



Education International

# Early childhood Education in Europe

## Achievements, Challenges and Possibilities



Report by  
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September 2009





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## FOREWORD

Children have a right, as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to receive education, and Early Childhood Education (ECE) must be considered part of that right. Education International strongly believes that early childhood education is of great value to all children and should be available to all. It provides a sound basis for learning and helps to develop skills, knowledge, personal competence, confidence and a sense of social responsibility. Therefore, every child, including children from deprived socio-economic backgrounds and other disadvantaged groups, should have access to early education services of good quality.

Education International commissioned this study in order to have a better understanding of the current and emerging ECE issues in Europe, models of good practice, challenges and opportunities. The findings of this study reflect the diversity and complexity of early education across Europe. While there has been continuous increase in access and provision in many countries, more still remains to be done, both in terms of access and quality. The majority of the countries in Europe are likely to miss the Barcelona Targets on Child Care. These targets require European Union member states to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age.

Quality concerns still exist in many countries and this is sometimes linked to the uneven level of staff qualifications. This is also compounded by the existence of split systems between education and care in some countries. Private provision also remains pre-dominant in many countries, thereby making it difficult for some parents to meet the costs. The study, therefore, reinforces the need to ensure that ECE is publicly funded and an integral part of every country's education system. There is also a clear need to provide pre- and in-service training to all ECE staff and to improve their working conditions.

We would like to thank the author, Mathias Urban, for his detailed analysis of the issues, and all the EI member organisations that participated in this study. We encourage teacher unions in Europe and beyond, to study this document, use it as an instrument to develop or further improve their ECE policies, and its outcomes as an advocacy tool.



Fred van Leeuwen  
General Secretary



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**This document is the report of a study commissioned by Education International. The findings of the study were presented to EI member organisations at the international seminar “Quality Early Childhood Education: Every Child’s Right” in Malta in November 2008. This final report has been produced following the discussion with EI representatives at the seminar.**

- Young children are citizens with rights of their own which we must respect. They are, at the same time, particularly vulnerable and affected by social injustice and inequality.
- It is a public responsibility to respect children’s rights and to ensure each child can live to reach her or his full potential. Early childhood education and care, too, is a fundamental need of any human society. Through care and education of young children we construct and reconstruct community, ensure continuity of tradition make innovation and transformation possible.
- Internationally, early childhood education has received unprecedented attention in the public and political sphere in recent years – but mostly for economic reasons. The link between the Lisbon Strategy of the European Union and the Barcelona childcare targets is a clear example for this rationale.
- Equality, educational attainment and an early start to lifelong learning provide other rationales for investing in early childhood education and care – and so does an increasing recognition of children’s rights at national and international level.
- There is an increasing recognition by policymakers that the quality of the early childhood workforce is crucial for achieving ambitious goals. This is supported by international research.
- At European Union level, the 1996 “Quality Targets in Services for Young Children” provide a multidimensional framework for quality, setting, among others, targets for policy, investment, participation and professionalisation. Unfortunately, a ten-year action programme to achieve the targets, as proposed by the European Commission Childcare Network, was never realised.
- Today, Europe is more diverse than ever. The wealth of traditions, experiences, practices and aspirations must be seen as an asset for the future development of Europe. European diversity is, on the other hand, reflected in stark inequalities between and within its countries and regions.

- The aim of this study is to shed light on the diversity and complexity of early childhood education in Europe and to celebrate successful developments and to highlight potentials for creating sustainable change for better and more equitable societal institutions for young children.
- The study was commissioned by Education International as part of its commitment to quality early childhood education, as expressed in its Pan-European Structure policy paper on early childhood education, adopted by the EI Pan-European conference in December 2006.

### **Outline of the report: data basis, possibilities and obvious limitations of this study**

- The aim of this study is to present key characteristics of ECE systems, highlight strengths and successful approaches and to identify major challenges and areas where urgent action is needed. To achieve this aim, the report comprises two main sections.
- The first section, Chapter 2 – *Setting the scene*, provides insights into the richness of the diverse *landscape* of ECE across Europe and particularly the 27 member States of the EU, one candidate State, Croatia, and Norway and Russia. This section draws extensively on previously published reports, eg. Starting Strong I+II (OECD, 2001, 2006), the EFA report on early childhood education (UNESCO, 2007), the European information network on education, Eurydice ([www.eurydice.org](http://www.eurydice.org)) and on the proceedings of two European conferences on the realisation of the Barcelona targets.
- The second section, Chapter 3 – *Changing practice in early childhood education: seven European cases*, presents seven case studies of projects and programmes that have developed responses to the needs of early childhood practice in their various contexts. All of them are examples of how to make a difference in children's and practitioners' lives in their everyday practice.
- *Key issues, challenges and possibilities* for joint action are drawn from both sections and proposed for discussion in Chapter 4.

### **Setting the scene: the landscape of early childhood education in Europe**

#### **Common policy concerns**

- Albeit diverse and in many respects incomparable due to their different socio-cultural contexts, ECE policies in Europe and particularly in the European Union today share common concerns about a number of issues. Significant and continuing progress can be identified in five ECE policy areas:



- Continuous increase in access and provision
- Acknowledgement of the importance of the workforce
- Increasing emphasis on parental involvement and partnership
- Policy focus on improving ECEC governance
- Focus on holistic curriculum

### Public funding for early childhood education: some trends

- The differences between ECE systems manifest, among others, in the set-up of institutions, the conceptualisation of the workforce and in the balance between public and private responsibilities for education and care services at various levels of government.
- All of those are reflected in the ways ECE is funded in different countries.
- While agendas of trans- and international bodies seem to suggest there is a consensus on purposes and goals of early childhood services, the funding differences are likely to remain.
- They reflect socio-economic patterns that determine, for instance, countries' cultural-economic beliefs in either a "demand-side" or "supply-side" governance and funding of public services.
- "Demand-side" funding, i.e. allocating resources primarily to parents (understood as customers) is linked to a conceptualisation of childcare as a commodity (as opposed to a public service) that can be purchased on the market. It often relies on private-for-profit providers and shows a strong belief in the self-regulatory forces of the market.
- In reality, this model regularly produces low quality at high costs for parents.
- International research shows "overwhelming evidence" (OECD, 2006) for a clear link between adequate *public* investment in *services* and the quality of ECE.
- While public expenditure (percentage of GDP) varies largely between countries, and only few countries meet the 1.0% benchmark set by the European Commission Network on Childcare, the overall trend appears to be positive: most countries are steadily increasing public expenditure on ECE.
- There is still a split between expenditure for early education (which is increasingly seen as *investment*) and childcare (which is more likely to be listed as cost). There is little commitment to every child's right to quality education (in its broadest sense) from birth. Instead, countries spend money on childcare for socio-economic reasons, e.g. to facilitate women's participation in the labour market.

- These policies are not sustainable. There are clear examples across Europe that in times of economic deceleration or recession, childcare - understood as service for working mothers - is first to disappear from policy agendas.

### **Workforce and qualifications**

- Similar to countries' funding patterns, their approaches to conceptualising and developing the workforce differ to a large extent, reflecting "structure, purposes, and underlying values of services [...] and the dominant constructions of young children and early childhood workers" (Moss, 2000).
- Currently, staff qualifications and the future layout of the early childhood workforce topics of a multi-faceted and complex debate throughout Europe.
- There is an increasing acknowledgement that quality early childhood education is not achievable without significant investment in the pre- and in-service qualification of the workforce.
- However, the reality across Europe is that qualifications range from literally non-existent (particularly in childcare) to a fully graduate profession. Most countries still distinguish between lower qualifications (and remuneration and status) of practitioners working with the youngest children and post-secondary or graduate qualification for practitioners (early childhood teachers) working with children from 3 to compulsory school age.

### **ECE and representative gender disparity**

- According to recent research, *Gender* is an almost *invisible issue* in the field of early childhood (Cameron & Moss, 2007). It is rarely remarked upon, even by male workers, and available data is scarce.
- The scarcity of men in ECE is problematic from different perspectives: it affects governments' possibilities of achieving childcare targets, equal opportunities and diversity, and the overall quality of provision (Rolfe, 2006).
- The European Commission Childcare Network set a target of 20% male representation in ECE in 1996. To date, no country has reached this target.
- However, in some countries, recruitment campaigns have generated a certain degree of success.
- To attract men into ECE work, creation of job opportunities and increase of salaries must be complemented by other measures, particularly an increase in the level and content of training (Men in childcare, 2008).



## Changing practice in early childhood education: seven European cases

- Seven countries were chosen to participate in a qualitative substudy, aiming to complement the broad picture of the European ECE landscape: Croatia, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Spain, Sweden and The Netherlands.
- Each of the seven countries is home to a project, or a programme that in itself represents an example of how change can be created, and better practices achieved at various layers of the early childhood system.
- In order to complement and frame the examples given by those projects, Teacher's Unions in the seven participating countries were asked to share their perspectives on ECE in their countries.
- Both projects and unions report on *key factors for success, key obstacles and challenges*, and share *lessons learnt and recommendations*.

### **Towards taking action: some key issues and possibilities for policy, practice and research**

- Create frameworks for democratic and innovative education from the very beginning
- Change paradigms: encourage critical questions
- Promote holistic pedagogies – education in its broadest sense
- Tackle the underrepresentation of childcare workers in split systems
- Focus on the interrelation of change and sustainability
- Continuous change: the challenge of mainstreaming educational reform
- Develop professionalism across the entire ECE system and in a broad range of settings
- Promote diversity and be proactive about gender and other disparities in early childhood education
- Overcome competition and join forces instead
- Invest in research and support a professional ethos of inquiry
- Revitalise the European Quality Targets

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a critical period in human life. It is widely recognised today, and an often repeated truism, that the experiences of young children, beginning with the very first day of their lives, form the basis for lifelong learning and development. But children's everyday experiences cannot be reduced to simply being the preparation for something that has yet to come. Their interactions with parents and caregivers in their families, and with practitioners in early childhood institutions, not least with other children, have a value of its own. Young children are not incomplete beings – future pupils and future adults – to be shaped through education in order to meet assumed needs of an adult society. While young children are particularly vulnerable and affected by social injustice and inequality, they are also fellow citizens with rights of their own which we must respect. But above all, early childhood is an opportunity, writes Martin Woodhead (1996):

*Each young child has a unique potential for development of human capacities, for communication and cooperation, for skill and feeling, for reason and imagination, for practicality and spirituality, for determination and compassion. (p. 12)*

Social responsibility to respect children's rights and to ensure each child can live to reach her or his full potential is only one (but crucial) part of a complex picture. Early childhood education is not only something a society does to children – it is a fundamental need of human society as well:

*Through the care and education of young children, a society constructs and reconstructs community and economy, ensures continuity of tradition between generations, and makes in-novation and transformation possible. (ibid)*

Early childhood education has received unprecedented attention in the public and political sphere in recent years and many countries have set ambitious policy goals to increase both quantity and quality of provision. While this has to be welcomed, one needs to bear in mind that the rationale behind the goals are seldom about children but mostly economic. Political agendas are driven by common concerns about employment, competitiveness and gender equality. As the OECD (2006) points out in its report on ECE policies in twenty countries, there are obvious factors for turning governments' attention to institutions and services for young children. They include:



*The wish to increase women's labour market participation; to reconcile work and family responsibilities on a basis more equitable for women; to confront the demographic challenges faced by OECD countries (in particular falling fertility rates and the general ageing of populations, and the need to address issues of child poverty and educational disadvantage. (p.12)*

It is in this economical and political climate, that, for instance, the European Union expresses the need to increase the *numbers* of childcare places and, at the Barcelona summit in 2002, agreed on providing fully subsidised childcare places for 33% of children aged 0-3 and 90% of children from 3 to mandatory school age by 2010.

The main concern, at least from the perspective of governments of countries we regularly refer to as being "developed", is that "economic prosperity depends on mainstreaming a high employment/population ratio" (OECD, 2006, p. 78), and policies to bring more women into the workforce have been put in place in most OECD countries. It is questionable, however, whether it is legitimate to speak about services *for children* when the driving factors for investing in them are so clearly economic in the first place.

But there are other rationales, too, that have moved early childhood institutions onto policy agendas, as well as onto electoral agendas. Besides being a condition for gender equality in an economy-dominated society, the expansion of early childhood institutions is seen as crucial for educational attainment, as the foundation of lifelong learning and social inclusion and equity. Concurrently, the policy context includes a new international and national attention to children's rights and participation framed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and recognised explicitly in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

The policy commitment to ECE provision at European level is also combined with a recognition that the provision has to be of good quality. There have been important European and national discussions on what quality entails, including the publication in 1996 of "Quality Targets in Services for Young Children" *by the European Commission Network on Childcare and other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities* (1996). These "Quality Targets" are an important document as they offer a multi-dimensional framework for quality, including, among others, targets for policy, investment, participation and professionalisation. Furthermore, the acknowledgement of a socio-economic necessity for early childhood provision may have paved the way for the general acknowledgement, today, that more and better services require substantial investment (Urban, 2005, 2008).

Europe has changed significantly since 1996 and is now more diverse than ever. At its centre, the European Union now comprises 27 member States, with three more countries awaiting accession in the near future. While the European Union may be the most visible expression of Europe as a political entity, many more countries, from Iceland and Norway to the north, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina to the south-east, to Russia and Ukraine to the east, are contributing to Europe's diversity (European Communities, 2009). Its diversity is reflected in a wealth of traditions, experiences, practices and aspirations within Europe on the whole and within its individual countries, at regional and sometimes municipal level. While being a major asset for the future development of the European Union, as well as for its role in the global context, Europe's diversity is also reflected in stark inequalities in and between its countries and regions. Not only are life situations *different* – and *inequitable* to a large extent – for children and families from Romania to Sweden, from France to Estonia. Diversity and inequity is also a common pattern within countries.



*Early childhood education has enormous physical, mental, social and economic benefits.*

The aim of this study is to shed a light on the diversity and complexity of the early childhood education and care systems across Europe. This is – deliberately – not done by systematic comparison or categorisation. Rather, the intention is to cherish successful and promising developments and experiences and to highlight potentials for creating sustainable change for better and more equitable societal institutions for young children in Europe.



Being a humble and, by its very nature, limited exercise, this study stands on the shoulders of giants. It would not have been possible without the immense amount of work that has been carried out by authors of previous studies, in particular the pioneering *Starting Strong study* by John Bennett, Collette Tayler and Michelle Neuman. Over the years, John Bennett has been hugely supportive and I am deeply indebted to him for offering his time, expertise and inspiration while discussing the *Strategies for Change* project (Urban, 2006, 2007). Peter Moss has been and is an invaluable supporter, mentor and critical friend.

Irene Balaguer, Anke van Keulen, Maelis Karlsson Lohmander, Monica Löfqvist, Nives Milinović, Gesine Nebe, Teresa Ogradzinska and Kathryn O’Riordan have all taken time off their tight work schedules to share their experiences in seven fascinating projects across Europe. Deirbhile Nic Craith, Bernhard Eibeck, Francisco Mirones Morales, Dorota Obidniak, Irene Leijten, Božena Strugar and Anna Tomberg, all representatives of Teachers’ Unions and member organisations of Education International, have shared their organisations perspective on the ECE developments in their countries. Without them, this study would not have been possible.

I am particularly grateful to Dennis Sinyolo and Guntars Catlaks of Education International for their commitment to making this study possible, for their openness to discuss the approach and frame-work, and for their support from the beginning.

## 1.1 From ECEC to ECE in its broadest sense : more than a choice of terminology

Most of the sources and policy documents that have provided data for this report refer to the services for children below compulsory school age as *Early Childhood Education and Care*. ECEC is the common abbreviation which most readers will be familiar with. Throughout this report, however, the institutions, practices and policies in our field are referred to as *Early Childhood Education* (ECE).

There are good reasons for adding “and Care” to the description of the institutions and services in question: it could be understood as an acknowledgement of the complexity of tasks and purposes of institutions set up for young children by modern societies. There is more to the relationships and interactions between children and adults than a narrow concept of education can capture. The concept of *education* is narrow, and limited, especially in the English language, as it is usually understood as something to do with formalised learning

and teaching in school-like settings. If this is the case, one might argue, the care part of ECEC hints at the existence of a much more comprehensive and complex reality in the lives of young children – something that has to be addressed by early childhood practices and policies. *Care*, from this point of view, could be the key to opening the limitations of *education*; ECE and C would be complements. There is indeed an increasing acknowledgement, in policy and research documents, of the close and inseparable relationship between the two (Cameron & Moss, 2007), and the OECD (OECD, 2001, 2006) deliberately uses ECEC as the term of choice to emphasise this.

But conceptualisations of *care* can be limited and narrow, too. This is almost always the case when *care* and *education* are defined as a dichotomy. “We don’t do nappies – we’re in education,” as someone involved in preschool education put it, reflects this kind of conceptual limitation. The split between *care* and *education* is more than just conceptual. It is reflected in the setup of institutions and services in many countries, where clear distinctions are made between institutions and services for the youngest children (usually up to the age of three) and those working with children from three to compulsory school age. This has far-reaching consequences, as care work, within this split paradigm, “can readily be understood and then treated as the commodification of what women do unpaid [and without professional qualification, M.U.] in the home for children [...]” (Cameron & Moss, 2007, p. 10).

Some countries, however, are taking a different approach. They have integrated services for all children, as well as administrative responsibility, within one domain, either education (e.g. England, Spain, Slovenia, Sweden) or welfare (e.g. Denmark, Finland). “In countries such as Spain and Sweden, Childcare has disappeared within education, and there are no childcare workers, only teachers and assistants” (Cameron & Moss, 2007, p. 9). Early childhood institutions in Scandinavian countries (as well as in Germany and some other continental European countries, to a certain extent) are operating out of the conceptual framework of *pedagogy* – where children’s education, development and upbringing are seen as inseparable and are addressed by policies and holistic practices in the broadest sense.

Some countries that have moved towards a fully integrated early childhood system deliberately refer to the integrated institutions as *preschool* or even *school* (as it is the case in Sweden and in northern Italy). In doing so, they are not suggesting the formalised, limited teaching-and-learning practices of mainstream schooling should be extended *downwards* to the youngest children. Quite to the contrary, by calling their institutions school, they are making a strong state-



ment: that *schools* can be defined differently and that education needs to be, and can be, reclaimed as a holistic, liberating and democratic practice. It is this *education in its broadest sense* that the abbreviation ECE stands for in this report.

## 1.2 Education International's commitment to quality early childhood education

Education International is a global advocate for high quality public education, representing nearly 30 million teachers and education employees in 171 countries. Its main aim is to promote free public education of high quality for all – which is a fundamental human right. Education International insists this right should be realised through establishing, protecting and promoting publicly funded and regulated education systems that guarantee equality of educational opportunity.

Education is seen as key to eradicating all forms of discrimination based on gender, race, marital status, disability, sexual orientation, age, religion, political affiliation or opinion, social or economic status, national or ethnic origin.

To realise its mission, Education International seeks to improve the working conditions, welfare and status of teachers and education employees. The protection of their human rights, trade union rights and professional freedom is a core interest of the organisation.

In line with the with the Education for All (EFA) goals set by the international community in the Dakar Framework for Action in 2000, EI works towards “expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.” (EFA goal no. 1, in UNESCO, 2007).

**Every child, regardless of age, gender, origin, ethnicity or social background, has a right to learn and develop to his or her full potential.**

(EI's commitment to quality early childhood education, May 2006)

Education International insists that the main responsibility for accessible, affordable and equitable early childhood education lies with governments at national and regional level, and that it is the responsibility of governments to support and provide resources for practice-oriented research into all aspects of early childhood education systems. However, as part of its commitment, Education International also launches own initiatives to identify and address critical issues in the field.

### 1.3 Outline of the report: data basis, possibilities and obvious limitations of this study

The aim of this study is to present key characteristics of early childhood education systems in Europe, to highlight strengths and successful approaches and to identify major challenges and areas where urgent action is needed. To achieve this aim, this report comprises two main sections.

The first section (Chapter 2) is entitled “Setting the Scene.” It provides insights into the richness of the diverse “landscape” of early childhood education across the European Union and one of its Candidate States, Croatia. Two more countries that are not members of the EU, Norway and Russia, are also included in the picture. This section draws extensively on available data and previously published reports and studies. Main source for this “mapping exercise” is the *Starting Strong II* report published by the OECD in 2006. Although only 14 out of 20 countries within the scope of *Starting Strong (I+II)* are member States of the European Union, it provides the most comprehensive overview and discussion on policies and practices in early childhood education and care that is available to date.

Another invaluable source of information is the data compiled in the 2007 “Education for All” Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2007) which focuses on the realisation of the EFA goals regarding early childhood education. The “country profiles” that have been prepared for the 2007 Global Monitoring Report provide additional information on European countries that are not OECD members, e.g. the Baltic countries or Romania, (UNESCO, 2006a, 2006c, 2006d, 2006e, 2006f).

The European database of the European information network on Education, Eurydice ([www.eurydice.org](http://www.eurydice.org)) has also provided specific information on individual countries.

Two European conferences on national and European policies towards realising the “Barcelona targets” adopted by EU member States in 2002 have provided international forums to discuss developments, trends and patterns across EU27. The first one – Childcare in a Changing World – took place in Groningen, The Netherlands, and was hosted by the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (2004). A second one – Putting Children First: Implementing the Barcelona Childcare Targets at Local, Regional and National Levels – was organised by the Party of European Socialists in 2007. Proceedings from both



conferences have provided valuable information that could be employed for this report.

Although these – and other – sources provide a wealth of information, data relating to provision and practice of ECE services within Europe remain fragmented, not least because of the major variations that exist in the research foci of the available studies and databases. Therefore, this report continuously refers to the above mentioned sources, but it has by no means the intention of replicating their approaches.

Rather, the aim of the first section of this report is to give an insight into the richness and diversity of early childhood education and care systems across Europe. The result resembles the view into a kaleidoscope. Colourful individual pieces form shapes and patterns, but the picture is far from static. It changes with the perspectives of the observers and with their every move.

The second – and main – section of this report (Chapter 3) takes a different approach. Compiled here are seven cases, or “stories,” about different practice projects in Croatia, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Spain, Sweden and The Netherlands. In sharing the experiences of these projects, the kaleidoscope view is replaced by a microscope, thus providing insights into the details of projects and programmes that might make a difference in children’s and practitioners’ lives in their everyday practice. The qualitative approach taken in this part of the study aims at creating a balance to the obvious limitations of large-scale international comparisons. With their bird’s-eye view on policies and structures they carry the risk of losing ground, or as Moss (2001) put it succinctly, “cross-national studies of early childhood can lose sight of the child.” It is necessary to add, though, that they can easily lose sight of the individual practitioner, too.

Each of the seven projects is an example – N.B. not a model! – for a contextualised response to the needs and particularities of early childhood practice. The project descriptions in this section are situated in the specific social, political and economic context of the early childhood systems in their countries, which is provided by a complementary statement by a teachers’ union, each an EI member organisation, in the seven countries.

Key issues, challenges and possibilities for joint action are drawn from themes that emerge across all seven cases, as well as from the sometimes overlapping, sometimes starkly differing perspectives of project and union in each country.

Finally, the last section of this report (Chapter 4) proposes eleven key issues and action points for policy, practice and research.



## 2. SETTING THE SCENE : THE LANDSCAPE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN EUROPE

Any attempt to depict the complex reality of early childhood education systems in Europe constitutes a mammoth – and somewhat insurmountable – task. A certain degree of futility is innate to such an endeavour, at least if the aim was to provide a comprehensive and up-to-date picture for all European countries. Although this study can draw on excellent overviews provided by international organisations, e.g. OECD and UNESCO, and on electronic sources like Eurydice ([www.eurydice.org](http://www.eurydice.org)), data relating to provision and practice of ECE services within Europe remain fragmented, not least because of the major variations that exist in the research foci of the available studies and databases. The aim of this section, instead, is to “map” the European “landscape” of ECE – detailing the “how” and “where” – thus to identify and thematically categorise apparent patterns and trends.

It is important to consider the mapping exercise as a synopsis of some of the main characteristics of different ECE systems across Europe. By its very nature, therefore, it is not intended to be exhaustive or comprehensive. It simply aims to identify trends and patterns and record them accordingly, in an attempt to provide material for further discussion.

The focus of this mapping exercise will remain mainly within the boundaries of the European Union’s 27 current member states. In an attempt to demonstrate variations and similarities within the existing ECE landscape of those countries however, it would seem pertinent to include a country that has had its candidacy for future membership formally accepted – that of the Republic of Croatia. Norway and Russia, two European countries with close links to the European Union, are also included in this exercise. In doing so, the diversity of ECE systems (in terms of funding, staff qualifications, curriculum, etc.) in constantly changing Europe is highlighted further.

The main findings of the mapping exercise are presented under seven thematic headings:

- notable characteristics
- shortcomings
- staff qualifications
- successful approaches and strengths
- funding trend
- gender (dis)parity.



Every country is not listed under each heading – rather, examples of each are briefly described where appropriate. As such, the combining of data from a multitude of systems is intended to provide general conclusions and facilitate an overview.

## 2.1 ECE systems in Europe: some notable characteristics

In order to describe key features of early childhood education and care systems across 30 diverse countries, one might, obviously, suggest developing categories to facilitate comparison. Countries could be grouped (e.g. according to models of governance, funding structures, formal level of staff qualification, pedagogical traditions etc.). Given the diversity of the European Union, and of Europe on the whole, however, we find it important to consider also some of the distinct characteristics of individual countries. They all contribute their specific piece to the rich and colourful, yet somewhat contradictory mosaic of early childhood education traditions and practices across Europe. Outlined below are some selected country-specific snapshots:

COUNTRY	SOME SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS
AUSTRIA	Only 12% of children aged from birth to three years use childcare facilities (Barcelona Targets, 2007:51).
BELGIUM (FLANDERS)	Experiential education (EXE) has become an influential model in early childhood education in Flanders (and in the Netherlands). It strives to use ECE as the starting point for: the development of (future) adults who are self-confident, curious and exploratory, expressive and communicative, imaginative and creative, well-organised and entrepreneurial, with developed intuitions about the social and physical world and with a feeling of belonging and connectedness to the universe and all its creatures (OECD, 2004b, p. 7).
CZECH REPUBLIC	Government funding is directed almost exclusively towards parental leave for the birth to three category. In practice, there is no longer an organised day-care service for children in this age cohort, compared to a coverage rate of 20% in 1989 (OECD, 2006, p. 304).
DENMARK	Services for birth to six year-olds are considered to be an integral part of the social welfare system. Each institution is established with the Social Service Act (1998). According to this law, the purpose of the institutions is pedagogical, social, and care related (OECD, 2006, p. 310). Staff in Danish early childhood centres have high levels of union membership and trade unions have played an important role in the development of services, not only in relation to pay and conditions for their members, but also with respect to training (Moss, 2000, p. 33).
ESTONIA	A series of legislative developments characterise the progression of ECE in Estonia. The objectives and tasks of pre-primary education are laid down in the Pre-school Childcare Institutions Act (1999), (UNESCO, 2006b). The Law on Pre-school Child Institutions (1993) determined the functions and operating procedures of pre-school establishments.

COUNTRY	SOME SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS
	The new Pre-school Childcare Institutions Act (1999) further defines the objectives and arrangement of the work of pre-schools (ibid). The curriculum regulates the work of the pre-school institutions, and is also the basis for the family advice services. Though all children in Estonia up to the age of seven have the right to receive this pre-school education (in either a kindergarten or a pre-school classroom), not all do.
FINLAND	Every child in Finland under compulsory school age has the right for day care to be provided by the local authority once parental leave comes to an end (OECD, 2006, p. 320).
FRANCE	Children have a legal right to a place in an école maternelle (pre-school) from the age of three years, and enrolments reach approximately 90% of the age cohort (OECD, 2006, p. 327).
GERMANY	There are three significant characteristics within the German ECE sector. Firstly, non-profit, private organisations are given priority in the provision of services (subsidiarity), local authorities, in principle, intervene only when private organisations are unable to provide. Secondly, a law on the expansion of day-care facilities (Tagesbetreuungs-ausbau-gesetz - TAG), was adopted in 2005. It seeks to respond to the demand for child-care facilities for children under three years. Despite the existing formal right to a place in a childcare facility, only 10% of children under three have such a place, compared to 64% in Denmark and 48% in Sweden (Party of European Socialists, 2007, p. 50). Finally, Germany is one of few European countries which only recently began to consider the adoption of formal curricular guidelines in early childhood settings. To date, 16 different curricular documents have been introduced at State (Länder) level.
GREECE	Though current developments in ECE in Greece appear relatively stationary, the end of the 1980's represented a significant era of progress in terms of early childhood education. Departments of early childhood education were established in universities, thereby replacing teacher colleges. The Institute of Education of Greece, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, developed a new kindergarten curriculum in 1987 and all kindergarten teachers updated their theoretical and practical knowledge by attending designated regional centres for further studies (Kondoyianni, 1998, p. 57).
IRELAND	Before the launch of a National Childcare Strategy (1998) there was limited debate about quality ECE provision in Ireland. Recent years have witnessed an increasing interest at national, community and local level on early childhood education. Notable examples of this include the National Forum on Early Childhood Education (1998), The White Paper, Ready to Learn (1999), The National Children's Strategy (2000), the National Childcare Strategy (1999), and the establishment of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2002). Unfortunately, the Irish Government has decided not to extend the remit of the CECDE beyond 2008.
ITALY	Relations and communication are the pivotal core of the pedagogy often associated with Italy – that of Reggio Emilia. The importance of the local community as the context for developing a curriculum is fundamental, along with a curriculum that allows for the development of each individual child (Bertram & Pascal, 2002, p. 36). Most important, services in Reggio Emilia are based on democratic participation “as a value, an identifying feature of the entire experience, a way of viewing those involved in the educational process and the role of the school” (Cagliari, Barozzi, & Giudici, 2004).
LATVIA	Pre-school education for children younger than seven years of age is a part of general education. Pre-school education for five and six year-olds has been compulsory since 2002 in Latvia (UNESCO, 2006c). The Ministry of Education and Science sets up curricula for pre-school education, the main aim of which is to prepare children for basic education.



COUNTRY	SOME SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS
LITHUANIA	Pre-school education is provided in accordance with two state programmes initiated in 1993: Guidelines for pre-school education – a curriculum for teachers and parents – and the kindergarten curriculum, <i>Vėrinėlis</i> (The String). Theoretically, both programmes pursue the same goals: to foster, in collaboration with the family, children's self-reliance, positive self-assessment, initiative, and creativity; to help children to acquire positive life experiences (UNESCO, 2006d). From a legislative context (Article 7, Part 3 of the Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania), however, the purpose of pre-school education is the same as that of Latvia – to enable the child to do well across the primary education curriculum.
NORWAY	Among OECD countries, Norway has the highest 'effective parental leave' – approximately ten times higher than Ireland or Spain, and five times higher than the UK (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2008, p. 16). ECE services, called <i>barnehage</i> (a translation of the German Kindergarten) are organised at community level and are highly subsidised by the State. As a result, parents usually pay no more than 10-15% of the costs; fees are completely waived for low income families (ibid, p. 20). Only recently, the Norwegian government has launched an ambitious strategic plan "for raising the competence in the sector" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2007). In 2007, 60 million NOK were invested to enhance pedagogical leadership, children's participation, language stimulation and the development of a practice-based research programme. Rights and entitlements of children from the Sami indigenous minority are explicitly specified in the Pre-school Act.
THE NETHERLANDS	There is an overt relationship between business and ECE in the Netherlands. Employers are important stakeholders in child care, either setting up their own child care services or, more usually, purchasing or renting company places in child care centres (OECD, 2006, p. 390).
RUSSIA	Russia is one of few countries where general accessibility to pre-school education is a constitutional right. The comparably high legal status of ECE is linked to its long history, dating back to the mid-19th century. During the 20th century, Russian psychologists and pedagogues (e.g. Lev Vygotsky) have made major contributions to developing a modern, science-based early education. Present-day Russian ECE, however, is facing major transformational challenges. The unified Soviet education system, with its centralised regulation and educational programme was beginning to see diversification and democratisation from the mid-1980's (Perestroika). Today, Russian ECE services follow a broad range of educational programmes and approaches, which are approved by the Ministry of Education. Access to services is increasingly inequitable, excluding mainly children from rural areas and low-income families (Taratukhina, et al., 2006).
SLOVAKIA	Children attend kindergartens in Slovakia from the age of two. The kindergartens are regulated by the Programme of Education and Up-bringing of Children in Kindergartens, a binding document for state owned and municipal kindergartens (Eurybase, 2006).
SLOVENIA	The recognition of children from minority groups is an important component of ECE in Slovenia. Pre-school education is regulated by two laws, the 'Organisation and Funding of Education Act' which regulates the conditions for implementation and specifies the method of management and financing, and the 'Pre-school Institutions Act' which regulates public and private pre-schools. Education in pre-schools and schools in ethnically and linguistically mixed areas is provided in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia, educational legislation, and the law regulating special educational rights of Italian and Hungarian ethnic minorities (UNESCO, 2006f).

COUNTRY	SOME SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS
SPAIN	Spain was the first European country to officially designate centres for children under three as part of the public education system. This has involved a major change in how services for children under three years of age are conceptualised, as 'they are recognized as both an educational and public issue, not just a welfare issue concerned only with working parents or disadvantaged children' (Moss, 2000, p. 41).
SWEDEN	Two primary components of the Swedish ECE system stand out. Firstly, the childcare system is designed to achieve the dual objectives of supporting early childhood education and promoting gender equality. Secondly, the provision of childcare for under-threes is mainly public or publicly subsidised, controlled and at a high level (Da Roit, 2007, p. 37). Practice is guided by a rights-based national curriculum that stands out in its brevity (22 pages) and is explicit about its value-base: "All preschool activity should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values" (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden. National Agency for Education, 2002).
UNITED KINGDOM	Public social educational services for children under three years are reserved for children of economically and socially disadvantaged households (Party of European Socialists, 2007, p. 37). Supply for the children of working parents is, consequently, very limited and the coverage of older pre-school children (i.e. those aged between three and four) is very low. Considerable efforts have been made to provide highly integrated services (children's centres) to an increasing number of families (Department for Education and Skills, 2004).

## 2.1 Learning with and from others: successful approaches and strengths of ECE systems across Europe

Albeit diverse and in many respects incomparable due to their different socio-cultural contexts, ECE policies in the European Union today share common concerns about a number of issues. The importance given to providing universal access, the focus on the *formation and qualification* and the general acknowledgment of the importance of the *workforce, parental involvement* policies, reforming *ECE governance* and strong interest in *content and curricula* highlight key areas of strengths in ECE policies and practices. Country examples, provided under each category, serve the purpose of mapping these policies and developments.

### 2.2.1 Continuous increase in access and provision

As core part of its Lisbon Strategy, the European Union, in 2002, adopted an ambitious agenda to significantly increase access to early childhood services by 2010:



*“Member States should remove disincentives to female labour force participation and strive, taking into account the demand for childcare facilities and in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age.”*  
(Presidency Conclusions, Barcelona, March 2002, cited in Plantenga, 2004)

Throughout Europe, the concept of universal access is generally accepted for children between the age of three and compulsory school age. According to OECD figures, most European countries offer at least two years of free, publicly-funded early childhood provision before children enter primary school.

Several countries established legal entitlements to ECE in the late 1980s and 1990s. In Belgium, France, Italy and the Netherlands, for example, national legislation entitles access to free pre-school services from the age of 30 months, 36 months and four years, respectively (Neuman, 2005). Throughout the European Union, access is a statutory right from the age of three, with the exception of The Netherlands and Ireland (OECD, 2006, p. 77). However, there is a clear divide between access to early education programmes, which are often free but targeted at children from disadvantaged background, and childcare services, which are often seen as a commodity for working parents. Services for children under the age of three are usually fee-paying, and in many cases provided by for-profit organisations.

It is not surprising that the highest levels of enrolment for children under three in licensed and subsidised provision are seen in **Denmark** and **Sweden**, where a well established publicly funded early childhood education system is embedded in a broader policy context of gender equity and family support. Generally, demand for affordable services for children under the age of three is significantly higher than the available places (OECD, 2006, p. 87).

Although accessibility and enrolment rates are generally lower compared to services for children aged 3-6, European countries are taking significant efforts to increase provision. The OECD identifies five countries that have already reached the “Barcelona Targets” for both age groups (Belgium [Flanders], Denmark, France, Norway and Sweden) and states that “several other countries are on the way to achieving similar coverage” (ibid, p. 78).

There are other examples of European countries that are successfully improving accessibility:

In **Finland**, where public investment is guaranteed and quality regulations are enforced, universal access to day care services has been a subjective right of each child under three since 1990 and of all pre-school children since 1996 (OECD, 2006, p. 323). This access to ECE services is part of the national support system for families with small children and is used to promote children's health, development and learning skills.

Similarly, in **Hungary**, access to a place in childcare for all children under three is assured under law. The onus of provision to meet demand rests with local authorities. This de-facto entitlement is watered down, in reality, by the experience of unemployed parents being denied access to services and by the reality of municipalities that cannot afford to fund services for children under 3 (OECD, 2006, p. 345).

Up to 2002, **Dutch** playgroups catered for approximately half of all 2.5 to 3-year-olds and received half of their costs from government (Bertram & Pascal, 2002, p. 12). Until 2004, services for children under 4 received direct funds from the government. The system has been changed to a "market" system funded by tax credits to parents. Enrolment of children in registered services for 0-4 year olds have increased from 22.5% in 2001 to 29% in 2003. Figures for the age group 2.5 - 4 years have risen by 9% since 2001 to 89% (2006, p. 388). There is no entitlement to a place in a childcare service.

In **Spain** the *escuelas de educación infantil* (infant schools) were developed as an integral element of the school system. Although a major shortcoming is exhibited in the fact that attendance is not compulsory, one of the strengths of the 'schools' is the flexibility that the timetable offers to ensure that its mainly social function for the under-threes is achieved. As already outlined, Spain was the first European country to officially designate centres for the under threes as part of the public education system. Consequently, there has been a major change in how services for this age category are conceptualised; they are considered as both an educational and public issue, "*not just a welfare issue concerned only with working parents or disadvantaged children*" (Moss, 2000, p. 41).

In **Ireland**, the National Quality Framework for Early Education (Síolta), introduced in 2006, focuses on ECE for children from birth to six years and is mediated into three age categories; birth to 18 months, one to three years and two and a half to six years. Standards within the Framework are, therefore, adaptable to the different needs of the under threes, while the overall focus on quality provision remains unequivocal (Centre for Early Childhood



Development and Education, 2006). Though this represents a good model theoretically, as the NQF is not statutory and is still in the voluntary roll-out phase, there is no evidence to date of achievement/outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

The **Slovenian** pre-school system has an attendance rate of 60%, and has been gradually increasing over the last ten years. The number of one to three year-olds attending is just over 40% (Umek, Kranjc, Urska, & Bajc, 2006, p. 134). The improvement in the provision for this age category has been bolstered by systemic changes in pre-school education, such as reductions in the number of children per group and in the number of children per professional, increased level of education and training for pre-school teachers and assistants and increased levels of training for management staff of pre-school centres.

**Maltese** state kindergarten education is free of charge and accessible to all, (Eurybase, 2006a, p. 29). In 1999, a new National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) was introduced covering pre-primary and compulsory education (three to 16 years old). It is tasked with guaranteeing each child's entitlement and establishing national standards. The implementation of the NMC is supported by the National Curriculum Council (ibid, p. 10).

Under the Law on Education of the Republic of **Lithuania** the provision is made that pre-school education is provided to children from one to five years of age (UNESCO, 2006d), while in **England**, three and four year-olds have an entitlement to a pre-school service for 15 hours weekly for 33 weeks annually (OECD, 2006, p. 421).

As of 2013, parents in **Germany** will have a legal right to a childcare place from their child's first year (Party of European Socialists, 2007, p. 51). An entitlement to a place in Kindergarten (from age three) had already been introduced in 1996.

**Sweden** is representative of the "social-democratic model" of early childhood education and care seen in the Scandinavian countries. It is characterised by higher levels of early childhood provision than the European average. From the age of four (three years, if a child has additional needs, i.e. second-language children) pre-school morning services of three hours are free

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<sup>1</sup> Only shortly after the research for this report was conducted, in September 2008, the Irish government decided to close the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE). Experts from the Irish ECE sector fear that the expertise gathered in developing the Quality Framework will now be lost.

(Da Roit, 2007). Sweden, therefore, has become the second European country to opt for a universal, education-based integrated early childhood system. Unlike **Spain**, however, Sweden has had the advantage of building on an early childhood system that is already well developed and has been integrated for many years. The Swedish state provides universal pre-school free of charge for four to six year-olds, with a minimum of 525 hours per year (Party of European Socialists, 2007, p. 57).

Reflective of the impressive pace which the country has set towards European integration, ECE in **Croatia** has been decidedly progressive in the last few years. In 2001, for example, the pre-school participation rate was less than 30% but by 2005, this figure had increased to 43% (UNESCO, 2006a), and is expected to augment further (to 60%) by 2010. Although overall this represents less than half of the pre-school population, Croatia has a somewhat unique solution for ensuring that all children engage in some form of pre-school education; a high percentage of children attend shortened programmes (100 to 150 hours) in 'little schools', where children who do not attend kindergarten programmes are obliged to attend the Pre-school Preparation for School Programme, during the year prior to entering grade one of elementary school. This programme has been in place since the 1970s and 95% of children complete the compulsory 100 to 150 hours.

## 2.2.2 Acknowledgement of the importance of the workforce

The inextricable link between qualifications of ECE practitioners and quality provision has been a central debate on the European platform in recent years. It is generally recognised and supported by international research that the workforce is central for achieving the policy goals of increasing both quantity and quality of provision (Dalli, 2003, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2005; Oberhuemer, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, & Muttock, 2002). The Effective Pedagogy in Preschool Provision (EPPE) Study in the UK, for example, concluded that the higher the qualification levels among setting managers, the higher that setting scored on quality (Sylva et al., 2005). Another highly influential UK policy document summarises a view on the early years' workforce that is now widely accepted throughout member States of the European Union:

*"The early years' workforce is critical in giving children the best start in life. A better qualified workforce, and with more workers trained to professional level, plays a crucial role in determining the quality of the provisions." (Department for Education and Skills, 2005, p. 24)*



While it is undeniable that European countries face major workforce challenges, especially with regards to those working with children below the age of three in systems that divide between childcare and early education, it must be acknowledged that countries are increasingly recognising the need to reform and re-conceptualise the early childhood workforce. The 2006 *Starting Strong II* report states that “training and work conditions for ECEC staff often contradict public rhetoric about the value placed on young children and the importance of their early development and learning” (OECD, 2006, p. 158). This is certainly the case and investment in pre- and in- service qualification, work conditions (eg. child-staff ratio, ‘non-contact’ time) and sustainable salaries need to be kept high on the political agenda by pressure groups and professional associations. However, the general picture across Europe shows a tendency to upgrade and professionalise the early childhood workforce. While this process is sometimes painfully slow and underresourced even in the most affluent countries (e.g. Ireland, Belgium/FL, Germany) and well advanced in others, particularly the Scandinavian countries, it must be emphasised as a strength of European ECE systems that every person working with children aged 3-6 holds a relevant qualification, the vast majority at tertiary level with a tendency to move towards a graduate or graduate-led workforce. This general tendency only applies to those working with the youngest children in countries that have adopted a fully integrated early childhood education and care system (0-compulsory school age, e.g. Denmark). In countries with split systems, practitioners working with children outside the early education sector are most likely to have varied backgrounds – ranging from “no training whatsoever” to a two year college degree (OECD, 2006, p. 158). Even in split systems, however, there is no country in the European Union without increasing recognition that this part of the workforce requires urgent attention and concrete action.

The European Union itself has played an important role in influencing national policy debates on workforce issues in early childhood although it has no legal authority over this policy domain (Peeters, 2008). And it continues to do so, as can be shown by the rationale of a policy seminar organised by the Directorate-General for Education and Culture of the European Commission in October 2008. It explicitly recognises “the importance of pre-primary education” and calls for “moving beyond existing pilot projects into generalised implementation, supported by investment, in particular in qualified staff.”

be underestimated, there are other reasons, too, for keeping the early childhood workforce on the European policy agenda. Cameron and Moss, in their study on Care Work in Europe (2007), demonstrate that "the EU sees care work not only as a pre-condition for increased employment, but also as a source of that employment. Between 1980 and 1996 service sector employment in the EU increased by around 19 million (p. 4). The European Commission (1999) has identified care work and education as two of five growth sectors (the other three being business activities, hotels and restaurants and retail trade).



*Qualified teachers provide quality ECE services.*

In **Austrian** kindergartens and crèches, every group must be led by a trained pedagogue (Kindergar-tenpädagogin), a binding rule which appears to be applied in all States (Bundesländer) (OECD, 2006, p. 278). There is a similar specification in **Latvia** where, since 2000, only persons who have completed professional higher education are allowed to work within pre-schools (UNESCO, 2006c). **Danish** kindergartens are monitored by trained pedagogical advisors who provide support to pedagogues to improve the quality of services or to implement special programmes, e.g. child participation, in a programme called Children as Citizens (OECD, 2006, p. 314) Such endeavours reflect the contention of Oberhuemer and Ulich (1997, p. 32) that "*decisions made about staffing will be decisions made about the quality of services.*"

The **Croatian** system of teacher training and qualification is undergoing significant changes (in accordance with the Bologna process), and is focusing strongly on assessment and evaluation. Teachers employed in pre-school education are required to hold a diploma (two years of study), and their teaching skills



are open to evaluation by the School Inspectorate. This inspectorate unit is responsible for monitoring pre-school institutions, primary and secondary schools, and evaluates educational and professional standards (Pavin, Vidovič, & Miljevič-Ridički, 2006). Professional staff within kindergartens include kindergarten teachers and senior nurses (Associate Degree holders, on completion of a two-year programme), in addition to pedagogues, psychologists and *defectologists* (all at Bachelor Degree level) (UNESCO, 2006a).

Some 35% of staff working directly with 0-6 children in **Norway** are qualified ECE pedagogues. While these figures are low in comparison to other Scandinavian countries, the Ministry of Education and Research, which has taken over responsibility for the barnehage from the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs in 2006, has earmarked considerable funds to increase the number of qualified staff (OECD, 2006, p. 397).

### 2.2.3 Increasing emphasis on parental involvement and partnership

**It is the right of parents to participate actively, and with voluntary adherence to the basic principles, in the growth, care, and development of their children who are entrusted to the public institution.**  
(Loris Malaguzzi in: Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998)

Coordinated partnership between parents/guardians and early years practitioners should span the first five years of a child's life (Reynolds & Clements, 2005). Recognising a parent's role as the primary educator of their child is an integral element of that partnership. In recognition of this fact, in the **Czech Republic** maternity leave is followed by a flat-rate parental benefit until a child is four years old and subsequently '*outreach to parents as equal partners has improved immeasurably*' (OECD, 2006, p.308).

Parental involvement in ECE programmes maximises the outcomes for children and is an added element of quality within the programmes. **Hungary** has proven to be quite progressive in its attempts to foster this partnership model, introducing the Education Law (2003), which formally seeks the involvement of parents in the educational process for three to six year-olds (OECD, 2006, p. 348).

In **Austria**, there have been calls for a federal law that sets general childcare quality standards at national level. One of the proposed initiatives is to encourage communication between home and setting, through the development of a compatibility indicator for family and professional life demands as a standard for every childcare facility (Party of European Socialists, 2007, p. 53).

The ECE system in **Russia** is struggling with dramatic transformational challenges and the numbers of ECE places have been reduced drastically in the last decade. But changes in structures of modern Russian families are urging for a new partnership between centre-based ECE and children's home environment. Demographic figures show an increase in nuclear families, single parents (mostly mothers), and no child care support from grandparents across the entire Russian society, resulting in a high demand for ECE places. Only a small minority of parents (7.8%) whose children do not attend ECE would prefer to educate their children exclusively at home – whatever the changes in external conditions (Taratukhina, et al., 2006, p. 14). Since modern Russian parents are becoming more confident expressing their needs for a variety of flexible ECE services, ECE institutions are facing the need to develop new forms of responsive services and a new partnership with parents.

## 2.2.4 Policy focus on improving ECE governance

ECE rose on the policy agendas of the European Union and its member countries during the 1990s. Neuman (2005), reporting on developments in OECD countries, identifies an increased focus on expanding access, improving quality and developing more coherent early childhood policies and programmes. Though more coherent and coordinated policies have emerged in relation to early childhood services, models of governance across the various European Union countries differ greatly. From an external perspective, European countries tend to vary on three primary institutional dimensions of governance: *administrative integration, decentralisation and privatisation* (Kammerman, 2000).

ECE governance has been in the focus of the 2001 OECD *Starting Strong report*. The major concern of the report was that, despite the complexity of the field, administrative responsibilities tend to be fragmented in many countries – with as many as seven different ministries or government agencies being involved in the governance of “one or other aspect of children's services”, e.g. in the case of **Ireland** (OECD, 2001, 2004a, 2006). While “pre-primary” or “pre-school” services are often regulated by one ministry (education), the fragmentation has severe effects on “childcare” services in split ECE systems:

*“The result can be a lack of coherence for children and families, with a confusing variety of funding streams, operational procedures, regulatory frameworks, staff-training and qualifications.”*  
(OECD, 2006, p. 46)

With the integration of early childhood services for children from birth to three as the overall goal, the 2001 *Starting Strong* report recommended that countries take the following steps:

- Formulate and work with co-ordinated policy frameworks at centralised and decentralised levels
- Nominate a lead ministry
- Adopt a collaborative and participatory approach to reform
- Forge strong links across services, professionals, and parents in each community. (OECD, 2001, pp. 126-128)

Six years on, countries seem to have taken on these recommendations (to some extent). While it is clear that the traditional separation of “care” and “education” is yet to overcome, the 2006 *Starting Strong II* report identifies “many interesting examples of country progress towards integrating services” (OECD, 2006, p. 48).

Within the EU, **Denmark, England, Finland, Scotland, Spain and Sweden** have developed integrated administrative systems. Research suggests that this type of unified approach may provide more coherent early childhood experiences for children, as a result of less fragmentation and fewer inequities (Oberhuemer & Ulich, 1997).

In **Ireland**, in December 2005, the Office of the Minister for Children was established by the government to maximise the co-ordination of policies for children and young people, including early childhood education (OECD, 2006, p. 352). Pre-School Regulations were implemented for pre-schools and childcare facilities in 1996 and revised in 2006, providing for the regulation of facilities (Hayes, 2007).

In **Belgium**, despite the fact that childcare and early education services remain under different auspices, both the French and the Flemish communities have succeeded in building a cohesive continuum of services for infants and toddlers. Within the Belgian context of decentralisation and deregulation, the integration and more effective management of services is promoted through consultation at municipal level (OECD, 2006, p. 48).

**Hungary** has demonstrated significant progression in provision for this age category. For children aged between three and six years, the Ministry of Education oversees the preparation and enactment of legislation and regulations, and has developed a draft national curriculum and associated inspection system (OECD, 2006, p. 343). Furthermore, attendance at pre-school kindergartens is compulsory for five year-olds and legislative amendments have made it obligatory for kindergartens to review and adjust their educational programmes in accordance with local needs (thereby facilitating greater parental involvement).

**Norway** shifted the responsibility for ECE from the Ministry of Children and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Research in 2006. This means a single government Department is now in charge of ECE from birth to compulsory school age, out-of-school services as well as the professional preparation of pedagogues. This shift is reflected at local level, with county governors now being responsible for both schools and ECE (OECD, 2006, p. 395). In accordance to the organisational reform a revised national regulatory framework (*Barnehage Act*) and a strategic *Framework Plan* were introduced in 2006 and major improvements announced. They include, among others, full coverage by 2007, the capping of parental fees, an entitlement to a place, and increased numbers of qualified staff (Ministry of Education and Research, 2007).

In **Finland**, the ministries and government agencies have made strong efforts to involve researchers, municipalities, providers and parents in all aspects of system reform. Leadership, financial steering and consultation are key to the approach. Information for all stakeholders is provided through a web portal containing a comprehensive database of current projects and studies.

<http://varttua.stakes.fi/FI/index.htm>

**Romania** has no education policy for children under three, or for institutions that cater for this age group, but has made significant legislative changes regarding provision for children in the older category. Consequently, kindergarten is now a public education service for three to six year-olds, structured by a national curriculum and qualified educational staff, with free attendance in public institutions (UNESCO, 2006e).

## 2.2.5 Focus on holistic curriculum

Bertram and Pascal (2002) identify as a unifying feature of ECE curricula in most European countries that “most are undergoing development” (p. 18).

In 2006, the OECD reports a general acceptance of some “structuring and orientation of children’s learning” and it states that “most OECD countries now use a curriculum in early childhood services” (p. 146). This is seen as part of the major policy change that has taken place in early childhood in the last decade. Beginning in the 1990s, many European countries introduced educational frameworks for services for young children. Others could build on the experiences gathered in these countries and Germany in particular developed what the OECD refers to as “second generation curricula” from 2003.

Most countries have chosen to introduce more formal curricula for the services closer to primary school, i.e. for children from the age of three, and some have developed a separate framework for children from birth to three (e.g. England 2005). However, countries with a fully integrated early childhood education system tend to develop pedagogical frameworks for the whole age range from birth to age six (Denmark 2004, Finland 1995/2003, Sweden 1998).

While pedagogical frameworks generally identify the key goals of early childhood services at national (or, in the case of federal States, at regional or State level), they vary not only in length (from 2 pages in Denmark to 320 pages in the German State of Bavaria) and scope. The documents generally focus on the values and attitudes towards children – and on those the country wishes to inform early childhood education. However, some are more explicit than others. The Swedish curriculum, for instance, clearly emphasises democratic values as it states: “All preschool activity should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values” (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, National Agency for Education, 2002). Others, such as England, put an emphasis on learning areas and outcomes that are seen as important or, as in the case of France, even set standards for literacy and numeracy (OECD, 2006, p. 134).

In line with the different traditions in ECE systems across Europe, two fundamentally different approaches to curriculum development can be identified: the adoption of a “sequential learning approach” in formal pre-primary settings versus a “holistic learning approach” that follows the social pedagogy tradition of the Nordic countries (OECD, 2006, p. 135).

**Sequential Learning :**

Different developmental areas are selected, including emergent literacy and numeracy, and teachers are expected to help children advance with carefully sequenced steps. The teacher knows where the children are at a given moment in the year and can raise the level of complexity whenever she judges the chil-

dren are ready to advance. However “[...], the sequential approach is primarily teacher directed and offers limited opportunities for children to develop self-regulation. Activities often fail to tap into children’s intrinsic motivation, because they do not authentically meet the needs and interests of children. [...] learning becomes artificial and uninteresting” (van Kuyk, 2006, cited in OECD 2006).

### **Holistic Approach :**

All developmental areas are addressed through play and broad project work that encourage active learning and multiple experiences. With the help of experienced teachers, and engaging with other children, young children can choose their activities and organise projects, an excellent experience in self-regulation and agency, and one that is highly motivating. Project work also provides an authentic opportunity to teachers to challenge and extend the meaning-making of children in different developmental areas. Language, negotiation and communication are also fundamental in group project work. (OECD, 2006, pp. 135-136)

In **Poland**, a “core curriculum for pre-school upbringing” for pre-schools and pre-school classes in primary schools was implemented in 2002 (Eurybase, 2006b, p. 6). In pre-school education there are no subjects as they are understood in the school system. Education is considered globally and is based on the main activity - play (ibid, p. 7). This focus on play and effective meaning-making is also central to the Swedish curriculum, which concludes that the child’s search for knowledge should be developed through *‘play, social interaction, exploration and creativity, as well as through observation, discussion and reflection’* (OECD, 2004b, p. 21).

In **Slovenia**, a National Curriculum for Pre-school Institutions was created and implemented in all pre-school centres by the year 2001/2002. The national curriculum guidelines are prepared for children of the two national minorities (Italian and Hungarian), and for children with special needs (UNESCO, 2006f).

**Croatia’s** Curriculum Framework for Preschool Education, General Compulsory and Secondary School Education (2007) determines the goal of national pre-school education as being:

*...to create and synchronize all the conditions necessary for a complete comprehensive development of preschool children, to intensify cooperation with parents, with the cultural, economic and other subjects of the local community, while respecting children’s behavioural patterns, principles of children’s rights and the needs of preschool children, as well as the criteria (standards) of optimal conditions for children’s development from the age of one to school age. (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, 2007, p. 15).*



Pre-school education in Croatia has, therefore, three important curricular components; health promotion/protection, educational and cognitive. Unlike its counterparts in Poland and Spain, there is no overt emphasis on the importance of play detailed within the pre-school curriculum.

**Austria's** strong social pedagogic tradition for children in the three to six years category is reflected in the attention and planning of suitable buildings and outdoor spaces (OECD, 2006, p. 279), with much weight given to the relationship between environments and learning and development.

### 2.3 Shortcomings of ECE systems across Europe

To use the term "weakness" to describe any apparent inadequacies within ECE systems is to ignore the ability of that system to progress or to improve. The hope with deliberately using the term "shortcomings" in its place is that such inadequacies are perceived as temporary, rather than long-term impediments, and are open to the influence and experience of their EU counterparts. Where general themes were used to categorise the strengths of ECE systems across the European Union, it is perhaps more pertinent to highlight some of the more transparent shortcomings of individual countries:

In **Austria** less than 10% of children under three years are in licensed services, formal staff qualifications are among the lowest in Europe and no national curriculum framework exists for the ECE system (OECD, 2006).

The fundamental deficiency of the Croatian ECE system appears to lie in the funding category. Expenditure on education constitutes just 4% of overall GDP and, according to Bejakovic (2004), the main characteristics of Croatia's educational spending are "*chronic under-funding, lack of equity and transparency in budgetary allocation, unbalanced structure of the education budget in terms of categories of expenditure and sources of funds*" (p. 18).

In **Germany**, central government funding of ECE is only possible in narrowly defined circumstances, and subsequently there are significant differences in the resources allocated to young children across the country (OECD, 2006, p. 336) and parental fees differ widely across regions (OECD, 2006). Despite the existing right to a place in Kindergarten, only 10% of children under three can actually have a place, due to a lack of childcare facilities (Party of European Socialists, 2007, p. 50).

Access to ECE services for children under three in **Hungary** is often denied to parents who are unemployed, or live in poor municipalities that cannot afford to fund a crèche service: "*Priority criteria often deny access to at-risk children who need these services most of all*" (OECD, 2006, p. 345).

**Ireland** has no national system of pre-school education and consequently, parental fees are the primary source of funding. Costs to parents are among the highest in Europe and average over 30% of disposable income for the Average Production Employee. In addition, the costs of child care are rising far more quickly than inflation. A further obvious shortcoming within the Irish system lies in the fact that requirements for staff qualifications in the ECE sector are not specified in recent legislative amendments, namely the Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations introduced in 2006 (Hayes, 2007, p. 5; OECD, 2006).

**Maltese** early years services are unregulated, and it is estimated that around 1,000 children are currently attending unregulated childcare facilities being provided privately (Party of European Socialists, 2007, p. 72).

National curricula do not yet exist in the **Netherlands** at any level of education (OECD, 2006, p. 391).

Severe negative trends have been identified in **Russia** as a consequence of the disintegration of the public ECE system:

*[...] the decline in child health, insufficient enrolment of staff in pre-school education as a stage in continuous education, the fact that it is not obligatory, lack of continuity in pre-school and primary school education, increased variation in the accessibility of different stages of education and in the level and quality of the education received. (Taratukhina, et al., 2006, p. 31)*

The most serious challenge for Russian public ECE seems to be a drastic rise of inequity due to social stratification and to huge differences between rural and urban areas:

*Essentially what is happening is the disintegration of the unified system into two parts which are barely linked: an elite system and a mass system. (ibid)*

All in all, the major weakness across European countries still appears to be their failure to create "sufficient numbers of licensed, publicly supported, childcare places for children under three" (OECD, 2006, p. 115) and, consequently, the failure to invest in appropriate qualification and professionalization of practitioners working with the youngest children.

The **Spanish** government's priority has been to provide universal provision for children aged between three and six, and services for children under three have therefore received less attention. Spaces for this age group are not yet available on request (Moss, 2000, p. 41).

Despite a growing investment in ECE in the **UK**, significant inadequacies still exist, particularly in services for children under three. This is partly the result of an unprecedented demand for ECE services (OECD, 2006, p. 104).

## 2.4 Public funding for early childhood education: some trends

The differences between ECE systems across Europe manifest in the set-up of institutions for young children and families, the conceptualisation and the role given to the workforce, and in public and private responsibilities for early childhood education and care at various levels of government. They are also reflected in the way services, institutions, and the entire system are resourced and funded in a particular country. Despite increasingly influential agendas of trans- and inter-national bodies and organisations to expand both quantity and quality of early childhood services (suggesting a consensus on purposes and goals, e.g. at European level), these differences are likely to remain. Not only are early childhood services culturally embedded and “deeply influenced by underlying assumptions about childhood and education” (OECD, 2001, p. 63); they are also embedded in socio-economic patterns of countries which are powerful as, for instance, they determine a cultural-economic beliefs in either a “demand-side” or “supply-side” governance and funding of services. Mahon (2006, cited in OECD 2006, p. 118) refers to this phenomenon as “Path Dependence”.

It is neither the intention of this section, nor the appropriate place, to provide a detailed discussion of the risks and disadvantages of early childhood systems that allocate resources primarily to the “demand-side”, especially in childcare, often relying on private-for-profit providers and showing a strong belief in the self-regulatory forces of the market. Rather, it aims at emphasising the importance of adequate public funding for equitable public education. The argument is in line with OECD findings that show – with “overwhelming evidence” – that there are clear links between adequate public investment and quality of services :

“... without significant public investment in policy, services and management, both affordability to parents and the quality of services are likely to be undermined. This is true not only for public services but also for licensed private providers. **Without sustained public funding** (either directly to services or indirectly through parent subsidies) and public regulation of all providers, **ECEC services are destined to be patchy and of poor quality in all but the more affluent neighbourhoods.** This defeats the main purpose of early childhood systems, that is, to provide quality care, development and learning for all children, and in particular, to improve opportunity for children living in at-risk situations.” (OECD, 2006, p. 118, emphasis added)

Public expenditure – expressed in percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – on ECE services varies largely between European countries. The Scandinavian countries rank highest, with Denmark investing 2.0% of GDP, followed by Sweden, 1.7%.

The significance of these figures becomes clear when benchmarked against the investment level recommended by the European Commission Network on Childcare (1996). An investment level of at least 1.0% of GDP is recommended as adequate for European countries. An estimation of the OECD (2006, p. 105), based on countries' own replies to a 2004 survey, shows that only four EU countries met this benchmark: **Denmark, Sweden, Finland** and **France**. According to the recently published UNICEF league table, **Norway** and **Iceland** also meet the 1% benchmark (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2008). The OECD further estimates that **Belgium** (Flanders) is also approaching the level of 1.0% while **Hungary** probably comes in just behind.

In **Estonia** the allocation of state and local municipalities funding for the development of infrastructure and services of pre-school services has also been increased to 1.0% of GDP. The objective is to raise the proportion of three to six year-old children accessing pre-school services to 90%, and the proportion of children aged between one and three years to 33%, that is, to meet the Barcelona Targets. (Sotsiaal Ministerium, 2004).

Most European countries still have a long way to go before they reach the 1.0% target which, in 1996, was seen as achievable within ten years. However, there is a clear trend towards increasing public investment in early childhood education across Europe over the last ten years – which can be seen as a common denominator in funding patterns. According to OECD figures, countries with comparatively low public expenditure in particular, have increased public investment significantly.

In **Denmark**, by the end of 1997, 55% of children under three years and 88% of children aged between three and six (excluding attendance at preschool classes) received publicly funded services (Moss, 2000, p. 33). Today, Denmark leads the OECD ranking with a public expenditure of 2.0% GDP. Another 0.3% must be added when preschool classes for children age 6 to 7 are taken into account.

In the **Netherlands**, government expenditure on ECE has expanded from € 617m in 2003 to € 800m in 2005, the growth being related to the growing use of child care (OECD, 2006, p. 390).



In **Portugal** the budget for pre-school education has more than doubled since 1996 (ibid, p. 104).

A similar trend can also be identified in the **UK**: Between 1998 and 2005, the British government allocated £14 billion to families and children. A doubling of investment in early childhood services (excluding tax credits) is predicted between 2004 and 2008, indicating an annual increase of 23% in spending (ibid, p. 420).

Given these impressions, the overall trend appears to be positive across Europe. Nonetheless, there are a number of factors common to most early childhood systems that may jeopardise the recent achievements and hinder the realisation of a fully integrated public early childhood education system for all children from birth to compulsory school age. Often, budgets are fragmented and different types of services are funded from different sources and under different regulations. Moreover, countries are likely to split investments between pre-primary, educational services and services for children under the age of three, hence enforcing the artificial conceptual and institutional split between “care” and “education”.

While public expenditure for early education is increasingly regarded as an investment that will eventually lead to significant financial and economic returns (knowledge society!), childcare expenditure is more likely to be seen on the “cost” side of the balance sheet. Most countries do not spend money on services for children under three because they are not committed to the ideal of every child's right to quality education (in its broadest sense) from birth. They do so because of an unprecedented rise in demand caused by increasing numbers of women joining the labour market. Eastern European countries, including former East Germany, in the early 1990s provide an excellent example of the risks of such an approach: in times of economic deceleration or recession, keeping women out of the labour market can quickly become a priority on government agendas – which, subsequently, can become a useful justification for closing childcare facilities. Another, even more recent example for this contradictory policy can be found in Ireland: one of the first reactions of the Irish government to the economic decline has been to withdraw the funding for childcare initiatives and to close the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in September 2008.

Therefore, the statement made by the European Commission Network on Childcare in 1996 must remain an action point on European and national policy agendas:

“without a coherent and coordinated system of public funding, in which all aspects of expenditure on services to young children are considered together as a whole, policies are less likely to be implemented, targets will remain unfulfilled, evaluation is incomplete, and inefficiencies and duplication in the system are likely to be exacerbated.” (p. 13)

## 2.5 Workforce and qualifications

A discussion on staff qualifications for early childhood workers is not easy to confine. Should it, for example, focus on the basic training of staff and how this relates to the structuring of early childhood services and their workforce? If so, it is argued that country approaches to staff training need to be considered *‘in relation to the structure, purposes, and underlying values of services in that society, and the dominant constructions of young children and early childhood workers’* (Moss, 2000). Or should it be the case that discussions on qualifications extend beyond the auspices of training, as the term itself contradicts *‘the very essence of educational practice as a transformative practice of mutual dependence and respect, co-construction and shared meaning-making between human beings?’* (Urban, 2008, p. 150). In such an instance, the issue of ongoing professional development is brought to the fore. It is a multi-faceted, complex debate that currently resounds through European and international ECE conferences and symposia, extending far wider than the confines of this paper. Accordingly, the following presents some snapshots of some of the quantitative data available for the differing level of qualifications among early years’ workers across the European Union.

Over 60% of staff in both kindergartens and crèches in **Austria** have a professional diploma. Kindergarten pedagogues receive five-years training in ECE (OECD, 2006, p. 278). Similarly, within the French community of **Belgium**, children’s nurses working in crèches have a three-year, post-vocational qualification, and in the *école maternelle*, teachers have a specialised three-year, tertiary level teaching diploma (ibid, p. 282). Within the **Flemish** community, however, only about one quarter of child care jobs require a diploma or certificate (Peeters, 2008).

In **Ireland**, qualifications range from non-existent (in childcare) to tertiary level. It is estimated that 30% of staff are without any qualification (OECD, 2006, p. 352). This arises from the absence of any statutory requirement that



staff must be formally qualified to work with young children in ECE settings, except in the case of early years' teachers in primary schools. This stands in stark contrast to its **Hungarian** counterparts, as 98% of kindergarten teachers have a 3-year tertiary degree from an approved training college and in centres for children under three, 90% of child care workers working directly with children are qualified (OECD, 2006, p. 347). **Portugal** places the same weight of importance on qualifications; the minimum qualification required for early childhood nurses working in crèches is a four-year university degree. Crèches are staffed by 'educators' (with a 4-year university or polytechnic training), nurses and social workers, all of whom have tertiary-level, professional qualifications. Kindergartens are staffed by *educadores de infância* who have graduated from four-year university or polytechnic training (OECD, 2006, p. 401).

Some Eastern European countries have been notably progressive in the requirements set out for the training of early years' staff. In **Lithuania**, pre-school teachers and teachers are trained at higher education institutions and teacher training colleges. At the end of 1997, teaching staff amounted to 12,200, of whom 91% were graduates of higher education institutions. Of those, 8,100 had a specialisation in pre-school education (UNESCO, 2006d). In **Latvia**, since 2000, only people who have completed professional higher education are allowed to work in pre-schools.

In general, two main "staffing profiles" (OECD) can be identified in ECE across Europe. In countries with split systems (i.e. an institutional distinction between childcare and early education), usually qualified teachers can be found working with children over 3 to compulsory school age. These teachers increasingly have a three-year tertiary degree and are often educated as (primary) school teachers that may or may not have a specialisation in early childhood. In the "childcare" parts of split systems, working mainly with younger children up to the age of 3, a core profession can hardly be identified:

[...] a large proportion of staff are in auxiliary positions and poorly paid [...] (OECD, 2006, p. 161)

[...] the hiring of a high proportion of unskilled, low paid women is common in childcare. (ibid, p. 163)

Another reason for the low level of qualifications is the lack of a framework clearly linking skills development with career progression. (ibid)

Countries with fully integrated ECE systems for children from birth (or age 1) to compulsory school age usually have introduced a core profession working with children across the age range. Tertiary educated *pedagogues* (e.g. Denmark), *educators* (e.g. Germany) or *early childhood teachers* (e.g. Sweden) work directly with children. They are often supported by qualified assistants who are seen as equally professional as the pedagogues (see Kinos, 2008 for Finland).

Not surprisingly, conditions for ECE workers are considerably better in countries with integrated ECE systems as “thought has been given to making clear professional profiles with fixed salaries and work conditions” (OECD, 2006, p. 163).

## 2.6 ECE and representative gender disparity

The issue of men working within early childhood education has, on the one hand, always been highly topical. Arguments range from the conservative-traditional to the emotive – from childcare as ‘women’s work’ to allegations of child abuse – with the space between occupied by barriers such as poor pay, limited training opportunities and a distinct lack of support networks (Cameron, 2006).

On the other hand, researchers attempting to explore the fundamental phenomenon that most early childhood practitioners are female while the children are always of both genders, find themselves confronted with a widespread “invisibility of the issue”. In their comparative study on Care Work in Europe, Cameron & Moss (2007) came across the striking fact that “this workforce imbalance, and any possible implications for how practice is carried out, was rarely remarked upon, even by male workers” (p. 101).

The “invisibility” of male early childhood workers continues into statistics and research. Cameron and Moss (2007) found that available data on gender issues in ECE are “highly variable” across countries (p. 102) – from literally non-existent in Hungary and Spain to “slightly more” in the Netherlands. Most information could be found in studies from Denmark, Sweden and the UK.

Not surprising, though, that the literature available on men working in, and/or training towards a career in ECE, is sparse. This is symptomatic of the fact that those men working in early childhood services represent a minority group, both in terms of ECE in particular and in “non-traditional occupations” (Cameron, 2001, p. 449) in general. Much of what has been published about male ECE workers lacks an empirical basis, or is further weakened by limited theoretical analysis and the ongoing rhetoric of masculinity and gender politics.



In the general European picture only **Denmark** stands out with a significant percentage of male early childhood practitioners. According to Jensen & Hansen (2003), 25% of students enrolled in *Paedagog* courses are men and numbers of male ECE practitioners in Denmark are the highest in Europe. At the other extreme, in **Hungary** and **Spain**, male early childhood workers are literally non-existent (Cameron & Moss, 2007). A similar picture can be seen in **Russia** (Taratukhina, et al., 2006).

The scarcity of men in the ECE sector is problematic from a variety of different perspectives. Rolfe (2006, p. 104) summarises three primary outcomes of this gender segregation; an issue for government work plans to meet parental employment and childcare objectives; an issue for equal opportunities and diversity within the sector; and an issue for the overall quality of childcare provision. The OECD, in the 2001 *Starting Strong I* report, argued for promoting a gender-mix among the workforce because of the positive effects on children's development through having dual role models in their lives and because of the added value brought to caring and pedagogy in early childhood centres by the presence of men (p. 133).

In 1996 the European Commission Network on Childcare set a target of 20% male representation in childcare, and envisioned ten years as being sufficient for the achievement of such. To date, no European country has reached that target (Peeters, 2007). A notable strength of the network's targets lay in the fact that they were set to include men working at all levels, inclusive of those working directly with children and not exclusive to those in managerial posts (target 29). Prior to that specification, statistics may have been thwarted and not wholly representative of the situation in Europe. In addition, the setting of these targets encouraged numerous campaigns and interesting initiatives that focused on the recruitment and retention of men to childcare. The most successful of these initiatives came from the Scandinavian countries, the UK and Belgium.

Within the EU, **Denmark** has the highest proportion of male childcare workers, constituting 8% of the workforce (Rolfe, 2005). Van Ewijk et al. (cited in Cameron, 2006, p. 71) estimate that of those workers, the minority (2%) work in nurseries with children under three, 6% work in kindergartens and the majority (41%) work in clubs with older children. This stronger presence of men in childcare is largely attributable to national recruitment campaigns, designed to increase the number of men entering the sector as students of pedagogy.

Currently, one quarter of Danish trained pedagogues are male. These pedagogues are qualified to work across a range of settings with children and young people aged from birth right through to "the age of hundred". Rolfe (2005) believes

that this figure is not the exclusive result of effective advertising campaigns, but is reflective of the nature of the work, which is more "knowledge-based and educational" than childcare within most other European countries (p. 6).

Although way behind Denmark, **Norway** has a considerable 8% of male ECE staff working directly with children. Furthermore, **Norway** had aimed at reaching the 20% benchmark by the end of 2007.

Other European Union countries demonstrate fluctuations in statistics for men in childcare, but are nevertheless consistent in their under-representation. Statistics for **Spain**, for example, are non-existent. Moss (2000) attributes this to the fact that Spanish culture is traditional in its perception of working with children as being "women's work", and consequently there are hardly any male students or workers.

Cameron and Moss (2007) add a telling aspect to this picture of gender bias: a Spanish trainer, they report, judges the few men on teaching courses as being "either very talented and committed or rather lazy and think it [childcare] an easy choice of career" (p. 101).

In **Austria**, the proportion of men among early childhood pedagogues amounts to 0.8% (OECD, 2006). Across **England** and **Wales**, this figure rises to somewhere between 2 and 3% (Farquhar, 2007, p. 18), similar to a figure of 2.3% in the **Flemish** region of Belgium (Peeters, 2007). In 2001 in **Finland**, men constituted 4% of early childhood workers (Cameron, 2001, p. 4).

**Croatia** demonstrates the same under-representation as its EU counterparts: Of the almost 13,000 teachers employed in pre-school institutions, 96.3% are women (Pavin, et al., 2006, p. 258); figures for the age group under three are not available.

## 2.6.1 Encouraging men into ECE

As outlined in the case of Denmark, recruitment campaigns have generated a certain degree of success. The English government, for example, launched a national Childcare Recruitment Campaign in 2000. It was designed to raise the profile of childcare as a career, through national television and press. Local partnerships, keen to promote the recruitment of men, included images and examples of male childcare workers in their recruitment literature. The campaign fixed targets of 6% male workers by 2004 but as the earlier statistics demonstrate, this has not been achieved.



In 2005, the fixed target of 6% men in childcare was replaced by a more general appeal to increase diversity in the workforce, thus effectively “reducing the focus on the representation of specifically male workers” (Cameron & Moss, 2007, p. 102).

The initial campaign’s success lay more in the field of symbolism than in actual recruitment, as (for the first time in England) images of childcare included both men and women, thereby deviating from the traditional stereotypes. There have also been some media-led initiatives in the Netherlands.

“Training may have a greater potential to attract men than jobs alone” (Rolfe, 2005, p. 36). In Scandinavian countries in the 1990’s, for example, an increase in the level and content of training raised the popularity of childcare among men (Cameron, 2006).

**Scotland** presents an interesting model in terms of its endeavour to recruit male workers to employment within ECE through training; methods of entry and the characteristics of training schemes are altered, without any particular process of professionalisation taking place (Hansen, Jensen, & Moss, 2004). Potential male childcare workers complete at least one fully-funded training course that is exclusively for men, and pitched at a range of different levels. The courses provide support and advice around job opportunities and a mentoring scheme is in place for full-time students. The ‘Men in Childcare’ network in the UK, (e.g. its projects in Edinburgh) is equally innovative in its work in designing and delivering men-only childcare orientation programmes. The project has run induction courses and access programmes that facilitate more advanced training (Men in Childcare, 2008).

These Scottish initiatives dispel some of the traditional myths by demonstrating that there is no necessary relationship or conflict between professionalisation and male worker entry to ECE.

The European Commission Network on Childcare (1996), in their “proposal for a ten year action programme” argues that increasing men’s participation in ECE training and employment requires the involvement of various authorities and organisations in formulating policy and action. Such policy-led innovations have enjoyed relative success to date in the Flemish community of Belgium, where the government launched a campaign to attract more men into childcare in collaboration with various umbrella ECE organisations and the University of Ghent. The partnership has guided policy towards more gender-neutral

definitions of the care profession. The reference to care in the name of the worker, for example, has been substituted with a more pedagogic word – ‘child carer’ (*kinderverzorger*) has become (*kinderbegeleider*) ‘companion of the child’. The campaign has been effective in increasing the number of men working in childcare; in 2002, prior to the establishment of the campaign, only 0.9% of the workforce was male.

This figure had almost tripled by 2006, when 2.3% of childcare workers were male (Peeters, 2007).

For all of the inarguable benefits that men can bring to the sector – meeting increasing demands for childcare, facilitating gender diversity, role modelling (Rolfe, 2006), equality and balance (Cameron, 2001) – there are an equal number of obstacles – low pay, little recognition of the contribution made by the sector, limited entry routes, attitudes of employers and parents, etc. Different European initiatives such as the *Sheffield Children’s Centre* in the UK, *Acidules et Croques* in Paris and *Menn I barne-hager* in Norway (VBJK, 2004) represent good models from which future work can be informed. Within Europe, however, they represent only a starting point.

The UK Equal Opportunities Commission once referred to the ECE sector as a gender ghetto. Until such time as research, practice, training and policy seriously and proactively addresses this imbalance, men in childcare across the European Union will remain in a skeletal minority.



*More men should be encouraged to take up ECE as a career.*



### 3. CHANGING PRACTICE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: SEVEN EUROPEAN CASES

The first aim of this study, which is to identify key characteristics of early childhood education systems in Europe, can be achieved by meta-analysing available data sources. The sources that the first section of this report draws upon ('setting the scene') provide a wealth of information, usually gathered at national level (e.g. OECD, 2001, 2006; UNESCO, 2007). At the same time, the scope and design of large scale international surveys often come with significant constraints<sup>2</sup>. They provide essential overviews and powerful tools and arguments for those making decisions on overarching policies, but they are limited by their very nature. With their bird's-eye view on policies and structures they carry the risk of losing ground – in a more than metaphorical sense. Moss (2001), in an address to the launch of the first *Starting Strong* report in Stockholm succinctly states "cross-national studies of early childhood can lose sight of the child." Their distance from actual contexts and processes, he argues, contributes to reproducing notions of universality. They create

*an image of the child as a universal and passive object, to be shaped by early childhood services – to be developed, to be prepared, to be educated, to be cared for. There may be little sense for the child as a social actor, situated in a particular historical and spatial context, living a childhood in these services, and making her own meanings from the experience. (ibid)*

As I have argued elsewhere (Urban, 2007), it can be one of the pitfalls of comparative approaches to describing complex entities like early childhood education and care systems, that, in order to manage the complexity, researchers may feel tempted (or urged) to reduce it. Thus, for reasons that too often are accepted as pragmatic, comparative research methodologies may contribute to constructing a *comparability* of its subject, hence to constructing the subject itself. The challenge for any comparison of institutions and practices in social systems is to explore their embeddedness in local contexts, histories, cultural pattern etc. – which may well make them *incomparable* in some of their most characterising and most interesting aspects.

<sup>2</sup> The introductory remarks on methodology in this chapter are, in parts, an excerpt from (Urban, 2007).

Most critical thinkers would agree that the appropriateness of any supposedly universal framework in early childhood has to be challenged and many authors have indeed done so – Martin Woodhead (1996, p. 17), for example, contests the powerful discourse that has shaped the notion of the universality of ‘quality’ as it inevitably leads, he argues, to a “world of uniformity” with little regard to the cultural and local context of practices, experiences and knowledges:

*Implementing contextually inappropriate standards [...] will prove more disruptive than constructive in fostering children’s development.*  
(*ibid*)

The authors of *Starting Strong* are, of course, well aware of these pitfalls and, although calling their report “comparative,” they are referring explicitly to the contextual, specific, hence diverse and controversial aspects of their subject, which, in consequence, may make simple comparison impossible:

*From this perspective, ECEC policy and the quality of services are deeply influenced by underlying assumptions about childhood and education: what does childhood mean in this society? How should young children be reared and educated? What are the purposes of education and care, of early childhood institutions? What are the functions of early childhood staff? (OECD, 2001, p. 63)*

These are of course crucial questions that have to be addressed and debated openly in the public and political sphere. By acknowledging their importance, the authors of the OECD report offer a perspective that reaches far beyond the simplistic comparison of structural data: they introduce the notion of *localised meaning-making* to the realm of cross-national comparison.

The diverse discourses on young children and their families, on the institutions set up to serve them, and their policies and practices tend to be increasingly globalised and, although providing a wealth of information, comparative research in these contexts, by its logic, contributes to *constructing the comparability* and therefore to constructing its subject in a very particular way – while it is most likely that there are other possibilities. Hence, it is important to bear in mind, that institutions, policies and practices – in educational practice as well as in research – are social constructs that need to be contextualised and framed in order to understand them (Foucault, 1973).

Case-based comparisons, e.g. the “Strategies for Change” project (Urban, 2006, 2007) acknowledge the necessity for cultural-historical contextualisation. While



recognising and embracing the possibilities offered by cross-national or *cross-contextual* research, Approaches like "Strategies for Change" also aim at the micro-processes, at the *here* as opposed to the generalisation:

*Taken for granted assumptions and understandings of childhood can become visible, and so subject to deliberation and confrontation. In this way, for example, cross-national work can contribute to making childhood contestable. But for this to happen, the starting point for cross-national work needs to be, how is childhood constructed here? What is the image of the child here ? (Moss, 2001, emphasis added)*

Early childhood education is a messy business – in day-to-day practice as well as in politics – and I want to suggest that any research that aims at developing an understanding of *what is actually going on, and why, and for whom*, needs to embrace, rather than avoid the messiness of its subject and to reflect the spatialised nature of knowledge in this field which, in effect, is a 'motley' (Turnbull, 2003).

Ethnographers, since Clifford Geertz (1973) see comparison in stark contrast to studying the particularities of the individual case and as

*actually competing with learning about and from the particular case. Comparison is a grand epistemological strategy, a powerful conceptual mechanism, fixing attention upon one or a few attributes. (Stake, 2003, p. 148)*

However, as the author rightly concludes, this grand epistemological strategy "*obscures case knowledge that fails to facilitate comparison*" (ibid). Not only can messy, complex, unique and vital case *knowledge* be obscured, by methodological decisions, and for the sake of keeping comparison manageable. The risk is, that the focus of interest will, perhaps involuntarily, shift from the 'thick of what is going on' (ibid) to the comparison itself.

But this study – as any piece of research – does of course share a perspective on its cases as well. Not only are the cases related, in general, in that they are all situated in the broader context of discourses on *institution, profession and change* in early childhood. There is also a relation that is constructed by the particular design of this study, which is interested in processes of, factors contributing to, and possibilities for facilitating the transformation of a stagnant system into one that is dynamic and that is developing a momentum of constant evolution. The special attention, paid to the workforce and its conceptu-

alisation – the roles assigned to early childhood practitioners and professionals as effective change agents – construe another relationship between the individual cases in this study. Asking similar questions in otherwise different contexts therefore creates a *structural equivalence* (Burt, 1982) that allows for a shared discussion between the participants, and between the participants and the researcher. It facilitates the creation of a space for *shared thinking, critical reflection* and, hopefully, *informed action*.

### 3.1 The sample for the seven country study

Seven countries were chosen to participate in a qualitative sub-study, aiming to complement the broad picture of the European early childhood education landscape with the experience and expertise of individuals, projects and programmes that may create change in their particular area. The selected countries represent a range of different early childhood education systems in terms of the overall structure, funding, staffing, governance etc. However limited and incomplete, the sample also is an attempt to cover the geographical scope of Europe, from the Scandinavian countries in the north to Spain in the south, from Ireland in the far west to Croatia in the east.

Besides the wish to represent a significant range of European early childhood education systems and in addition to the geographical representation, the main criteria for selection are reflected in the title of the qualitative study: Each of the seven countries is home to a project, or a programme illustrating how change can be created and different practices achieved at various layers of the early childhood education system.

It needs to be mentioned here that the seven cases are by no means meant to be taken as “best” or “unique” practices. As cases, or exemplars, they can only represent themselves. Nevertheless, the projects that have been included in this report are possibilities – seven out of many more possible examples.. In the words of Paolo Freire the seven cases represent *hopeful examples*: “hope, as an ontological need, demands an anchoring in practice. As an ontological need, hope needs practice in order to become historical concreteness.” (Freire, 2004, p. 2)

In order to complement and frame the examples given by the seven projects, or local partners, the teachers’ unions in the participating countries – all of them member organisations of Education International – were asked to share their perspective on early childhood education in their countries. In the following sections, their “Union’s Perspectives” are added to the accounts of the seven local partners.

### Changing practice in early childhood education and care : participants

	COUNTRY	LOCAL PARTNER	PARTICIPATING EI MEMBER ORGANISATION
1	CROATIA	Pučko otvoreno učiliste Korak po Korak / <i>Open Academy Step by Step</i>	Sindikata radnika u predškolskom odgoju i obrazovanju hrvatske / Trade Union of Workers in Preschool Education of Croatia (TUWPSEC)
2	GERMANY	Projekt Bildung:elementar	Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft (GEW) / <i>German Education Union</i>
3	IRELAND	Association of Childcare Professionals (Cork Branch)	Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO)
4	POLAND	Comenius Foundation for Child Development	Związek Nauczycielstwa Polskiego (ZNP) / <i>Polish Teachers' Union</i>
5	SPAIN	Associació de Mestres Rosa Sensat	Federación de Enseñanza CC.OO., FFE.CC.OO.
6	SWEDEN	Gamla Åkeredsskolan's Preschool/ Göteborg University, Department of Education	Läraryrket / Swedish Teachers' Union
7	THE NETHERLANDS	Bureau MUTANT	Algemene Onderwijsbond (AOB) / <i>Dutch Teachers' Union</i>

## 3.2 Methodology

Both Teachers' Unions and local partners in the participating countries were contacted in writing to inform about the overall aim and outline of the study and to request their participation in the study. Letters were sent directly by the author. In addition, the Teacher's Unions received a letter from Education International asking them to support the study. Cover letters were provided in English and Spanish.

**Local partners were asked :**

- to give a brief description of their project or programme
- to name key factors that they consider to contribute to its success
- to name key obstacles and challenges for their programme
- to name any lessons that can be learnt from their experience and any recommendations that can be given to others.

**Teachers' Unions were asked :**

- to give a brief description of the overall situation of early childhood education and care in their country
- to name key issues in policy and practice from a Union's perspective
- to describe their organisation's perspective on the funding situation for early childhood services in their country including:
  - the general picture
  - any particularities (e.g. distinctions in funding for different types of services, age groups, target groups etc.)
  - funding trends over the last ten years and in the foreseeable future
- to provide their organisation's perspective on the situation of the workforce in their country including:
  - the general picture
  - gender issues
  - qualification issues
- to name successful examples and promising developments in early childhood education and care in their countries
- to name key obstacles and challenges for the early childhood education and care system in their country
- to share any lessons that can be learnt from the experience of their country and any recommendation that can be shared with others.

The sections below provide excerpts from the local partners' responses, followed by the respective Teachers' Union's perspective. Either part follows the structure of the questionnaire.

All responses have been entered into a software tool for qualitative data analysis (Atlas.ti) for further, more elaborate analysis.



### 3.3 Croatia

#### 3.3.1 Step by step towards “schools tailored to pupils”

The Croatian partner in this study is Korak po Korak , the Zagreb-based “Open Academy Step by Step”. Korak po Korak is a member of the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) which is based in the Netherlands and Hungary. Established in 1999, ISSA’s network today comprises members from Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Asia, and the Americas. Its core membership consists of nongovernmental organisations working in the field of early childhood development and education. All member organisations are committed to implement the Step by Step programme, originally initiated by the Open Society Institute (OSI) in 1994 (ISSA, 2008). ISSA advocates for equal access to quality education for all children, strong family involvement and community participation to help every child reach his or her full potential :

*“We believe that children learn best when they are active participants in the learning process. ISSA’s programs encourage children to express their ideas creatively, to help one another, to develop critical thinking skills and to practice responsible living by learning to make choices. We recognize that each child is unique and seek to meet his or her individual educational needs in the classroom” (ibid)*

ISSA explicitly links its focus on democratic approaches to “the current emphasis internationally on a rights-based approach to early childhood education and care issues” (ibid). To achieve its goals, the organisation operates within a framework of values that orient the work at all levels of early childhood practice and policy:

*Advocate for policy to ensure that every child regardless of gender, race, religion, nationality or ability has the opportunity to develop to his or her full potential.*

*Engage in Systemic Education Reform Projects that work from the grassroots level up to achieve lasting policy reform.*

*Develop new teacher resources and early childhood education standards, provide high quality training, and encourage research.*

*Implement national, regional and international projects.*

*Provide a forum for early childhood educators, experts and policy makers. (ibid)*

The Croatian government launched a major reform of its public education policy in 2005, announcing new educational standards to bring about “schools tailored to pupils”. Until then, several thousand Croatian teachers had been trained by Korak po Korak – a major achievement that formed the practical basis for the reform. This is how the team of Puāko otvoreno uāilite Korak po korak, the Open Academy Step by Step describe their project and their approach.

### *Background to the project*

Korak po Korak (KpK) began their work in 1994, at a time when the Croatian education system was “completely traditional and teacher centred”:

*“Children were supposed to sit in silence in the classroom while listening to ex-cathedra teaching, and to memorize and reproduce large amount of facts not connected to their experience.”*

The project, introducing the Step-by-Step approach, set out to change this paradigm and focus on active participation of children in the learning process, cooperation between teachers and parents/families, and individualised teaching instead. Many teachers embraced this approach, even though they had not been encouraged by education authorities. Education policy changed, however, and new National Education Standards were launched in 2005, explicitly aiming at creating “schools tailored to pupils”. Korak po korak had already trained 5000 teachers until then; they provided the ground for the change, as many of them were contracted by the Ministry of Education to train more practitioners in child-centred approaches:

*“We believe that without our 10-year work with teachers the change would not have been possible.”*

Although the child-centred methods of teaching are now incorporated in official policy documents, KpK’s work continues and more than 1000 teachers participate in their in-service training every year. The training offered to pre-school teachers is modularised and touches on a broad range of issues, e.g. child-centred teaching, cooperative learning, education for social justice, organisational improvement and mentoring.

Supported by the International Step by Step Association (ISSA), KpK developed a particular focus on inclusion and social justice in order to promote the rights of disadvantaged children in Croatia.

The KpK Open Academy Step by Step became a partner in the project dealing



with the education of Roma children in two counties where significant number of Roma live. They trained teachers and provided mentors' support to teachers. The evaluation of the project showed improvement of Croatian language speaking, and pre-literacy and pre-math skills of children that attended preschool.

The increased involvement of Roma parents in the education of their children was another important outcome of this work. As a result of the cooperation between teachers and families, expectations towards Roma children's educational achievements were raised on both sides.

### *Key factors to success*

KpK believe that the impact of their work has been significant, considering they are only a small NGO with no more than four full-time employees. The quality of the programme in general, and the quality of the trainers in particular, seem to be the key factor to KpK's success in Croatian ECE:

*"We are continuously working on improving and upgrading modules and materials according to the changes in our education system. We have the network of more than forty trainers and we invest in their professional development."*

### *Key challenges*

Croatian education has been going through major changes. Agencies for education and teacher training, as well as for vocational education and for adult education were established, but according to KpK, most of laws are still in a developmental stage. Over the years, many changes have been announced. There is, says KpK, a sense that "things are moving", but often too slowly and sometimes in a disorganised fashion. There is not much to add to this straightforward statement:

*"We could say that at present there are no obstacles for our everyday work, except for the mess within the educational legal framework."*

### *Lessons learnt and recommendations*

Resistance to change appears to be a key feature of education systems and this is the case in Croatia as well. Regarding the agents of change, Korak po Korak's experience is that established government institutions often underestimate the potential and the contribution of NGOs to initiate and bring about change. There is a clear recommendation that every available resource should be used to achieve the common goal – better public education for all children.

In the light of their experience, KpK urges the EU to strongly encourage the cooperation of governmental institutions with the NGO sector.

### 3.3.2 The Union's perspective: Sindikat Radnika u Predškolskom Odgoju I Obrazovanju Hrvatske

The Trade Union of Workers in preschool education of Croatia ( Sindikat Radnika u Predškolskom Odgoju I Obrazovanju Hrvatske) (TUWPSEC) begin their statement with a definition of the key terminology that frames preschool education in Croatia: *Odgajati*, which describes the obligation to “give children all the best” in terms of love, tradition, and a broad range of skills, including social skills, health and physical skills, art, music and drama. The conceptual complement to *Odgajati* is *Briga*, which translates as care but describes a much broader concept. *Briga* is about the responsibility of the society for children from (pre)birth until they complete their education, comprising welfare, healthcare and security.

Conceptual foundations for early childhood education in Croatia are laid out in the “Preschool Care and Education Act”. The legal framework establishes preschool as an integral part of the public education system, with a holistic approach to care and education. Programmes are expected to be organised according to children’s needs in diverse cultural and religious contexts. Programmes for ethnic minorities have to be provided, with particular mentioning of the Roma community.

The preschool act makes explicit reference to the workforce, which is composed of a range of highly specialised professionals including pedagogues, psychologists, defectologists, preschool teachers, nurses and specialised teachers for languages, music, drama, dance, art and sport.

In addition to the preschool act, which is the main legal basis for the structure and quality of Croatian preschool education, a number of strategic documents give profile to the future development of the sector. A “Plan for Improving Education in Croatia 2005-2010” has been put in place, alongside a strategy for developing a curriculum from preschool to secondary education and the national pedagogical standards, which also apply to all levels of public education.

TUWPSEC’s role in recent years has been to promote the recognition of preschool as an equal part of the education system: “... the same position in

society as primary and secondary education, the same level of education for teachers”.

Structural standards, e.g. for adult-child ratios in different age groups that were suggested by TUWPSEC have been included in the legal framework.

Continuous change has been the prevailing characteristic of the Croatian education system since the early 1990's. The first post-communist preschool curriculum dates back to 1991, the preschool act which, until today, provides the legal framework for preschool education in Croatia, was introduced in 1997. The strategic plan to improve education in Croatia was launched in 2005 and stretches to 2010. Only recently, in 2008, national pedagogical standards for all levels of the education system were introduced. Despite this ongoing process of legislative and conceptual change, however, TUWPSEC still considers it “... very hard to make one step forward”:

*“When we started, the war stopped all our actions. After it we did what we could. Now we are in a better position. I think that acts we have are the good fundament [for TUWPSEC, M.U.] to be a quality social partner to Ministry of Education [and] local government.”*

### ***Workforce issues, including gender and qualifications***

Composition of preschool staff in Croatia is generally multidisciplinary. The workforce consists of pedagogues, psychologists, defectologists (with four year university degree), preschool teachers, specialised teachers (language, music, art, etc.) and nurses (three years medical school or four years university degree). According to TUWPSEC, men are found in all those professions and there are male practitioners in Croatian preschools. However, no figures are provided.

The union argues for the highest possible qualifications for practitioners working in preschool; it urges the Ministry of Education to take political leadership. In 2006, a three year university degree for preschool teachers was introduced by universities, but, according to TUWPSEC, this move “did not improve [the] quality of education teachers”. Therefore, the Union still sees a need to “press” and lobby for upgrading the qualifications of all members of the workforce. It is confident, however, to achieve a significant improvement by 2009/10.

A remarkable feature of the structure of preschool practice, according to TUWPSEC, is that full time teaching staff, while working a regular 40-hour week, have ten hours “non-contact-time” for planning, documentation, parent meetings and “other obligations”.

### *Successful examples and promising developments*

It is an achievement that high quality preschool education in Croatia is an integral part of the public education system. Although private preschools have been in place since 1990, the quality of private provision is considerably lower compared to public preschools. Another achievement of the Croatian public education system is the entitlement to preschool education from the age of six months to compulsory school age. Targeted programmes for minority children are also considered to be successful by the union.

### *Key challenges*

The educational parts of preschool programmes in Croatia are funded by the central government, while the local authorities provide funds for care, nutrition, building maintenance etc. Parents' contribution is approximately 30% of the total costs. The biggest share of the funds, however, has to be provided by the local authorities.

The split administrative responsibilities and funding sources make it difficult for the union to negotiate “collective agreements”. For the central government, on the other hand, the split responsibility is a serious obstacle for implementing policies regarding professionalisation and accessibility.

### *Lessons learned and recommendations*

According to TUWPSEC, six key features can be identified that form the basis of any successful public preschool system:

- Accessibility for all children
- Accessibility from an early age, in connection with parental leave
- Full day provision, in line with parents' working hours
- Provision of high quality meals for all children
- Integrated provision of education and care in one public institution
- General staff qualification at tertiary degree level.



## 3.4 Germany

### 3.4.1 Bildung:elementar: Curriculum development and evaluation as participatory action research

#### *Background to the project*

In 2002, the Ministry for Health and Social Affairs of the German federal State of Saxony-Anhalt commissioned the Early Childhood and Profession Unit at Halle University to develop an early childhood curriculum for publicly funded ECE services. Early education had only recently gained attention of policy makers in Germany; for the first time a considerable public debate on the appropriateness of the education system in general, and of the early years education in particular was taking shape. Being a federal State, Germany's education system is somewhat fragmented as the responsibility for education lies with the 16 States instead of the federal government. Moreover, *Kindergarten*, the German ECE institution, traditionally used to be administered by Departments of Families and Social Affairs as the early years were not seen as part of the education system. In former East Germany, which the State of Saxony-Anhalt is part of, *Kindergarten* had been part of the *unified socialist education system* but this was abolished after reunification. The West German education system, which was extended to the entire reunited country in 1990, never knew formal curricula or education frameworks for pre-primary education. But in 2002, for the first time, early childhood curricula were being developed in all of the 16 German *Länder*.

In Saxony-Anhalt the Ministry could be persuaded that the new curriculum would have to be developed in close collaboration with practitioners if it was to have an impact on every day practice. Therefore, the project group at Halle University worked closely with a number of ECE centres in the State and involved a large number of practitioners, parents and service providers in the process (Urban, Huhn, & Schaaf, 2004). As a result of this collaborative action research approach the curricular framework (called *bildung:elementar*) abstains from listing early learning goals or achievements expected from individual children. Instead, it is organised as a framework of questions for practitioners working with young children, expecting outcomes to be achieved by autonomous professionals. It is, in this regard, a framework for professional development rather than a curriculum. In 2004, the document was published and made mandatory for all ECE services for children 0-6 in the State of Saxony-Anhalt. It was agreed between the Ministry, welfare organisations, service providers and project team, that the implementation of the new curriculum would be collaboratively evaluated in 2007.

As part of the (ongoing) implementation of the *bildung:elementar* framework, some twenty ECE centres across the State participated in a project called *Qualifizierung der Kindertagesstätte zu einem Zentrum frühkindlicher Bildung* (ECE services qualifying as centres of competence for education in the early years). Their process was subject to the evaluation discussed in this report.

### The project consisted of three stages :

1. From spring 2006, teams of professional educators in the participating centres, together with management and service provider, developed their own approach to enhancing the quality of their educational practice and to implementing the *bildung:elementar* framework. They received external support from experienced trainers or 'coaches'.
2. In 2007, in every centre, *bildung:elementar* project workers conducted separate group meetings with staff, management and heads of centres. During those meetings, core criteria were discussed and agreed upon, that would allow to describe and evaluate the pedagogical quality of every day work at the centre.
3. In 2008, external experts were invited to evaluate all participating centres against the jointly developed criteria.  
At the end of this process, the external evaluators were asked to recommend whether or not the centre should be awarded the status of a centre of competence.

The main challenges teams were dealing with during the first phase of the project, according to *bildung:elementar*, emerged around the issues listed below:

- Strengthening decision making competence and developing a sense of responsibility within the service provider organisation
- Promoting and developing leadership competences at management level
- Setting 'developmental tasks' for the entire organisation and working creatively on achieving it
- Promoting an attitude of quality and professionalism in the entire team
- Acknowledging, respecting and empowering parents as most important *Bildungspartner* of their children
- Creating publicity and achieving transparency
- Purposefully gaining and using external and/or academic support
- Keeping focused on professional tasks in order to achieve the status of centre of competence.



### *Key factors to success*

The most important factor named by the *bildung:elementar* team is the collaborative approach to the evaluation:

*"Focus was placed not only on the team/the practitioner herself (or the head teacher or the supporting organisation/management respectively) but on their concerted work towards the targets."*

### *Key challenges*

*bildung:elementar* reports that some of the participating teams found it difficult to "grasp the idea of the developmental task". Tasks were set rather broad and unspecific, making them difficult to achieve or evaluate in practice. Some chose a task they had been working on before the actual project started, while others took the opportunity to set out on a completely new task, taking advantage of the external support. The different approaches provided potential obstacles for the external evaluators. They also raised questions about the 'measurability' of the processes involved:

*"In some cases what the teams had achieved was a lot – in relation to their initial position – but not very much at all – in relation to the standards (that were jointly agreed upon, M.U.)"*

Other difficulties arose from the general brief of the project. Since the aim of the funding Ministry was to award centre of competence status to those that met the criteria, it proved to be difficult to praise and appreciate achievements of all participating institutions:

*"[...] in the end there had to be a decision – either yes, good enough to be called centre of competence or no ... This is discouraging and might even stop further development."*

The openness of the approach was promising and problematic at the same time: A clear goal had been set (by the funder) to develop participating institutions to centres of competence – but duties and responsibilities of such a centre were not clearly defined.

A major challenge for a collaborative approach, as taken by *bildung:elementar* in this project, arises from the diverse experience and background of the individuals involved. "Quality", as it turned out, has to be enhanced in pedagogical practice as well as in the supporting process:

*"It became clear that the quality of the coaching process varied widely. There is no agreement on what makes a 'good' coach in Germany yet. This I find critical in order to support professional development in the field."*

### *Lessons learnt and recommendations*

There are a number of recommendations that can be drawn from the experiences of this project. Perhaps the most important one is that collaborative and dialogic processes are appropriate for developing the quality of early education in an entire education system. The project successfully involved individual practitioners, entire teams of professionals, provider organisations and reached out to the level of education policy in the State. Evaluation, *bildung:elementar* concludes, "should be done by the participants themselves in order to perpetuate a process of learning and organisational development".

Having gone through the process for three years, the project team now strongly suggests keeping the learning process separate from predefined outcomes – in this case the external award of the status of competence centre. Transparency is crucial – perceived "hidden agendas" will almost certainly jeopardise the process.

### **3.4.2 The Union's perspective: Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft**

In their response to this study, the German teachers' union, *Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft (GEW)*, elucidates the role of early childhood education in the German welfare system as being one of three pillars in the system of child and youth services. GEW refers to the *Kinder- und Jugendhilfegesetz (KJHG)* or *Child and Youth Welfare Act*, which provides the legal ground for early childhood services at federal level. Being a federal State, however, policy responsibilities are shared between different levels of government in Germany. Education and welfare are two important policy areas that lie exclusively at the responsibility of the 16 State governments; the *Kinder- und Jugendhilfegesetz* is no more than a framework. It does, however, grant an entitlement to a place in a Kindergarten for every child from age three to compulsory school age. Kindergarten is the key component of the German early childhood education system. The term describes an early childhood institution with a social-pedagogical approach combining education and care.

The entitlement is limited to four to six hours per day in most States and since Kindergarten is publicly funded but fee-paying, not all children are attending.



GEW strongly demands increased accessibility:

*"The GEW demands that a legally guaranteed claim to education and care in a day-care centre for all children between 0 and 14 years be implemented without restriction. Every facility has to be open all day and provide lunch for the children."*

### ***Workforce issues, including gender and qualifications***

According to GEW, the German early childhood sector faces major recruitment problems. Gender disparity adds to the problematic outlook:

*"One of the biggest problems is the lack of young people in the profession. It's still almost exclusively women working in this profession. Compared with other careers for women, however, it has become much less attractive. Payment is poor, the workload is high and there are hardly any opportunities for advancement. It is to be suspected that not the best school leavers are interested in this profession, but only those who can't find another vacancy. This will cause massive problems with regard to the improvement of educational quality. Therefore, the GEW calls for an explicit upgrading of the profession, a general education at colleges and considerably better payment."*

### ***Successful examples and promising developments***

The Union acknowledges the entitlement to a place in Kindergarten, although an expansion to full day sessions is strongly requested.

On the positive side, efforts are currently taken by the federal government to expand services for children under the age of three. Following an amendment to the child and youth care act, an entitlement to a place in a Kindergarten/ Crèche will be in place from 2013. As it is estimated that approximately 35% of children under the age of three will attend, some 100,000 additional places will have to be provided.

Relating to the quality of provision, GEW recognises the efforts that have been taken by State and federal government and by provider organisations since the early 1990's. GEW identifies two crucial elements in the strategies towards improving quality: early childhood curricula have been developed and put in place in each of the 16 States, and noticeable efforts are taken to increase participation in professional development and further education. The Union is committed to contribute to this positive development:

“The GEW will also continue to develop the area of professional further education and make considerably more offers for trade unionists.”

Degree courses in Early Childhood Studies are now being developed by German University Colleges (*Fachhochschule*). GEW welcomes this development as it is the Union’s position that all early childhood professionals should be educated to BA degree level.

### **Key challenges**

There are three main strands that need critical attention immediately, as they are causing severe quality problems in the early childhood sector.

First, the pressure to increase provision, especially for children under the age of three, has sparked a discussion that will potentially question the non-profit nature of German early childhood education. Until now, only non-profit providers and provider organisations receive public funding. Therefore, the majority of services (app. two thirds) are provided by welfare organisations and charities which are both denominational and non-denominational. Local authorities also provide early childhood services; traditionally, the number of centres run by municipalities is higher in former East Germany. Since there is no funding available for for-profit providers, their role has been marginal until to date. This is likely to change as the federal government seeks to open the sector for privately owned businesses in an attempt to create more Kindergarten places. GEW, in line with welfare organisations and charities, rejects any marketisation of public education.

A second area of concern for GEW is the transition from preschool to primary school education. According to the union there is an urge for better cooperation and coordination between the institutions. The early years sector is increasingly expected to work towards “school readiness”, which, too often is wrongly understood as homogenising the diverse group of children leaving Kindergarten to enter primary school. Instead, GEW argues that “schools have to be ‘competent for children’ rather than children be made ‘ready for school’.”

Third, language education is an issue that often contributes to the problematic relationship between Kindergarten and primary school. The focus on fostering children’s German language competences is often accompanied by a disregard for their first or family language. While children’s language skills are regularly being assessed, tests are often carried out too late. They generally assess children against the schools’ expectations instead of documenting actual communication capabilities. GEW therefore demands that more attention should be paid to “children’s communication behaviour throughout their time in the day care centre. This also includes competences in their non-German mother tongue”.



## 3.5 Ireland

### 3.5.1 Organising childcare workers : The Association of Childcare Professionals

One of the main characteristics of early childhood systems that differentiate between childcare and *early education* is the deep split in the workforce, usually between *childcare workers* and *early childhood teachers*. This conceptual divide has very practical consequences for the members of the work-force as childcare workers are often formally less qualified and poorly paid. Teachers' unions have been struggling for better work conditions for their members – there are successful examples from many countries. However, a key obstacle to overcoming the unacceptable work conditions of staff working with very young children (and with older children in out-of-school services) is that teachers' unions in split systems usually do not represent childcare workers, leaving a major part of the early years system frail and disorganised.

While unions concerned with Education For All must clearly address this problem and actively approach, and give voice to childcare workers in order to overcome inequitable education systems, this has yet to be achieved in many countries. It is therefore worthwhile to shed light on a groundbreaking initiative from County Cork, Ireland.

Taking a bottom-up approach and grounded in the context of local practice, a group of childcare professionals have set up the Association of Childcare Professionals (ACP). In the Irish context, it is a unique and unprecedented attempt to organise practitioners in an important part of the early childhood sector whose interests have not been represented by a professional body to date.

#### *Background of project*

The group, that has been initiated, among others, by the coordinator of the Cork City Childcare Committee, has established a professional body for childcare workers. Its scope is broader than the union's as it represents practitioners in early childhood care and education, as well as in out-of-school childcare. According to its mission statement, the group is open "for all those working with children from across a wide range of service provision". Given the diversity of services for young children in Ireland this includes practitioners working in:

- sessional pre-school / playgroup settings
- Full day care settings
- Montessori schools
- Naionrai (Irish language provision)

- Steiner schools
- Community and family centres with childcare provision
- Workplace crèches
- After school services
- Childminders offering home based Family Day Care
- Educational Institute crèches.

The aims of ACP are

- to define a professional identity for people working in the early years and school aged child-care sector
- to form a body to which workers can affiliate
- to advocate for the rights of its members to equitable pay and work conditions
- to promote, develop and support the continuing professional development of childcare professionals.

Now in the second year of its existence, ACP already represents 200 members from the local area.

### *Key factors to success*

The list of institutional and informal settings from which ACP is recruiting its members clearly shows that none of these practitioners are represented by the teachers' unions. Bringing them together in a professional body, for the first time, is a remarkable achievement. ACP's obvious success seems to originate from a fortunate combination of a group of childcare activists (who strongly believe in the need to professionalise the work with young children outside the compulsory school) and a sector that, facing dramatic changes and challenges, is increasingly sensitive to its important role in a changing society: "The time seemed right in Ireland".

*"We planned and carried out public meetings for a two year period so consultation and discussion took place. We have a committed and interested Council of hard working women."*

### *Key challenges*

One of the major obstacles for self-organised groups is the lack of support and resources. In the case of the Cork Association of Childcare Professionals, another challenge had to be met. Being a pioneering initiative, there were simply no examples to follow:



*"We have to do anything and everything by ourselves. There are few models to follow from within the sector in Ireland. Pay and conditions remain hindered by the way the sector is funded.*

*So far we only accept applications from our own County (Cork) and we are encouraging others to set up [similar local ACP branches, M.U.] in other areas of the Country."*

### *Lessons learnt and recommendations*

ACP has experienced a key issue of sustainability – and they are clearly expressing it:

*"We have to do things for ourselves.*

*Change must come from within the sector. We have waited too long for someone to do it for us.*

*We have everything we need in terms of skills to change things ourselves."*

## **3.5.2 The Union's perspective : Irish National Teachers' Organisation**

### *The general picture*

According to the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) the early childhood education and care sector in Ireland has undergone dramatic changes in recent years. There is a clear distinction between services for children under the age of four (childcare) and early education. Childcare services remain fragmented; accessibility and affordability are major issues. Primary school provision starts at four, with approximately half of all four year olds and almost all five year olds attending in classes of up to 30 children.

INTO identifies several factors that contribute to the recent shift in policy debate and strategy. Growing recognition of the "rights and needs" of children liaise with changing working patterns of parents (mothers in particular) and an increasingly acknowledged right of working parents to high quality childcare. Another influential strand in the policy debate is concerned with a compensatory approach and early intervention for disadvantaged children and children with special needs. All in all, these developments have led to a number of policy initiatives in the area.

Although the Office of the Minister for Children was set up in 2006 following a critical review of the Irish early childhood sector by the OECD (2004a), the lack of “coordination between government departments and state-agencies with responsibility for various aspects of ECCE” is still a key issue, according to INTO. There is also a concern that the lack of a coherent national policy on ECE has led to the growth of an “ad-hoc system of pre-school providers that has been bolstered by a policy of payments to parents to choose their preferred provider”.

The current trend for direct payment to parents is encouraging private enterprises to develop and provide services in the area of early education. This is a major cause of concern for INTO. According to INTO, health and safety regulations must be adhered to by all providers. But there are no educational standards in place, other than in primary school.

### *Funding issues*

In the light of the aforementioned experiences, INTO is in favour of a coherent state-funded pre-school and childcare system that would be accessible to all children.

The split between early education and childcare is reflected in the funding and salary structures. While teachers in infant class (children age four to six in the primary school system) and in state-funded, targeted programmes (e.g. Early Start) receive the same salary as other primary school teachers, childcare workers do not. Salaries of childcare workers in Early Start services are determined by the State but are less than teachers’ salaries. In the voluntary sector, salaries for neither teachers nor childcare workers are regulated.

State funding for capital costs and staffing is available only for some community based services, targeted at children and families from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Thus, community organisations are enabled to provide subsidised early education and care services. In general, parents have to cover the total cost of childcare, pre-school and after-school services.

In 2006 a childcare supplement was introduced, payable to all parents of children under the age of 6. In line with the policy of direct money transfer to parents (as opposed to funding services), the intention behind the supplement is to help parents to cover the costs of childcare services provided by the “market”. In 2008, the payment was increased and, according to INTO, it is likely that this policy will continue.

INTO argues for an expansion of the state-funded Early Start programme, which currently comprises only 40 schools. All areas designated disadvantaged should benefit from this programme.



INTO is also seeking a lower teacher-pupil ratio in the early years' provision in the primary school sector (infant class), an annual grant for equipment and materials and the appointment of classroom assistants as well as continuous professional development.

### *Workforce issues, including gender and qualifications*

One concern of INTO is, that while there is a government initiative to develop an National Training Strategy for the workforce in early childhood education and care, there is little recognition of the need for continuous professional development of primary school teachers.

It is evident that the vast majority (85%) of Irish primary teachers are women. Since all teaching staff is part of the primary school system, and individual teachers deployed to different age groups by the school principal, INTO does not have an overview over the gender composition of teachers working in the early years (four to six). In 2006, the Minister for Education launched a campaign to encourage men to take up a career in the early years.

While all primary school teachers are formally qualified to teach children from age four, INTO demands more time for the early years' module that is an integral part of pre-service teacher education in Ireland.

Due to an increasing number of degree courses in early years' studies, the number of graduates working in the sector has been increasing over the last ten years. However, INTO demands that every teacher working with young children should have a qualification at degree level, and there should be a minimum qualification requirement (Level 5 of the National Qualifications Framework) for assistants in pre-schools.

### *Successful examples and promising developments*

The move towards a National Quality Framework, developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), is generally welcomed by the union. However, INTO's concern is that the framework remains voluntary. Siolta, the National Quality Framework is one pillar in the attempt to bring more coherence into the Irish early childhood sector. A second one is a National Curriculum Framework for children from birth to six that is currently being developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). INTO sees these as positive developments but is critical of the conditions of their implementation which will require adequate funding and support for professional development.

### *Key challenges*

A major challenge, according to INTO will be to overcome the disparities in class size and adult-child ratio between infant classes in primary schools and private pre-schools. INTO argues that the curriculum in the primary school infant classes tends to be more formal due to the large class sizes.

To secure adequate funds remains the second challenge for the early childhood system in Ireland:

*“Funding for young children in the Irish education system compares poorly to European standards, or to per capita government investment in third level education.”*

As mentioned above, raising the general qualification level of staff (pre-service as well as in-service) is another key task yet to be accomplished.

Despite the efforts that have been made by the government in recent years, the fragmentation of the early childhood sector, remains the major obstacle for developing a coherent and equitable early childhood system in Ireland:

*“Traditionally the Department of Education & Science does not see the education of children under 4 as its responsibility. It has limited its involvement to early intervention for children with special needs and children in socio-economically disadvantaged areas.”*

### *Lessons learnt and recommendations*

There are a number of improvements INTO would like to see in the Irish ECE sector and in the provision for four to six year olds in primary schools in particular. However, the existence of a state funded, high quality primary education system that is monitored and evaluated by the Department of Education is seen as a benefit.

While parents welcome the assistance in childcare costs through the childcare supplements, INTO strongly recommends that funds should be made available to providers rather than individual “customers” to ensure high quality childcare provision.

INTO welcomes the development of a curricular framework that covers the whole pre-compulsory school age, regardless of the type of setting. The curriculum is not operational yet.

Finally, INTO insists that staff in early childhood need to have access to support services similar to primary school teachers, including “support and guidance on curriculum, pedagogical and whole school planning issues”.



## 3.6 Poland

### 3.6.1 ECE in transition: Where there are no preschools (yet)

Poland provides a good example of a post-communist country in transformation. Remnants of the once universal state-run preschool system can be found in the cities, while provision in rural areas has been in decline ever since the early 1990s. It is in this context that non-governmental organisations are beginning to explore alternative approaches, and are striving to establish additional early education services throughout the country. One of them, the Comenius Foundation for Child Development, is running a programme to help local communities, especially in rural areas, to set up educational services for young children and their families *where there are no preschools*.

#### *Background to the project*

The long-term goal of the *Where There Are No Preschools* programme (WTANP) is to provide equal educational opportunities for children aged three to five years, especially in rural areas with high unemployment figures. WTANP has been developed in response to the growing inequalities in the education of young children in Poland. Poland has the lowest preschool attendance figures within the European Union (38% average, but down to 15% in rural areas). According to WNTAP, figures are even lower in some parts of the country:

*"In eight Polish provinces the figures are lower than 10 per cent, and in the province of Podlasie it is only 4 per cent. In more than 850 rural communities there is not a single preschool open."*

*Where There Are No Preschools* helps local communities to create new educational arrangements for children aged three to five in rural areas with no preschool facilities. Those community-run services are referred to as "alternative forms" of pre-school education in the Polish context.

WTANP draws on experiences from Portugal (*itinerant teachers*), and follows the example of the rural preschool clubs that operated in Poland between the two world wars and in the 1950s. WTANP is flexible, so it can be adjusted to specific local needs and financial budgets.

The pilot phase involved eight rural communities, where 23 pre-school centres were created. It was initiated by the Polish Children and Youth Foundation in 2001; the Comenius Foundation has been responsible for the programme since 2003. To date, WTANP works with 100 communities that are operating 300 pre-schools; 4,000 children participate in the programme.

WTANP has developed a comprehensive approach, tailored to the needs of rural communities. It includes :

- training modules for teachers, parents and local authorities
- a group of trainers and methodology advisers
- work plans for teachers at the pre-school centres
- organisational and teaching standards for the centres
- a system of educational supervision
- educational materials for teachers and parents
- a manual for rural communities with detailed information on how to create preschool centres.

WTANP pre-schools are set up in different locations, depending on what is locally available. They can be found in art centres, school buildings or community libraries. The educational programme operates 9 to 20 hours per week, according to demand and local budget. A key characteristic of WTANP pre-schools is that they are staffed with trained teachers who are responsible for groups of no more than 10 children aged three to five. Parents are invited to participate in the classroom activities. All WTANP pre-school teachers have completed a 100-hour training programme developed and delivered by the Comenius Foundation. The training covers areas like working with mixed age groups, involvement of parents and local communities and working with a project approach. WTANP is continuously monitoring the quality of the work and offers ongoing support and supervision to practitioners.

### *Key factors to success*

According to the project group, 7 measurable key achievements mark the success of the programme :

- *“More children have access to preschool education. In the communities involved in WTANP, the preschool attendance figures have gone up by 15 per cent on average. In many communities Preschool Centres have made it possible to offer early education and care to more than 50 percent of local children aged three to five; in several communities almost all the children aged three to five have been given access to preschool education.*
- *New jobs are created. The programme has facilitated the creation of new jobs for unemployed women – about 50 per cent of teachers who now work at the centres used to be unemployed.*
- *Parents are involved. The programme involves parents in helping the centres. Most of them assist teachers in the classroom, offering support and carrying out logistic tasks.*
- *Children are better prepared for school. Research conducted by the Warsaw School of Social Psychology under Dr Olaf Zyllicz shows that children*



who attend the centres are well prepared socially, mentally and emotionally to start school.

- *The public approves the programme. Research conducted for the past three years by students at the Faculty of Pedagogy at Lodz University shows that rural communities see the centres as places that offer better education for children.*
- *Alternative education is part of the European Social Fund. The Ministry of Education has asked us to lay down the principles for alternative forms of preschool education; our ideas are now a part of educational equity projects implemented under programs operated by the European Social Fund.*
- *Alternative education is part of educational legislation. In partnership with other NGOs we have inspired a number of amendments to educational legislation to enable local communities to create alternative forms of preschool education."*

### **Key challenges**

While WTANP has created huge benefits for children, families and practitioners, the project is also facing severe difficulties. The Polish Teachers' Union (ZNP) is strongly opposing any form of so called "alternative form" of pre-school education, mainly because of concerns about the quality of the programmes.

Besides driving the development 'on the ground', the Comenius Foundation is constantly engaging with education policy at national level. Part of this advocacy work is the Foundation's campaign to include "adequate quality-ensuring provisions" in the regulations issued by the Polish Ministry of Education.

### **Lessons learnt and recommendations**

WTANP's mission is to create new solutions and to introduce change to an education system that is perceived as stagnant and not meeting the needs of children and families. This can only be achieved, the project has learnt, through close collaboration and open communication with all stakeholders. There are four central conclusions to be drawn from the project's experience:

**Pilot** the new solution together with the group – in our case it was a close cooperation with rural municipalities, teachers and parents.

**Evaluate** the effects of new solution using external academic institution in order to have solid evidences of success – in our case it was cooperation with Warsaw School of Social Psychology .

**Promote** new solutions through media, conferences, educational materials.

**Build** a broad coalition of supporters who help us to advocate new solutions – in our case it was coalition of non governmental organizations, academics, local municipalities representatives and media.

### 3.6.2 The Union's perspective: Związek Nauczycielstwa Polskiego

#### *The general picture*

Związek Nauczycielstwa Polskiego (ZNP), the Polish Teachers' Union, provides detailed information about the situation and recent developments in the preschool system. On the whole, according to ZNP, the situation is characterised by the transformation of public institutions since the 1990s:

*After the political transformation in Poland, in the 90s the pre-school education system has nearly fallen apart. Over 50% of kindergartens mainly in rural areas have been closed."*

While over 4.500 preschools have been closed in total, there is a clear divide between urban and rural areas. According to figures published by the Ministry of Education, 51,2% of all services have been closed in rural areas, compared to 26,8% in urban areas. For ZNP, decentralisation of public funds is the main explanation for these developments: The local level of government (the Boroughs) had been given the responsibility of funding the services without adequate financial resources. As a consequence, today, preschool education in Poland today covers less than 30% of 3 year olds, 41,2% of 4 year olds and 51,2% of 5 year olds. 2005 figures show that over 650.000 children did not attend any form of preschool at all.

There is a significant rise in attendandance figures for 6 year olds, since almost all of them (97,6%) attend the compulsory preschool preparation year. This can take place in a Kindergarten as well as in so called kindergarten-divisions attached to primary schools. In fact, many Boroughs only realise kindergarten divisions in primary schools, which is also due to the fact that this form of provision receives less funding than the 3 to 5 Kindergarten.

As a consequence, ZNP state "that in case of rural areas we may speak only of pre-school education of 6 year olds which de facto is obligatory."

ZNP acknowledges government attempts to change the picture, but is generally critical of so called "alternative forms" of preschool education as they "are generally meant for a small number of children, functioning only a few hours per week and realising only fragments of basic curriculum chosen by the teacher".

#### *Funding issues*

As already mentioned above, public preschool education in Poland has been decentralised and the responsibility for both governance and funding shifted to the

local authorities (Boroughs). Costs for building maintenance, equipment, salaries etc. have to be covered by local revenues which vary largely between local authorities. As a consequence, one increasingly “popular” way of reducing costs for local authorities is to refrain from offering preschool services at all, with the exception of compulsory “Kindergarten divisions” for six year olds in primary schools.

According to ZNP, private Kindergartens receive a 75% subsidy per child from the Borough. The so called “alternative forms” of preschool provision receive no less than 40% of their expenses.

In addition to the public funding, parents pay a monthly fee for attendance exceeding five hours per day. They also have to cover the costs of meals and optional additional classes such as language or music. Due to this funding pattern, local authorities tend to prefer the “alternative forms”, which are provided mostly by associations and foundations (e.g. the Comenius Foundation for Child Development, see above).

ZNP seems to be ambivalent about this development. From their perspective, preschool education in general may well benefit:

*“[...] thanks to the low costs of maintenance and the availability of EU funds the alternative forms of preschool education may become a very popular method of popularising preschool education.”*

On the other hand, with an agenda driven by financial concerns only, questions about quality, content and effectiveness need to be raised:

*“The decisions concerning preschool education are determined by the financial issues. There is a lack of assessment of preschool education quality and the debate on curriculum and pre-school education methods. There is no research conducted on the early childhood education, its effects and education policy in this area.”*

### ***Workforce issues, including gender and qualifications***

2006/07 figures show about 57.300 teachers employed in public preschools in Poland. This refers to staff holding the qualification and professional status of teacher, which is regulated by the “Teachers’ Charter”. Other (“non pedagogical”) staff employment is regulated through the Labour Code and “particular rules apply to local government employees”.

It is remarkable, though, that Polish preschool teachers are enjoying pay parity with teachers in the compulsory school system.

Employment requirement for teachers is generally a Masters degree, or a vocational degree with additional pedagogical training. Pre-school teachers may also

be employed with a degree from a Teacher Training School. According to ZNP, most teachers strive for the highest achievable level of qualification (5 years Master or 3 years professional training plus 2 years of study), due to a highly competitive labour market.

ZNP has successfully lobbied to ensure equal qualification levels throughout the sector. The 2006 “Teachers Charter” requires teachers working in “alternative forms” of preschool education to have the same qualifications as teachers in the public system.

Gender equity is a largely unresolved issue in Polish preschools. According to ZNP there are no data available on gender distribution of preschool staff. In primary school, however, only 0.9% of all teachers are male and it is assumed that in the preschool education the figures are even lower.

In addition to the comparatively low salaries of teachers in general – which, according to ZNP, makes teaching an unattractive career for men – prevailing gender stereotypes also contribute to male underrepresentation:

*“Fairly low wages make the profession of teacher unattractive for men. Also a domination of women may be a barrier discouraging young men to undertaking a teacher’s career especially in Kindergartens (stereotypes in the roles of men and women).”*

ZNP identifies a clear need for a public debate on this issue and to launch a campaign to encourage men to choose early education as a career.

### *Successful examples and promising developments*

ZNP considers the high standards of public preschool education in Poland a major achievement:

*“[...] Kindergartens are well equipped with didactical tools and high norms (qualifications of staff, equipment, safety) which must be satisfied are a guarantee for the high level of classes and children’s safety.”*

The union also supports the government’s current move to promote preschool education throughout the country. They are, on the other hand, critical of a possible loss of quality if this is realised through “alternative forms” of preschool education:

*“it may cost the quality of this education because so called alternative forms will not realise full preschool curriculum but only its fragments”.*

### *Key challenges*

This concern links directly to the key challenge addressed by ZNP: Poland will have to increase pre-school provision significantly without giving away the achievements of the public preschool system. The union is highly critical of the move towards NGO's becoming preschool providers as it argues that quality cannot be maintained by "creating a web of alternative establishments which de facto will be more of childcare establishments than Kindergartens."

One important step towards universal, high quality public preschool education would be, according to ZNP, that preschool education be recognised as the first step of the public education system. This recognition would have to be matched with adequate public funding from the national budget.

### *Lessons learnt and recommendations*

ZNP clearly states that the public preschool system in Poland can only be developed (or the status quo ante recreated) with substantial funding from the national budget. Action needs to be taken quickly to counter the increasing lack of preschool places in many areas.

ZNP is therefore promoting an amendment to the law which – if passed by Parliament – would guarantee preschools national funding similar to compulsory schools. This would stop, ZNP argues, the trend to increase parents' fees, commercialise preschool education and guarantee accessibility especially for children from disadvantaged contexts.

It would also counter the trend towards NGO-run preschool provision: "the biggest misunderstanding is the so called alternative forms of Kindergartens".

## **3.7 Spain**

### **3.7.1 A need, a desire, a shared responsibility: Rosa Sensat's Teachers' School**

#### *Background to the project*

*I am completely persuaded of the importance, the urgency, of the democratization of the public school, and of the ongoing training of its educators, among whom I include security people, cafeteria personnel, and custodians, and so on. Their formation must be ongoing and scientific. Nor should it fail to instil a taste for democratic practices,*

*among which should be an ever more active intervention on the part of educants and their families as to which direction the school is going.*  
(Freire, 2004, p. 14)

It is unlikely that Paolo Freire knew about the group of Catalonian teachers that founded a professional association to realise their mission of a reformed and truly democratic public school in a country that had suffered badly from decades of fascist dictatorship. But it is not hard to imagine that Rosa Sensat is exactly the kind of project he had in mind when he wrote *Pedagogy of Hope*. The Barcelona-based initiative, Rosa Sensat, is an extraordinary example of what can be achieved for practitioners by practitioners. Moreover, Rosa Sensat and its people clearly demonstrate that there is no such a thing as apolitical education. The following account was provided by Rosa Sensat for this study. It is presented here in full text in order to preserve its original spirit.

*Rosa Sensat was founded on the basis of a need, a desire, a hope, a shared responsibility. The fascist dictatorship suffered in the country for more than 40 years did not succeed to silence the voice of teachers who believed in pedagogical renovation and who survived the tragedy of the civil war. These teachers, instead, learnt to talk quietly, to act secretly, clandestinely.*

*In the 50's, teachers and families created some first schools, in an initiative grounded in the will for the recovery of the republican school, a school where children can express freely and have the chance to acknowledge their own reality. Those are schools that recover the pedagogical tradition of a school of all the children and for all the children, no matter their back-ground, with no segregation whatsoever. Those schools were founded in different cities and established some coordination among them, sharing the pedagogical and social principles of the New School: an active school, a co-educative school, a lay school, a school where team work is fostered and in which families actively participate.*

*As a result of the political situation, however, in these times it was impossible to develop a democratic school, partly because many teachers did not know what such a school was. And this lack is the main reason for the birth of a "teachers' school", a teachers' school with an organization and contents that allowed for young teachers and practitioners to discover a new education and, through a new education, a new school.*

*In September 1965, the Rosa Sensat Teachers' School was founded. In this school everything was done with scarce material resources, but with a great deal of hope and confidence in the young teachers who, in very short time (a single year) could gather enough knowledge and enthusiasm in favour of a new education.*

*Rosa Sensat Teachers' School has one requirement: all the attendees had to work in a school. It was essential that during the mornings everyone was working at school so that in the afternoons they could attend the teachers' school.*



*The teachers working in these schools were, mainly, colleagues with a larger experience. Some of them, such as Marta Mata (one of the driving forces of Rosa Sensat's school), had experienced as children the school of the Spanish Republic. Others had travelled around Europe and knew about other ways to educate and to manage a school; some others had had the chance to read the books of forbidden authors, such as Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori, Decroly, Dewey. And all these teachers had shared and discussed their experiences and lectures with teachers who had suffered reprisals organised by the fascist dictatorship, such as Alexandre Gali, Engeleta Ferrer, Artur Martorell.*

*Besides these teachers and colleagues, many other people came to Rosa Sensat Teachers' School. The teachers attending could share an afternoon with artists, intellectuals, literary authors and other significant personalities in the field of culture.*

### **The Summer School**

*In July 1966, Rosa Sensat started a new training: the Escola d'Estiu, the Summer School, an intense training during the first fortnight in July. The Summer School is characterised by its openness, its will for dialogue with all the teachers who are interested in pedagogical renovation, who do not miss the past but who instead think of the past as a stimulus for the future. It is an open training for teachers from Euskadi, Galicia, Andalucía, Madrid – but also from Italy, France, the UK, the Nordic countries or Latin America. A territorial, cultural and linguistic openness, possible because we all share some realities and challenges to school and education.*

### **A commitment, a style**

*Currently Rosa Sensat is a Teachers' Association. But as it has always happened, it is more than a Teachers' School and more than a Summer School. Rosa Sensat has, for instance, a library with more than 60,000 books on education and school, on pedagogical sciences and education, on didactics and scientific knowledge, but also with an extensive collection of literature books for children. A library where anyone can find the inspiration for the school library.*

*Rosa Sensat also edits different publications, with collections of books and magazines, as another element for the training of teachers. As a consequence, the contents of these books reflect on innovative practices of teachers and schools, as well as on the most recent theories or ideas on education.*

*Rosa Sensat also hosts a number of work groups where teachers meet in a systematic way to share their successes and doubts, and to discuss and construct the present and the future together. It might sound strange, but some days, activity fills every corner in Rosa Sensat, and our facilities resemble an anthill, crammed with people working to change or improve their daily practice and education as a whole.*

### *Key factors to success*

*It is precisely because of its commitment and style that one might think the history of Rosa Sensat is a paradox, since from its very beginnings one of its main trends is to reclaim that the activities the association develops are done by the responsible or competent institutions. In this way, Rosa Sensat has never sought to preserve these activities. Instead, its aim is to create, at all times, new spaces, new contributions to the improvement of the country's education and school systems. Therefore, Rosa Sensat accepts that its role is that of a continuous replacement, especially when there is a chance that someone else might develop such tasks. Rosa Sensat is always willing to resign from these tasks if by doing so it favours the "normalisation" of the country. For example: when the Universitat Autònoma (the "Autonomous" University) was founded, and within the University a Teachers' School was founded, Rosa Sensat stopped every activity of initial training in favour of the University. When later on all the teachers could finally be trained in Catalan language, Rosa Sensat also gave up this training. When the competent administrative body started developing the ongoing training for teachers, Rosa Sensat resigned from this training and redefined its offer. This action can be defined as paradoxical, but in truth it is what contributes to the fact that Rosa Sensat is a lively and exceptional organisation. Especially since it is a private institution, a teachers' association that offers a public service.*

### *Key challenges*

Should we have to refer to four key challenges, we would currently mention:

*Keep our capacity for continuous change, our capacity to adapt ourselves to the evolving reality and to keep our freedom to create and act. Therefore, our capacity to be receptive to new needs and to answer to those needs.*

*If openness has always been one of the main trends of Rosa Sensat's work, it is now an exigency, a requirement imposed by globalisation.*

*To be capable to involve and to give the leading part in our work to young teachers, so as to guarantee the continuity of the association.*

*To be capable to surmount the technological gap is essential nowadays.*

### *Lessons learnt and recommendations*

*Maybe the most important lesson learnt is the following: not to pretend being the only people doing what we do. On the contrary, our will is to work so that others create their own movement in favour of teachers and education.*

*This means to be willing to establish links (what we would now call "to create networks").*



*Maybe another lesson learnt is to expose our ideas without unnecessary shrillness, keeping our politeness, but without giving up our ideals.*

*There is another issue that might seem unimportant but has helped us to keep our freedom: it is important to keep a balance between economical aids or grants (in our case, public subsidies) and our own resources. The fact that our own resources are larger than public grants gives us strength and independence to develop a "public" service aimed at our society.*

*No recommendations can be made, since every country is different, and no receipts can be given: the only exception is that maybe one's experience can inspire others.*

### **3.7.2 The Union's perspective: Federación de Enseñanza de CCOO**

#### *The general picture*

Federación de Enseñanza CC.OO., F.E.CC.OO., the Teachers' Federation of the Workers Commissions) begin their statement with a description of the Spanish ECE system, and are emphasising the division between services for children from birth to three and from age three to compulsory school age. Although Spain has, at federal level, placed all services for young children under the responsibility of the Department of Education, there is still a factual split in the system. Similar to France, the Spanish ECE system comprises two distinct "cycles" (0-3/ 3-6) that both have an educational as well as a social welfare component. ECE is, however, not part of the compulsory school system.

The second cycle is described as being "educational in nature". It has a remarkably high enrolment rate, as almost all children attend ECE for the entire duration of the three-year cycle. Although ECE is not compulsory, services for children three to six are often provided by schools:

*"A broad network of institutions amply covers existing demand. In more than 90% of cases, the second cycle of early childhood education is provided in institutions which also provide compulsory primary education."*

This network does not extend, however, to the services and institutions for the youngest children. Although "first cycle" childcare centres for children up to the age of three have an educational role as well, and no clear distinction is made between care and education, they operate separately from the second cycle, which is closer to compulsory schooling. Provision has increased significantly over the last years, mostly for socio-economic reasons, and the union identifies

*"a growing demand resulting from more women joining the labour market as well as from the arrival of large numbers of immigrant families with young children".*

*FECCOO* The teachers' union appreciates that early education and care has reached the political agendas. Nevertheless, from the Union's perspective there are a number of key issues that need further attention. First of all, the union argues, the second ECE cycle for children 3-6 should become compulsory. Within the first cycle (birth to three), both care and education elements need to be defined more clearly. The union also emphasises the importance of more stringent qualification requirements for practitioners at both levels, but in particular for the first cycle. Public investment in ECE needs to be increased.

### *Funding issues*

Public funding of the second cycle is very similar to the compulsory education system, which is not surprising considering its closeness to the school. Nevertheless, there are some remarkable differences. A comparatively high proportion of ECE funding comes through subsidies and "special agreements with the private and voluntary sectors", rather than through direct public funding of ECE services. This may be explained, according to the union, by the fact that universal ECE has been introduced much later, compared to compulsory schooling.

All in all, the funding system for services for children from three to six appears to be secure, although more public investment is needed to ensure the quality of services. For the younger children (first cycle), the picture differs markedly. While demand for childcare places has been growing "exponentially", according to the union, the government has failed to secure funds and plan for provision in this area. As a result, most first cycle services are offered by private-for-profit providers, and, in turn, large parts of the population are excluded as these services are unaffordable for many families.

Federación de Enseñanza CC.OO., F.E.CC.OO. explains that one reason for the insufficient funding for first cycle services is the administrative gap between the federal government and the governments of the Autonomous Regions. While ECE on the whole is under the auspices of the Ministry of Education at federal level, first cycle ECE is administered by Social Welfare Departments (Consejerías de Bienestar Social) in many Autonomous Regions. According to the union, this has resulted in serious public underinvestment and "lax requirements":

*"Some direct financial help has been provided for families and practically all applications for the establishment of childhood education centres have been approved."*

In order to change this situation and to secure sustainable funding for the entire ECE system, the union calls for an increase of public funding in general, and for the system of special agreements ("sistema de concertos") between state and private providers to be extended to first cycle early childhood education.



### *Workforce issues, including gender and qualifications*

The factual split that still exists in administration and funding of Spanish ECE is reflected by the situation of the workforce, which is composed of teachers and “ECE technicians” (Técnicos Superiores en Educación Infantil, TSEI) in the second and first cycles, respectively.

*“In the second cycle, where children are taught by qualified teachers, salaries are similar to those of primary school teachers and the union’s demands are also similar in this respect. Workers in first-cycle centres have different qualifications, and salaries are much lower.”*

In both cycles, however, practitioners are working much longer hours compared to the rest of the education system. This is a consequence of the welfare, or child-care component of a system that has to meet the demands of working parents and match their working hours.

Federación de Enseñanza CC.OO., F.E.CC.OO. demands working hours be reduced and salaries of first cycle practitioners (TSEI) be increased.

With regard to the gender composition of the workforce, the union’s assessment of the situation is straightforward:

*“Most of the workers are women and no specific initiatives [to change this, M.U.] exist on this front.”*

In terms of general workforce qualifications, the union has been successful in securing qualification levels at both cycles of ECE. There are qualified teachers in the second cycle, while qualified early childhood education technicians (TSEI) are working in the first cycle. It is seen as problematic, however, that still no specific training requirements are in place for the classroom assistants working alongside the TSEI and the union is currently working on this issue.

### *Successful examples and promising developments*

Despite the shortcomings listed above, Spanish early childhood services for children 0-3 and 3-6 are understood as being part of the education system, rather than being a detached “childcare” provision. Having opposed so-called reforms that would have limited first cycle services to a childcare role and weakened the educational brief of the second cycle, is seen as a major success by the teachers’ union:

*“Our organisation firmly believes in the educational value of childhood education.”*

The high enrolment rate of nearly 100% of children aged three to six is seen as another positive development in the Spanish ECE system in recent years.

### Key challenges

Accessibility is a key challenge in Spanish ECE, especially for children under the age of three. The gap between demand and available places is increasing rapidly. Since adequate provision has not been planned for on time,

“authorities are forced to improvise, adopting makeshift solutions to provide an immediate response to the problem.”

As already mentioned above, necessary public funding has not been made available and adequate regulation is lacking:

“The sector has been left in private hands, with regulations which are as permissive as possible.”

### Lessons learnt and recommendations

An efficient network of first cycle ECE services has yet to be created. This has been prevented so far by the general lack of provision and governments' attempts to reduce costs “by limiting the educational value of the centres and introducing a reductive welfare approach to childhood education”.

## 3.8 Sweden

### 3.8.1 Sustainable development at the neighbourhood preschool

The first impression of the Swedish preschool curriculum (Lpfö 98) is tangible: comprising only 22 pages, it is the most concise curriculum document in Europe. This, of course, is only possible because, unlike many other European preschool curricula, it abstains from giving direct instructions to practitioners. No detailed “early learning goals” are listed in the document; neither does it come with directions or suggestions for day-to-day activities or assessments. Instead, the Swedish preschool curriculum is a value-based framework that provides fundamental orientation and states overall purposes and goals of preschool in the Swedish society. “All preschool activity should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values”, is the opening statement of the curriculum, and, in consequence, every decision and every activity with children and adults should be oriented towards and evaluated against these values. Children’s rights as citizens of Swedish society are central to the curriculum, as are participation and equity.

Besides making a clear statement about the importance of public education from an early age, the Swedish preschool curriculum is also an impressive declaration of trust in the early childhood profession and its individual members. Highly qua-



lified teaching professionals – who work in a team and are in constant dialogue with children, families and the community – are well able to interpret the values and goals of an open framework and to develop their day-to-day practice according to the needs of the local community. This is the central belief underlying the conceptualisation of the early years' workforce in Sweden.

The following is an example of what this dialogic and reflective practice of *interpretation* and *transfer into practice* can look like in a neighbourhood preschool. The account has been provided by the head teacher of the preschool who describes her role as being “one in a team of three teachers who are responsible for raising the professional qualifications among teachers in preschools in the township”. It has been documented for this study by Maelis Karlsson Lohmander, a researcher and senior lecturer at Göteborg University.

### ***Background to the project***

In 1987 the UN released a report entitled *Our Shared Future*, the so-called Brundtland Report. In that report, sustainable development is understood as “a development that satisfies the needs of today without jeopardising the possibilities for future generations to satisfy their needs”. In Sweden, since 2004, this has become an important issue for all preschools.

Sustainable development is about shared responsibility and solidarity between generations, between women and men, and between people and countries, and it comprises three intertwined dimensions: ecological, economical and social.

In order for this to be achieved, it is important to start early with very young children in early child-hood education/pre-schools. Hence, in pre-school sustainable development is to permeate all activities and everything that goes on there.

In line with the curriculum for pre-school, Lpfö 98, learning for sustainable development is to be grounded in democracy and involves a multi fold of educational approaches where a critical reflective perspective is prevalent. It is easy to agree on the importance of having sustainable development as a foundation for the work in the setting, but the important and sometimes difficult question is: How do we put theory into practice? How do we work with children from the ages of one to five for sustainable development?

### **Ecological dimension**

Members of staff need to act as role models for the children. With young children it is very important to be practical and work with the things that are known to them. In our pre-school we do composting and try to recycle all waste. We try not to waste water and make children aware of the situation for other

children in different parts of the world, where water is a limited resource and where they may have to walk far to get water. Likewise we make sure to switch off the lights when we are not present in a room in order to “save electricity”. When children are drawing we try to make them aware of the fact that paper comes from our trees and that we must not waste paper if we want to preserve the forests. We buy fruits and vegetables from a local shop close to the pre-school and talk to children about what gains we make in doing so.



*Young children learn better through play.*

Together with the children we collect bottle caps, weigh them and talk about the damage they can make in the environment to people and animals, and what we can do if, instead of just throwing them on the ground, we recycle them. We tidy up the surrounding environment to make it nicer and talk about the cost for cleaning this and what we could do with the money if we did not have to spend it on trucks to collect the garbage and take it to the garbage dump.

### **Economical dimension**

This links to the ecological dimension; it is about not wasting materials but recycling and mending things, for example toys that are broken, instead of just buying new. We try to look at it from a global perspective and learn about children from other parts of the world and how they live. We communicate over email with children in other countries.

### **Social dimension**

This is about democracy, equity, giving children a voice, and encouraging them



to talk and express their views and participate in decision-making as much as they can, depending on their age. It is about really involving children in the planning and decision making of daily activities. One example of this may be the meal planning meetings that we have. Two children, four and five year olds, take turns participating in the meal planning meeting on Mondays where they, together with the cook, discuss and decide about the dessert for Friday lunch and then go food shopping.

In regards to gender aspects, we try to encourage boys and girls to participate in activities and play that they do not usually take part in. It is about enriching them not changing them. Hence we try to encourage the girls who may be a bit shy and quiet to speak up and participate in “rough and tumble games” if they want to. Likewise we try to invite boys into the home corner by making it more appealing and by not calling it “home corner” but rather “workshop”.

### ***Key factors to success***

Discussing the key to their achievement – *living* sustainable development on a day-to-day basis with children – the practitioners take a clear professional stand. Support and in service training are essential for developing a professional attitude as described by the team:

*“It is important to be grounded in practice. It is NOT about teaching subjects to the children but about providing an environment characterised by ‘learning by doing and experiencing’. As a preschool teacher you need to have a holistic perspective. And it is crucial that you try to involve parents in your work.”*

### ***Key challenges***

One challenge in regards to gender equity is the fact that the majority of the members of staff are women. It would be beneficial to also have male role models for the children.

The idea of sustainable development and the protection of the environment, not over-consuming and wasting etc., is challenged by the sometimes very aggressive consumer society that we all live in. Through the media, magazines, TV and computers, even our very young children are “drowned” in a message saying “buy this, buy that and you will be happy”.

It can also be challenging to talk about children in other countries not having enough clothes and that what we do in our country matters, that is we can reuse and inherit clothes, buy second hand etc, when the parents of the children spend a lot of money on clothing and dress their children in expensive branded clothes.

And it can be a challenge if in your group of children the majority are in the ages one to three years.

### *Lessons learnt and recommendations*

Be grounded in practice and face your own difficulties and shortcomings. You do not need to be “perfect” when it comes to, for example, recycling. You can still do a good job in the pre-school. It is important to start early to make a difference. Even the very young children (one- and two-year-olds) learn and the older children act as role models for the younger children. The earlier you start the better it is. What you do has implications for the future. It is about taking small steps but even small steps make a difference in the long run and that is very encouraging.

### **3.8.2 The Union’s perspective : Lärarförbundet**

The Swedish member organisation of Education International, Lärarförbundet, starts their description of the overall picture of preschool education in Sweden by providing some basic figures: 80% of all children aged one to five are enrolled in preschool, with an average child to adult ratio of 5:2.

According to Lärarförbundet, 53% of all staff in Swedish preschools are teachers qualified at university level with the majority of those who are not holding a qualification at post-secondary level.

Lärarförbundet situates the preschool within the context of the Swedish welfare state and of the integrated care and education system for children aged one to five (preschool) and six (preschool class). They refer to its “dual purposes of supporting children’s learning and their development regardless of the employment status of their parents”.

The union mentions briefly the national preschool curriculum, which had been introduced in 1998 after the integration of preschool into the general education system: “Goals and guidelines are outlined, but no methods, though the importance of play is emphasised. The goals are process-oriented, and there is no formal (summative) assessment.”

From the union’s perspective, key issues in early childhood education in Sweden include:

- unresolved issues of work organisation and time management (including time for planning and development)
- qualified teachers having to bear the main responsibility for the work (compared to other members of staff), and
- the need for increased funding for research on curricular content.

### *Funding issues*

According to Lärarförbundet, public funds need to be generally increased in order to improve the quality of preschool education. Lärarförbundet is also critical of how existing funds are used. Teachers, the union states, need to have more influence on this.

There are a number of areas where Lärarförbundet would like to see increased teacher influence:

*“Lärarförbundet believes that in order to increase quality, teachers must have more influence over aspects such as group size and composition, professional development, time management, etc.”*

Although operating within a national legislative and curricular framework, actual preschool practice is largely decentralised in Sweden. Both publicly and privately owned preschools are subsidised by government and municipal grants; additional fees paid by parents are income-related. Since pre-school funds are distributed through the local authorities, they vary between municipalities. Therefore, the union criticises, funding inequities arise and, for instance, sufficient numbers of qualified staff cannot be secured in every preschool:

*“ [...] today, teacher density differs greatly within and between municipalities.”*

From the area of immediate practice, staffing etc., funding issues extend to the entire preschool system, including research and development:

*“There is a dire need for the State and municipalities to invest much more in research and development in the field of early childhood education.”*

Although public funding for preschools is generally not at risk in Sweden, there have been fluctuations in the past – and Lärarförbundet is expecting a policy change in the near future. The preschool system is still struggling with the after-effects of budget cuts in the 1990s, which had led to increasing group sizes and worsening work conditions. Over the last decade, the adult-child ratio has been “more stable, but at a higher level than in the early 1990s”. In 2005, funds were earmarked to improve the adult-child ratio but subsequently withdrawn by the newly elected government.

There is growing concern that Sweden is facing a policy shift towards a more market-oriented early childhood system, as the government is expected to introduce a childcare voucher system to enable parents “to buy a place in a public or privately owned preschool”. In addition, from July 2008, municipalities have introduced a voluntary childcare allowance. Both funding instruments seem to mark a shift from funding public services (which has for decades been a key characteristic of the Swedish welfare state) to direct transfer of monies to individuals.

### *Workforce issues, including gender and qualifications*

Lärarförbundet expresses concerns about recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood staff in Sweden, as from their perspective there is “a severe teacher shortage in some municipalities”.

There are, according to the union, obvious reasons for this shortage. Preschool teachers' salaries are at the lower end of the (academic) pay scale, work conditions have not improved (teacher-child-ratio – see above), and teachers' lack of time for planning and preparation. Surveys among preschool teachers suggest that a combination of these hindrances is the main factor for high staff turnover rates and for teachers leaving the early childhood profession.

For those who stay, Continuous Professional Development is an area that needs urgent attention:

*“Many teachers believe that they have little possibility to influence in-service training according to their previous knowledge and competencies, and the needs of the group of children.”*

Even though Swedish preschool teachers are now qualified at university level, the move towards higher qualifications does not extend to the entire early childhood workforce. The split between teachers and childcare workers is an ongoing matter of concern. It is reflected in the professional bodies and unions representing the different parts of the workforce as the teachers' union does not represent child care staff. But, unlike many other countries, there is a union that represents child care workers. Komunal and Lärarförbundet are cooperating on several issues related to professionalism. However, it has been an obstacle, both unions agree, that professional roles have been too “blurred”. A joint project was launched in 2005 to initiate discussions on professional roles and pre-school quality.

The Swedish early childhood workforce is predominantly female (97% women, 3% men), with an even lower rate for men at teacher level (2%). Local initiatives have been set up to increase recruitment of men. A 2006 government committee report on gender equality in preschool focused mainly on “educational aspects rather than on the gender composition of staff.” The report concluded that “pedagogical skills and knowledge of gender issues” were actually more important than simply increasing the number of men in the early years' profession. Focusing on percentages rather than knowledge and attitudes can even be counterproductive, as both men and women could be encouraged to assume more traditional gender roles.

In 2001, Sweden introduced an integrated Teaching Degree at university level, with specialisations for pre- primary and secondary school teachers. But integration does not necessarily bring equal status. In the context of the Bologna process,

Läraryöbundet explains, it can even create new divisions. Preschool teachers receive their degree after 3.5 years of study, which leads to their education being labelled “basic”, compared to upper secondary teacher education which takes up to 5.5 years and can therefore claim “advanced” level. The union rejects this division of the teaching profession and awaits the report of a government commission, due in November 2008, which investigates possible alterations to the structure of teacher education in Sweden.

A second divide – the one between the teaching and the caring profession – also remains unresolved:

*“Child carers have no uniform qualification. There are 3-year programmes [...] with a certain focus on childcare and leisure time. [This is, M.U.] currently the most common qualification for child carers. There are also local examples of 1-year post-secondary qualifications for child carers.”*

### **Successful examples and promising developments**

Generally, the integration of early childhood services into the education system is seen as an important step forward. Along with the development of the national curriculum, this move marks a change of perspectives. Early childhood education now explicitly focuses on children’s rights to learn and develop, rather than on the needs of working parents.

The union also appreciates the announcement of increased public funding for professional development and the expansion of universal preschool provision for 3-year olds.

### **Key challenges**

Läraryöbundet expects the cost for the childcare allowance and the voucher system to become a serious threat to municipal funding for preschools:

*“Upcoming reforms may affect the right to quality early childhood education for children under the age of three, and in some aspects may, to an extent, harm the ‘EduCare’ model. Deeper trenches may be dug between early childhood education and compulsory education, which is very unfortunate for preschools, preschool classes and compulsory schools alike.”*

### **Lessons learnt and recommendations**

Läraryöbundet’s policy recommendations unfold around three main strands, which are seen as the key to a successful public early childhood education:

- The integration of early childhood institutions into the main education system
- An entitlement to quality education for all children from age 1 to compulsory school age
- A clear focus on children’s rights to learn and develop.

## 3.9 The Netherlands

### 3.9.1 Sustainable change in the professional learning community

The following project from the Netherlands differs significantly from the other cases as it is a business model with a vision of creating change in the context of corporate childcare provision. The team of Bureau MUTANT, Utrecht, describe their business as “a small independent firm supporting professionals and institutions in early childhood education, welfare and health care”. What makes MUTANT stand out among the plenitude of consultancy firms is their mission to “contribute to equity in society by supporting and empowering professionals”. MUTANT has an explicit set of values that orients the consultancy and training:

- equity and justice
- start at each person’s capacity
- acknowledge diversity
- break boundaries between social sectors (health, education, welfare)
- use a multitude of knowledges (academic as well as intuitive, tacit knowledge)
- stimulate intercultural relationships.

MUTANT works with childcare provider organisations all over the Netherlands which are generally run as private-for-profit enterprises.

#### *Background to the project*

MUTANT’s current core project, Sustainable Change in the Professional Learning Community, builds on previous experiences in action research and training projects, e.g. Parents and Diversity (2003-2006) and Diversity and Parental Involvement (2004-2006). Questions unresolved in the earlier projects became a starting point for the Sustainable Change project:

- How to anchor the insights and methods of cooperation with parents within childcare provider organisations ?
- How to create a sustainable learning process with professionals ?
- How to create wide support for innovation and change at all levels of a childcare provider organisation ?
- How to organise collective learning in teams ?

Starting in 2007, four child care provider organisations worked with MUTANT, aiming to improve the cooperation with parents:

*“The methods for the sustainable learning process are based on innovative learning theories (MacNaughton, Urban, Bateson, Korthagen) including the reflective practitioner, asking critical questions, and the critical learning community.”*



Within this theoretical framework, the project participants developed eight “learning methods”:

- naming your colleague's capacities
- asking critical questions
- learning process diary
- reflection in thinking, feeling, aiming
- awareness raising of the context of the child care centre
- personal challenges
- cooperation with a colleague as a critical friend
- commitment in a learning community.

In the project, MUTANT worked with the entire organisation of the participating child care providers, providing support for practitioners and management:

- the teams of educators, including their team managers, followed a training course
- the team managers and coaches received feedback while exploring and co-constructing the new learning methods with their teams
- the managers and staff at central level followed 2 or 3 meetings to develop plans for sustainable change in their organisation.

The project is currently documenting the experiences in a methodology book and disseminating the results into child care policy in the Netherlands.

### *Key factors to success*

Project participants report that new synergies are created when new and innovative approaches to organisational learning are combined with concrete “themes” that are relevant for everyday practice. The result is a collaborative learning process which all participants describe as “empowering and motivating”. Addressing staff at all levels of the organisation as one learning community, processes of change, once initiated, were more likely to be sustainable. Continuous documentation and analysis of participants’ “learning moments” – an action research approach – enabled the participants to take control over their own learning. At the same time, the different levels of the organisation involved in the process began to influence (and challenge) each other and created a dynamic that could best be described as “double-loop-learning” (Argyris). In this process, all voices were heard: educators, managers, parents, external experts and project team.

In addition to the collaborative attitude and approach of the project, MUTANT identified further aspects that made an important contribution to the success of the process:

- *“Internalisation: an internal learning process started and was established*
- *Cooperation with a critical friend: colleagues supported each other in pairs, asking critical questions and providing constructive and positive feedback*
- *Valuing and recognising each other's qualities (capacities) supported the individual as well as the team*
- *Linking up with the questions and needs in the teams guaranteed more success*
- *Immediately learning through practice. Not everything can be learnt at the vocational training school; also by doing and reflecting you learn in daily practice on the job*
- *The methods and instruments as provided in the training, contributed to lifelong learning*
- *The methods and instruments as provided in the training, lead to more pleasure and enthusiasm in the work*
- *The methods and instruments as provided in the training, lead to increasing commitment: professionals contributed to more collective (team) tasks*
- *It was astonishing what could be realised within a limited number of training sessions (5 – 6).”*

### **Key challenges**

According to MUTANT's experiences from this project, clear conditions need to be set for the col-laborative learning process. Time and space are crucial, to begin with. Other critical aspects identified by participants include:

- *The organisation should not face too many challenges or problems*
- *A safe environment in the team is necessary in order to show the new learning methods to full advantage*
- *It is necessary to link up with the questions and needs in the organisation and in the teams. Although this is also mentioned as success factor, we face it as a challenge as well: to link up with the phase of the organisation*
- *Tensions arose because of the experimental character of the project: we were aiming to explore and to co-construct some methods and instruments, while this was not always the first need of the organisation*
- *Selection of the pilot organisations: setting too high criteria would not be realistic because you will not find any organisation that fits in all the criteria, or you are exploring the innovations only in a 'best practice' organisation.*

### **Lessons learned and recommendations**

MUTANT suggests that the following aspects and experiences can be transferred to any learning and development process of complex organisations:

- *It is important to take into account the context of the organisation and of the teams*



- *Settled patterns, relations and organisational culture change very slowly*
- *A long period of experimenting and learning is necessary: a year with sufficient training sessions, sufficient reflecting time and sufficient coaching*
- *The learning process of critical reflection is not obvious automatically; it takes a long period of time*
- *Critical reflection and asking critical questions (as “verbal” methods) are not suitable for everyone. A recommendation is to use multiple reflection methods (verbal, visual, dramatic, etc.)*
- *The learning process touches all levels of the organisation: team coaches and managers have to follow the training course, too – for their own learning process as well as for the learning process of the teams of educators*
- *The trainers that provide the training course have to start their own learning process in critical reflection.*

### **3.9.2 The union's perspective : Algemene Onderwijsbond**

The Dutch Teachers' Union *Algemene Onderwijsbond* (AOB) starts their report by giving a comprehensive description of the early childhood system in the Netherlands. A key feature of the Dutch ECE system is the split between primary school (which the majority of children begin at the age of four) and the childcare facilities for younger children (as well as out-of-school care), offered by a variety of provider organisations. Although childcare and early education are provided by separate institutions, administrative responsibility for childcare has recently been moved from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

In 2000, a publicly-funded early childhood education programme was set up, targeted at children “at risk of educational or language disadvantage”. This programme (VVE) is provided by playgroups and day nurseries for children aged two to four, and by primary schools for children aged four and five.

The VVE-targeted early childhood education programmes are administered and funded by municipalities, as they are seen as an integral part of municipal policies to eliminate educational disadvantage. In 2006, VVE reached 49% of the designated target group at preschool age, and 69% at primary school. The government is seeking to increase the number of children who benefit from VVE, aiming at 70% of the target group at both preschool and early primary school level by 2010.

In order to improve the quality of provision, in-service training for practitioners will be provided and an early childhood education module will be developed for teacher training colleges and social workers.

### *Funding issues*

VVE-targeted early childhood education is funded through the municipal budget for eliminating educational disadvantage. However, there is a distinction in funding between the age groups. Funding for VVE at preschool level is provided directly by the municipalities, whereas schools receive their funding indirectly through a weighting system. This is a matter of concern for the union, as is the cooperation between municipal policy and schools in general:

*“Municipal authorities have the fundings and are responsible for the implementation of VVE. Schools can use the funding for other priorities. They don't see the advantage of VVE.”*

AOb is also concerned about increasing social segregation which is likely to be reinforced by the different policy approaches to childcare and early education in the Netherlands:

*“We have the Childcare Act for parents who can afford it and we have the childcare arranged by the municipal authorities for the unfortunate parents.”*

According to AOb there is a trend to increase funding for all forms of childcare and early childhood education. Working parents are receiving an increased childcare benefit and, through the 2007 Childcare Act, employers are required to contribute to the cost of childcare. Public funds for targeted VVE early childhood education programmes are also increasing. More funds are expected to be available for recruitment of staff, professional development and an overall increase of quality. The government has announced to consult the association of municipalities about how to better support them to implement the VVE programme.

### *Workforce issues, including gender and qualifications*

AOb recognises a shortage of teachers, particularly in bigger cities. Initiatives have been launched to encourage students to choose teaching and childcare as a career.

Although childcare providers have to comply with a set of quality standards laid out in the Childcare Act, the different level of qualifications between childcare settings and primary schools are worrying. AOb is convinced that this affects the quality of provision:

*“We think that the quality is better when there are more higher-educated employees in childcare.”*



### *Successful examples and promising developments*

Despite the overall difficulties, examples of good practice can be identified in some areas. Their main characteristics are:

- Close collaboration between municipal authorities, childcare providers, primary schools and external consultants
- A focus on children's rights and needs – instead of institutional requirements
- A clear orientation towards equity for every child

### *Key challenges*

AOb identifies three key areas that need to be addressed in order to overcome the problems in the split between early childhood education and care system in the Netherlands:

- Funding
- Qualifications and professionalisation of the workforce
- Quality of provision

### *Lessons learned and recommendations*

Drawing on the positive examples, AOb argues for an increased involvement of all stakeholders in further developments. A most important lesson from the more successful collaborations in early childhood education relates to their processual nature:

***“Take time for a good implementation, make plans and evaluate them.”***

## 4. TOWARDS TAKING ACTION: SOME KEY ISSUES AND POSSIBILITIES FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The projects presented in the previous section differ in many respects. Some of them, for example *Korak Po Korak* in Croatia and the *Comenius Foundation for Child Development* in Poland, work across the entire early childhood system in their countries. They are influencing policies at national level, organising training and professional development and, at the same time, providing services at local level.



*Early childhood education should be every child's right.*

Others have a more regional scope. Rosa Sensat from Barcelona is dedicated to offering its services to teachers from the autonomous region of Catalunya. *The Association of Childcare Professionals* focuses on just one county in Ireland: Cork. However, both projects have been set up in response to key characteristics and shortcomings of the early childhood education systems in their respective countries.

The Swedish participant, *Gamla Åkeredsskolan*, is a local preschool that develops its day-to-day practice within the framework of a slim national curriculum

which, in its brevity, demonstrates great confidence in the early childhood professionals, and in their ability to interpret it in response to diverse local situations. The projects in this sample also address a wide range of target groups. Some, like the aforementioned Swedish preschool, work directly with children and their families. *Bildung:elementar*, based in the German State of Saxony-Anhalt, is an example of a project that works mostly with practitioners, and has well-established links to the university and academic research. Another project, the Dutch MUTANT agency from Utrecht, even targets managers and owners of for-profit services in a corporatized childcare system. In their diversity, these seven projects tell very different and particular stories.

Each project has a lot to offer in its own respect. Situated in their distinct contexts, and working at different layers of the early childhood education systems, they may be considered examples of how to create and sustain change and innovation. For each country, a teachers' union offers a complementary perspective. The project's perspective serves as a focal point, or a lens that directs the attention to particular possibilities and challenges in that country's early childhood system. The union's depiction of the ECE system in general, and of workforce and funding issues in particular, helps contextualise the individual examples. However, the perspectives are not always complementary. There are issues of high relevance for early childhood professional practice on which the unions' perspectives are different, or even contradictory to the perspectives offered by the practice projects.

There are, however, a number of key issues and common threads that appear across the seven cases. It is suggested that those themes indicate possible 'fields of action' for an organisation like Education International, and therefore should receive increased attention.

In addition to the critical issues identified from the seven country cases in Section 3, there are a number of key issues that can be drawn from the entire picture as presented in sections 2 and 3 of this report. Those issues were brought to the attention of delegates and union representatives at an international conference entitled *Quality Early Childhood Education: Every child's right*. Organised by Education International, the conference took place in Malta in November 2008.

Findings of this study were presented to the conference and a draft report was discussed with delegates. As a result of this discussion and the suggestions and amendments made by participants, the following eleven action points *and recom-*

*mentations for policy*, research and practice in early childhood education were formulated.

### ***1. Create frameworks for democratic and innovative education from the very beginning***

Education systems, of which early childhood education is an integral part, face a fundamental challenge that is contradictory at first sight. In order to ensure every child's right to develop to her or his full potential they need to provide stable and reliable frameworks in terms of funding, regulation, support etc., allow for inventions, encourage experimentation and embrace unpredicted and surprising outcomes. Situated at the very core of society, education systems need to reflect democratic values at every level – in everyday practice with children, families and communities, in professional preparation and development as well as in research. Education, understood as a democratic project of meaningful interaction between citizens, both children and adults, constantly re-constructs and re-interprets human society.

#### **A stable framework for innovation: the Centres of Innovation Initiative**

Funded by the Department of Education, the New Zealand **Centres of Innovation Initiative** (Ministry of Education, 2007) provides resources and a secure framework for developing local responses to local requirements – which are then employed to inform changes of the EC system on the whole. Early childhood settings across the country are encouraged to apply for this initiative by illustrating practices they consider being innovative and which they want to explore and further develop in a three-year action research process. The participatory action research is facilitated by a “research associate”, typically a researcher from the university, who has to be identified by the centre. The initiative draws on the diversity of local experiences, the capability of practice to bring about innovation, and to contribute actively to building a professional body of knowledge. While policy provides a stable and well resourced framework for the local research and its dissemination, academic researchers take on the role of “critical friends” (Urban, 2006), working at eye level with practitioners and communities to pursue questions of relevance for the entire professional system.

How can unions contribute to systematically encourage and enable democratic, inventive practices and embrace “untested feasibilities” (Freire)?



## *2. Change paradigms: encourage critical questions*

There is increasing acknowledgement of the need for reform in early childhood education systems – and in education systems in general. Unions, in many countries, play an important role in advocating for better, more democratic and equitable education. However, being an integral part of the education system, unions tend to operate out of the same paradigm as the system they intend to change. Instead of encouraging experimentation and creative invention, proposed reform strategies sometimes resemble ‘more-of-the-same’ solutions. Innovative projects, as shown by the seven cases in this report, can only be successful if they question taken for granted assumptions about educational practice. In other words, their success in their respective contexts often derives from a paradigmatic shift, especially towards participatory, collaborative and rights-based practices.

What can unions learn from this shift of paradigms and how can large organisations, operating within the education system at national level, encourage the asking of critical questions at all levels of their organisation ?

## *3. Promote holistic pedagogies and education in its broadest sense*

Education International and its member organisations are dedicated promoters of the right to education for every child. Yet, unions seem to be particularly strong in promoting early education in institutions and programmes that are closest to the compulsory school sector. Successful early childhood systems have integrated “care” and “education” not by simply adding one to the other. Rather, they have overcome the conceptual divide between care and education, are embracing the educative nature of care, and reclaim (or are at least beginning to) the concept of education from the traditional school.

How can unions more actively promote approaches to pedagogy that are well established in some parts of continental Europe (e.g. the Nordic countries, parts of Germany, individual municipalities in Northern Italy, individual projects in South and East Europe) but unfamiliar to policy and teaching profession in the majority of European countries?

## *4. Tackle the underrepresentation of childcare workers in split systems*

Being part of the mainstream education system, unions often focus on the part of the early childhood workforce that is situated in the education system, early childhood teachers in particular. In many countries, though, preschool educa-

tion is only one, albeit significant, part of the system. Especially in countries with a classical 'split' system (childcare for children under the age of 3; early education for children aged 3 to compulsory school age), childcare workers make up a major part of the early childhood workforce. However, they are usually not represented by, or organised into teachers' unions. While the long term goal is to overcome split systems and to fully integrate care and education, unions need to actively approach the entire early childhood workforce and/or support the establishment of professional associations of childcare workers.

### *5. Focus on the interrelation of change and sustainability*

Quite often, innovative projects succeed in initiating new developments and introducing change in early childhood systems that have become stagnant. Unions, on the other hand, are likely to be better established in the mainstream education system.

How can unions benefit from the innovative potential of small independent projects? And how can they support them to make their initiatives more sustainable?

### *6. Continuous change: the challenge of mainstreaming educational reform*

It is a common success factor across the seven projects that they manage to introduce continuous change into their various working contexts. While this is welcomed, in principle, by those who promote educational reform, there is also a longing for certainty in educational developments. Despite the fact that the mainstream education system is often perceived as inadequate or even "messy", the creative disturbance brought into play by innovative projects often brings about resistance. It is a common experience that innovative projects, although successful in their context, find it difficult if not impossible to mainstream their approach.

How can unions help bridge the gap between innovative projects and the mainstream education system?

### *7. Develop professionalism across the entire ECE system and in a broad range of settings*

Since unions are representing highly qualified teachers, they are rightly concerned with their professionalism and invest significantly in continuous professional development. In integrated early childhood education systems this can be highly effective. However, early childhood professional practice takes place in



a broad range of settings and is not limited to preschools or schools. Quite often, early childhood practitioners work in separate sub-systems, e.g. childcare and early education. In stratified or split systems, unions tend to focus on the teaching profession, sometimes neglecting the professional development of those working with children outside the school system or below preschool age.

### ***8. Promote diversity and be proactive about gender and other disparities in early childhood education***

Gender disparity – i.e. male underrepresentation – is a common feature of the early childhood education and care workforce throughout Europe. Scholarly debate, scarce as it is, seems to have come to a consensus about the reasons. Yet, initiatives to tackle ideologies of maternalism that have led not only to the effective exclusion of men from caring work, but also to unbearable work-conditions for female childcare workers, remain fragmented. Moreover, the gender gap is only one expression of the startling lack of diversity among the early childhood workforce.

What coordinated initiatives could be taken by Education International to promote diversity and equality for those working with the youngest children? Can unions become active agents that create pressure to bring gender and diversity issues on top of political agendas at national and European level?

### ***9. Overcome competition and join forces instead***

Despite their different perspectives (in some cases, significantly different) the unions and the projects in this study are largely concerned with similar issues regarding the quality of early childhood education in their countries. Yet there is little collaboration, and sometimes even strong opposition. Apparently, large and established organisations sometimes underestimate the potential of small projects and NGO's to initiate and successfully achieve change in their context. One obvious question arising from this picture is: How can unions actively identify and approach innovative projects and organisations in order to reduce competition and join forces instead?

### ***10. Invest in research and support a professional ethos of inquiry***

The scarcity of research into and with early childhood practice is a key issue across the seven countries in this study, and one that is shared between the unions

and the projects. There is, all respondents suggest, a necessity for more research on the quality and the actual effects of early childhood practice and early childhood educational policies. Research projects are often short-lived and usually disjointed. Too often, their interests seem limited to individual aspects of the complex early childhood field, therefore carrying the risk of losing sight of the overall picture.

The early childhood professional community needs to establish communities of learners and encourage an ethos and culture of inquiry across the entire professional system. Instead of being distinct from professional practice, research can become an integral part of the professional culture in the field. Unions can, and should, play a key role in establishing and supporting a culture of quality, research-based continuous professional development and self-evaluation.

### *11. Revitalise the European Quality Targets*

At European level today, there is consensus about the necessity to significantly increase services for young children and their families. The “Barcelona Targets” set ambitious policy goals and countries are increasingly acting to achieve them. But besides the quantitative agenda, debate on purpose, profile and content of early childhood institutions at European level is hardly taking place. The 10-year action programme proposed by the European Commission Network on Childcare in 1996 has moved out of the focus of European politics long before it reached its proposed end in 2006. An enlarged and constantly-evolving European Union needs new forums for member states and citizens to discuss and negotiate and argue over purposes, common understandings, principles and values that underlie early childhood institutions.

Can Education International, and its member organisations at national level, together with other national and international stakeholders, create such spaces and revitalise the process that led to the development of the “Quality Targets” ?



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# Education International

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