher to help the child reach targets.* (Malta)

*The kindergarten is inclusive in the activities it performs, it welcomes diversity and provides support through a collaborative teaching team (class teacher, specialist teacher, all school staff) which in turn encourages child participation and individual development.* (Italy)

Participation was certainly seen as the main criterion for successful teaching in at least one particular example. Here, children’s engagement was assessed through observation and scoring of relevant scales:

*The following instruments were used to assess the quality of practices used by teachers to promote the inclusion of children with disabilities within daily classroom processes:*

- *Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP; Soukakou, 2012).*
- *The special needs subscale of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-E; Sylva, Blatchford and Taggart, 2003).* (Portugal)



## Engaging each child through a ‘child-centred approach’

To make the curriculum meaningful to each child, most examples referred to a child-centred approach and ‘individualisation’ of learning. They did this by balancing the standard curriculum’s targets with meeting each child’s individual strengths and needs. The descriptions of individualisation are better represented by the concept of ‘personalisation’, given the emphasis on following the child’s interests:

*We accept the children in their individuality, with their strengths and their weaknesses, their dispositions and talents, at their particular stage of development, accept them as a whole, with their individual, unique movements, language, thoughts, expressions, perceptions and abilities. (Austria)*

*Not doing ‘the same for everyone’ but instead making ‘each to his own’ possible is the goal of our educational work. This requires a high degree of internal differentiation, which makes it possible to structure the everyday routine, as well as the offers and projects in such a way that impetuses and chances for development are created for everyone. The starting points are always provided by the children’s strengths, interests and inclinations, in order to allow them to have experiences of self-efficacy. (Germany)*

*Kindergarten teachers are expected to know the provision’s educational programme and use it as a basis from which to meet the children’s individual needs. (Hungary)*

*... educating in diversity means adopting a model which facilitates the learning process of each and every child from different family, personal and social situations. It is therefore necessary to find solutions for the organisation, methodology, adaptation of the curriculum, etc., in order to give the most adequate, diverse and creative response which facilitates the optimal development of all the competences in each and every one of the learners at the precise moment. (Spain)*

## Promoting children’s initiative

Some examples made explicit reference to the aim of developing **children’s initiative**. This was mainly by focusing on each child’s **strengths** and offering them opportunities to make **choices**:

*We let the children act in a self-determined manner, as long as they will not endanger themselves or others. Each child receives our maximum trust, for example, to use certain rooms without direct supervision. This way, the children are supported in developing their own personality. (Austria)*

*The teacher in this pre-school is a guide, a ‘stage director’, co-authoring the activities with the children, who are the main protagonists in their growth*



*process. ... The teachers follow the Montessori style of teaching, the idea being that children should be 'free to act' to allow holistic growth. (Italy)*

*Each teacher organises the programme based on the children's motivation. The programme is experiential and multisensory, and aims to allow the children to have options on how they want to participate. (Greece)*

Some examples emphasised the importance of giving children an opportunity to **express themselves**:

*In each classroom or school project, children are offered the opportunity each day to create, express themselves, make themselves heard and felt at school and, most importantly, also outside school by means of activities such as exhibiting paintings and sculptures, doing scientific experiments, etc., in the library, cultural centres, museums, etc. This enables the school to fulfil its goal: to make today's children visible. (Spain)*

At least two examples explicitly referred to involving children in **planning and assessing** their own learning, as well as in planning the pre-school environment:

*Children are involved in planning their own learning, through 'plan-do-review' and all have been involved in setting personal learning targets which are reviewed regularly with children and parents. They have special books documenting their learning. Children undertake peer and self-assessment and identify personal achievements on a weekly basis. (UK – Scotland)*


*The kindergarten has a naturally designed play area of approximately 2,000 m<sup>2</sup>. A redesign decisively influenced by the children took place several years ago. Many of the children's ideas were realised. For example, we now have a permanent play shop and a difficult climbing course. (Germany)*

### **Using 'personalised, flexible and formative assessment for learning'**

In these examples, it was striking that a holistic curriculum was also matched with **formative assessment**, more recently termed '**assessment for learning**'. Several examples underlined that they had a system for assessing the child's progress and development. The system was initiated from the start of the child's attendance, was on-going and was used formatively. Indeed, in one example there was a reformulation of assessment as 'planning' rather than classification:

*Teachers should spend less time sorting children and more time helping them to realise their innate talents and interests. (Iceland)*

*It could be said that the quality of a school can be measured, among other variables, by the capacity to plan, provide and evaluate the optimal curriculum for each learner in the context of learner diversity. ... Diversity always has to be*



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*present when planning educational action in pre-school ... Every child will learn if they have help. However, this help cannot be the same for the whole group, but will depend on the needs ... of its members. From this approach, we may talk about individualisation of teaching, which is understood as the process by which, starting from the analysis of the individual characteristics of the learners, educational action is integrated from the concept of the child as a 'global and unique person'. (Spain)*

For example, the following report describes how all children were closely observed from the beginning and any need for additional support was noted:

*Tremorfa Nursery use a variety of assessment tools to ensure that each child is accessing a developmentally-appropriate curriculum, that the learning environment supports their needs and that all staff in the setting have a holistic picture of each individual child.*

- 1. ... Practitioners use a 'traffic light system': Green – no concerns; Amber – keep an eye (may attend a nurture group or adult support); Red – concerns, discuss with family/other professionals.*
- 2. Early years on-entry tracking system which assesses all areas of development.*
- 3. I CAN stages of development tool to assess early speech and language used at home and in the setting. (UK – Wales)*

On-going **formative, regular activity-based assessment for learning** was emphasised:

*Throughout daily regular activities, the pre-school teachers promote participation and engagement of each child and provide feedback and support. (Portugal)*

*Each class section uses scientific educational project assessment tools and evaluates children according to their individual development in different areas. Daily diaries are used to note down (by hand or with recordings, photographs, video recordings) critical events in the children's development process and the educational process is observed by the psychologist and the teachers themselves. Fortnightly teacher observations take place with inter-disciplinary staff, the psychologist and specialist teacher. (Greece)*

*Staff are skilled in observation and assessing children's progress and achievement and moderate their professional judgements within the centre and across other local settings. (UK – Scotland)*

Children with additional needs are not merely identified at one point in time. There are provisions for constant readjustment of understanding of the children's



development and support needs. For instance, in one case the **response to intervention approach** was used:

*The children in need of additional support benefit from differentiated measures, if necessary. These measures are mostly of an educational nature and are developed in the context of the classroom and in collaboration with the family. Also taking into account the additional support needs of children, the Agrupamento de Escolas de Frazão created the Integrated Support Service for Learning Improvement, which operates according to the **Response to Intervention** model, focusing on multi-level action and on collaborative, preventive and early practice. (Portugal)*

*Class teachers and specialist teachers work with children as a team. They observe children with disabilities or with diverse and additional needs in three different contexts: while the child is working alone, in a small group and with the whole class. (Italy)*

Some examples emphasised that **assessment was done as part of daily activities**. This was in a flexible and individualised way to support each child's development and progress with the support of special education teachers during regular daily activities:

*... through their special expertise, early childhood special education teachers bring a special education perspective to the observation and assessment of children, as well as to planning and education. The model also highlights flexibility. The demand for resources is not assessed based on children's diagnoses, but instead depends on the expertise of consultative early childhood special education teachers and the early childhood special education teachers who work in the day-care groups. (Finland)*

*Children with specific needs have an Individual Education Plan: a working document which includes measurable targets. For example, children with speech and language difficulties access intense targeted intervention from the setting's highly-trained staff ... Children's development is documented in the form of learning stories. These include photographs, next steps, adults' roles. The learning stories document a holistic picture of individual children's skills, as well as providing information for discussion with parents, families and other professionals. (UK – Wales)*

*The organisation of the inclusive pedagogical process is as follows: ...*

- *Planned co-operation between the child, family, teachers and support team allows the fulfilment of tasks and the achievement of aims for the child's personal development and education;*

- *The child's self-evaluation is a part of progress evaluation;*
- *The criteria for determining the tasks and aims are reached;*
- *Assessment of the process makes it possible to change the plans if necessary. (Latvia)*

There was wide emphasis on the **individualisation of assessment**, focusing on each child's strengths and needs. There were frequent references to early identification of strengths and needs and **individual education plans (IEPs)**:

*In observing and assessing the children's learning, the staff focuses on finding and identifying the children's different needs. There is good co-operation with the special education department for pre-schools in Reykjavik and other pre-school professionals who provide services to children with special needs. Meetings are held regularly on how the child is developing, involving all professionals who are working with the child. The objectives of these meetings are to get a good overview of the development progress from all relevant experts and to co-ordinate inputs and methods used. An individual plan and goals are prepared with the participation of parents and in co-operation with other professionals involved in the work with the child. Reassessment of goals takes place once a month. (Iceland)*

*To meet the special educational needs of children attending pre-school education, Decree-Law 3/2008 establishes educational measures that aim ... to achieve educational success and to prepare learners for further studies. These measures must be set out in an IEP and are applied whenever a child is eligible for specialised support to carry out the activities and experiences included in the common curriculum ... of the child's group. Such measures also include adaptations to the curriculum design that depart significantly from this common framework so as to meet the needs of individual children. It is mandatory for the IEP to be prepared jointly by the pre-school teacher responsible for the class, by the special education teacher, by the parents, and by other professionals that may be involved in the child's educational process. (Portugal)*

*In each of these settings, an initial individual assessment of need is undertaken for each child. This is built upon by regular observations to monitor social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. (UK – Northern Ireland)*

### **Making 'accommodations and adaptations and providing support as needed' while removing barriers to participation**

To ensure the participation and engagement of each child, particularly those with additional needs, the examples underlined the strategies for removing any barriers



to participation. They also explain the provision of accommodations, adaptations and regular additional support where needed. The examples first addressed **financial, accessibility and transport barriers to the child's attendance:**

*Pre-primary education in Cyprus is mandatory and offered freely to children aged 4 years 8 months to 5 years 8 months who attend public kindergartens. Younger children aged 3 years to 4 years 8 months take up vacant places in public kindergartens and pay low fees – a fixed amount of €42. Fee reduction is given to poor families with four children or more. Priority is given to children with special educational needs, irrespective of age. For other children, selection is made according to criteria concerning children at risk and socio-economic deprivation. (Cyprus)*

*Transport is provided where required due to additional support needs. (UK – Scotland)*

*Because all the provision is free of charge, there is no financial barrier; this is important in the Larne community, which has experienced a significant rise in unemployment levels in recent years. (UK – Northern Ireland)*

*The school has a bus which can provide access for all children, even those who live in remote areas. (Greece)*

Examples list various **adaptations for children's different needs:**

*The Education Authority provides funding for teaching assistants to support children with SEN in accessing their learning and to ensure they derive the maximum benefit from the daily activities in the provision. (UK – Northern Ireland)*

*Some examples of adjustments for children with visual impairment:*

- *A constant assistant to overcome physical barriers and encourage independence.*
- *Spatial adjustment: permanent space planning, tactile markings for orientation on fences, doors and floors. Adjustments to the playroom for free passage.*
- *Marking paths for guidance, tactile markings, and different tactile structures (floor mark from the entrance of the kindergarten to the playroom, the playroom entrance, bathroom and toilet; a permanent place in the group is established).*
- *All the children's names indicated in Braille in the dressing room.*
- *Toys that develop all the senses and compensatory skills.*



- *Application of specific natural materials, designs and models.*
- *Allowing extra time for characterisation, demonstrations and familiarising themselves with new content, in facilities and movement, and integration of verbal description with their own sensory-motor experience.*
- *Communication: verbal announcing, concrete orientations, description of events.*
- *Specific experience and active learning: allowing various multi-sensory experiences, tactile guidance with verbal support and explanation.*
- *Additional training of all professionals who work with the visually impaired child, best practice exchange, observation lessons and regular visits to Ljubljana's Institute for Blind and Partially Sighted Children. (Slovenia)*

Many examples highlighted the **use of ICT and other innovations** for enhanced participation:

*The use of the **interactive white board** is common practice and both teachers and learners enjoy using it as an effective, efficient teaching/learning tool. (Malta)*


*Equipment, Appliances and Minor Alterations Capital Grant ... This level recognises that some children require **specialised equipment**, appliances, assistive technology and/or that some early years settings may require minor structural alterations to ensure children with a disability can participate in ECCE. (Ireland)*

*For over 20 years, the kindergarten has been conducting integrated early language learning for children age three and upwards, **in an innovative way**. In co-operation with the National Education Institute it carries out the following innovation projects:*

- *Playing English (2009–2014)*
- *Therapy dog to visit children and support for early mathematics learning (2010 onwards)*
- *Emerging literacy (2013 onwards)*
- *Children's play in a multilingual and multicultural environment (from 2015 onwards). (Slovenia)*

*... the Estonian Union for Child Welfare has been leading a project called 'Kiusamisest vaba lasteaed ja kool' (**Kindergartens and Schools Free of Bullying**) since 2010. ... As the prevention of bullying is directly related to accepted social norms and the quality of social relationships, it is important*





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*that these values are taught to children from an early age. ... The 'Free of Bullying!' methodology is child-orientated and focuses on the group of children or class as a whole. ... In order to pass these behaviour models to children, a specific methodology was developed and put together in a coloured suitcase (green for kindergarten, blue for school) which includes different materials for ... children and teachers... [and] parents. (Estonia)*


*The school is characterised by its **continuous search for pedagogical innovation**, which is reflected in its key projects connected to art, science and ICT integration in pre-school, its continuous team training and documenting of those experiences and projects that identify it as an educational community. (Spain)*

### **Providing additional support as a regular feature**

In addition to removing barriers, the examples highlighted how they provided **additional support for children who needed it, while trying to avoid labelling** and classification into categories of disability. Support was made available to teachers to meet the needs of all the children as part of the provision's regular resources:

*In Jyväskylä, a so-called three-step support model is used. ... All children receive general support as part of quality ECE, which includes the observation of children, educational environments and pedagogy as an integral part. The educator teams consist of ECE teachers and practical nurses. Some day-care centres have additional assisting staff. If a child is recognised as needing more support, observation of the child as well as related planning and pedagogy are intensified, for instance, so that a consultative early childhood special education teacher also participates in creating an individual education plan for the child. If this intensified support is not enough, the child will receive special support. Special support usually implies that, in addition to the planning stage, early childhood special education teachers are involved in implementing the child's education and guidance. The support the child receives is evaluated regularly, and the child can return to general support when sufficient development has been achieved. (Finland)*

*The pre-school head is responsible for ensuring each unit is based on participation and inclusion. ... supervision focusing on special needs is available via seven centrally organised special needs educators/teachers. The goal of this supportive function is to contribute to the achievement of an equal and accessible pre-primary education, where all children can be included and participate. ... Generally support is not given to individual children but to the entire class. If required, the number of staff can be increased or the number of children in the class decreased. Interventions concerning communication or*



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*interaction, for example, include the entire class. Also smaller groups can be created within the class to meet children's different needs. ... The revised pre-primary curriculum clearly states that education will be adjusted to fit the needs of all children. (Sweden)*

*The rule that 'the therapist goes to the child' not 'the child goes to the therapist' means that children enter the therapists' offices as little as possible. The nursery therapists always prefer to work with the children in their natural environment, especially when working on improving self-reliance and developing social skills. (Poland)*

*For some children with disabilities, a notification from the MDPH (department-based structures for disabled people) allows them to be supported full-time or part-time in their education by a school aid (AVS), following an assessment of their specific needs. ... Their role within the school can vary considerably, depending on the child's specific needs. For some (with motor disability, for instance), the school aid's role will be mostly related to organisation, help with the child's movement, care, the child's positioning in school assignments and possibly assisting the child in building relationships with the other children. For others (with intellectual or learning disabilities) the school aid will mostly ensure the child understands instructions given, and support the child's efforts when necessary. (France)*

*... class and specialist teachers are co-operating in an attempt to co-plan and co-teach in order that no children are left out. (Cyprus)*

There were several references to '**special pedagogies**':

*In one of our special education groups we have implemented the 'kindergarten with 4 paws' project. Working with a therapy/assistance dog meets the requirements of fostering a focus on the individual. The specially trained dog perceives the child's emotions; it is flexible and easily adjusts to the child's needs, resources and current emotional state. The dog joins in as a sort of co-pedagogue in everyday life ... The St. Isidor integrative horse farm provides a special experience for people with different disabilities. The encounter, as well as the movement with the horse, is stimulating and relaxing at the same time and conveys emotional warmth and closeness. (Austria)*

*Children with special needs are encouraged to develop their strengths through music and art, both of which can also serve as a means of therapy and communication. (Malta)*

*The centre takes very good account of children's emotional wellbeing and uses the PATHS (Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies) approach to help children develop self-regulation. When required, the staff use individualised*



*programmes of support such as Tacpac, a programme that combines touch and music to promote communication and social interaction, sensory, neurological and emotional development for children with autistic spectrum disorders. (UK – Scotland)*

**‘Therapeutic intervention’** or rehabilitation with the child is not the focus of the current concept of inclusive systems. Nevertheless, it was still seen as serving the child’s need to develop potential and skills that enable participation in society. In one instance, such intervention was regarded as the sixth of seven levels of action for inclusion. There were a few examples where the enabling of active citizenship was indeed seen to occur through rehabilitation. This was particularly true for children with hearing or language impairments:

*Level 6: Therapeutic Intervention ... This level provides for access to therapeutic services where they are critical to enable the child be enrolled, and fully participate in ECCE. (Ireland)*

*The aim of these programmes is to prepare children for successful educational and social inclusion or inclusion in mainstream education when the child is psychologically and physically ready ... The large majority of the clinic’s users (more than 80%) are children with hearing and/or speech impairments and children with difficulties in speech and language development. The basic aim of verbotonal rehabilitation is to develop speech and to overcome hearing and speech disabilities, which are significant factors in children’s development. For these children inclusion through speech is the best route to a full and equal life, and SUVAG Polyclinic has been seeing significant results for five decades. ... All children receiving care in the Section for Speech Disorder Therapy are in mainstream education. (Croatia)*

The above example was indeed a specialised service. It served as a **national resource centre** for other mainstream services to ensure the needs of children with hearing impairments were met:

*In addition, SUVAG Polyclinic’s employees collaborate with the Education Agency and provide a mobile support service. Mobile teams carry out expert lectures on working with children with hearing and/or language difficulties at the request of the Education Agency or educational institution. In 2014, the mobile team carried out 33 presentations for educators in ten locations across Croatia. (Croatia)*



One important area of support was for **managing difficult behaviour**. Children were not excluded for misbehaviour, but rather strategies were used to enable children to regulate their behaviour:

*The centre has a positive approach to challenging behaviour, with staff recognising behaviour as an expression of feelings. Approaches focus on meeting the needs of the child, rather than focusing on the behaviour, and through teamwork, improving wellbeing and reducing anxieties. (UK – Scotland)*

*These methods [songs, stories, manipulation activities, psycho-motor activities, watercolours] were used in the late morning or afternoon, before the various curricular activities in which the child often displayed unsuitable behaviour. A song preceded the activity and was used to calm the learners. It particularly relaxed the specific child, which allowed the child to be integrated into the class ready for the subsequent teaching. The watercolour was both cathartic and motivational, awarded as a prize for good work. (Italy)*



### THEME 3: INCLUSIVE STRUCTURES WITHIN THE IECE SETTING

The example descriptions indicated that a variety of subsystem structures facilitated inclusive interactions for each child within the IECE setting. Eight such structures were identified, namely:


- Having procedures for ensuring a warm welcome and a safe atmosphere for children and families
- Building on-going close links with the child's family
- Having a holistic and personalised curriculum
- Setting up the social and physical environment to make it accessible and engaging for all children
- Employing qualified staff who were open to and skilled for inclusive approaches
- Providing staff with continuing professional development in IECE
- Adopting a culturally-responsive approach to respect the diversity of learner characteristics and backgrounds
- Building all these structures through strong leadership committed to IECE and working through shared responsibility and collaboration among all.

#### **A warm welcome for each child and family**

Several examples described how pre-schools prepared for each child's inclusive engagement. The pre-school offered a warm welcome and a caring environment for all children and their families. This was both in the transitional phase and during the child's attendance. They had explicit procedures (structures) for each child's smooth transition from home to the ECE setting:

*When welcoming a new child to the setting, the staff take time to get to know each child as an individual ... the setting's leader takes time to get to know the parents/carers as well as the child ... Discussions and activities are in place, for example 'what's in a name?' where the family share the meaning behind their child's name, to support and settle children and their families into the nursery. (UK – Wales)*

*Our intensive exchange with parents and sensitive, attentive accompaniment of the child provide the basis for coping with the new situation, the transition to the day-care centre and a group of children. It of course goes without saying that we offer parents the opportunity to directly accompany their child in the day-care centre. (Germany)*



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*Children are greeted and their parents can stay and play with them for 15 minutes. (Netherlands)*

**Transitions for children with additional needs** were seen as requiring more intensive and individualised procedures to ensure they quickly became full participants within their peer group:

*To support the transition of children with additional needs into our service we organise protocol meetings with parents/guardians and the local early intervention team and all other relevant stakeholders. These meetings give parents and staff an opportunity to exchange key information about a child's individual needs and how the service can effectively meet these. We discuss the programme and experiences we already provide and what changes, if any, we need to make to ensure that every child can fully participate in all our daily activities in an inclusive environment. (Ireland)*

Some examples also explicitly described how they tried to provide a **constant safe and caring environment** – two examples mentioned ‘love’ for the children:

*Love and respect: In our kindergarten we strive to create an atmosphere of appreciation and mutual respect (not only towards the children, but also towards colleagues and parents) – that is, an atmosphere in which each child feels at ease and accepted. (Austria)*

*... the school management team and all teaching staff do their very best to make children feel safe and secure in a caring environment, where each and every child is loved and cared for. (Malta)*

*Múlaborg's mottos are respect, trust and security and the pre-school emphasises receiving every child with warmth and respect so that the child will feel secure in the pre-school. (Iceland)*

### **Working in partnership with parents**

An essential supportive and inclusive structure described in all the examples was the establishment of a collaborative relationship with parents. Parents were not merely seen as an essential means for ensuring that children could attend the IECE, but also as essential collaborators for the child's development. They were also seen as providing the context for teachers to understand the children and meet their needs. Some examples indicated that parents were asked to participate in planning the general and individual curricula for children, as well as in evaluating the ECE service:

*Pre-school teachers contemplate children's needs and interests in their daily practice, involving families in the process as much as possible. Moreover, pre-school teachers have developed some specific projects that bring families and the community to the pre-school. For example, the 'Let's read together' project*



*aims to develop literacy activities with the families of children from 3 to 6 years. (Portugal)*

*We believe that partnership with parents is critical to children's overall development and enjoyment in pre-school. The stronger the relationship between home and pre-school, the better the care children will receive in both settings. This is clearly outlined in our Parent and Carer Involvement Policy. There are a variety of opportunities for parents to be involved in activities within the setting, taking into account the range of parents' circumstances, interests and availability. (Ireland)*

*The parents had weekly meetings with the multidisciplinary team and the teachers ..., discussing and evaluating the child's development in school and at home. The parents had time and space to express doubts, ideas and wishes. Moreover, the school provided individual parent counselling with the psychologist at no cost. ... Parental counselling ... aims to encourage families to participate in the educational process. (Greece)*


*On some occasions, input from the family is required to prepare the child from home and working with the family is very important. For this reason an open-door policy is in place, where parents can come to school whenever they have a query. (Malta)*

*The broad spectrum of our parental work ... Parents can sit in on classes: open parental work can also mean that the parents participate in the kindergarten's daily routines. ... They can experience our pedagogical style and recognise the value of play. Sitting in on classes, as well as joint activities, bring family life and kindergarten life closer together. (Austria)*

*The municipality offers parental training for parents of children of all ages, as a general prevention technique. (Sweden)*

In several examples, parents had a say in planning the curriculum, with one instance working through a parents' council. The administration's consultation with parents' councils is mentioned in a few examples, while one example talked about '**parental rights**':

*Active communication and discussion with the parents of the children entrusted to us, is a central element of successful educational work ... The parents' council is elected to represent parents' interests and is an important instrument for ensuring the appropriate degree of parent participation in the context of the upbringing partnership. It has the right to be informed and heard with regard to all important matters of education, upbringing and care. (Germany)*



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*In short, including families is a key objective for Zaleo, essential for understanding the new proposals for the learning process, where collaboration between the family, the school and the surroundings introduces positive changes to the educational contexts and generates new challenges and educational opportunities for the family, the school and society ... All the activities in the school ... show us how the classroom and school educational project continue to be built with full collaboration from families, from daily classroom activities to more specific workshops, after-school activities, etc. (Spain)*

For **children with additional needs**, co-operation with parents was more intensive:

*SUVAG Polyclinic kindergarten also puts a great emphasis on parent collaboration, and all educational and rehabilitation activities are conducted in collaboration with and with advice from parents. Methods of working with parents include individual counselling, parent meetings, workshops and parental participation in activities with children. (Croatia)*

- *Parents participate in the creation of individual educational and therapeutic programmes and are partners in consulting, developing and evaluating educational and therapeutic results.*
- *Parents are involved in their child's individual classes at the nursery.*
- *The nursery gives parents an opportunity to contact each other through support groups, parent societies, integration meetings, celebrating children's birthdays at the nursery.*
- *The nursery offers home visits for children in therapy at the parents' request. (Poland)*

### **A holistic and personalised curriculum**

Many examples described the adoption of a holistic and personalised approach to education as a structure for facilitating the child's engagement. Such IECE provisions put the child at the centre of their policies and practices. These aimed to develop each child's potential through a holistic and individualised curriculum and pedagogy. All children were offered an opportunity to succeed. Moreover, the children were seen as active agents in their own learning.

Each child's engagement in learning was made possible in the first place in all examples through a **holistic curriculum**. This went beyond the cognitive dimension and included physical, social, emotional, ethical and spiritual dimensions. This holistic curriculum also included expression and communication, language, aesthetics, knowledge about the environment and the world, mathematics and new





technologies. Emphasis was placed on curriculum flexibility in order to adjust to all children. A holistic curriculum was seen as related to 'life in society':

*The curriculum in each class is inter-disciplinary, approaches knowledge as a whole, uses numerous didactic tools to meet needs and gives opportunity for child participation, therefore aiming for constant and all-round development. (Greece)*

*The kindergarten aims for the harmonic, multi-faceted development of the enrolled 3–6 year old children, their differentiated and individually-focused improvement, and assistance to allow them to reach social maturity. (Hungary)*

*The Framework Plan is based on a holistic approach to both care and education and on the basic respect for the value of childhood itself. The Framework Plan:*

- ... focuses on four basic elements: play, learning, care and formation;
- focuses on inclusion and children's participation. (Norway)

Some examples emphasised the importance of helping children to develop a **sense of responsibility** – a more positive description of discipline:


*All children are supported to develop as successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens. (UK – Scotland)*

*Only children who learn to take responsibility for their actions and to make their own decisions can become self-determined and independent adults. When defining limits, the following points are important to us:*

- *There should be consistent rules and limits to provide continuity and stability for the children. However, the limits and rules shall never be applied rigidly. ...*
- *The limits always have to be directly connected to the situation, so that the children experience them as a logical consequence.*
- *We reject the withdrawal of affection for the setting of limits.*
- *The children experience that there are limits and rules for adults as well. We are equally involved in the existing framework of regulations and structures. (Austria)*

Some examples underlined the importance of '**play**' as a way to promote the child's holistic development. It serves to actively engage all children by enabling them to follow their interests, and to put them in touch with the world they could explore:

*The most natural activity for children is play, which is viewed in this provision as a medium for holistic development. The staff in the kindergarten understand play as a facility for a child's own self-creation ... Teachers intentionally*



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*implement different types of didactic games, using a lot of drama activities and structural play in the educational process. (Slovakia)*

*... play is an important way to promote the child's whole development. (Iceland)*

*Tremorfa Nursery has long been a beacon of good practice with regard to outdoor learning and play. It has worked hard to create a free-flow indoor/outdoor environment, developing features such as a small Forest School and an innovative pond within the grounds to encourage the children to engage with the natural world. (UK – Wales)*

*A creative and open environment is produced and independent play helps to develop the child's imagination, fantasy and understanding of the world around them. (Latvia)*

*Play allows each child to experiment with different objects, learn about the outside world and understand it. Children can create and confirm their own theories about a wide range of objects and phenomena through experimental play. The kindergarten staff carefully plan playful activities, integrating them into thematic projects. (Slovakia)*

Sometimes, the link between the kindergarten play activities and the children's **everyday life experience** was more explicit:

*Even more so than in later stages of life, living and learning in the elementary area are directly and indivisibly linked with one another. Everyday activity and social interaction with other people, adults and children, the co-construction of life practice, language and knowledge are the central elements of this educational process. (Germany)*

Many referred to **extra-curricular activities** to enhance and extend children's learning experiences and strengthen community relations (please also refer to the section on 'External recognition'):

*[The staff] overcomes limitations in an innovative way, as there are garden plots in all kindergarten units, and the children are taken on trips and are actively connected to the wider environment. ... In co-operation with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food of the Republic of Slovenia and the Slovenian Beekeepers Association, the kindergarten participates in the annual pan-Slovenian campaign 'Traditional Slovenian Breakfast'. (Slovenia)*

### **Ensuring an inclusive pre-primary environment for all**

The examples showed concern for arranging the social and physical environment in a way that enables each child's engagement. There were references to assessing the adequacy of the '**inclusive environment**' to see to what extent it suited the child's



strengths and needs. At the same time, examples noted that adapting the environment was beneficial for the whole class:

*In order to give an adequate educational response, the school starts out by analysing the context of its own diversity and the resources present inside and outside the school. Educating in diversity and attending to individuality requires the adoption of models of school organisation and curriculum development which facilitate learning in each and every one of the learners (with their differences). That is why the school applies measures for global school functioning, the use of spaces and times, and child grouping. School organisation is an element that determines the educational response, affecting the development of activities and the attainment of objectives. (Spain)*


*From these [specific inclusive education training] sessions the teachers have developed a horizontal curriculum for all learners. An IEP was developed, of which the pilot project for inclusive education naturally became a part, in addition to the observations, techniques, inputs and the use of TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children) to improve the child's environment. The doors of learning were opened, and through the PAPEC (Plan para la Aplicación de la Prosocialidad en Escuelas de Catalunya) methodology soft skills and peer emotions have improved, thus establishing an inclusive environment. (Italy)*

*All children with special needs have adaptations according to their individual programmes in the following ways:*

- *A reduced number of children in the group. ...*
- *Adaptation of the site and facilities in accordance with the instructions tailored to programme implementation and in accordance with special educational needs.*
- *Space adjustment: ensure adequate space (intimate playing corners) for individual work, special equipment (e.g. a special chair for children with physical disabilities, various orthopaedic aids, accessories for feeding, communicator, wheelchairs, etc.).*
- *... Enabling the corresponding transitions between different activities, constant routine. Checking a child's understanding. (Slovenia)*

*Each child has individual developmental and other needs and a flexible environment favours learning and ensures quality of attendance in the educational institution. (Croatia)*

*It is mainly the organisation of the class of spaces in various 'corners' or 'workshops' of discovery, experimentation, etc., which gives everyone the*



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*opportunity to learn, to socialise, and to build, at their own pace and according to their needs. (Belgium – French speaking community)*

*Regular reviews of the learning environment. For instance, the setting is currently working on becoming an autism-friendly setting so, for example, displays are neutral with no bright overwhelming colours. Visual prompts are used for all children attending the setting. (UK – Wales)*

### **Employing qualified staff open to IECE**

Three main features were found that ensured quality in the examples' staff composition. Firstly, teaching staff was generally trained to bachelor's degree level. Secondly, teaching staff had the support of some form of teaching assistance. Thirdly, regular staff included support staff trained in special education as well as other child support professionals, such as speech therapists. The examples showed a variety of staff compositions and organisation:

*At the Agrupamento de Escolas de Frazão, each group has a teacher with a bachelor's/master's degree in pre-school education, who is responsible for planning, organising and implementing educational activities with the group. (Portugal)*

*Both the teachers (mainstream and specialist) have a first degree in pre-primary education, hence they are aware of the available ways in which a teaching plan can be taught, the variety of options available and the aids needed to facilitate learning according to age and possible difficulties. (Cyprus)*

*Finnish ECE teachers have completed a bachelor's degree, and other ECE staff also have adequate training. In addition to the bachelor's degree, early childhood special education teachers have completed a minimum of 60 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits in special education. (Finland)*

*The school staff consists of teachers who hold a higher education degree in early childhood education, a psychologist, a specialist teacher and a speech therapist. It also co-operates with specialists such as doctors and occupational therapists. (Greece)*

*The head, deputy and teachers are qualified to SCQF level 9 (EQF level 6); practitioners are generally qualified to SCQF level 7 (EQF level 5), although in this setting up to 80% of staff have undertaken additional qualifications up to SCQF level 8 (also EQF level 5). (UK – Scotland)*



**Support educators** also received some level of training in ECE:

*Assistant pre-school teachers have secondary education obtained through the educational programme for pre-school education or have completed the fourth year of gymnasium and a professional course for work with pre-school children. Advisory workers must have a university degree in an appropriate field and pedagogical qualifications. (Slovenia)*

*The team involved in the project consists of the curriculum faculty and support staff. In the Italian school system support teachers have a degree in primary education specialising in support activities (specialist education, developmental psychopathology, neuropsychiatry, psychology of disability and rehabilitation, specialist teaching methods and learning), which supports the teaching curriculum and keeps up to date with developments in special education. (Italy)*

*In France, there is no specific pre-primary teacher training. Teachers get the same training (Baccalaureate plus five years of higher education) for both pre-primary and primary school education. ... Since September 2014 new institutions, ESPEs (Écoles supérieures du professorat et de l'éducation, or higher-learning schools of professorship and education), have been set up to dispense this training. Each ESPE enjoys some autonomy but must offer a curriculum that will match the specifications drawn up for teacher training. (France)*


### **Using a culturally-responsive approach**

Having qualified teaching staff made it more possible for them to be inclusive in another way: they could be empathic towards the families' and children's cultural backgrounds when these were different from their own. Many examples mentioned adopting a culturally-responsive approach through an appreciation of and respect for the children's and families' background cultures. This was to ensure they felt at home in the pre-school.

Numerous settings mentioned that, as well as having a diversity of children with additional needs, the **children came from very diverse ethnic backgrounds:**

*The school deals with issues of diversity related to religion, ethnicity, language and special needs on a daily basis. The children enrolled the current school year come from five different ethnic backgrounds and seven different religions and languages ... (Cyprus)*

*The kindergarten also includes other children who have different difficulties and the need for individual programme adjustments, such as children of immigrants, socially disadvantaged children and children from foster families and safe houses. (Slovenia)*



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*The kindergarten enrolls children from diverse ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds ... Among them, many children do not have the language of instruction as their mother tongue. The pre-school regularly welcomes children with disabilities and/or SEN. (Belgium – French speaking community)*

*Botkyrka is a municipality in the suburban area of Stockholm with almost 90,000 inhabitants. Of these, 56% were either born outside Sweden (39.8%) or have two parents that were born outside Sweden. ... About 100 different languages are represented within the municipality. ... Botkyrka has also a fairly large number of socio-economically disadvantaged inhabitants. (Sweden)*

Recognition of diverse family and child backgrounds was accompanied by accounts of **ensuring that children and families from minority or disadvantaged groups were enabled to feel like full members** of the setting:

*The setting works hard to reflect the community's cultural diversity within its events and to identify and celebrate special cultural aspects. (UK – Wales)*

*The setting takes account of cultural diversity, and recently staff and parents have been supported to learn British Sign Language to ensure that families with hearing impairment can be fully included not only in the centre but also in the wider community ... Families are encouraged to share their culture and language within the centre, celebrating diversity and enriching the curriculum. (UK – Scotland)*

*To include the children from Chinese-speaking families, for the first month their parents come and take an active part in the pedagogical process with them, spending time together with their children and teachers. Gradually the children are left with Latvian-speaking children for more and more time. (Latvia)*

*The Education Act and the revised pre-primary curriculum state that pre-primary education should offer children the opportunity to develop both their Swedish and their first language, but in reality only around four out of ten children with a first language other than Swedish are given this chance. (Sweden)*

### **Promoting diversity in staff composition**

Moreover, at least three centres addressed the aim of valuing learners equally through deliberate attempts to have **gender, ethnic and linguistic diversity among staff**. This was a way of increasing the understanding and empowerment of diverse children and families:

*The pre-school has exceptionally diverse staff composition compared to other pre-schools in Iceland. ... Both men and women are employed, as well as*



*teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds. The staff members speak a wealth of languages. (Iceland)*

*Nursery schools in Poland are female-dominated. In this nursery school each group has two tutors, a man and a woman. A diverse group of peers and tutors provides more opportunities for children to seek out a person they trust to establish a safe relationship with, particularly during the adaptation stage. (Poland)*

*... our day-care centre is completely open to all children. However, diversity does not only refer to the children. We also welcome differences in the staff team and the enrichment that it brings to our education work. (Germany)*

### **Committed inclusive leadership and collaboration**

The examples suggest another important structural quality of ECE settings that are engaged in developing more inclusive services. They deliberately promote collaborative endeavour among all their members. This is described as requiring committed inclusive leadership. Such leadership can develop a sense of shared responsibility among staff and the whole learning community, and enable inter-disciplinary co-operation:

*The keys to the programme's success to date have been ... open communication and active collaboration on the part of all involved. (UK – Northern Ireland)*


### **Developing inclusive committed leadership**

Collaboration is best achieved when the leadership promotes it. Several examples mentioned **committed leadership** that built strong teamwork within the setting, but also created positive networks with sources of funding and expertise from outside the provision:

*The school leadership team comprises the headmistress and a secretary. This team believes that education is an instrument for personal and social development. ... The leadership team has been the promoter, motivator and facilitator in inclusive projects. It has been directly involved in their development and launch, being the guarantor of their inclusion in the school's educational projects and their continuity over time. (Spain)*

*The setting's leader has worked at the nursery for over a decade, first as a teacher and now as a head teacher. She is passionate about early years and providing the best possible education and experiences for all children and their families. This passion is reflected in her team, which is committed to working together, sharing and developing knowledge and expertise to provide the best*





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*possible care and education for children, whatever their background or need.*  
(UK – Wales)

*The head of centre is part of the local authority ‘away team’, engaging with others from across Scotland to improve practice with the centre and across agencies.* (UK – Scotland)

*The head teacher promotes and drives the processes of inclusion by co-ordinating the teaching staff (teachers and support teachers) and non-teaching staff (administrative staff, other school staff, municipal teaching assistant), facilitating contact with the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, University and Research), local government agencies and private institutions and meeting teachers’ training needs to ensure they are professional and up to date. The head teacher also implements the plans laid out in the new ‘Good School’ reform approved in July 2015.* (Italy)

### ***Developing collaboration and shared responsibility***

These IECE leaders worked deliberately to develop **shared responsibility** and a commitment to common goals among staff:

*Teamwork as a key factor to unite the group when assuming common goals.*  
(Spain)

*One of the employees’ goals is to develop early childhood education based on professional co-operation and promote shared responsibility among all employees in the care and education of all children. Many professionals work together ..., such as pre-school teachers, primary school teachers, educationalists and assistants ... The workforce has planning days, staff meetings, department meetings and daily information meetings. All departments have a weekly planning meeting to divide responsibility for all of the children.* (Iceland)

There were several examples of setting up deliberate **structures for ensuring collaboration and the sharing of expertise** by teachers and other staff:

*Their [teachers’] work emphasises collaboration with parents, the educators of day-care centre groups, superiors, children’s therapists, and future teachers.*  
(Finland)

*The organisation of the inclusive pedagogical process: ... Planned co-operation between the child, family, teachers and support team allows the fulfilment of tasks and the achievement of aims for the child’s personal development and education.* (Latvia)





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*... a Learning Support Assistant (LSA) ... works hand-in-hand with the play leader or class teacher to ensure that these children are participating in all class activities and integrating with their peers. All play leaders, class teachers and LSAs meet for a weekly planning session, in which they review and evaluate the activities carried out in the previous week and plan for the following week. (Malta)*

*The nursery is aware of the significance of local collaboration, and has therefore been creating a network of collaboration for several years. The nursery tries to promote good practices and develop interesting solutions, implement new initiatives and search for new partners and allies. (Poland)*



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## THEME 4: INCLUSIVE STRUCTURES IN THE SETTING'S COMMUNITY

Inclusive structures inside the pre-primary setting were further supported by inclusive structures in the surrounding community. Five such structures were identified:

- The IECE setting's search for collaboration with the families
- Opportunities for in-service training for IECE staff
- Various other support from the surrounding community which was committed to providing a quality ECE to all its children
- The co-operation of inter-disciplinary and inter-agency support services from outside the pre-school
- Arrangements for the smooth transition of the children from the IECE setting to compulsory education settings.

### **Promoting parents' active engagement**

Because ECE is non-compulsory, ensuring children's access to ECE provision was usually tied to a **proactive search for parental engagement**. The pre-school sought this even before the child was due to be enrolled. Pre-school staff reached out to the community to encourage parents to send their children to pre-school:

*The centre is well-known within the local community and encourages engagement with families from first contact. Those making applications are encouraged to join outreach and community/parental involvement programmes prior to taking up placement. This supports a smooth home to early learning and childcare transition, and ensures families have support during this interim period. (UK – Scotland)*

*Co-operation with the family begins even before a child begins to attend a day-care centre. At first, the educators meet the family at the child's home ... If necessary, an early childhood special education teacher is included in the meeting. The inclusiveness of early childhood special education from the family perspective is demonstrated by the feedback received from these families. For example, they have said that their child's early childhood special education is the only thing in their lives that has been organised in a 'normal' way. (Finland)*

### **Providing support to families**

Some centres went beyond directly engaging families in their child's education and provided different forms of **support for adequate family functioning**. Such support included arrangements for different hours of service, as well as extending childcare to allow parents to manage work and family commitments.



*Parental involvement and engagement is a priority ... the centre works closely with families through a range of interesting and innovative services including infant massage, Bookbug Rhymetime sessions, stay and play sessions, and a fortnightly health visitor clinic. (UK – Scotland)*

*The educationalists in this partnership link also with health professionals. For example, the partnership's Parent Support Programme for Autumn 2015 includes sessions on: 'Healthy Meals on a Budget', 'Setting up Routines with Toddlers', 'Developing Language' and 'Positive Behaviour for Starting School'. (UK – Northern Ireland)*

*In over 50% of families, either both parents work or they are single-parent families. Since the kindergarten is free of charge, childcare during lunch hour and in the afternoons is increasingly in demand ... Upon advance registration, parents are invited to have a look at the kindergarten, to ask questions and to find out more about our institution. (Austria)*


*The Department for the Medical Rehabilitation of Pre-primary Age Children carries out early rehabilitation of hearing-impaired children and parent counselling. One goal is to help the parents of hearing-impaired children accept that their child has difficulties and, as much as possible, to help them become competent rehabilitators. (Croatia)*

*Our understanding of ourselves as service providers supplementing the family is also reflected in the design of the daily schedule. The objective here is to maintain the balance between the educational and upbringing mission and the differing needs of individual families. ... We therefore offer a variety of care times, which families can select according to their needs. (Germany)*

### **Providing staff with continuing in-service training**

Continuing training for staff, particularly in inclusive education attitudes and skills, was linked to the development of inclusive environments. Staff development activities included determining what training was required by which staff, encouraging them to take up offers, providing relevant training within the service, visiting other settings and establishing links with universities and other training networks.

*Continuing professional development is a real strength of the setting. Not only do practitioners share their expertise within the team, but they also access a wide range of specific early years training. For example, all staff are trained in developing young children's communication skills, in Philosophy for Children and many staff are Forest School accredited. More qualified members of staff often take on mentor roles to develop other staff members. (UK – Wales)*



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*TFC is a learning organisation with staff development at its core. ... Staff are encouraged to attend training courses as part of their work time and are facilitated to undertake training. Staff are supported to engage in training at all levels up to doctoral degree within the centre and are encouraged to use the centre as a site for on-going research and development. (Ireland)*

*A significant part of the work of ... early childhood special education teachers consists of their own continuing education and the training they offer to other staff based on it. Our early childhood special education teachers have received continuing education on such themes as multiculturalism, collaboration with families, the autism spectrum, and encountering violence. (Finland)*

*To us it is essential that our staff avail of up-skilling ... According to official regulations and to the system of remuneration, certain days are defined for further education, depending on the extent of employment. The employees also get monetary support. Staff development is an integral part of our management work. (Austria)*

*The involvement of all the adults in the school in the project constitutes a fundamental asset for its implementation and for the evolution of representation. The entire school staff is trained in therapeutic educational approaches and adapted teaching, which constitutes a significant qualitative factor. (France)*

*In SUVAG Polyclinic special attention is given to the professional training and scientific educational activities of employees which is accomplished through professional and scientific projects, participation in domestic and international conferences, scientific publishing activity, education in colleges and universities, mentorships and work with graduate students. (Croatia)*

*Qualification upgrading and re-training is funded by the national or municipal budget. This allows teachers to acquire the necessary knowledge of methods and approaches for planning and organising everyday pedagogical processes for children with special needs. (Latvia)*

**Support staff** also received continuing training:

*One of the consultative early childhood special education teachers co-ordinates the ECE of immigrant children and one trains special needs assistants. (Finland)*

*The staff that support and educate the children with SEN receive guidance and have completed various relevant courses. Some of the guidance and courses are given by the municipality. (Norway)*



## Seeking the local community's support

Many of the examples sought and drew strength from the support of the many local community resources and spaces, in addition to parental collaboration:

*The premises in St. Isidor are ideal, since we are embedded in a village. Our children/groups make regular use of the numerous green spaces, playgrounds, forest areas, fun court, tobogganing hill and outdoor swimming pool. (Austria)*

*To guarantee integration in our environment through co-operation with the other institutions in the neighbourhood. ... The spaces and surroundings of all the educational communities participating in this project will enrich the learning experience of all the participants in the educational community. Moreover, the schools, through this project and others, are opening their doors even more than before and promoting learning environments that go beyond their borders, the borders of their cities and the borders of their countries. (Spain)*

*... the setting works hard to engage the local community. A designated member of staff is building her skills and expertise in successfully engaging parents/carers in a very deprived area of a large city. Also, the setting often runs events and trips to enrich all children's experiences and to engage parents/carers in their children's learning and development. (UK – Wales)*


*Múlaborg pre-school ... is close to the centre of Reykjavík and the children come from all areas of Reykjavík. Múlaborg co-operates closely with organisations in the neighbourhood, such as primary and upper-secondary schools, as well as non-profit organisations and companies which provide services to people with disabilities in Iceland. (Iceland)*

## Seeking inter-disciplinary and inter-agency collaboration

Most example descriptions strongly emphasised their collaboration with inter-disciplinary and inter-agency support services from outside the setting. This was particularly seen as necessary for children with additional needs. Such co-operation took place both within the setting, as well as with external services in the community and through inter-sectoral co-operation:

*Teachers collaborate with families, the local health centre, the local municipality and the school head teacher to write a personalised education plan for children with diverse needs and an individual teaching plan which favours children with disabilities. (Italy)*

*Jyväskylä's IECE model is implemented according to the national guidelines in the entire city, and thus with the support of authorities and political decision-makers. The co-operation partners include the University of Jyväskylä and the Niilo Mäki Institute in Jyväskylä, which focuses on research into learning*



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*difficulties. Co-operation is also carried out with the Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting, which operates in Jyväskylä under the Finnish National Board of Education, particularly when children have support needs related to vision, hearing, language and interaction. (Finland)*

*Once established in a nursery school, the UEMA programme associates teachers with health and social welfare professionals. It is run under a contractual agreement between the educational establishment and a support service specialising in invasive development disorders. The success of this programme is assured through a combination of several principles:*

- *... the diversity and collaboration of various professionals (teachers along with health and social welfare professionals) taking part in the programme, which practically ensures a 1:1 ratio of adults to children. (France)*

There were often references to using **external expertise** to serve the needs of all learners, particularly those with a disability:

*Active and continuous collaboration also takes place with the following institutions:*

- *Pedagogical Institute: Step-by-step programme ... staff training ...*
- *Faculty of Ljubljana and Koper: Department of Pre-school Education ... Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation.*
- *Pre-school Education School and Gymnasium of Ljubljana, Koper, Jesenice and Kamnik, with teaching practice placements, practical performances and practice of students:*
  - *intergenerational co-operation*
  - *performances and workshops for children*
  - *therapy dog visiting kindergarten in conjunction with mathematics innovation project ...*
- *Secondary School of Nursing: carrying out voluntary work.*
- *Primary schools surrounding the kindergarten through various forms of work with a view to a smooth transition to school and a single co-ordinated operation of:*
  - *the use of the gym in Bevk Elementary School and Sava village*
  - *children's visits*
  - *performances for children. (Slovenia)*



*Off-site support: Special needs specialists, paediatrician, psychologist, social worker. On-site support: Regular visits to speech therapy, music therapy ... psychologist. Co-operation with primary school. (Czech Republic)*

### **Ensuring a smooth transition from home to ECE and from ECE to primary school**

Many examples highlighted another important structure in the community around the pre-school: linking the ECE setting to the compulsory schools which would receive the children. Indeed, this has been mentioned in some earlier quotations. This was rather less intensive than their efforts for a smooth transition from home to the ECE setting (please refer to Theme 3). Nonetheless, many examples described working towards a smooth transition to compulsory education for the children:

*Throughout the school year, pre-school teachers plan activities to facilitate the transition of pre-school children to first grade (e.g. by carrying out joint activities between pre-school children and primary school children). In addition, pre-school teachers co-operate with the first grade teachers in joint meetings for preparation of cycle transitions. (Portugal)*

*The child is expected to continue the training from kindergarten to primary school, through the active exchange of information between teachers and the participation of children in primary school workshops with exchanges of activities and materials. (Italy)*



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## THEME 5: INCLUSIVE STRUCTURES AT REGIONAL AND NATIONAL LEVELS

All the descriptions began with a reference to the regional or national policies and legislation for ECE. Six subthemes of inclusive structures were identified at this level:

- A rights-based approach to IECE
- The provision of mainstream access to ECE for all
- The development of a regional/national holistic curriculum and standards
- The availability of pre-service education for teachers and staff in IECE
- Good governance and funding for IECE
- Procedures for monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance.

### Adopting a rights-based approach to inclusion

This subtheme captures the inclusive attitude that appeared to give meaning to these practitioners' inclusive endeavours. This attitude reflects international developments in inclusive education, including the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006), which was also officially adopted as EU legislation. This attitude was evident in how they welcomed each child and parent with unconditional positive regard (please also refer to Theme 3). However, some examples specifically referred to this approach as constituting the application of international human rights conventions, related national policies and the principles of equality and social justice:

*The principal describes her vision as being an equality- and human rights-based approach and the pre-school as being a learning community where both staff and children learn from each other. ... The work is based on ... the right of children to grow up together and to learn from each other and with each other. Children's rights are supported in the international conventions to which Iceland is a member and in Icelandic laws and regulations. (Iceland)*

*The aim of this kindergarten is reflected in its motto: 'The sun shines equally for all'. (Slovakia)*

*The implementation of the anti-bias approach is based on our belief that all children have the right to participate equally in our service. (Ireland)*





## **Promoting an inclusive culture**

The human rights approach was evident in descriptions of how some services tried to create an inclusive culture by educating staff and children about the values of equality and inclusion and also, interestingly, about respect for nature:

*The values and principles that guide their educational work are, among others:*

- ... to educate children about equality of rights, overcoming any type of discrimination;
- to respect diversity, based on acceptance of the different races, cultures and ethnic groups;
- ... to educate about values: education for life, peace, health, as well as respect and appreciation for the natural environment. (Spain)

*... [A] high level inter-departmental working group ... recommends a multi-level and multi-layered response in support of the following objectives:*

### *Level 1: An Inclusive Culture*

*This level is the critical foundation for the model. This sets out that a strong culture of inclusion must be fostered and embedded to support all children's maximum participation in ECCE. (Ireland)*

## **Ensuring mainstream access for all children**


The human rights approach was also evident in the endeavours to make mainstream IECE provision an entitlement and possibility for all children in the community. These examples translated this rights-based attitude into a determination to ensure the ECE provision was truly open and accessible to all children in the locality:

*The school is open to all children and by definition does not exclude any demographic. (Greece)*

*Tremorfa Nursery is proud of its inclusive ethos and has never turned a child away. (UK – Wales)*

*All children ... have the chance to attend the pre-school, to be involved in the educational process and prepare for the next educational level, primary school. (Latvia)*

*In Estonia, local governments are obliged to provide all permanently resident children aged from 1.5 to 7 years with the opportunity to attend a pre-primary childcare institution in their catchment area if the parents so wish. ... Currently 93.5% of 4- to 7-year-old children are in pre-primary education, with 77% of 1.5- to 3-year-old children in pre-primary education and 10% in childcare. ...*



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*At the end of 2015 the Ministry of Education and Research adopted a new concept of early childhood education and care. ... The planned changes will give local governments more flexibility in organising the provision of early childhood education and care opportunities, based on the needs of children and families. With the help of ESF (European Social Fund) and ERF (European Refugee Fund) funds, local governments have the chance to create around 3,200 new kindergarten or childcare places. About 47 million euros will be invested during the years 2014–2020. (Estonia)*

There were indications that one of the main ways of enabling all families to send their children to ECE was through the provision of free or subsidised ECE services:

*Local government funds [the] pre-primary education curriculum. ... In appropriate cases, local authorities ensure financial and social support for the children and their families. (Latvia)*

*Norwegian kindergartens are owned by the municipalities (47%) and by private owners (53%). The fees are statutory and set by the authorities. Municipalities and private owners receive financial grants from the authorities that cover most of the costs, which means that fees are relatively low. The same act and national framework regulate both public and private kindergartens. (Norway)*


*Pre-primary school is free of charge for all children and is compulsory from the age of four. (Switzerland)*

### **National holistic curricula prescribed by legislation**

Another macro structure supporting inclusion processes was the development of regional and national curricula. These established standards for both ECE environments and ECE holistic curricula:

*All the ECE settings in the Czech Republic follow the obligatory Framework for ECE which includes five educational areas:*

- *Biological: the child and their body, with focus on the overall physical development of the child ...;*
- *Psychological: the child and their psyche, with focus on the psychological development of the child and their brain ...;*
- *Interpersonal: the child and others, supporting interpersonal relationships between children and with adults ...;*
- *Socio-cultural: the child and society, with focus on learning about the place where they live ...;*

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- *Environmental: the child and the world, with focus on respect for life, nature ...*

*This ensures a holistic approach to early years education. (Czech Republic)*

*The 2007 Decree ... establishes the school's missions, especially in kindergarten. These are to: (1) develop and promote awareness of the child's own potential through creative activities and self-expression; (2) develop social skills; (3) develop cognitive learning, social, affective and psychomotor skills. (Belgium – French speaking community)*

Another source for ensuring high-quality inclusive curricula was the use of well-known models of pre-primary education, namely **Montessori** and **Fröbel**. Two examples referred to these:

*The teachers follow the Montessori style of teaching, the idea being that children should be 'free to act' to allow holistic growth ... The curriculum covers all aspects of a child's personality, keeping in mind not only the cognitive dimension, but also the emotional-affective, physical, social-relational, aesthetic, ethical and spiritual dimensions. The contents chosen by the staff relate to a holistic vision of child development. (Italy)*

*Zīlīte uses Fröbel's principle ... 'children are born with the need to learn about the world around them through perception and senses'. The child develops perception and observation skills, and makes decisions based on existing strong links in the world around. The pedagogical process allows every child the opportunity to experience positive emotions from different activities, including everyday sports, active learning through playing and games, listening, speaking, singing and dancing. During these activities children develop their bodies, minds, emotions and social skills. Yoga for 5- to 6-year-olds helps to develop concentration skills and self-confidence. (Latvia)*

### **Development of pre-primary teacher education**

There were indications that progress towards high-quality IECE requires the development of more appropriate teacher education programmes in the country or region. Two examples referred to collaboration with teacher-education institutions:

*Espira Solknatten is also a kindergarten that co-operates with the University College connected to kindergarten teacher education. (Norway)*

*Teacher education (for early childhood education teachers, primary school teachers, and special education teachers) is one of the mainstays of the University of Jyväskylä. (Finland)*



## **Good governance and funding: developing a coherent, adequately funded system of IECE provision**

There was evidence of national policy and legislation being developed to ensure equal opportunities for all to attend ECE and benefit from quality provision. Emphasis was put on the need for the availability of free services and indeed of additional funding and provisions for vulnerable groups:

*Scottish Government legislation and policy has a strong emphasis on ‘Getting it Right for Every Child’ (GIRFEC). The GIRFEC wellbeing indicators (safe, healthy, active, nurtured, achieving, respected, responsible and included) are used and understood by all public services to support joined-up and co-ordinated services for families. They underpin the approach to additional support, which includes a single ‘child’s plan’ across all agencies. Staff at Kilwinning Early Years Centre work very closely with a range of specialist and universal services, including educational psychologists, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists. Within this framework, the staff operate a staged intervention process for all children requiring additional support (including additional challenge). (UK – Scotland)*

*Decree-Law 281/2009 ... established a National Early Childhood Intervention System (NECIS), as a shared responsibility of the Ministries of Health, of Education, and of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, with the collaboration of Private Social Solidarity Institutions, and in close co-operation with families. The NECIS aims to provide early childhood intervention to children between 0 and 6 years, who are at risk of developmental delay or have established conditions, and to their families. (Portugal)*

*In 2011 new legislation for special schools was approved in Ticino. In the New Legislation for Special Pedagogy (2012), the inclusion of children with special needs in regular classes is explicitly indicated as an available option. The ... case study was started within this new regulatory framework. (Switzerland)*

*Since 2010, the Irish Government has funded a universal free pre-school year in an early childhood care and education (ECCE) programme, which provides every child aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months the opportunity to receive one year of pre-school education in the year before they commence primary school. Under the ECCE programme, the State pays a capitation fee to participating services. Almost every pre-school service (more than 4,300) in the State is participating, with up to 68,000 children, or 95% of the eligible age cohort, expected to avail of the programme in 2015. ... Until recently there was no nationally co-ordinated approach to supporting early years services with the challenges of inclusive early education practice. This was recently addressed by*



*a high level inter-departmental working group which has resulted in the development of a strategic proposal for support to commence in 2016. (Ireland)*

### **Quality assurance through regular monitoring and evaluation**

All the examples referred to a search for effectiveness and the use of monitoring and evaluation procedures. They mentioned the application of national quality standards and evaluations. They also highlighted the use of reflective practice that was often incorporated into collaborative practices.


### ***Promoting reflective practice***

An important way of ensuring that staff rendered a quality service to children was through constant reflective practice aimed at meeting the children's needs. Significantly, one example even used the writing of their proposal for this project as an opportunity for a collective and reflective endeavour that could help to improve their services:

*We first presented the [IECE] project to the school pedagogical board and to the pre-school education department. All twelve pre-school teachers as well as leadership members of the school were informed and collaborated in the first part of data collection. We did interviews with four pre-school teachers and completed observations in three pre-school classrooms. ... The school and its workforce understood this case study as an opportunity for organisational improvement and professional development. Based on the collected data, the school community is developing efforts to improve some aspects and to implement some adjustments. (Portugal)*

These inclusive examples regarded themselves as **learning organisations** engaged in continuous improvement:

*We also see ourselves as a learning organisation, in which informal processes are of central importance for the quality of continuing development. Of primary importance here is everyday exchange with our users, the children and their families. Beyond this, we work intensively on the networking of our institution, so that participation in various committees ... co-operation with primary, special needs and professional schools ... and co-operation with early childhood intervention service, therapists, continuing training measures for the staff, etc., provides important impetuses for development. These impetuses for development are continuously reflected upon and adapted where appropriate. (Germany)*



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*The educational commitments taken on by the team in recent years have been and are key. They came from a process of reflection and internal participative consensus, which they sought out and planned, and self-evaluation and reflection processes carried out in the past years. ... Without a doubt, prior reflection in teams and individually must be the starting point for each teaching team, and for European exchange environments or fora. (Spain)*

### **Evaluating effectiveness**

Most of the examples also ensured quality by engaging in formal evaluation of the service. Several examples referred to national evaluation processes linked to standards for ECE provision:

*The curriculum contents, together with the quantity and quality of teaching staff, learning aids and the facility settings, are organised into licensed programmes determined by state regulation. (Latvia)*

*Kindergarten Centrum has started its journey towards inclusive education, but progressive changes in the educational process and quality improvements cannot be achieved without the presence of evaluation ... This includes internal and external evaluation of the educational process, the school educational programme or curriculum and children's achievements in relation to their personal development. (Slovakia)*

*All the work is linked to Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and the national Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers (2006) to critically reflect on practice. Curious Minds completed the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme in 2014 and was externally validated at the highest possible level of quality in practice. (Ireland)*

Some examples included **parents' opinions in the service evaluation:**

*A ministry evaluation report from 2011 (Elíasdóttir and Jóhannsdóttir, 2011) states that parents are generally very pleased with the pre-school and confirms that there is good collaboration between the parents, staff and principal. Parents are particularly satisfied with the individual curricula for each child, which are developed in co-operation by parents and the pre-school. (Iceland)*

*Parents have praised the management for employing a highly educated workforce and promoting teamwork, continuous professional training, exchange of experiences and transfer of excellent practice. (Slovenia)*



One example referred to the **long-term success of its previous children** as proof of its effectiveness:

*Of the children that left SUVAG Polyclinic's kindergarten in 2014, 63% are enrolled in mainstream education (kindergarten or school) and 31% attend SUVAG Polyclinic's primary school. Continuous tracking of the Polyclinic's rehabilitants shows that 85% of hearing- and speech-impaired children that have completed the rehabilitation and education programme move on to education in mainstream schools (primary and secondary) and 11% continue on to universities and higher education. (Croatia)*

**Participation in European projects** was also seen as a good way to improve practice:

*In recent years, the school has looked for good practices outside its immediate surroundings as an associate in European projects, as well as co-ordinator of a multilateral Comenius project between 2010 and 2012 ... It has worked in collaboration with other European schools, established ties with schools from other European countries and has had the opportunity to exchange experiences and learn about many other educational projects. This has had a clear impact on incorporating new methodologies and improvements to its project. (Spain)*

*The Tree of Life Project ... is a European Union (EU) funded project run by Kreattiv initiative which left a huge legacy at the Happy School. The tree itself transformed a cold and uninspiring space into a fun, bright and creative area, which keeps expanding with new projects that develop over time. (Malta)*

*Since 2001, Kindergarten Jelka has been actively involved in international projects and partnerships:*


- *2001–2004: Co-ordinating Socrates-Comenius-School development project: 'Young learners – Integrating second language at early age' in partnership with Bulgaria, Italy, Germany, Poland, Romania, Spain (Palma de Majorca), Spain (Canary Islands), Finland and Malta. (Slovenia)*

The proposals also referred to **external recognition** of the quality of their service:

*The pre-school is a pioneer in the inclusion of children with and without disabilities. It also provides consultancy for other pre-schools on inclusive practices and has received awards for its inclusive work. (Iceland)*

*External recognition: Family Prize of Upper Austria for the children's hotel. (Austria)*





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*In recognition of the centre's outstanding practice, it has been featured on the Education Scotland website and in the Early Years Matters publication to share its highly effective practice. The head of centre has also been asked to contribute to a national working group to support the professional development of staff on GIRFEC. Her skills were also recognised by the local authority, which asked her to lead the recent expansion of high-quality early years services. (UK – Scotland)*

Some proposals described how their provision served as a **training centre** for ECE educators:

*Kindergarten Centrum is often visited by teachers from other kindergartens, or by pre-primary teaching students who are interested in acquainting themselves with the operation and organisation of the school. Kindergarten Centrum co-operates with the University of Matej Bel in Banska Bystrica and regularly provides teacher training for students. (Slovakia)*

*SUVAG Polyclinic is a unique health institution in the Republic of Croatia, and also a world centre for the improvement, interpretation and promotion of the verbotonal theory and its application. The verbotonal method is used in education on every continent, and verbotonal training for experts from around the world is carried out here. (Croatia)*

**Links to research institutions** or other institutions with quality provisions were another way of enhancing quality:

*The school collaborates periodically with the National University of Athens in research to promote literacy, the social and emotional development of children and the training of educators in aspects of the educational process. (Greece)*

*Some universities have considered the Agrupamento de Escolas de Frazão as a partner in projects about learning and development. This partnership is viewed as an important external recognition. For example, the school participates in the University of Minho's 'I'm still learning ...' project, which aims to develop an online platform for assessment and intervention in reading disabilities. (Portugal)*

*The provision described works positively with the university in Rome and receives teacher training students. The school also collaborates in certain university research projects on the application of metacognition in education in order to prevent learning disabilities in early childhood education. As it uses Montessori materials for learning, the school is also recognised by the Italian Montessori Association, which sends future specialist Montessori teaching students to the school. (Italy)*





## **Engaging in transformative processes**

Some examples referred to **transformative processes** they went through in their search for more inclusive provisions. This was true of both those already deeply engaged in the inclusive journey and those struggling against prevailing systems of segregation:

*National legislation is gradually adjusting the platform and conditions for inclusive education in kindergartens. In Slovakia these adjustments develop gradually, as shown in Kindergarten Centrum where the process is in movement. Therefore, although Kindergarten Centrum is in some aspects closer to and in some aspects further from true inclusive education, change of thought has begun there in the recognition of the need to ensure qualified and highly professional staff (inclusive team) that can recognise and respond to the individual needs of each child. (Slovakia)*

*All the elements of the UEMA prepare children with autism and their school peers to be educated together. ... Mobilising national education in conjunction with the medical and educational fields creates the necessary partnership from early childhood. This partnership requires organising collaboration between all professionals in order to ensure the coherent implementation of the project. ... Meetings with the teaching and extra-curricular staff were organised prior to the start of the programme. As the children have only very recently started the programme, the team has focused on their welcome and getting to know one another. The school's teacher takes part in teacher, course and school meetings. For now, the children are in partial inclusion in the pre-school lunchroom (there is a specific table for the UEMA children, who are in the lunchroom at the same time as the other children). There is complete inclusion during recess and nap time for some of them. Inclusion plans in other classes as well as the inclusion of other schoolchildren in the UEMA classroom are already underway. (France)*



## CONCLUSION

This analysis forms part of the findings of the three-year IECE project (2015–2017). The project aims to foster a wide understanding among policy-makers, practitioners and researchers that quality IECE is essential for every child's development. It is particularly important for children who are at risk of exclusion. It is an attempt to start answering the IECE project question: *How do European ECE practitioners perceive inclusion and how are they trying to make their provision more inclusive?*

The findings arose from the qualitative thematic analysis of 32 descriptions of IECE in 28 European countries. These descriptions were submitted to the Agency's IECE project in 2015. The analysis identified 25 subthemes on quality IECE that were presented within the new Ecosystem Model of IECE. A combination of two major perspectives on quality ECE inspired this new model: the Outcome-Process-Structure model and the Ecological Systems model. The new model is founded on the example descriptions by practitioners and their advisors on IECE. It aims to promote a deeper and wider understanding of IECE issues. It is also expected to contribute to IECE research, policy and practice in Europe and internationally.

Firstly, the development of the new Ecosystem Model of IECE, inspired by two previous major models, should clarify the understanding of the issues related to quality ECE. The IECE project itself will continue to refine this model in its wider and deeper reaches. This will ensure it does indeed represent issues that are important for improving quality in ECE and particularly in IECE.

Secondly, the analysis strongly suggests that, from an inclusion point of view, the most important outcome of quality ECE is to enable each child to attend ECE regularly ('to be there'). While being there, each child should experience being a full member of the teacher's group and the peer group. Each child should enhance their learning and be actively engaged in the ECE setting's social and learning activities (please refer to Imms & Granlund, 2014; Imms et al., 2015). The primary emphasis is the child's participation and holistic development as the main outcomes, rather than the attainment of age-appropriate curriculum targets. This creates a more equitable goal of ECE than that emphasised to date in international policy documents (please refer to European Commission, 2014; OECD, 2015) and international assessments (e.g. OECD, 2014).

At the same time, the importance of participation raised in this analysis is in line with both national and international conventions on human rights (e.g. UNCRPD, 2006). It supports the focus on 'student engagement' as a way of improving learning for all learners and across all levels of education (Alford et al., 2016; Great Schools Partnership, 2016). From an inclusion point of view, the focus on participation is



even more important. It allows all children, whatever their level of achievement, to be valued equally as active participants and learners with their peer group.

Thirdly, the analysis shines a new light on the major processes in which children are directly involved and which most influence each child's participation and learning (please refer to Pianta et al., 2009). The focus on processes of participation, holistic development and learning highlights the importance of interpersonal teacher-child and child-child relationships. It also emphasises the use of a personalised, child-centred approach and assessment for learning in any efforts to improve the quality of ECE. In order to promote this perspective, one of the products of this Agency IECE project will be a self-reflection tool for practitioners in ECE settings. This tool would be used to try and improve the inclusiveness of their social and physical environments.

Finally, the analysis clarifies the structural factors needed to support the development of more inclusive ECE settings. It also shows how they are related to local and national policies and practices. Situating the structures at the ECE setting, community and regional/national levels is important in leveraging them to bring about the changes needed to enable each child to participate and learn. For instance, the analysis highlights how, within the setting, important structural factors include:

- Adopting an inclusive, welcoming ethos
- Strong partnership with parents
- A holistic, accessible and flexible curriculum and environment
- Employing qualified staff
- Support from a committed leadership that has worked towards and promoted collaboration and shared responsibility among all stakeholders.

The model also helps to clarify the overlap of local and national responsibilities. For instance, initial teacher education for IECE may be primarily a regional/national responsibility. On the other hand, the employment of qualified staff and their continuing up-skilling is more closely linked to the responsibilities of ECE settings. Similarly, legislation and funding which entitle all learners to access to mainstream provision are mainly the responsibility of regional/national policy-makers. Ensuring that all children and families can actually access the local provision is a concern of the leadership in the local setting.



The project team wishes to thank the practitioners and researchers who invested time and energy to describe and submit the examples of IECE settings. We hope they feel that the analysis does justice to their efforts. Readers should also note that the full example descriptions are available on the project website:

[www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/inclusive-early-childhood-education](http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/inclusive-early-childhood-education)

The issues raised in this report will be further explored through an analysis of the detailed case study visits. They will also be analysed in light of the country questionnaires on national structures for IECE from the 28 European countries. Furthermore, the issues will be discussed in relation to the relevant literature.

In this way, the project expects to continue to contribute to a better understanding of the IECE success factors that researchers, policy-makers and practitioners can use in their endeavours to improve the quality of ECE for all children.



## ANNEX 1: METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the method for analysing the data for the identification of themes related to IECE.

All the data from the 32 proposals was subjected to thematic qualitative analysis. Using ATLAS.ti computer-aided qualitative data analysis software, all the text from each example was first segmented according to the topics addressed in each paragraph or sentence. These segments were then placed in different relevant categories, such as curriculum, staff training, etc. The collection of quotations for each topic category was then reread to identify which IECE structures and processes were being put forward in the data. This led to the identification of 25 subthemes. These were then organised into five main themes within an eco-systemic model of IECE.

### Identification of subthemes

An inductive data analysis method was used. Each theme was initially derived from the text of the example descriptions. However, as is often the case in qualitative analysis, this inductive process was still intertwined with the project's theoretical knowledge in two ways.

Firstly, themes were identified because an issue that was raised was regarded as significant for inclusive education and not simply because it was mentioned in all or most proposals. Thus, current IECE theory influenced the analysis.

Secondly, there is some indication of the prevalence of each theme across examples. However, it should be said that some subthemes were raised in only a few examples. For instance, only three examples mentioned promoting staff diversity. On the other hand, there were themes which every example mentioned, such as seeking family engagement.

It is clear how all the themes identified in this analysis are in line with the inclusive vision adopted by the Agency:

*The ultimate vision for inclusive education systems is to ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers (European Agency, 2015, p. 1).*

It should be noted that the analysis follows the project's focus on good practice. Thus, the initial call was for examples of good IECE settings. Similarly, this subsequent analysis searched for examples of possible successful inclusive arrangements rather than for problematic, unresolved issues.



Using the above criteria, 25 subthemes were identified. These were then further interpreted and reorganised into **five main themes within a model inspired by the Outcome-Process-Structure and Ecological Systems perspectives** for understanding inclusion and child development.

### **Evidence for each identified theme**

This document is intended to provide ECE policy-makers, administrators, practitioners and researchers with insight into and evidence of current IECE developments in Europe. It therefore provides a concise description of each main theme and subtheme with a few relevant quotations from the data to illustrate the inclusive outcomes, processes and structures that have been identified.

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