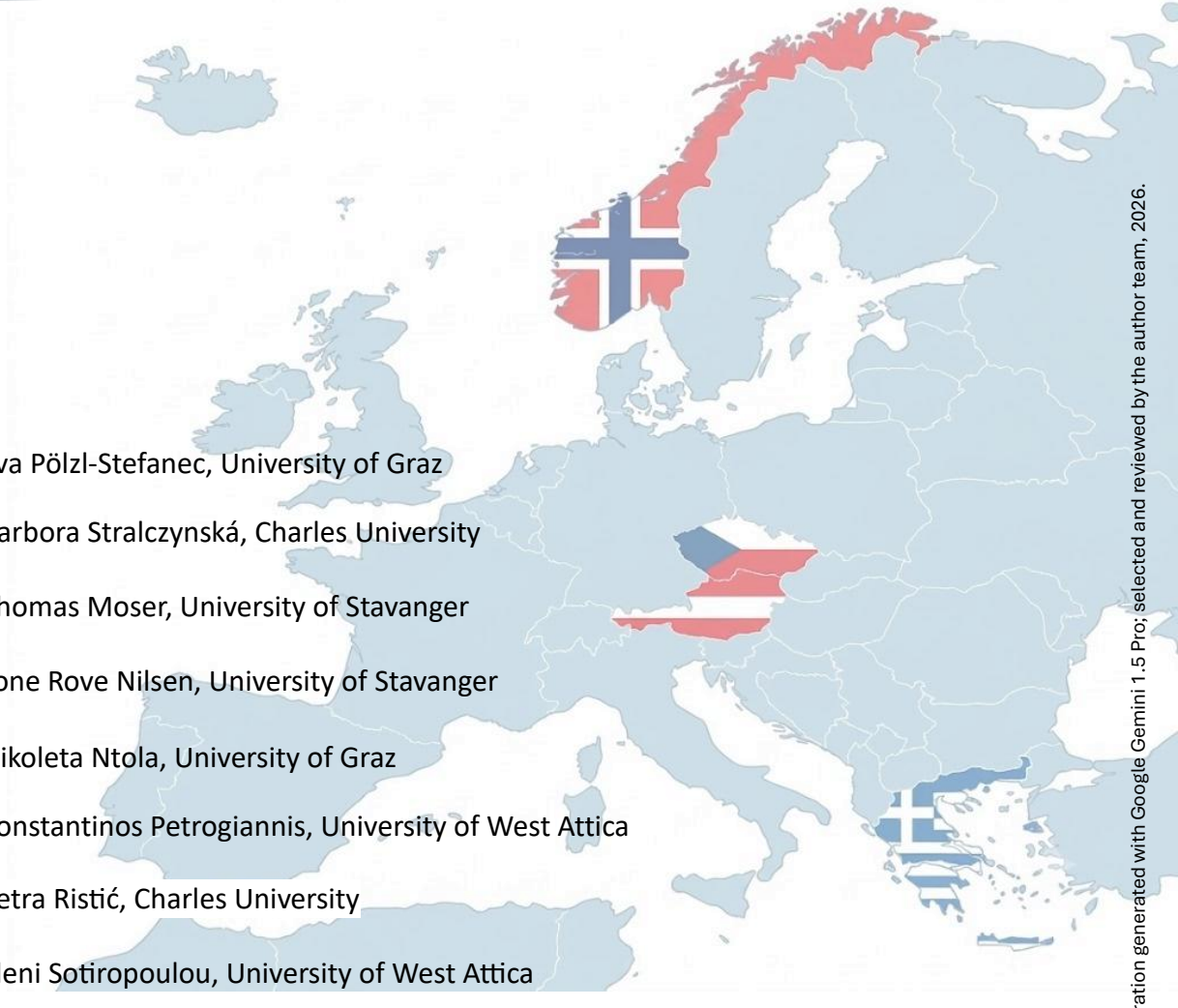
POLICY PAPER

Policy recommendations for strengthening inclusive play-based ECEC systems in Austria, Czech Republic, Greece and Norway.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction and background This policy paper examines how early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems can be strengthened through inclusive, play-based learning in order to promote equal opportunities. The study compares the systems in four European countries: Austria, the Czech Republic, Greece and Norway. A key objective is to counteract the so-called 'Matthew effect' – that is, the tendency for privileged children to benefit most from education, whilst marginalised children are structurally left behind.

In this report, the term 'ECEC' (Early Childhood Education and Care) refers to all state-regulated provision for children from birth until they reach the statutory school starting age. ECEC facilities are located in designated premises outside the parental household. They are subject to an official state regulatory and supervisory framework, are run by qualified educational staff and offer regular, year-round care and education in group settings. The specific terms for these ECEC institutions vary by country:

- **Austria:** 'Krabbelstuben', 'Kleinkindbetreuungseinrichtungen' or 'Kinderkrippe' for children under 3 years of age, 'Kindergarten' for children aged 3 to under 6, and 'age-expanded educational institutions' for children aged 0 to 6.
- **Czech Republic:** the system is divided into two parts: children's groups (dětské skupiny) for younger children (from six months up to, primarily, under three years of age), and traditional kindergartens (mateřské školy) for children aged three and over.
- **Greece:** A distinction is made between crèches (vrefikos stathmos bzw. vrefikoi stathmoi, for children aged 0 to under 3 years), day-care centres (paidikos stathmos bzw. paidikoi stathmoi, for children aged 2½ to under 4 years), and pre-schools (nipiagogeio bzw. nipiagogeia, for children aged 4 to 5 years), which are affiliated with the primary school system.
- **Norway:** There is a fully integrated, unified system of state-regulated nursery schools (barnehager) for children aged 1 to 5.

The concept of play-based learning and inclusion Play-based learning is understood as a continuum ranging from completely free, unstructured play to highly structured, teacher-led activities. It is a highly adaptable pedagogical tool that enables barriers to be broken down. Children with different abilities, mother tongues or special educational needs (SEN) can interact authentically with one another through play, which fosters empathy and a sense of social belonging. To analyse the contextual conditions, this study employs a three-level analytical framework distinguishing between the macro level (policy and funding), the meso level (institutional organisation, leadership and resources), and the micro level (children's everyday interactions with peers, families and ECEC professionals). The framework draws on multilevel approaches in educational research and is informed by a broader ecological perspective on child development.

Structural differences and barriers (macro level) The four countries exhibit very different starting conditions and structural barriers:

- **Investment and the ECEC gap:** Norway invests a larger share of its gross domestic product (GDP) in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector than most other OECD countries. OECD data show that Norway spends approximately 2% of GDP on ECEC, compared with an OECD average of less than 1% (OECD, 2024). Additionally Norway guarantees a childcare place following parental leave (minimal ECEC gap). However, the Norwegian case also shows that strong structural entitlement does not automatically guarantee equal implementation quality, especially where staffing, sickness absence, municipal variation and specialist support are concerned. Austria and the Czech Republic are in the middle of the pack at 0.67% and 0.62% of GDP respectively, but have care gaps of approximately four and two years accordingly, as there is no universal entitlement during these years. Greece continues to experience structural underinvestment in ECEC (<0.30% of GDP), combined with split governance between different ministries and local authorities and limited universal entitlement before the age of four, resulting in persistent inequalities in access, particularly for younger children.
- **Staff qualifications:** Norway requires pedagogical leaders to have ECEC- education or equivalent higher education, while the workforce also includes child and youth workers and assistants. Greece requires a Bachelor's degree (ISCED 6) for pedagogical staff working as early childhood educators, although ECEC settings also employ support and auxiliary personnel with different qualification pathways. Despite comparatively high qualification requirements for pedagogical staff, implementation continues to be constrained by structural underinvestment, workforce shortages and fragmented governance. In Austria and the Czech Republic, the minimum qualification requirement for ECEC teachers still remains ISCED 3. ISCED 4 and 6 are also avaliable qualification routes, but ISCED 3 is set as the minimum in legislation.
- **System fragmentation:** Whilst Norway has a fully integrated system under a single ministry, the Czech Republic and Greece struggle with administratively divided responsibilities (e.g. different ministries for children under and over the age of three). In Austria, federalism makes it difficult to establish uniform quality standards, as each federal state enacts its own laws.

Empirical findings (meso and micro levels) The study draws on literature reviews, surveys, focus groups and interviews to examine everyday practice.

- **Parents' perspectives:** Parents recognise the value of play for social integration and forming friendships. However, a significant tension has emerged: many parents (particularly those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds) equate play with leisure time and instead demand academic instruction out of fear that their children might fail at school. Parents in the Nordic sample expressed comparatively higher levels of trust in play-based pedagogy.
- **Challenges in everyday practice:** Professionals from all countries identified acute staff shortages, oversized groups and a severe lack of time as the greatest obstacles to

effective inclusion. Due to these conditions, work is often limited to mere 'supervision' or crisis management, meaning that quiet children or those with special educational-needs (SEN) are overlooked.

- **Resources and infrastructure:** A lack of funding for specific support materials, as well as unsuitable (e.g. non-accessible) buildings and a lack of outdoor spaces, make implementation difficult.
- **Professional expertise:** Staff would like to see more practical further training in dealing with diversity, behavioural challenges (e.g. autism) and working with parents. The enormous bureaucratic burden of documentation is also criticised, as it takes up time that could otherwise be spent with the children.

Key recommendations for action To counteract the 'Matthew effect' and ensure equal opportunities, the paper sets out the following strategies:

- **Structural adjustments:** Investment must be increased to enable smaller groups and better staff-to-child ratios. Furthermore, administrative divisions (e.g. between crèches and nurseries) should be overcome.
- **Multidisciplinary teams:** On-site educational practice should be more strongly supported by external specialists such as psychologists, social workers and speech therapists.
- **Professionalisation and mentoring:** Academic and practical training must be strengthened. New entrants to the profession require targeted mentoring programmes to enable them to confidently apply theoretical knowledge (e.g. inclusion or communication with parents) in everyday practice.
- **Design of the learning environment:** Instead of highly structured 'single-purpose toys', more open-ended materials and natural materials should be provided, which stimulate creativity and make it easy to bridge language barriers. Furthermore, teachers should be encouraged to make greater use of open play areas and the natural environment (e.g. forest kindergartens).
- **Collaborative work with parents:** Culturally sensitive communication and educational outreach are needed to convey to parents (with the help of interpreters where necessary) the educational value of play and to bring them on board as educational partners.

FOREWORD

Play-based learning is not just a child-friendly approach; it is also a vital tool for achieving social justice. It harnesses the unifying power of play to counteract individual disadvantages through targeted educational measures, creating a level playing field in the process. As education researchers from Austria, the Czech Republic, Greece and Norway, we see play-based learning as an overarching pedagogical concept that combines guided play, children's self-determination and curricular goals effectively.

This policy paper focuses on the central question of which systemic, institutional and individual barriers and conditions for success influence the implementation of this approach. We have examined European early childhood education and care systems (ECEC) in detail at the macro, meso and micro levels to make these complex dynamics tangible.

This paper offers in-depth insights and evidence-based strategies, made possible only through the dedicated involvement of many stakeholders. We would therefore like to take this opportunity to express our sincere thanks:

Firstly, a heartfelt thank you to the European Union's Erasmus+ programme, which made this project possible by providing financial support as part of the 'PLEOS – Playing and Learning for Equal Opportunities and Success' initiative.

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to the experts from the field and the political stakeholders. We would like to thank the numerous early childhood educators, heads of institutions, and political stakeholders who provided us with such open, critical, and valuable insights into their everyday working lives and the structural challenges they face through focus group discussions, online surveys, and interviews. Their contributions form the indispensable foundation of our recommendations for a more equitable educational future.

We would also like to thank the entire international team of authors and the project consortium for their excellent and inspiring collaboration across national borders. Thanks also go to the researchers at the University of Graz (Austria), the University of Stavanger (Norway), Charles University (Czech Republic), and the University of West Attica (Greece).

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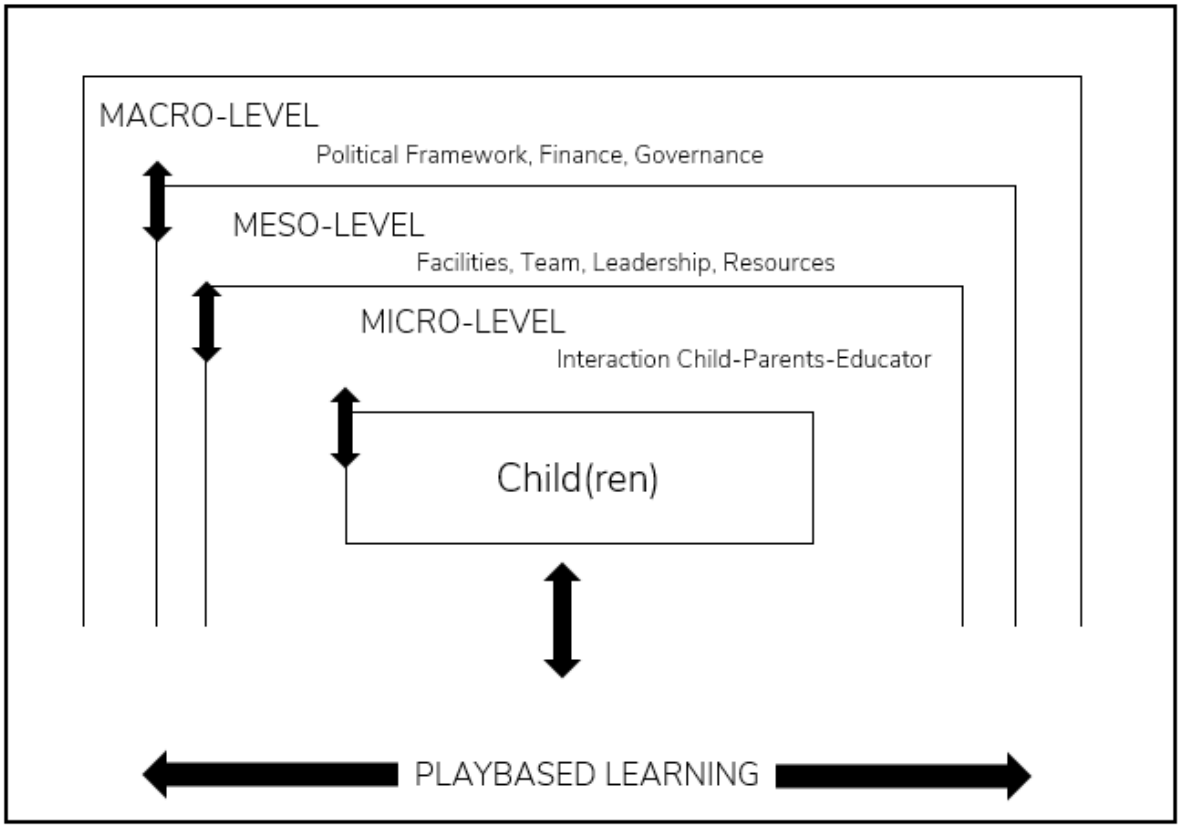
PLAYFUL LEARNING AND INCLUSION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

The implementation of equitable inclusive and high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a key focus of global education policy as set out in UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2. However, early childhood education systems worldwide risk reproducing the so-called 'Matthew effect', whereby privileged families benefit most from educational opportunities, while marginalised or low-income children are structurally left behind (Rad et al., 2022).

High-quality early childhood education is considered the most important means of breaking this intergenerational cycle of disadvantage and achieving SDG 4.2 (Rad et al., 2022). However, paradoxically, it is often precisely those vulnerable children who would benefit most from excellent educational programmes who are most frequently affected by low-quality care in reality (McLaughlin et al., 2016).

To make this complex goal more tangible from an analytical perspective. research employs a multi-level ecological model that divides the framework conditions into three layers (Figure 1).

Figure 1 *A multilevel analytical framework for play-based learning in early childhood education and care. Authors' own illustration, drawing on multilevel approaches in educational research and informed by an ecological perspective on child development.*



MACRO LEVEL

The systemic macro level defines the overarching framework of the ECEC system; it encompasses national policy guidelines, funding, and structural and administrative management (Rad et al., 2022).

MESO LEVEL

The institutional meso-level serves as a crucial link, representing the level of individual child care facilities. It is defined by the leadership culture within those facilities, the allocation of resources on-site, and the quality of collaboration within the team and with families (Rad et al., 2022).

MICRO LEVEL

Finally, the individual micro-level focuses attention on what is happening in the immediate moment: it encompasses the direct interactions within the triangle of the child, parents, and early childhood educators, as well as their specific professional attitudes and competencies (Rad et al., 2022).

PLAYBASED LEARNING

A key educational approach for achieving these goals is play-based learning, which can be used at all levels. This approach combines child-directed, free play activities with a certain degree of adult guidance and structured learning objectives, promoting the holistic and academic development of children in educational settings (Weisberg. Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff. 2013). Current research views play-based learning as a broad continuum encompassing various forms of play differing based on the respective degree of child autonomy and pedagogical guidance (Pyle & Daniels, 2017; Pyle et al., 2023). To realise the full potential of this approach, research urges us to stop viewing children's play as an absolute contrast to formal learning and instead seeing it as a dynamic continuum. This continuum ranges from unstructured free play, where children have complete control over their actions and resources, to guided play, where professionals and children collaborate to shape the play context, and finally to highly structured, teacher-directed play, such as rule-based play or board games (Pyle & Daniels. 2017).

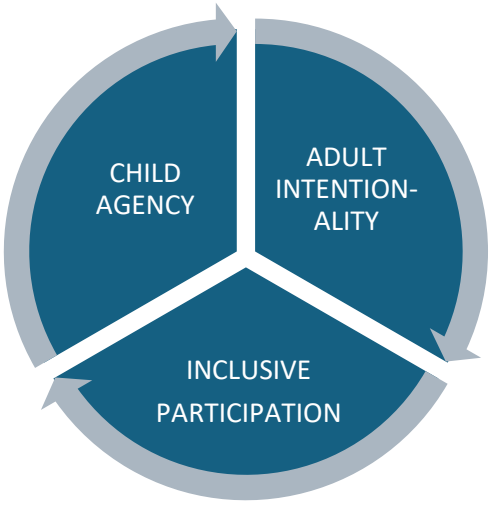
The connection between play-based learning (PBL), inclusion, and equity lies in the highly adaptive nature of play as an educational tool, which makes it possible to break down barriers to learning and address individual needs. Unlike rigid, teacher-centred 'one-size-fits-all' approaches, where children with learning difficulties or language barriers often struggle from the outset. PBL provides a natural, stress-free and adaptable learning environment (Mohammed et al., 2026). Within the game, children with different abilities or special educational needs (SEN) or first languages can interact authentically with one another at their respective developmental levels. As

children's play is intrinsically motivating, it fosters genuine social participation. Empathy, and a sense of belonging among all children - which is at the heart of inclusive practice (Rad et al., 2022).

DEFINITION PLAYBASED LEARNING

Play-based learning (PBL) is an educational approach in which children learn directly through play. Combining child-directed, free play activities with targeted adult support, it is guided by natural curiosity and exploratory discovery. Teachers provide open-ended materials and guide children to enhance their learning processes. This flexible approach ranges from free play to structured activities, fostering key competencies such as creativity, problem-solving, communication, cooperation and self-regulation.

Key components:



The PBL continuum, in conjunction with 'intentional teaching', is crucial in achieving true equity of opportunity. Equal opportunity does not mean that all children receive the same standardised treatment, but rather that each child receives the individual support they need to reach their full potential (McLaughlin et al., 2016). When teachers closely monitor play and use 'guided play' to provide targeted learning prompts tailored to each child (scaffolding). they can effectively address developmental delays (Pyle & Daniels, 2017). Empirical data confirm the effectiveness of this approach: programmes combining free play with systematic instruction integrated into play achieve the greatest progress, particularly among children from disadvantaged or underprivileged backgrounds. Studies show that PBL interventions significantly improve executive

functions, reading skills and mathematical problem-solving abilities in marginalised children to a much greater extent than in traditionally taught classrooms (Mohammed et al., 2026).

DEMOGRAPHICS, GEOGRAPHICAL CHARACTERISTICS, AND COUNTRY-SPECIFIC DEVELOPMENTS

- The text compares early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems in Austria, the Czech Republic, Greece, and Norway.
- Common challenges faced include an ageing population, low birth rates, increasing diversity from immigration, and a significant gender pay gap.
- Funding discrepancies are notable; Norway invests over 2% of GDP, whereas Greece invests less than 0.30%, leading to underfunding and gaps in provision, particularly for children under three years old.
- All countries experience acute staff shortages. Austria and the Czech Republic have responded with shortened training programs, while Norway allows temporary dispensation from the educational requirement or pedagogue norm under defined conditions when qualified applicants are not available.
- Opportunities for mutual learning exist, with Norway's integrated system, Greece's high standards in academic training, and the Czech Republic's legally protected right to inclusion serving as valuable examples.

To systematically identify these multifaceted barriers and conditions for success, it is essential to first take a detailed look at the structural realities of the countries under study.

The project consortium, which consists of universities from Austria, Norway, the Czech Republic and Greece, reflected the wide range and diversity of European ECEC systems. These range from fully integrated, well-funded systems with no coverage gaps, to administratively fragmented systems that struggle with significant 'ECEC gaps', chronic underfunding or acute staff shortages (European Commission et al., 2025; Krenn-Wache, 2024; Schreyer, et al., 2024). Approaches to inclusion and handling growing diversity also vary greatly depending on the country and local jurisdiction (Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2024a; Schreyer et al., 2024b; Schreyer et al., 2024c).

Austria

DEMOGRAPHICS	Austria's population is projected to grow to 9.4 million by 2040, after which it will begin to decline, reaching 9.1 million by 2080 (Statistik Austria. 2025). Short-term growth in the future will be driven exclusively by expected net migration gains (Statistik Austria. 2025). The population is also ageing: by 2040, over 26% of people will be over 65 (Statistik Austria, 2025). The population is becoming increasingly diverse, with 33% of preschool children currently speaking a first language other than German (Statistik Austria, 2025). There are significant regional disparities in demographic change, as Vienna is experiencing strong growth due to international migration (+9.2% by 2040), while federal states such as Carinthia are expected to face population decline (Statistik Austria, 2025).
FERTILITY RATE	The natural population change is negative (-11.248 in 2024), and the fertility rate stands at 1.31 per woman.
GENDER PAY GAP	Austria has a very high unadjusted gender pay gap of 18.7%, which is largely due to the above-average proportion of mothers working part-time (76.1%) compared to fathers (7.4%) (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2025; Kaindl & Schipfer, 2025).
ECEC AS A PERCENTAGE OF GDP	Public spending on early childhood education stood at 0.67% of GDP in 2021 (European Commission et al., 2025).
GEOGRAPHICAL CHARACTERIS-TICS	The ECEC legal framework has a strongly federalist and decentralized structure, with legislative authority and the allocation of spots resting with the nine federal states (Krenn-Wache, 2024; Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2024a). Consequently, costs for families vary widely: while kindergartens are largely free in Vienna,

	Burgenland. and Carinthia, other states charge income-based fees (Bundeskanzleramt, 2013).
ECEC-GAP	There is a significant "ECEC gap" of about four years between the end of parental leave and the guarantee of a spot in early childhood education and care (Krenn-Wache, 2024).
EARLY CHILDHOOD AND CARE (ECEC)	In Austria, there is no universal legal entitlement to a childcare spot before the age of five; however, a mandatory and free kindergarten year (20 hours per week) begins at that age (European Commission et al., 2025; Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2024a). While the coverage rate for three- to five-year-olds is very high (approx. 94%), fewer than 35% of children under the age of three attend a facility (European Commission et al., 2025; Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2024a). The cross-state Educational Framework Plan serves as a pedagogical guideline for the entire phase from 0 to 6 years of age (European Commission et al., 2025). The minimum qualification for childcare professionals is below the bachelor's level (ISCED 5) (European Commission et al., 2025; Krenn-Wache, 2024). Inclusion is implemented at the local level and mostly takes place in inclusive groups; however, there is no universal entitlement to an inclusive spot (Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2024a).
INCLUSION	Inclusion is a matter for the states; there is no nationwide legal right to an inclusive care placement (Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2024a). Implementation takes place primarily in inclusive groups with the help of additional staff; however. significant shortcomings in achieving comprehensive inclusion are considered a major weakness of the system (Krenn-Wache, 2024; Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2024a).
COUNTRY-SPECIFIC DEVELOPMENTS IN ECEC	The biggest structural challenge facing the education system is a widespread shortage of staff, exacerbated by working conditions that are less favourable than those in the school system. Since 2009 a cross-state Educational Framework Plan exists (Krenn-Wache, 2024).

Czech Republic

DEMOGRAPHICS	At the end of 2024, the population stood at 10.91 million, growing solely due to positive net immigration, while the natural population change showed a significant deficit (Czech Statistical Office, 2025). The

	share of people aged 65 and older is nearly 21% and is projected to rise to 29% by mid-century (Czech Statistical Office, 2025).
FERTILITY RATE	The number of births and the fertility rate (1.37) are at historic lows (Czech Statistical Office, 2025).
GENDER PAY GAP	The gender pay gap stands at 18.4%, with 80% of this gap remaining unexplained, suggesting widespread discrimination or a lack of pay transparency (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2025).
ECEC AS A PERCENTAGE OF GDP	In 2021 spending amounted to 0.62% of GDP, which, similar to Austria, places it in the middle range (European Commission et al., 2025).
GEOGRAPHICAL CHARACTERISTICS	Local authorities bear a significant responsibility for providing childcare services, as municipalities are legally required to ensure that preschool education spots are available for children aged 3 and older upon parental request (European Commission et al., 2025).
ECEC-GAP	The ECEC gap in the Czech Republic is approximately two years if defined as the period between the end of well-compensated early leave and the start of a guaranteed ECEC place. Maternity benefit is earnings-related and amounts to 70% of the reduced daily assessment base for 28 weeks, followed by a flat-rate parental allowance of CZK 350.000 for children born from 1 January 2024, which can be drawn flexibly up to the child's third birthday. Children under three do not have a general legal entitlement to a preschool place; municipalities guarantee a place only from age three, upon parental request. Therefore, access for children under three remains dependent on local capacity, children's groups, nursery school availability and family resources (European Commission et al., 2025).
EARLY CHILDHOOD AND CARE (ECEC)	The Czech ECEC system remains administratively split. Children's groups, which fall under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, may accept children from six months of age and provide childcare mainly for children under three, although they may also serve children up to the start of compulsory schooling. Preschools, which fall under the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, provide pre-primary education mainly for children aged three to six/seven, with possible admission from age two. A municipal guarantee of a kindergarten place applies from the age of three, upon parental request (European Commission et al., 2025; Schreyer et al., 2024c). The minimum qualification route for preschool teachers may still be completed at upper-secondary pedagogical level (ISCED 3), although higher vocational and university-level routes also exist. In children's groups, qualification requirements are broader and

may include pedagogical, health, social or care-related. (European Commission et al., 2025; Loudová Stralczynská, 2024).

INCLUSION	Since 2016, the Education Act has guaranteed all children in need specific, free educational support in mainstream schools (Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2024a; Schreyer et al., 2024c). In addition to targeted measures supporting Roma children, children with Ukrainian temporary protection and children with a different first language, the full implementation of inclusive education is currently hindered by an acute shortage of educational support staff, teaching assistants and specialised support services. Recent reforms also restrict school-entry postponement and foresee the abolition of preparatory classes from 1st September 2029, which will further increase the need for inclusive support within mainstream preschools and primary schools.
COUNTRY-SPECIFIC DEVELOPMENTS IN ECEC	The fragmented system structure complicates educational transitions, which is why there are calls to place all ECEC programs under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (Schreyer et al., 2024c). An acute shortage of teaching assistants makes inclusion and care in often large groups difficult in practice (Loudová Stralczynská, 2024).

Greece

DEMOGRAPHICS	Greece has experienced a sustained demographic decline over the last decade, combined with population ageing and regional depopulation. particularly in rural, island and remote areas. These demographic trends create uneven demand for ECEC services: while some urban areas face pressure due to concentration of population and migration, smaller municipalities may struggle to maintain stable provision and staffing. Migration and refugee flows have also increased the linguistic and cultural diversity of ECEC settings, particularly in metropolitan and reception areas (European Commission et al., 2025).
FERTILITY RATE	The country has a very low fertility rate of 1.32 (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2026).
GENDER PAY GAP	The unadjusted gender pay gap stands at 13.5%. with the paradox that, while women are statistically better educated, they earn significantly less in practice due to unexplained wage disparities (12%) (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2025).
ECEC AS A PERCENTAGE OF GDP	Greece is among the countries with the lowest levels of investment in this sector. In 2021, public spending for ECEC amounted to less than 0.30% of GDP (European Commission et al., 2025).

GEOGRAPHICAL CHARACTERISTICS	Access to ECEC and the allocation of spots depend heavily on local municipal capacity, with marginalised families and single parents given priority in the allocation process (Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2024a).
ECEC-GAP	Since the statutory minimum maternity leave (depending on the sector) ranges from only 17 weeks to 5 months, and there is no legal guarantee of a childcare spot before the age of 4 (when the two-year mandatory preschool period begins), a significant structural childcare gap for younger children arises in practice (European Commission et al., 2025; Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2024a).
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECEC)	The Greek childcare system is divided into two parts: daycare centers for children under four (administered by the Ministry of the Interior/Ministry of Social Cohesion) and kindergartens for children aged four and older (administered by the Ministry of Education) (European Commission et al., 2025). A legal guarantee of a spot exists only for the two mandatory preschool years starting at age 4, which leads to shortages for younger children in many places (European Commission et al., 2025; Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2024a). Thus, the childcare coverage rate for children under three years of age is just under 30% (European Commission et al., 2025). A national curriculum exists only for the age group starting at age 4 (European Commission et al., 2025). It is noteworthy that, despite limited budgetary resources, a bachelor's degree (ISCED 6) is consistently required for professionals in the ECEC sector (for ages 0 to 6) (European Commission et al., 2025). This constitutes an important strength of the Greek system. The relatively high academic qualification level of ECEC professionals provides a strong basis for pedagogical reflection, curriculum implementation and inclusive practice. However, the potential of this qualification profile is not always fully realised in practice, due to limited resources, insufficient specialist support, high child-staff ratios and uneven access to continuous professional development.
INCLUSION	Greek legislation promotes the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream educational settings, and children with disabilities, SEN, and vulnerable social backgrounds are often prioritised in admission procedures. However, an important distinction should be made between childcare centres and kindergartens. While support mechanisms, specialised personnel, and inclusive provisions are more clearly established within the kindergarten sector, equivalent support structures are less systematically available in childcare centres. In

practice, access to multidisciplinary specialist support for younger children attending childcare centres is often limited and varies considerably across municipalities and providers. As a result, families may need to rely on privately funded specialist services when additional support is required. Furthermore, the implementation of inclusive policies and support measures varies considerably across regions and settings (Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2024a).

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC DEVELOPMENTS IN ECEC	Greece faces severe structural underinvestment in the ECEC sector which creates, with public spending amounting to less than 0.30% of GDP (European Commission et al., 2025). This creates persistent challenges for staffing. Infrastructure, materials and inclusive support. At the same time, recent curriculum (for kindergartens) reforms and the high qualification profile of professionals indicate important potential for quality improvement, provided that pedagogical reforms are accompanied by adequate structural investment. Despite these structural challenges, Greece has made important progress in strengthening academic preparation of ECEC professionals, curriculum reform and inclusive education policies. These developments provide a solid basis for future quality improvements, provided that adequate investment and implementation support are ensured.

Norway

DEMOGRAPHICS	Norway is experiencing steady population growth, which is expected to push the population past the 6-million mark by around 2041 and reach 6.08 million by 2045 (Statistics Norway, 2025). Demographic aging is progressing, which will lead to a doubling of the number of people over 80 by 2050 (Statistics Norway, 2025). About 22% of the Norwegian population has a migrant background (Statistics Norway, 2025).
FERTILITY RATE	The fertility rate is at 1.48.
GENDER PAY GAP	The unadjusted gender pay gap in Norway stands at 13.7%.
ECEC AS A PERCENTAGE OF GDP	Compared to other countries. Norway invests a great deal in its childcare system. Public spending is very high, amounting to over 2% of GDP (OECD, 2024).
GEOGRAPHICAL CHARACTERISTICS	Local governments in Norway are facing demographic changes driven by geographical factors, including declining birth rates and urban concentration, which are putting pressure on sparsely populated regions (Statistics Norway, 2025).

ECEC-GAP	Norway has a comparatively minimal ECEC gap because children have a statutory right to a childcare spot from around age one, depending on month of birth and application procedures (European Commission et al., 2025).
EARLY CHILDHOOD AND CARE (ECEC)	Norway has a highly regulated, fully integrated early childhood care system (from around the age of 1 year to school entry) that is nationally regulated under the education sector, with municipalities responsible for local authority functions, admission, supervision and important funding decisions (European Commission et al., 2025; Schreyer, et al., 2024b). The structural reality of barnehagen (ECEC institution for children from one till six years) in Norway is almost universally full-time. The data shows that a striking 98.8% of the children attending childcare have a full-time arrangement for 41 hours or more per week. Part-time arrangements (under 40 hours) are virtually non-existent at less than 2% across all age groups ("The Norwegian ECEC System" n.d.). However, these numbers need to be interpreted with cautious, because having a full-time place in the childcare centre does not mean that the children are there full-time. The linguistic landscape of Norwegian early childhood education has shifted significantly over the last decade. As of recent data, around 22% of the population has an immigrant background, while 20.2% of children in ECEC-Settings are registered as minority-language children (defined by SSB as both the child and parents having a first language other than Norwegian, Sami, Danish, Swedish, or English) (Statistics Norway, 2025). All facilities follow a nationally binding framework plan (Rammeplanen/ Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017), and pedagogical leaders must have ECEC teacher education or equivalent higher education; the wider staff group also includes skilled child and youth workers and assistants (European Commission et al., 2025). Staff-to-child ratios are strictly regulated by law. The general staffing norm is at least one employee per three children under 3 years and one employee per six children over 3 years, while the pedagogue norm requires one pedagogical leader per seven children under three years and one pedagogical leader per 14 children over 3 years ("The Norwegian ECEC System," n.d.).
INCLUSION	The Kindergarten Act guarantees children with disabilities priority admission; children under compulsory school age have a right to special pedagogical support if needed; children with disabilities have a right to an individually adapted childcare offer (Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2024a; Schreyer et al., 2024b). Inclusion primarily takes place in mainstream institutions and encompasses legally enshrined anti-

	discrimination guidelines as well as the protection of the language and culture of minorities, such as the indigenous Sámi (Schreyer et al., 2024b).
COUNTRY-SPECIFIC DEVELOPMENTS IN ECEC	To address these issues. the government reduced childcare fees or introduced free spots in certain sparsely populated and northern areas of Norway in 2023 (Statistics Norway, 2025).

Only by understanding these different starting points can we identify where systemic barriers are preventing equal opportunities, and determine which structural conditions the guided game fosters to promote equal opportunity.

The matrix (Table 1) reveals disparities in early childhood education across Europe. While Norway has established an integrated system with no gaps in provision thanks to high levels of investment (>2% of GDP), Austria. the Czech Republic and Greece are grappling with administrative disconnects, lower qualification levels and severe budget constraints. These systemic differences are why barriers to equal opportunities arise at different points in the educational journey in each country.

Table 1 Comparison Matrix of European ECEC Systems

County	ECEC GAP	Legal Entitlement	Governance	Staff Qualification	Inclusion Entitlement	Main Barrier	Transferable Lesson
Austria	~4 years Between the end of parental leave and a guaranteed place.	No universal entitlement before the age of 5; a mandatory, free part-time preschool year (20 hours/week) starts at age 5.	Decentralised & federalist Legislative authority and allocation of places lie with the 9 federal states; widely varying cost structures.	Below bachelor's level (ISCED 5) Minimum qualification is positioned relatively low in European comparison.	Matter for the states No nationwide legal entitlement; implementation is mostly local in inclusive groups with additional staff.	Acute staff shortage Exacerbated by working conditions that are less favourable than those in the school system; significant regional disparities.	Cross-state Educational Framework Plan A common pedagogical guideline for the entire phase from 0 to 6 years. despite the federal structure.
Czech Republic	~2 years Between the end of well-compensated leave and a guaranteed place.	From age 3 Municipalities are legally required to guarantee a preschool education place from the 3rd birthday upon parental request.	Administratively split "Children's groups" (under 3) fall under the Ministry of Labour; kindergartens (3–6) under the Ministry of Education.	Upper secondary level (ISCED 3–4) Qualification requirements in both systems are below bachelor's degree level.	Legally guaranteed Since 2016. free. specific educational support in mainstream schools. Abolition of preparatory classes from 2029.	Fragmentation & staff shortages Split responsibilities complicate transitions; acute shortage of assistive staff in often large groups.	Legally enshrined support Direct. free entitlement to specific support within the mainstream system via the Education Act.
Greece	Significant Statutory maternity leave only 17 weeks to 5 months; no guaranteed place until the age of 4.	From age 4 only takes effect with the start of the two-year mandatory preschool period.	Divided into two parts daycare centres (under 4) under the Ministry of Interior/Social Cohesion; kindergartens (from 4) under the Ministry of Education.	Bachelor's degree (ISCED 6) Consistently high academic level required for the entire sector (ages 0 to 6).	Legal priority is given to children with disabilities and SEN, but structured specialist support is largely available only within the kindergarten sector (from age 4).	Severe underinvestment Public spending at less than 0.30% of GDP; high child-to-staff ratios. lack of state support for under-3-year-olds.	A highly qualified workforce provides a strong foundation for quality improvement, but must be accompanied by sustained investment and specialist support.
Norway	Minimal gap Seamless transition secured after the end of parental leave.	From ~1 year Legally guaranteed right to a childcare place from the completed first year of age.	Nationally regulated under the education sector, with municipalities responsible for local authority functions, admission, supervision and important funding decisions; almost universally full-time attendance (41+ hours/week).	Pedagogical leaders: ECEC/equivalent higher education; mixed workforce including skilled workers and assistants. Academic training coupled with strictly regulated staff-to-child ratios (e.g., 1:3 for under-3-years-olds; 1:6 for children over three years, while the pedagogical norm requires 1:7 for under-3-years-olds and 1:14 for over three-year-olds).	Comprehensive & prioritised Right to special education support applies even if not attending childcare; explicit protection of minority languages (Sámi).	Implementation variation: qualified staffing, sickness absence, substitute competence, municipal funding differences and inclusion capacity. Urban concentration vs. declining birth rates and pressure to maintain provision in sparsely populated regions.	Holistic investment High budget (>2% of GDP) enables an integrated system with a minimal gap and strong statutory staffing and pedagogue norms. However, actual adult availability may be weakened by sickness absence, opening hours, meetings and substitute use.

Demographic and socio-economic convergences

Although the systems differ profoundly, significant similarities can be found at the macro-structural level. All four countries are experiencing far-reaching demographic change, characterised by an ageing population and historically low fertility rates (ranging from 1.31 in Austria to 1.48 in Norway). Where data is available, population growth, and thus an ongoing increase in diversity within early childhood education settings, is driven solely by net immigration. In Austria, 33% of pre-school children have a first language other than German, while in Norway, around 22% of the population has a migrant background.

At the same time, the countries are affected by unresolved gender-specific inequalities in the labour market. The unadjusted gender pay gap ranges from 13.5% in Greece to 18.7% in Austria. This situation is particularly exacerbated in German-speaking countries by the high proportion of mothers who work part-time. Another common feature is regional disparity. Whether due to urban concentrations, a pronounced urban–rural divide, or decentralised structures in terms of costs and provision, access to ECEC services in Austria, Czech Republic and Greece depends heavily on local jurisdiction. In Norway, legal access is nationally guaranteed, but quality, staffing stability and support capacity vary locally. All systems have also recognised the need for compulsory pre-school provision, although the timing of this varies considerably.

Differences between educational systems and their impact on ECEC

The most significant systemic differences, and thus the main obstacles to educational equity, lie in funding, administrative organisation, and qualification profiles. While Norway invests heavily in the sector at over 2% of its GDP, Austria and the Czech Republic are in line with the European average at 0.67% and 0.62% respectively. Greece, shows clear structural underfunding at less than 0.30% of GDP. These financial conditions are directly linked to the so-called 'ECEC gap' - the structural gap between the end of parental leave and the point at which a statutory entitlement to childcare begins. Norway has high participation overall and has largely closed the structural entitlement gap from around age 1 year. Statistics Norway report that 84% of one-year-olds attended childcare in 2025 (Statistics Norway, 2026). The other countries, show significant deficits: Austria has a gap of around four years and a U3 coverage rate of under 35%. In the Czech Republic, the under-three coverage rate is below 7.3% (Education & Training Monitor, 2025) due to the lack of a legal entitlement before the age of three and social conventions. Greece also faces significant shortages in childcare provision. Combined with relatively short statutory maternity leave and the absence of a legal entitlement to an ECEC place before the age of four, this creates a substantial structural gap for families with younger children. Administrative fragmentation in the Czech Republic and Greece also hinders consistent educational transitions, as responsibility for the youngest children lies with the social affairs or interior ministries and for older children with the education ministry. Austria manages its system in a decentralised manner across nine federal states. However, it has a comprehensive cross-regional educational framework for children

aged 0 to 6 that is recognised by all federal states. A paradox emerges in the qualification requirements: In countries where core qualifications have traditionally been focused on secondary and post-secondary education (ISCED levels 3–5), the issue is further compounded by a mismatch between training schedules and actual entry into or retention within the workforce. In Austria, for example, analyses point to a chronic shortage of personnel, primarily due to unfavorable structural conditions such as large class sizes, insufficient preparation time, and the subsequent dropout rate from the profession (KDZ, 2023). In order to maintain legal entitlements and staffing ratios, the meso-level (i.e., providers and federal states) is increasingly responding by fragmenting the training landscape and accelerating the recruitment of career changers through short-term academic or state-specific programmes ('crash courses'), a practice which is the subject of critical discussion in academic circles in terms of potential deprofessionalisation. In the Czech Republic, the shortage is particularly evident in the rapid expansion of flexible childcare groups (dětské skupiny), for which educational qualification requirements for staff have been lowered in favors of proof of competence in caregiving or social work alone. In systems with high formal qualification requirements at bachelor's level (ISCED 6), the shortage of applicants is leading to a strategic relaxation of quality standards in day-to-day practice. In Norway, the shortage of qualified childcare teachers is mitigated by the legally permissible use of temporary exemptions (dispensasjon fra utdanningskravet), resulting in a de facto shift towards non-formally qualified support staff in the staffing structure (Statistics Norway, 2025). The Greek case differs. Rather than relaxing qualification requirements, Greece maintains high formal qualification standards (ISCED 6) for pedagogical professionals. However, chronic underinvestment, fragmented governance, staff shortages and insecure, fixed-term contracts, particularly in childcare settings (βρεφονηπιακοί σταθμοί), constrain the consistent implementation of high-quality, play-based and inclusive practice (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2025).

Areas of learning and application

From this overview, it is possible to identify key areas for mutual learning with a view to breaking down barriers and strengthening the conditions for the success of inclusive, high-quality early childhood education and care:

SYSTEM INTEGRATION AND STATUTORY ENTITLEMENT	In Austria, the Czech Republic, and Greece, the Norwegian model offers an important reference case for integrated governance, statutory entitlement and regulated staffing, but its transferability depends on welfare-state financing, municipal capacity and workforce supply. Early legal entitlement and strictly regulated staff-to-child ratios (e.g., 1:3 for the youngest children) are solutions for minimising the 'ECEC gap', demonstrating how structural quality and work-life balance can be better combined. Norway's 2023 regional policy measure, which provides fee

	exemptions or reductions in sparsely populated regions, offers valuable insights into how to address rural deprivation.
ACADEMIC TRAINING AND NEEDS-BASED PROVISION	Greece provides empirical evidence that comprehensive academic training of staff (ISCED 6) can be achieved even under extreme budgetary constraints. Furthermore, the Greek system's strict prioritisation of marginalised families and single parents when allocating places demonstrates how to use scarce resources in a targeted manner to compensate for socio-economic risks.
LEGAL ENSHRINEMENT OF INCLUSION	Austria's lack of a nationwide legal entitlement to inclusive childcare and significant regional quality disparities are considered clear weaknesses. The Czech Education Act of 2016 could serve as a valuable model here. The legal guarantee of free. specific support within the mainstream system enshrined therein is an example of how inclusion can evolve from a benevolent local practice into an enforceable right.
CURRICULAR CONTINUITY	The Austrian National Curriculum Framework could guide the Czech and Greek system in closing the curricular gap for children under three and ensuring educational continuity throughout early childhood.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELD

- Multi-method research approach: This chapter examines barriers to and facilitators of inclusive, play-based learning through a systematic literature review (2020–2026), an online survey of 443 professionals, 13 focus groups and 9 stakeholder interviews in Austria, the Czech Republic, Greece and Norway.

- Parental perspectives and the dilemma of school readiness: Whilst parents value play-based learning as central to social inclusion, many (particularly those from lower-income groups) experience a significant tension between free play and societal pressure to prepare children academically for school; this contrasts with the high level of trust in educational approaches demonstrated by Scandinavian parents.

- Results of the quantitative survey: The data reveal a strong child-centred approach, but also highlight deep country-specific divides - whilst Czech professionals rate their training as a solid foundation for practice, their Norwegian counterparts call for significant improvements; furthermore, Greek professionals perceive migration-related and inclusive diversity as the greatest burden due to a lack of resources.

- Country-specific qualitative barriers (focus groups): Day-to-day inclusion suffers from structural shortcomings: Austria struggles with bureaucratic federalism and a lack of legal certainty a lack of legal certainty in healthcare (e.g.: Inclusion of children with diabetes); the Czech Republic with a lack of autonomy for Czech graduates in play supervision; Greece with a massive shortage of facilities and equipment; and Norway with high levels of sickness absence and unqualified substitute staff.

- Strategic governance and knowledge transfer (policy interviews): Political stakeholders emphasise the need for evidence-based reforms, but point to the disconnect with practice – calls are being made for more flexible resource allocation formulas rather than rigid group sizes (Austria), visual rather than purely legal curriculum formats (Czech Republic), structured feedback loops (Greece) and practice-oriented ‘micro-research’ carried out directly within the institutions (Norway).

A multi-part, cross-national research design (Austria, Norway, the Czech Republic, Greece) was implemented in the 'Empirical Findings' chapter in order to provide comprehensive answers to the research question:

RESEARCH QUESTION

What systemic, institutional and individual barriers, as well as enabling factors. influence the implementation of equitable, inclusive and play-based learning in European ECEC systems. and what evidence-based strategies can be derived from this for professional development and policy guidance?

METHODS

A systematic literature review - covering the period 2020–2026. in accordance with the PRISMA standard - (Page et al., 2021) laid the theoretical foundation by specifically examining, within international and national databases. parents' perspectives and their considerations regarding inclusive and play-based learning. From a quantitative perspective, a standardised online questionnaire survey was conducted with 443 participants to evaluate formal curricula, the quality of training, spatial resources and the handling of diversity in everyday practice. To shed deeper qualitative light on the challenges of practice, 13 focus group discussions were held with educational specialists and managers, and analysed using a qualitative content analysis based on Mayring's (2010) methodology. Finally, 9 semi-structured stakeholder interviews with policy-makers at local, regional and national levels provided important insights into the systemic and governance-related framework conditions of early childhood education.

Parents' perspectives on inclusive and play-based learning in early childhood education: A systematic literature review

In the field of early childhood education and care, the central role of play and play-based approaches in children's development is undisputed. However, the question of what role these elements play in relation to inclusion from the perspective of parents and carers has received far less attention. For this reason, this systematic literature review addresses the key research question: *How do parents perceive the importance of play and play-based learning in creating an inclusive early childhood education and care environment, and what are their considerations?*

To provide a nuanced, international picture, a systematic survey was conducted in Austria, the Czech Republic, Greece and Norway. The search strategy included queries in the respective national languages, as well as the targeted inclusion of international English-language literature that has undergone rigorous peer review.

Methodology

The methodology of the literature review is based on a systematic literature search that strictly adheres to a predefined protocol. Thanks to this structured approach, the results are transparent and reproducible. To ensure the relevance of the sources, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established for the selection of the literature. Only studies published between 1st January 2020 and 28th February 2026 were considered. Only scientific articles that have undergone the peer-review process were included in the analysis. The focus was on studies that examined parents' perspectives on inclusive, play-based learning in ECEC settings. The search was conducted in international databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, as well as in national databases - for example. FIS-Bildung for the German-speaking world. The selection process, which complied with the PRISMA standard (Page et al., 2022; Tricco et al., 2018), comprised several consecutive steps: relevant literature was first identified by using defined keyword combinations in the respective national languages. Two independent reviewers then screened the titles and abstracts. The remaining articles were examined in full text.

Although the topic is of societal importance, the country-specific search processes revealed significant differences in the current state of the literature. A gap was identified for the Czech Republic and Greece: in both countries, no relevant sources were found that met the methodological requirements. The situation was different in the north and in German-speaking countries: in Norway. 90 sources were identified and secured for the final analysis, whilst the search in Austria's national databases (such as the Austrian Library Network) yielded 6 sources.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION. BONDING AND INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT

Parents view play and play-based learning as important tools for social inclusion and emotional development, but often have to make difficult trade-offs between the pressure to perform and their children's needs. For many parents, an important indicator that their child is successfully integrated into the group is the friendships they are able to form through shared play activities (Tympa et al., 2024). Mothers find it particularly valuable when professionals specifically involve their children in shared play so that they can experience autonomy without feeling excluded (Loudová Stralczynská et al., 2025). Through play-based activities, children learn important skills such as sharing, waiting, problem-solving and understanding themselves and others, which parents regard as fundamental building blocks for social development and a functioning community (Joy, 2025). The inclusion of children with specific needs also highlights the importance of play. Parents attach enormous importance to certain play objects, such as those with sensory stimuli or sounds, as therapeutic learning tools and for physical stimulation in children with severe disabilities (O'Connor et al., 2021).

THE TENSION BETWEEN HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT AND THE PRESSURE TO SCHOOL READINESS

Parents experience frustration and a sense of exclusion when necessary medical procedures (such as the insertion of a feeding tube) interrupt their child's play and vital socialisation (Swan, 2021). Parents often weigh up the pros and cons when evaluating play-based learning: they recognise the holistic, inclusive benefits of play, but also worry that their child might not be adequately prepared for school. Despite the general recognition of the benefits of play for development, many parents feel considerable anxiety regarding school readiness (Singh & Ngadni, 2023). Driven in particular by fears of future academic failure, some parents - for instance, those from lower-income groups in rural China, but also in Zambia or Kenya - call for more direct academic instruction, as they view ECEC primarily as a preparatory stage for formal primary schooling (Liang & Peters, n.d.). Early literacy and numeracy are attributed higher value, while holistic play-based milestones (Pattathil & Neelakantan, 2026) are viewed as 'just playing' and regard play as less important than the strict

imparting of knowledge (Li et al., 2020; Lungu & Matafwali, 2020; Okullo, 2024). The added pressure of the "Admission Olympics" forces parents to prioritize tutoring over unstructured play (Kobakhidze & Hui, 2023).

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND TRUST IN PLAY-BASED LEARNING

The way in which parents make these trade-offs is strongly influenced by their cultural context. In the Nordic and Scandinavian countries, parents typically have a high level of trust in play-based pedagogy; they view ECEC settings primarily as places for socialisation, well-being and shared play (Einarsdóttir, 2010; Yngvesson, 2026). Unlike in many other countries, they are significantly less concerned about early academic education and trust that educational staff will take on the task of imparting knowledge later on, as they are convinced that free play is the best foundation for learning (Brooker. 2010). Even in these regions, parental anxieties regarding physical safety, hygiene, and eventual school readiness still encroach upon children's freedom to engage in unstructured play (Burns et al., 2024; Zimanyi & Rossovska, 2020).

Parents' perceptions of measures to facilitate inclusion

Parents agree that there are several key factors and educational approaches that facilitate and strongly support successful inclusion in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings:

EDUCATIONAL STAFF WHO ACT PROACTIVELY AND COMPETENTLY

Parents emphasise that successful inclusion depends heavily on how competent and committed the staff actually are (Westman Andersson et al., 2021). Parents of children with medical needs consider it crucial that educators consciously take the time to familiarise themselves with the specific requirements, thereby creating a safe and supportive environment (Swan, 2021).

TARGETED. PRESSURE-FREE INTEGRATION INTO SHARED ACTIVITIES

Another crucial component is an educational approach that deliberately involves the child without isolating them or putting them under pressure. Finding a good balance between the child's autonomy and inclusive practices, such as specifically inviting the child to join in shared games or art activities, is highly valued by mothers. From the parents' perspective, it is crucial that staff ensure the child understands the routines and does not feel excluded from what is happening (Loudová Stralczynská et al., 2025).

UNCONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE AND PERSONAL RECOGNITION	Parents believe that inclusion is facilitated when the setting provides a 'safe haven' where the child experiences unconditional acceptance and learns to trust their teachers and friends. For parents. this also means that teachers genuinely recognise the child for who they are (Van As et al., 2023), and that children should under no circumstances be punished for their disabilities. as is the case with exclusionary disciplinary measures (Gal et al., 2024).
FOSTERING FRIENDSHIPS AND PEER ACCEPTANCE	Ultimately, parents see the successful development of friendships within the class as an important indicator and enabler of inclusion. Parents find it much easier to cope with the process when they see that their children are accepted by their peers, are making friends and are having a good time at the school (Tympa et al., 2024).

How parents' perceptions of disability affect inclusion

Parents identify numerous barriers and difficulties that hinder or even prevent genuine inclusion in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. Based on the included articles, these can be categorised into the following areas:

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS AND INSUFFICIENT RESOURCES	Parents express deep frustration at the lack of systemic support and insufficient resources. They are not shy about criticising the fact that schools and nurseries often lack the appropriate adaptational materials or the necessary, or even specialized, staff to provide adequate care for children with SEN (Otwate et al., 2025; Zhang & Li, 2021). A serious obstacle can arise when support hours. which are guaranteed by law, are severely restricted due to a shortage of therapists and specialist staff. Furthermore, structural and language barriers pose a significant challenge; disadvantaged or refugee mothers experience enormous pressure and stress when navigating the education system, particularly if they lack the necessary social capital or have to cope with their own limitations (Loudová Stralczynská et al., 2025; Nurse, 2025). Another significant barrier is active social exclusion by peers and other parents, such as deliberately not inviting them to birthday parties or group activities (Gal et al., 2024). Mothers also indicate that they feel judged by other parents at the playground because of their children's different behaviour (Nurse, 2025). Even children with complex medical needs (e.g., feeding tubes) experience social stigmatisation: the alarm sounds from medical devices sometimes cause families to be stared at. feel uncomfortable and feel the need to leave social spaces (Swan, 2021). Studies indicate

that parents frequently perceive centres as unwelcoming. reporting that schools sometimes actively discourage the enrolment of children with SEN (Zhang & Li, 2021).

INADEQUATE EDUCATIONAL ADAPTATION ("PSEUDO-INCLUSION")

Parents, for example of children with autism spectrum disorder. criticise the practices of so-called "pseudo-inclusion". An inclusive environment is hindered by the fact that. whilst educational staff accept the child, they treat them "like everyone else" without addressing their specific needs or making necessary educational adjustments (Westman Andersson et al., 2021). Parents also find it frustrating and exclusionary when necessary medical care interrupts the child's play and vital socialisation within the group (Swan, 2021).

DISCIPLINARY MEASURES INVOLVING EXCLUSION AND SEGREGATION

Exclusionary practices and punishments imposed by institutions are massive barriers. Parents point out that exclusionary disciplinary measures, such as suspensions, cause the child emotional distress, unfairly punish them for their disability, and promote further stigmatisation (Gal et al., 2024). Parents are also opposed to segregation because they fear that their children's behaviour might actually worsen if they are excluded from mainstream schools and sent to special schools (Nurse, 2025). Inclusion could also be hindered by community-level cultural and religious beliefs that mandate the segregation of sexes. It has been noted that parents may sometimes instruct teachers that boys and girls should not mix during playtime, creating exclusionary practices in the learning environment (Otwate, et al., 2025).

Factors that promote an inclusive early childhood education and care (ECEC) environment from parents' perspective

Parents hold diverse and sometimes even conflicting views on the importance of play and play-based learning in early childhood education and care (ECEC). These perspectives range from recognising play as a key means of social inclusion to dismissing it as a mere pastime.

PARENT-TEACHER PARTNERSHIP

Beyond physical access, true inclusion is dictated by the quality of the parent-teacher relationship. Adams and Myran (2022) frame poor communication as a matter of "epistemic injustice", noting that parents feel profoundly excluded when school leaders ignore their voices or dismiss them as non-credible knowledge sources. This power imbalance is echoed in rural China, where Li et al. (2020) and Li et al. (2023) describe the "pedagogicalization" of parents. In these settings. schools dictate the terms of involvement. treating parents as

subjects to be instructed rather than equal partners, which alienates lower-SES families. On the other hand. when educators demonstrate proactive outreach, clear communication without inducing parental guilt, and genuine affection for the children, parents across all racial and economic divides report a deep, facilitated sense of belongingness (Laxton et al., 2021; Puccioni et al., 2020; Van As et al., 2023). Interestingly, Nurse (2025) highlights that a mother's own past biographical traumas (such as childhood poverty or bullying) can act as an internal, psychological barrier to feeling included in her child's current school space. It can be noted that when parents are actively included in the play process and are taught to recognize the hidden academic and socioemotional value within play, their beliefs shift from scepticism to strong advocacy (Uysal Bayrak et al., 2021; Yaslı Kutluca & Abanoz, 2025). Interventions that make learning outcomes visible, such as pedagogical photo documentation, effectively help parents reconceptualise play as a vital developmental tool, shifting their beliefs toward child-centred practices (Matsumoto et al., 2023). Parents also perceive equity as being facilitated when schools actively value their "funds of knowledge", embrace intercultural sensitivity, and implement anti-racist curricula (Bilbao et al., 2025; Jacobs et al., 2021). Fostering community partnerships and integrating multicultural activities allows migrant parents to maintain their cultural identity while integrating into the local school community (Binasis et al., 2022; Brunson et al., 2025).

THE ROLE OF PLAY AS A DRIVER OF INCLUSION AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

For many parents, play is a key tool for creating an inclusive environment and promoting cognitive and socio-emotional development (Joy, 2025). Parents view the formation of friendships through shared play activities as an important indicator that their child is successfully included in the group and is socially accepted (Tympa et al., 2024). Parents particularly value educational approaches that strike a balance between children's autonomy and inclusive support. such as the deliberate inclusion of children in shared games or drawing activities so that no one feels left out (Loudová Stralczynská et al., 2025). Parents report that through playing together, children learn essential skills: sharing, waiting, problem-solving and understanding themselves and others, all of which form the basis for social development (Joy, 2025).

SIGNIFICANCE FOR CHILDREN WITH SEN	Parents attach enormous importance to certain play objects (such as those with sensory stimuli, special textures or sounds) when it comes to therapeutic learning tools and physical stimulation for children with severe disabilities (O'Connor et al., 2021). For families with complex medical needs, an inclusive and safe ECEC environment is perceived as severely disrupted when necessary medical care interrupts the child's play and vital socialisation within the setting (Swan, 2021).
THE TENSION BETWEEN PLAY AND SCHOOL READINESS	Although the development-promoting aspects of play are recognised, many parents feel a significant tension between the value of play and the fear of a lack of school readiness. Despite the general recognition of the benefits of play for holistic development, many parents frequently have concerns regarding future academic performance (Singh & Ngadni, 2023). Although some parents recognise the value of play in childhood, they question its academic rigour, often influenced by social pressure and the expectations of fixed curricula (Okullo, 2024). An interesting paradox seems to be highlighted across the available literature through the fact that, at home, parents that acknowledge the importance of unstructured play still seem to favour educational tasks or technology-enhanced toys that promise specific functional outcomes, such as fine-motor skills or vocabulary building, over open-ended exploration (Bourha et al., 2024).
REJECTION AMONG THOSE WITH LOW SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS (SES)	This conflict is particularly pronounced among parents from lower-income groups, who often view play strictly as a purely recreational activity ("[…], as one testament put it"), which is completely separate from learning (Li et al., 2020). In some perspectives, children's play is even viewed as a disruptive source of noise and a distraction, whilst real learning only begins later through the direct imparting of knowledge by adults (Dighe & Seiden, 2020). Driven by a deep fear of their children falling behind at school, these parents often reject play-based learning in mainstream settings and instead demand direct academic instruction, such as formal teaching of spelling (Li et al., 2020).
THE NORDIC OR SCANDINAVIAN PERSPECTIVE	In contrast to this are parents from Nordic and Scandinavian countries generally have a very high level of trust in play-based pedagogy and view early childhood settings primarily as safe places for socialisation, children's well-being and shared play (Yngvesson, 2026). In Europe, and particularly in the Nordic countries, parents place a clear emphasis on social-emotional development and the joy of play, rather than on early academic preparation; they entrust ECEC professionals with the direct transmission of knowledge at a later stage (Metaferia

et al., 2021; Yngvesson, 2026). However, it should be mentioned that this is a broader description and does not reflect the perspectives of all parents in Norway.

Quantitative Insights: Questionnaire Survey

The online survey was designed as a standardised questionnaire was completely anonymous and lasting around 10 minutes. The questions focused primarily on the assessment of formal curricula, the quality of the respondents' own training and professional development, the physical and material resources available to the facilities, and the day-to-day management of diversity (for example, linguistic, cultural or religious diversity). The survey is supplemented by an open-ended question on the greatest obstacles encountered in everyday life, as well as a socio-demographic section on the structure of the groups of children and the personal qualifications of the staff.

The questionnaires were distributed between April and June 2026 in the countries participating in the project. A total of 443 early childhood educators took part in the questionnaire survey.

Sample

Region The sample covers a broad regional spectrum, ranging from rural communities to large cities, with metropolitan areas with more than 300.000 inhabitants accounting for the largest share (31.1 per cent; n = 147 out of 443). However, the geographical distribution within the participating countries is heterogeneous. Whilst in the Czech Republic the majority of respondents work in a metropolitan area (52.7%; n = 78 out of 148), the Norwegian sample is drawn almost exclusively from small towns (58.2%; n = 39 out of 67) and medium-sized towns for Greece (26.9%; n = 18 out of 67). In Austria, a clear division is evident: the majority of participants come either from rural areas (42.2%; n = 54 out of 128) or from metropolitan areas (24.2%; n = 31 out of 128).

Type of institution In terms of types of childcare provision, the ECEC-Institutions for three- to six-year-olds is the most common, accounting for 63.3% (n = 238), followed by crèches for children under three, at 27.9% (n = 105). At country level, Greece deviates significantly from this trend, as the majority of respondents there focus on crèches (75.2%; n = 85).

Provider Across the countries surveyed, the funding structure is dominated by public bodies, which account for 63.3% (n = 279 out of 441) of the sample. This proportion is particularly high in the Czech Republic (79.1%; n = 106 out of 135) and Greece (88.5%; n = 100 out of 113). In contrast, in Austria, religious or denominational sponsorship leads the way at 49.2% (n = 63 out of 128), whilst in the Norwegian questionnaire sub-sample, private, non-profit predominate at 56.7% (n = 38 out of 67).

Profile In terms of professional roles, early years education and care (ECEC) staff make up the largest group at 52.8% (n = 234 out of 443), followed by

managers (30.5%; n = 135 out of 443) and assistants (16.7%; n = 74 out of 443). In the Norwegian sub-sample, pedagogisk leder of the children's groups make up the clear majority at 67.2% (n = 45 out of 67), and therefore not representative for the whole workforce.

Qualification The highest level of vocational qualification among respondents varies across national education systems. A secondary school qualification is the most common qualification, at 42.7% (n = 189 out of 443), driven by the sub-samples from Austria (63.3%; n = 81 out of 128) and the Czech Republic (51.9%; n = 70 out of 135). In Greece and Norway, the majority hold an academic degree. Overall, 57.3% of all respondents have completed a university degree at Bachelor's (31.2%; n = 138) or Master's level (26.2%; n = 116).

Limitation When interpreting the data, structural biases must be taken into account. With regard to social deprivation in the catchment area, 68.4% of respondents stated that there were no acute social problems in their localities (n = 303 out of 443). Only in Greece is the existence of social disadvantage affirmed with above-average frequency, at 27.4% (n = 31 out of 113). Furthermore, the proportion of children from migrant backgrounds in the sample is strikingly low: in 65.7% of all institutions, this figure is 10% or less (n = 291 out of 443). By international comparison, higher proportions of children from migrant backgrounds – exceeding 26% or 50% – are most commonly found in Austrian and Czech institutions. Finally, one limitation concerns the diagnosed additional support needs of the children in care. In the majority of institutions (53.5%; n = 237 out of 443), only one or two children with support needs are cared for. In 33.4% of cases (n = 148 out of 443), there are currently no diagnosed SEN at all, which suggests a relatively low number of cases requiring support in the area of inclusive care within the sample.

Below is a descriptive analysis of the responses by participating country. For this purpose, the response categories have been grouped into 'Agreement' (strongly agree and agree), 'Mixed' responses, and 'Disagreement' (partially disagree and strongly disagree). A detailed breakdown of the individual figures can be found in the appendix to this document.

Inclusive, play-based learning

"The national curriculum (or another formal educational framework) contains clear guidelines on inclusive play."

AGREEMENT Norway (NO) has the highest level of support here, at 62.13% (n = 41). closely followed by Austria (AT) at 60.00% (n = 70) and the Czech Republic

(CZ) at 59.70% (n = 77), Greece (GR) brings up the rear with 41.00% (n = 45).

NEUTRAL Greece has the highest level of uncertainty at 23.40% (n = 26). In the Czech Republic, the figure is 17.10% (n = 22), in Austria 8.70% (n = 10) and in Norway just 4.50% (n = 3).

DISAGREEMENT Greece tops the list with 34.85% (n = 38), just ahead of Norway with 33.00% (n = 22) and Austria with 30.40% (n = 35). The Czech Republic has the lowest level of opposition, at 23.33% (n = 30).

"At my workplace, there is a shared approach to working with children with different needs or starting points."

AGREEMENT In Austria, there is an extremely high level of agreement on a common approach, at 90.40% (n = 113). The Czech Republic follows with 71.50% (n = 93). Greece with 54.00% (n = 60) and Norway with 50.80% (n = 34).

NEUTRAL Greece shows 18.00% (n = 20) of neutral responses here, the Czech Republic 10.00% (n = 13), Norway 7.50% (n = 5) and Austria just 4.00% (n = 5).

DISAGREEMENT Norway has the highest rejection rate at 41.80% (n = 28). It is followed by Greece at 27.90% (n = 31), the Czech Republic at 18.40% (n = 24) and Austria at a minimal 5.60% (n = 7).

"My initial professional training has given me a solid foundation for recognising inequalities and discrimination in everyday life."

AGREEMENT The Czech education system receives the highest rating here, at 78.40% (n = 105). Greece stands at 71.10% (n = 79) and Austria at 67.20% (n = 86). Norway lags far behind here: only 37.30% (n = 25) agree.

NEUTRAL Greece records 16.20% (n = 18), the Czech Republic 12.70% (n = 17). Norway 10.40% (n = 7) and Austria 5.50% (n = 7).

DISAGREEMENT An absolute majority of Norwegian respondents (52.00%, n = 35) see shortcomings in training in this regard. In Austria, the figure is 27.30% (n = 35), in Greece 12.60% (n = 14) and in the Czech Republic 8.90% (n = 12).

"My initial vocational training has given me a solid foundation for dealing with inequalities and discrimination in everyday life."

AGREEMENT When it comes to practical application, the figures are slightly lower than for recognition alone. The Czech Republic leads with 62.60% (n = 82), just

ahead of Greece with 62.50% (n = 70). Austria achieves 57.10% (n = 72), whilst Norway remains at 43.30% (n = 29).

NEUTRAL The undecided middle group stands at 20.60% (n = 27) in the Czech Republic, 20.50% (n = 23) in Greece, 19.40% (n = 13) in Norway and 11.10% (n = 14) in Austria.

DISAGREEMENT Norway (37.00%, n = 25) and Austria (31.70%, n = 40) express the strongest reservations regarding their training content. In Greece (17.00%, n = 19) and the Czech Republic (16.80%, n = 22), the criticism is milder.

"Through regular professional development and further training. I am able to recognise inequalities and discrimination in everyday life."

AGREEMENT Austrian professionals see further training as a powerful tool for raising awareness (88.00%, n = 110), Greece agrees with 82.00% (n = 91), and the Czech Republic with 79.90% (n = 115), Norway, reports significantly less success here, with only 44.80% (n = 30).

NEUTRAL A neutral position is held by 14.90% (n = 10) in Norway, 11.70% (n = 13) in Greece, 11.40% (n = 15) in the Czech Republic and 8.80% (n = 11) in Austria.

DISAGREEMENT Whilst 40.30% (n = 27) in Norway deny the benefits of further training in detection, the figures are negligible in Greece (6.30%, n = 7). Austria (3.20%, n = 4) and the Czech Republic (2.00%, n = 2).

"Through regular professional development and training, I am able to deal with inequalities and discrimination in everyday life."

AGREEMENT When it comes to taking a proactive approach, 87.30% (n = 110) of respondents in Austria feel empowered by further training. In the Czech Republic, the figure is 77.30% (n = 102), in Greece 71.80% (n = 79) and in Norway, once again, a consistent 44.80% (n = 30).

NEUTRAL The Czech Republic reports 19.70% (n = 26) in the middle range. Greece 19.10% (n = 21), Austria 7.90% (n = 10) and Norway drops to 1.50% (n = 1) here.

DISAGREEMENT In Norway, 40.30% (n = 27) reject the statement. Greece records 9.10% (n = 10), Austria 4.80% (n = 6) and the Czech Republic 3.00% (n = 4).

"I have regular access to professional development and training courses that help me to flexibly adapt and design educational programmes for all children."

AGREEMENT	Access to suitable training is perceived to be best in the Czech Republic (88.80%, n = 119) and Austria (85.70%, n = 108). Greece stands at 57.80% (n = 63), whilst Norway remains at 44.80% (n = 30).
NEUTRAL	Norway shows 20.90% (n = 14) of respondents who are undecided on this point, Greece 18.30% (n = 20), the Czech Republic 5.20% (n = 7) and Austria 2.40% (n = 3).
DISAGREE-MENT	In Norway, 34.30% (n = 23) criticise a lack of access or flexibility in courses, Greece follows with 23.80% (n = 26), Austria with 11.90% (n = 15) and the Czech Republic with just 5.90% (n = 8).

"The layout and environment of my group enable all children (including those with disabilities) to participate fully in daily play and educational activities."

AGREEMENT	The Czech Republic leads by a clear margin with 77.60% (n = 104) in terms of positive assessments of the spatial conditions. Austria scores 61.50% (n = 85). The situation is critical in Greece (38.50%, n = 42) and Norway (34.30%, n = 23).
NEUTRAL	Norway (20.90%, n = 14) and Greece (19.30%; n = 21) show relatively high proportions of neutral responses. The Czech Republic stands at 6.70% (n = 9), and Austria at 6.30% (n = 8).
DISAGREE-MENT	Huge geographical barriers are cited in Norway (44.80%, n = 30) and Greece (42.20%, n = 46). In Austria, 25.40% (n = 32) see a need for improvement, whilst in the Czech Republic the figure is 15.70% (n = 21).

"I have a wide range of materials at my disposal to meet the children's diverse needs during play."

AGREEMENT	In terms of material provision, the Czech Republic (80.60%, n = 108) and Austria (78.10%, n = 100) are very close together at the top of the table. Greece stands at 46.50% (n = 52). whilst Norway stands at 41.80% (n = 28).
NEUTRAL	Greece has the largest undecided segment at 24.10% (n = 27). In the Czech Republic the figure is 11.90% (n = 16). in Austria 6.20% (n = 8) and in Norway 4.50% (n = 3).

DISAGREE-MENT	More than half of respondents in Norway (53.70%. n = 36) complain about a lack of play materials. The figures for Greece are 29.50% (n = 33). for Austria 15.60% (n = 20) and for the Czech Republic 7.40% (n = 10).

The results of the survey in Austria (AT), the Czech Republic (CZ). Greece (GR) and Norway (NO) highlight the strong commitment of educational professionals. They reveal the areas where valuable foundations for inclusive education are already in place, through honest reflection on current practice. sustainable further developments can be initiated. The Czech training system provides professionals with a strong foundation (78.40% agreement on identification, 62.60% on management). Norwegian professionals demonstrate a particularly keen awareness of the issues and a reflective approach: with their clear feedback (52.00% identify shortcomings in recognition, 37.00% in handling), they signal a clear desire for more practice-oriented and intensive preparation for these socially important issues during their initial training. However, the Norwegian results should be interpreted as experienced pedagogical leaders' retrospective assessment of their own initial training, not as a direct evaluation of current childcare teacher education.

Educational practice and everyday challenges

"Decisions made during play activities in my group are primarily influenced by the needs and abilities of each individual child."

AGREEMENT	There is an extremely high level of consensus in all three countries surveyed. The Czech Republic (CZ) leads with 91.90% (n = 124), closely followed by Austria (AT) with 89.80% (n = 115) and Greece (GR) with 88.50% (n = 100).
NEUTRAL	Greece has the highest proportion of neutral responses here, at 10.60% (n = 12). In the Czech Republic, the figure is 5.90% (n = 8) and in Austria 3.90% (n = 5).
DISAGREE-MENT	Rejection is minimal: in Austria it stands at 6.30% (n = 8), in Greece at 4.00% (n = 4) and in the Czech Republic at 0% (n = 3).

Note: No data has been submitted for this item for Norway (NO).

"I make a point of seizing opportunities to support the learning and development of all children."

AGREEMENT	This item achieved the highest approval ratings across all countries in the entire survey. Greece leads with 97.30% (n = 110). followed by Austria with 96.90% (n = 124) and the Czech Republic with 96.30% (n = 130). Norway is just behind with 89.60% (n = 60).

NEUTRAL	The undecided middle ground is practically non-existent: the Czech Republic reports 3.70% (n = 5), Greece 2.70% (n = 3), Austria 1.60% (n = 2) and Norway 1.50% (n = 1).
DISAGREE-MENT	There is no rejection in the Czech Republic or Greece (0%, n = 0). In Austria, it stands at 2.00% (n = 2), whilst in Norway it is highest at 9.00% (n = 6).

"I find linguistic diversity in my daily work to be a challenge. "

AGREEMENT	Greece perceives linguistic diversity as the greatest challenge, at 71.70% (n = 81). In the Czech Republic, just over half agree (51.90%; n = 70). whilst in Austria it is just under half (48.40%; n = 62). In Norway, only a minority of 23.90% (n = 16) feel this way.
NEUTRAL	Norway shows the highest level of ambivalence at 25.40% (n = 17). followed by the Czech Republic (20.70%, n = 28). Greece is slightly lower (20.40%, n = 23) and Austria shows the least amount of neutrality among the participants (18.00%, n = 23).
DISAGREE-MENT	The majority of Norwegian professionals (50.80%, n = 34) do not see this as a challenge. In the Czech Republic, 27.40% (n = 37) disagree with this, in Austria 10.90% (n = 14) and in Greece only 8.00% (n = 9).

"I find cultural diversity in my educational work to be a challenge."

AGREEMENT	Greece stands out with a very high perception of it as a challenge (82.30%. n = 93). The Czech Republic (40.00%. n = 54) and Austria (39.90%. n = 51) show absolutely identical moderate figures. In Norway. cultural diversity is perceived as a barrier the least frequently, at just 14.90% (n = 10).
NEUTRAL	The proportion of neutral responses stands at 21.50% (n = 29) in the Czech Republic, 21.10% (n = 27) in Austria, 15.00% (n = 17) in Greece and 13.40% (n = 9) in Norway.
DISAGREE-MENT	An overwhelming majority in Norway (71.70%, n = 48) reject the classification as a challenge. Austria (39.00%, n = 50) and the Czech Republic (38.50%, n = 52) also share almost exactly the same level of rejection here. In Greece, the level of rejection is a minimal 3.00% (n = 3).

"I find religious diversity in my educational work to be a challenge."

AGREEMENT	In Greece the majority view religious diversity as a challenge (55.80%, n = 63). In Austria (27.30%, n = 35), the Czech Republic (25.90%, n = 35), and Norway (20.90%, n = 14) this issue is viewed in a much more relaxed light.
NEUTRAL	The Czech Republic (29.60%, n = 40) and Greece (29.20%, n = 33) show a large, undecided middle group. Austria follows with 25.00% (n = 32). whilst Norway, with 6.00% (n = 4), hardly occupies an intermediate position.
DISAGREE-MENT	Norway leads the top group of those who do not see it as a challenge with 73.10% (n = 49). In Austria, 47.60% (n = 61) share this view, followed by the Czech Republic with 44.50% (n = 60). In Greece, 15.10% (n = 17) hold a negative view.

"I find working with children with SEN to be a challenge in my educational work."

AGREEMENT	Working with children with SEN is perceived as a very significant challenge in Greece (77.00%, n = 87) and Austria (72.70%. n = 93). In the Czech Republic, this figure is somewhat lower at 57.70% (n = 78).
NEUTRAL	The undecided group stands at 17.70% (n = 20) in Greece, 16.30% (n = 22) in the Czech Republic and 10.20% (n = 13) in Austria.
DISAGREE-MENT	In the Czech Republic, 26.00 per cent (n = 35) do not regard this work as a primary challenge. In Austria, this figure stands at 17.20 per cent (n = 22) and in Greece at a low 5.00 per cent (n = 6).

Note: No data has been submitted for this item for Norway (NO).

Across all countries, respondents demonstrate a strong commitment to child-centred practice. This is reflected in an extremely high level of agreement when it comes to making the most of opportunities to support all children and to focus on individual needs. The results from Greece stand out significantly: here, cultural diversity (82.30%), working with children with SEN (77.00%), linguistic diversity (71.70%) and religious diversity (55.80%) are perceived most strongly as everyday challenges. In stark contrast, the majority of Norwegian professionals do not view linguistic (50.80%), cultural (71.70%) and religious diversity (73.10%) as a challenge. These findings should not be interpreted as lower commitment to inclusive education, but rather as reflecting differences in structural conditions, available resources and access to specialised support across countries.

Promoting interaction and active participation

"I encourage interaction between children with different abilities or SEN."

AGREEMENT	This initiative is receiving extremely strong cross-border support. The Czech Republic leads with 98.60% (n = 133), followed by Norway with 97.00% (n = 65). Austria with 96.90% (n = 124) and Greece with 95.60% (n = 108).
NEUTRAL	The figures for those that are undecided are minimal: Greece reports 3.50% (n = 4), Austria 1.60% (n = 2), Norway 1.50% (n = 1) and the Czech Republic 1.50% (n = 2).
DISAGREEMENT	Rejection is practically non-existent: Norway stands at 2.00% (n = 1). Austria at 1.60% (n = 2) and Greece at 1.00% (n = 1). In the Czech Republic. the figure is 0% (n = 0).

"I encourage interaction between children of all genders."

AGREEMENT	Austria and Norway lead the way on this item, each with 98.50% (AT: n = 126; NO: n = 66). Greece follows closely behind with 98.20% (n = 111). In the Czech Republic, the approval rate is also very high at 92.60% (n = 135).
NEUTRAL	Only Greece (1.80%. n = 2) and Austria (1.60%. n = 2) show minimal neutral responses here. In the Czech Republic and Norway, nobody selected this option (0%. n = 0).
DISAGREEMENT	There is no rejection of the statement in Austria, the Czech Republic or Greece (0%. n = 0). Only in Norway do 2.00% (n = 1) of respondents disagree.

"I encourage interaction between children from different cultural backgrounds."

AGREEMENT	The Czech Republic leads the field with 97.80% (n = 132), followed by Greece with 95.50% (n = 108) and Norway with 94.00% (n = 63). Austria records the lowest, albeit solid, figure here at 90.60% (n = 116).
NEUTRAL	The largest neutral mid-range is found in Austria at 8.60% (n = 11). followed by Norway at 6.00% (n = 4). Greece at 2.70% (n = 3) and the Czech Republic at 2.20% (n = 3).
DISAGREEMENT	A negative attitude is virtually non-existent in all countries: Greece reports 2.00% (n = 2) and Austria 1.00% (n = 1). In the Czech Republic and Norway. the figure is 0% (n = 0).

"The children in my group are actively involved in deciding which play materials we use."

AGREEMENT	Active participation in the selection of materials is most frequently reported in Austria, at 90.60% (n = 116). Norway follows with 88.10% (n = 59), the Czech Republic with 86.70% (n = 117) and Greece with 81.40% (n = 92).
NEUTRAL	Greece has the highest level of indecision at 16.80% (n = 19). In the Czech Republic. the figure is 11.10% (n = 15). in Norway 10.40% (n = 7) and in Austria 5.50% (n = 7).
DISAGREE-MENT	The rejection rates are very low: Austria stands at 3.90% (n = 5), whilst the Czech Republic, Greece and Norway all show a rate of 2.00% (CZ: n=3; GR: n = 2; NO: n = 1).

"The children in my group are actively involved in deciding which activities they would like to take part in during the day."

AGREEMENT	When it comes to daily activities. there is a massive drop in participation in Southern Europe and Scandinavia: Whilst Austria, at 93.00% (n = 119). and the Czech Republic, at 84.50% (n = 114), show very high figures. the level of participation drops to 38.80% (n = 56) in Norway and to as low as 32.70% (n = 90) in Greece.
NEUTRAL	Greece has the largest neutral segment at 17.70% (n = 20), followed by the Czech Republic at 11.90% (n = 16). Norway at 7.50% (n = 5) and Austria at 3.10% (n = 4).
DISAGREE-MENT	It is noteworthy that, despite low levels of support, explicit opposition in Norway stands at just 9.00% (n = 6). In the Czech Republic, the figure is 4.00% (n = 5), in Austria 3.90% (n = 5) and in Greece 2.70% (n = 3).

"I regularly reflect on my educational approach to play and adapt it as necessary."

AGREEMENT	Self-assessment of a willingness to reflect is high across the entire sample. Greece tops the list with 93.80% (n = 106), followed by the Czech Republic with 91.10% (n = 123), Norway with a similarly high percentage of 88.00% (n = 59), and Austria with approximately 73.40% (n = 94).
NEUTRAL	The Czech Republic records 8.90% (n = 12) in the middle range, followed by Norway (7.50%. n = 5), Greece (5.30%. n = 6) and Austria with approx. 25.00% (n = 32).
DISAGREE-MENT	There is virtually no rejection of this professional standard: Norway reports 5.00% (n = 3), Greece 1.00% (n = 1), whilst Austria and the Czech Republic remain at 0%.

Professionals in all four countries state that they actively encourage children's interaction and participation. which demonstrates an overwhelming cross-national consensus regarding the promotion of interaction between children with different abilities or SEN, genders and backgrounds. However, the data reveal significant differences in terms of active participation. Whilst children in all countries are heavily involved in the selection of play materials, there is a striking discrepancy when it comes to daily activities: Whilst staff in Austria (93.00%) and the Czech Republic (84.50%) report a very high level of child participation, the figures drop sharply in Norway (38.80%) and Greece (32.70%). In the Greek context in particular, this suggests that whilst inclusive interaction is deeply embedded, systematic opportunities for children to actively have a say in daily routines and structured activities could be further expanded. These findings may also reflect differences in how child participation is interpreted and enacted across ECEC settings. In Norway, this item might not fully capture Norwegian forms of child participation, which are often embedded in everyday interaction rather than formal choices of predefined activities.

"What are the biggest obstacles to achieving equity of opportunity in your day-to-day work?"

To capture nuance beyond closed responses, the questionnaire included an open-ended item asking participants: "What are the biggest obstacles to achieving equity of opportunity in your day-to-day work?"

The open-ended responses from educational professionals collected as part of the survey were subjected to an inductive qualitative content analysis based on Mayring (2010) using the MAXQDA24 software. In this process, the core themes and categories were derived directly from the text material in order to reflect the participants' everyday experiences and perspectives unfiltered. A structured summary of this analysis is provided below.

AUSTRIA	**Staff shortages and group size**	One of the most frequently cited obstacles is the excessive number of children per group (often 22 to 25 children) in relation to the available staff. There is a shortage of qualified staff to cater for each child's individual needs, particularly when children have SEN.
	Time constraints	Due to staff shortages, a large number of additional organisational tasks and a heavy administrative workload, there is simply not enough time in day-to-day work for individual support and preparation.
	Language barriers and diversity	From the respondents' point of view. differences in first languages and insufficient knowledge of

		German among children and parents significantly hinder equal opportunities.
	Lack of space and materials	There is often a lack of funding for specialised teaching aids. as well as a shortage of suitable premises. In particular. a lack of accessibility (e.g., no lifts for children in wheelchairs) prevents genuine inclusion.
	Collaboration with parents	If parents do not cooperate. fail to put suggestions into practice at home. or do not communicate their child's support needs out of a sense of shame (for example, due to poverty). the schools often have their hands tied.
CZECH REPUBLIC	**Overwork due to unfavourable staff-to-child ratios**	Large groups and a severe shortage of qualified staff and assistants mean that nursery teachers are usually only able to carry out basic safety and routine tasks, rather than working in an inclusive and personalised way.
	Inadequate facilities and resources	The classrooms are often too small for the large number of children, which prevents group work from taking place without disruption. Furthermore, there is a lack of funding for teaching materials and specific resources.
	Cultural barriers and lack of family support	A growing number of children with different mother tongues or from different cultural backgrounds often withdraw from social situations. Irregular school attendance, a lack of familiarity with the rules at home, and difficulties communicating with parents have also been identified as major obstacles.
	Time constraints	The strict daily routines leave little room for flexibility when it comes to working intensively with smaller groups or individual children, or reflecting on the day together with the teaching staff.
GREECE	**High child-to-teacher ratios and limited specialist support**	Staffing arrangements differ across the Greek ECEC system. While childcare centres typically employ more than one educator per group, kindergarten teachers may be responsible for up to 25 children.

		Across both sectors, there is a severe shortage of specialist support staff, such as speech and language therapists and psychologists, to support children with SEN.
	Need for continuous professional development	Although pedagogical professionals are highly qualified, participants highlighted limited opportunities for continuous professional development, particularly in inclusive education. Professional learning often depends on individual initiative and personal financial investment. Further training on inclusive and equitable pedagogical practices was identified as an ongoing professional need.
	Lack of infrastructure and materials	State or local authority support is so limited that teachers often have to buy teaching materials out of their own pockets. According to those questioned, there is also a shortage of suitable premises and playgrounds.
	Collaboration and attitudes	Unconscious biases, stereotypes and a lack of a shared vision within the team make the work considerably more difficult. Furthermore, some parents view the school as if as if they were its "clients", and this attitude makes it difficult to work together on educational matters.
NORWAY	**Low core staffing levels and staff absences due to illness**	Although Norway has statutory staffing norms, actual adult availability may be reduced by sickness absence, substitute use, long opening hours, practical tasks and documentation demands.
	Variations in specialist knowledge within the team	Differences in training, a lack of knowledge about specific needs and differing approaches to teaching make it difficult to provide consistent, high-quality support for the children. There is often a lack of time for joint professional reflection.
	Time constraints	A severe lack of time. largely due to structural constraints, often prevents childcare professionals from carrying out the necessary planning, preparation or implementation of specific measures tailored to the children's needs.

Cultural diversity	Established Norwegian childcare traditions may unintentionally dominate everyday routines unless staff actively negotiate practices with multilingual and culturally diverse families. A shortage of interpreters for new children with different first languages make it even more difficult to take the children's interests into account at an early stage in the planning process.

A comparison of similarities and country-specific differences

Although Austria, the Czech Republic, Greece and Norway have very different welfare state and education systems. a look at the reality on the ground reveals profound, cross-national similarities. Professionals in all four countries face almost identical core problems that stand in the way of genuine equality of opportunity: an acute staff shortage and excessively large groups often reduce educational work to a mere supervisory role. This situation is exacerbated by a chronic lack of time for preparation and team reflection. as well as by inadequate premises and a shortage of teaching materials. Furthermore, increasing socio-cultural diversity, language barriers, difficulties in engaging with parents and a lack of pedagogical consensus within teams' present universal challenges for professionals.

The main differences between countries therefore lie not so much in the nature of the problems, but rather in their severity and context. Whilst a country such as Norway traditionally has a stronger resource base and a highly favorable staff-to-child ratio in the education sector, structural shortcomings still manifest uniquely. For instance, Norwegian institutions are currently heavily impacted by severe personnel shortages and high rates of absenteeism due to sick leave, meaning the theoretical resource advantage does not always translate into daily stability. Consequently, these structural shortcomings may affect day-to-day life differently than, for example, in Greece, which is often directly confronted with harsher financial austerity measures. The intensity of linguistic and cultural heterogeneity also varies depending on the regional migration dynamics of the individual countries.

Qualitative Perspectives: Focus Group Discussions

Qualitative research methods were employed to explore the research questions in greater depth. A total of 59 participants took part in 13 focus group discussions. Given the composition of the national samples, the findings should be interpreted as context-sensitive qualitative insights rather than as statistically representative accounts of each national ECEC system. Nonetheless, this diverse sample composition enabled a multifaceted and dynamic exchange of perspectives regarding how professionals and stakeholders perceive and navigate inclusion in early childhood education. The exact demographic characteristics of the participants, their distribution across the individual focus groups (see from page 86 of the report) and the specific characteristics of the sample are clearly set out in the relevant tables in the appendix to this thesis.

A methodological analysis of the empirical data was carried out in accordance with the recognised standards of qualitative content analysis by Mayring (2010). A deductive approach was employed, whereby the category system was defined in advance based on the interview guide. A multi-stage quality assurance procedure was incorporated prior to the main analysis to ensure that the results are as valid and comparable as possible across different levels of political governance. To this end, we first coded selected interview segments independently of one another and then reviewed them collectively within the research team. An initial quantitative analysis of this test phase revealed 22 complete matches, 17 mismatches and 7 missing codes. The identification of discrepancies in the first round was strategically used to uncover ambiguities in the coding guidelines. As part of a consensual coordination process, the discrepancies were critically discussed, conceptual distinctions clarified, and a uniform understanding of the categorisation system established. Once the analysis criteria had been successfully calibrated, a team of three trained coders carried out a final and consistent evaluation of all remaining data.

After conducting a thorough content analysis of the data, we carried out systematic coding and categorisation in MAXQDA. The findings were then processed efficiently using AI tools and condensed into concise text blocks. These summarised sections provide the empirical basis for this policy paper.

Austria

Brief description of the sample

The Austrian sample (5 FG, n = 25) reflects a high degree of professional diversity. The group consists mainly of educational practitioners, as well as heads of institutions, educational advisers, and a social worker. Participants are distributed fairly evenly across the various regions, with most working in large cities and small towns, and a smaller proportion working in medium-sized towns. A defining feature of this group is that most respondents work in socially disadvantaged environment and many of the institutions are located in challenging areas. In terms of educational attainment. there is a balanced distribution between

bachelor's and master's degrees, as well as qualifications obtained through adult education or diplomas ('Mature'). Professional experience is characterised by diversity too, ranging from those who have just started their careers with one year's experience, to seasoned professionals who have been working for 30 years.

STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK

One of the biggest challenges facing inclusive early years education in Austria concerns the structural and legal framework. A key issue is federalism, whereby each federal state has its own laws and regulations. This results in a lack of uniform quality standards and framework conditions, meaning that children's educational opportunities vary depending on where they live. Another major obstacle is the limited financial resources of providers and local authorities, which often results in a reduction in quality. The unfavourable staff-to-child ratio is another factor. with as few as two carers responsible for up to 25 children. This makes it almost impossible to respond appropriately to the individual needs of every child. particularly those with SEN. Valuable time in a child's early development is lost due to bureaucratic hurdles and extremely long waiting times for diagnosis and support staff approval. Furthermore, the lack of legal safeguards in basic medical care. such as the administration of insulin or emergency medication, creates significant uncertainty among staff. A uniform federal framework law that creates equal opportunities for all, as well as a general reduction in group sizes and greater political awareness of the importance of early childhood education as the foundation of society, are seen as major opportunities.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

At the institutional level, inclusion often fails due to factors such as staff shortages and high staff turnover. Frequent sick leave, maternity leave and staff changes lead to unstable teams, severely disrupting educational work. Each time this happens, valuable time is lost that could be spent building relationships while the teams find their feet again. Another issue is that although additional support staff or inclusion assistants are often approved. they often lack educational training and can be completely overwhelmed by challenging children (e.g., those on the autism spectrum). Consequently, group leaders face even greater strain as they must guide both the children and the untrained support staff. Furthermore, the increasing administrative burden takes up a great deal of time that should be spent working with the children. On the other hand, stable, multi-professional teams have enormous potential. Those that establish supervision, regular

team meetings for reflection, and an open culture of learning from mistakes are able to cope with pressures much more effectively. Support from mobile teams (such as psychologists and inclusion teachers), as well as effective networking with external organisations (e.g., child and youth welfare services), are also crucial in strengthening these institutions.

PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS. SKILLS AND DEVELOPMENT

Basic training, particularly at BAfEPs. is often criticised for being too theoretical and out of touch with reality. Young graduates often find it challenging to put inclusion into practice. conduct difficult discussions with parents or deal with extreme behavioural issues. Mentoring schemes. in which experienced educators provide close support to new entrants to the profession during their first few years. offer great potential for change. In contrast to traditional training pathways where students begin specialized early childhood education at vocational schools (BAfEP) at just 14 years old, career changers and those enrolled in postsecondary training tracks (the Kolleg format) enter the field at a completely different life stage. These postsecondary students are often considered a valuable resource because they bring greater life experience to the profession, making them more mature, reflective. and determined. However, the greatest potential ultimately lies in overall staff attitudes and their ongoing willingness to engage in lifelong learning. Continuing professional development, biographical work (such as reflecting on one's own childhood and formative experiences), and self-reflection are all essential because the five-year basic training programme cannot cover the full range of subject-specific knowledge, such as that relating to autism or language development.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AND MATERIAL-SPATIAL CONDITIONS

Physical and spatial conditions can vary greatly, either significantly hindering or greatly promoting inclusion. Older buildings are often inaccessible due to a lack of ramps or doorways that are too narrow for wheelchairs. and their small group rooms offer few places for children who need quiet or alternative spaces to retreat to. This results in high noise levels and stress. New buildings that have been carefully planned to incorporate open-plan designs, such as marketplaces or various function rooms. offer a great deal of flexibility and make educational work considerably easier. Even without a budget for high-quality materials. the creativity of educators can be a valuable asset. Valuable, inclusive learning environments can be created on a small budget by repurposing unused spaces (e.g.. converting junk rooms into places of retreat), using every day or

natural materials, or deliberately incorporating gardens and corridors as play areas.

PROCESS AND INTERACTION LEVEL

When it comes to interactions and processes. it is clear that teachers incorporate inclusion into their daily work. Meeting the needs of all children in large and diverse groups is a major challenge. Children with behavioural issues or a diagnosis often attract so much attention that quieter children are overlooked or neglected. Inadequate language skills. low frustration tolerance and difficulties with emotional regulation (often exacerbated by excessive media consumption at home) also present significant challenges for staff. Furthermore. many parents lack basic parenting skills. meaning educators have to engage in intensive work with parents, taking time away from the children. A strengths-based approach is most effective here: each child is supported according to their current stage of development rather than focusing on deficits. Open-ended approaches, self-determination in daily life (such as flexible snack times) and needs-based support can have a very positive influence. Inclusion is successfully implemented when open, non-judgemental communication is evident, cultural diversity is embraced (for example through the inclusion of various religious festivals) and professionals respond creatively and flexibly to the children's interests.

Czech Republic

Brief description of the sample

The Czech sample (2 FG, n = 8) consists of seven female preschool directors and one male preschool director from Prague and smaller towns outside the capital. The sample was intentionally composed to reflect diverse institutional, geographical and social contexts.

The participating preschools include institutions from socially disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged areas, including preschools with a high proportion of children with a migration background and extensive experience with children with SEN. The sample also includes a preschool from a socially disadvantaged locality that represents good practice in supporting children of Roma origin.

As preschool directors, the respondents provided both pedagogical and leadership perspectives on play-based learning, inclusion, cooperation with families, staff capacity, support measures and systemic barriers in Czech early childhood education.

STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK

The revised Framework Educational Programme for Preschool Education is generally viewed positively by Czech respondents, who

value its support for a flexible, open, and child-centred approach compatible with play-based learning. However, since its compulsory implementation has been postponed, participants emphasized that preschools will require sufficient methodological support to translate this curricular freedom into everyday practice. In everyday settings, some teachers may find it challenging to work with an open curriculum, tending instead to rely on more structured daily routines and detailed guidance.

Furthermore, respondents stressed the need to strengthen movement, outdoor learning, and physical activity in preschools, particularly to support children's physical development and posture. This was framed not as a flaw of the curriculum itself, but rather as a practical implementation challenge requiring stronger methodological and organizational support.

A key structural barrier concerns staffing and support. While preschool classes may include up to 24 children, there is no automatic entitlement to additional support staff. In contrast, from September 2026, only first-grade classes in primary schools with at least 15 pupils will be entitled to a teaching assistant. Because preschools must continue to depend on individual support measures, local capacity, and staffing possibilities, respondents perceived preschools as structurally disadvantaged compared to primary schools-especially regarding staff capacity, inclusion, and administrative workload.

Finally, the increasing administrative burden, including documentation and inspection-related pressure, was described as reducing the time teachers can spend in direct interaction with children. Consequently, respondents highlighted smaller class sizes, improved staffing, stronger methodological support and reduced bureaucracy as vital conditions for enhancing educational quality, inclusion, and play-based learning in Czech preschool education.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

At an institutional level, having a stable and adequate number of staff is fundamental to the success of inclusive education. The involvement of teaching assistants and specialist staff. such as social education workers, speech therapists and psychologists, is extremely helpful. Social pedagogues, for example, provide support in communicating with disadvantaged families, overcoming language barriers and applying for financial assistance. High staff turnover poses a major obstacle, whether due to fixed-term contracts expiring, staff moving residence or staff returning from maternity leave who no longer subscribe to the institution's current educational philosophy.

	Management must continuously carry out fundamental team-building work. School leaders try to ensure institutional quality by minimising administrative burdens and trusting the practical work of the teaching staff rather than recording everything in detail in writing.
PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS. SKILLS AND DEVELOPMENT	The qualifications and ongoing professional development of staff are crucial to the quality of the facility. While they often have a solid theoretical understanding of child development, young graduates often struggle to support free play effectively in practice - they either fail to intervene or exert too much control over the play. Inadequate pay is a significant demotivating factor. Preschool teachers' remuneration is structurally lower than that of primary school teachers due to their different placement within the Czech public-sector salary tables. Consequently, many well-trained educators either do not enter the profession or switch to primary schools. There is a desire for a genuine career progression system that financially rewards further training and specialisation (e.g., in art or SEN) and supports this with opportunities for advancement. Teachers are often overwhelmed by methodological guidelines, so it is important that they are given time during working hours to discuss and reflect on the content of further training with their colleagues.
PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AND MATERIAL-SPATIAL CONDITIONS	The physical and material environment plays a key role in free play. It is recommended that the number of toys with predefined shapes is reduced, and that open-ended toys and natural materials are provided instead, such as simple scraps of fabric. These stimulate children's imagination and creativity far more effectively. Toys designed solely for a specific purpose can stifle a child's potential. Educational settings can create a more dynamic space by designating quiet areas for introverted children and spaces for more physical activity. It is also important to use outdoor environments more systematically for educational activities, play and exploration, while supporting children in rediscovering how to use natural materials creatively. Teachers should also show more courage and entrust children with real tools (such as hammers and saws) or experiments.
PROCESS AND INTERACTION LEVEL	Free. unstructured play is the most important element of educational work at the level of interaction, as it is essential for children's development. One of the greatest challenges is social pressure, particularly from parents who demand targeted. school-style preparation. such as after-school clubs or English lessons, and who misunderstand free play as merely a means of 'keeping children occupied'. Teachers must have the competence to address these

expectations confidently and defend the value of play. In educational theory. criticism is often levelled at the fact that the end result (e.g., in craft activities) is still prioritised over honouring the creative process. Successful interaction is characterised by teachers closely observing the children to recognise their needs, while giving them the freedom to resolve conflicts and situations themselves. Free play that is harmonious and inclusive arises when children are socially and emotionally secure.

Greece

Brief description of the sample

The Greek sample (4 focus groups; N = 16) was heterogeneous and included professionals from both parts of the Greek ECEC system, namely childcare centres and kindergartens. Participants included ECEC managers or heads of institutions, both from childcare centres and kindergartens, a director responsible for all municipal childcare centres at local authority level, early childhood educators (0-4 years old), kindergarten teachers (4-6 years old), and a special education professional. This composition provides insights not only into leadership and organisational perspectives, but also into practitioners' everyday experiences of inclusion, play-based learning, and support needs across different ECEC settings. The regional distribution is divided almost exactly between the four focus groups conducted. In the Greek sample, this includes both the two groups of managers (Managers/Directors) and the two groups of practitioners (Practitioners): The participants in the first focus group all work in a major city, whilst the managers in the second focus group, with one exception, work in small towns. This geographical division is also reflected in the social context: the urban institutions in the first group are all classified as socially non-disadvantaged, whereas all institutions in the small towns of the second group are considered socially disadvantaged. The educational level of the Greek professionals is exceptionally high and highly academic; the vast majority hold a master's degree, three people have a bachelor's degree and another even holds a PhD. With regard to professional experience, the picture is mixed, ranging from 1.5 to 28 years, although the second focus group, characterised by disadvantage, includes a strikingly high number of managers with relatively little experience (under 8 years).

STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK

A major problem within the structural framework is the enormous bureaucratic burden. Staff spend a great deal of time on documentation via online platforms, planning workshops, and completing detailed reports and documentation related to support and assessment procedures, including processes involving KEDASY (Centers for Assessment and Guidance of Children with SEN) services,

	distracting them from their educational work with children. Furthermore, institutions continue to face structural underinvestment, meaning that participants reported that, in some settings, basic educational materials are occasionally purchased by teachers or parents because of limited institutional resources. Another major obstacle is the high staff-to-child ratio. Staff-child ratios also vary across the split ECEC system. In public kindergartens, one teacher may be responsible for up to 25 children, while participants reported that staffing ratios are not always adhered to in some private childcare centres (e.g., one staff member for 16 toddlers). According to participants, smaller groups of 10–15 children would better support high-quality pedagogical practice. Regarding the curricula, there is a clear divide: kindergartens must follow highly structured programmes, such as 'Skills Workshops', which are sometimes perceived as being out of touch with practical reality. In contrast, for day-care centres serving younger children, the absence of a national pedagogical curriculum framework may lead to considerable variation in pedagogical approaches across settings. Furthermore, the lack of specialised support staff is hindering the implementation of genuine inclusion due to massive delays in recruitment.
INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK	At an institutional level, there is a severe lack of time available for joint lesson planning, reflection and team meetings during regular working hours. Continuous educational work is also made more difficult by the fact that substitute teachers often have to change schools every year, which means that established structures and bonds with colleagues and children are constantly broken. External specialists such as psychologists or social workers, who would actually be essential for inclusion, often visit schools only once a week. Participants reported that external specialists often have limited opportunities to work directly alongside teachers in classrooms. Managers of childcare centres also report that they are so heavily burdened by administrative tasks that they lack the time to closely guide and support their educational teams in their day-to-day practice.
PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS. SKILLS AND DEVELOPMENT	Although Greek ECEC professionals generally have a strong academic qualification profile, participants reported that initial university training does not always provide sufficient preparation for complex everyday challenges, particularly in relation to autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, physical disabilities, intercultural communication and inclusive play-based practice. Further training in inclusive or intercultural education is often not embedded within institutions. is

frequently only available to permanent staff, and often only covers inclusion in an abstract theoretical sense. Consequently. many professionals reported that they often need to seek additional professional development independently and pay for seminars themselves. In everyday school life, there is also often a discrepancy between the academic theory of teamwork and the reality of its implementation: successful educational collaboration depends heavily on the personalities of the individuals involved, and it often breaks down due to entrenched views, a lack of self-reflection, or conflicts between the lead teacher and integration assistants.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AND MATERIAL-SPATIAL CONDITIONS

Participants identified physical and infrastructural conditions as a major barrier to the implementation of inclusive play-based learning. Participants reported that many buildings are old and inaccessible, lacking features such as ramps and disabled-friendly toilets. In some cases, they are even dangerous, meaning large glass fronts have to be blocked off with furniture. Outdoor facilities are often inadequate: according to participants, some centres do not have a playground, meaning children must stay indoors for up to eight hours a day. Other nurseries share playgrounds with primary schools. Due to the large number of older pupils, spending time outdoors is almost impossible, particularly for children experiencing crises or sensory overload (e.g., those with autism). Although qualified staff emphasise that sensory experiences with natural materials outdoors (such as soil, water or leaves) have an extremely calming effect on children. such activities often fail due to management guidelines aimed at preventing mess indoors. Due to the lack of ready-made educational materials, nursery teachers often rely on recycled items and homemade games to make learning content tangible.

PROCESS AND INTERACTION LEVEL

In terms of interaction, free, sensory and experience-based play is considered the most effective inclusion method, as it naturally overcomes language barriers and developmental differences, enabling all children to participate equally. Teachers make targeted use of guided games at the start of the year to model ways of social interaction and respect for the children, before allowing them to engage in free play. A major issue in day-to-day interactions is the lack of systematic language support. Participants reported that insufficient systematic language support may increase the risk of social isolation for some children. Participants also expressed concern that these early language difficulties may continue into primary education if appropriate support is not provided. Cooperation with parents can also be difficult. Participants perceived that some Greek and migrant

parents sometimes lack interest in school rituals and play's social significance, instead focusing primarily on cognitive prerequisites (e.g., being able to write their name). Language barriers among parents with a migrant background also make even the simplest organisational communication considerably more difficult. Despite these challenges, professionals strive to create a safe atmosphere through empathy, music, and special transitional rituals (e.g., hand puppets), in which children can play an active and independent role. This indicates that, despite structural constraints, Greek ECEC professionals draw on relational, creative and low-cost pedagogical strategies to support inclusion. They also illustrate the strong commitment of Greek ECEC professionals to maintaining child-centred and inclusive pedagogical practices despite structural constraints.

Norway

Brief description of the sample

The Norwegian sample (two focus groups, n = 11) is a highly homogeneous group. All participants were heads of childcare centres. The sample is predominantly urban, with limited representation from small-town and rural municipalities. Regarding the social context of the institutions, the picture is mixed, with some locations serving socially disadvantaged areas while others do not. Looking at the personnel structure, formal qualifications among heads and pedagogical leaders are primarily linked to higher education, specifically university-level childcare teacher education. However, Norwegian childcare centres also employ child and youth workers with vocational qualifications, as well as assistants without specialised degrees. Another important characteristic of this group is their consistently high level of professional experience. There are no early career professionals in the Norwegian sample; all participants have at least nine years' experience in the field and most have between 15 and 30 years experience.

STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK

The Framework Plan provides a common national framework for values. content and tasks, but leaves considerable room for local interpretation and does not in itself guarantee equal implementation quality. It provides the basis for institutions' annual plans and conveys important values. However, some managers view the plan as too theoretical and vague. arguing that it contains too few concrete tools for day-to-day practice. This means that it relies heavily on facility management to implement these guidelines. Another significant structural challenge is funding. The widely varying subsidy rates

offered by local authorities mean that the quality of care often depends on how much money a facility has available. For example. this affects the ability to fund cover staff in the event of illness. Participants also referred to ambitions to increase the proportion of qualified kindergarten teachers, but national regulation is formally expressed through the pedagogue norm rather than a general 60% staff target.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

At an institutional level, childcare centres are significantly struggling with staff shortages and high levels of sick leave. Managers reported that practical and administrative tasks reduce time for sustained pedagogical interaction, even though everyday routines such as meals, dressing and tidying can also have pedagogical value when adequately staffed. rather than interacting with the children. The increasing burden of documentation, particularly in cases of child protection or for children with SEN, consumes valuable resources that are then lacking for general planning. To compensate for staff shortages, substitute staff are deployed, though this is viewed critically as they are not sufficiently familiar with the educational approaches or the children. Some managers reported that insufficient Norwegian-language and pedagogical communication competence among substitutes can challenge inclusion and interaction quality. However, it is emphasised that excellent institutional and pedagogical organisation helps to avoid falling into a purely 'firefighting' mode (i.e., crisis management) even on days with high staff absence due to illness. Additional funding, which could enable a 50% increase in staffing levels in individual departments, would be a major relief.

PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS. SKILLS AND DEVELOPMENT

Professional qualifications and staff development are regarded as key factors in ensuring quality. Participants perceived that new graduates may be better prepared for child-oriented pedagogical activities than for leading staff teams, managing parent cooperation and taking professional authority in complex everyday situations. While many new entrants to the profession have good theoretical knowledge, they often lack the confidence to take on genuine leadership roles or set direction within groups. For this reason, managers emphasise the importance of targeted further training, such as national competence resources and packages from Udir, together with local childcare-based competence development, and encourage staff to develop their skills continuously by studying research literature, in order to professionalise the role. This is most effective when the whole team learns and develops together, but the stress of everyday life often

	leaves little time for planning and reflection. Managers in particular must demand further training and ensure that time is set aside for it.
PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AND MATERIAL-SPATIAL CONDITIONS	The physical learning environment, including the spatial and material conditions, is crucial for children's play. Careful spatial design can calm groups and promote children's language and play skills. Interestingly. it is not only expensive, ready-made toys that matter; 'undefined' play materials from nature, such as wooden planks, pipes, and sticks, often stimulate children's imaginations far more than highly structured toys. A combination of structured and unstructured materials is key to engaging all children effectively. Even if the buildings or outdoor facilities are not in the best condition, an excellent play environment can be created through the creative and inclusive use of the surroundings and adjacent natural areas. The physical environment should also be age-appropriate and continually adapted to the children's current interests.
PROCESS AND INTERACTION LEVEL	When it comes to interactions, the central focus is on adults' active, relationship-oriented role. Role models must be qualified professionals who observe and support children's play attentively without dominating it directly. Otherwise, overly dominant adult steering may reduce opportunities for peer interaction and child agency. Some managers perceived that more children need adult support to enter and sustain peer play, which they associated with changes in home environments, media use and social experience.

Stakeholder Interviews with Policy Makers

We conducted nine semi-structured interviews with political stakeholders and decision-makers at all levels: local (city), regional (state), and national (federal). The number of interviews conducted in each country was as follows: AT: N=3; CZ: N=2; GR: N=2; NO: N=2. This study aimed to analyse the policy and systemic frameworks for inclusive, play-based learning in early childhood education, care and upbringing (ECEC). This multi-level approach enabled us to identify specific needs. resource constraints and implementation barriers at the interface between legislation. administration and practice.

Data analysis was carried out using qualitative content analysis based on Mayring (2010). with a deductive-inductive procedure applied to develop categories. The PLEOS project's deductive framework was formed using existing theoretical concepts, which were differentiated and supplemented by inductive categories derived from the empirical material. To ensure reliability, two interviews were initially coded independently by different individuals. The initial inter-coder reliability was 68%. The reported 68% refers to the initial percentage agreement obtained during the calibration phase and was used primarily to refine the coding framework rather than as a final indicator of coding reliability. Following detailed reconciliation and consensus on coding differences, a single coder finalised the remaining corpus. The synthesis and summarisation of the extracted results were carried out with the aid of artificial intelligence (AI). However, the research team subsequently checked and validated the summaries generated by the AI manually to ensure they were accurate in terms of both content and context.

Austria

INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION	The aim is essentially for all state facilities to be open to all children. regardless of their personal circumstances or any disabilities they may have. Early childhood professionals generally give children a warm welcome, although it must be admitted that not every childcare setting is ideal for every child. A successful recent strategy has been to work closely with specialist organisations to provide additional support for children and parents within the facilities and within budgetary limits. One great practical example of this is the deployment of mobile psychological teams who observe and provide informed feedback. Another strategy that the government seeks to employ is through the implementation of new training programs, such as the standard bachelor's degree "Elementarpädagogik" and the university course "Elementar+" or "ElementarPro", which will also take great care in instilling an inclusive mindset to new educators. Dealing with children who exhibit behavioural difficulties poses a major challenge. If they pose a danger to themselves or others, they may be withdrawn from the programme. This can lead to a breakdown

in relationships and constant changes of facility until the compulsory kindergarten year. To counteract this, a step-by-step plan is to be introduced before a child is withdrawn. There is significant potential for change in providing greater support for children without a formal diagnosis. to prevent them from falling through the cracks. There is also potential for change in supporting gifted children through additional provision.

CURRICULUM AND POLICY

From a policy perspective. the constantly updated National Curriculum defines early childhood education as a distinct sector and places particular emphasis on inclusion and play. Support schemes, such as the Disability Act and the 'KISA' programme (Kindergarten Social Work), which ease the burden on parents. are already in place in some Styrian institutions. Another aspect of current policy is ensuring a smooth transition from kindergarten to school. This is supported by the compulsory childcare year, a Section 15a agreement, and simplified data sharing, all of which aim to ensure a fair start. However, the current system has a significant gap concerning a 'third group' of children. These children have no diagnosed disability or primary language deficits, but exhibit marked behavioural tendencies, for example due to high media consumption. Currently, this group has no appropriate support systems. Inclusion can be further hindered by the fact that, due to the current division of responsibilities, there are legal and financial limitations in place that don’t allow for governmental overlap. In order to remain fit for the future, it is argued that existing systems must be continuously reviewed, cumbersome measures reformed and greater focus placed on aspects such as democratic development. Effective coordination and structured phased plans are always required to realistically implement policy objectives. The government is also being very aware of its duty in training new generations of early childhood educators and maintains contact with the states and other relevant stakeholders on how to best implement inclusive practices in the field, while a qualitative advancement of initial and continuing education with a focus on inclusion is actively being championed as well.

QUALIFICATION AND COMPETENCE

Even with a solid education, care workers often find it difficult to cope with the complex and rapidly changing challenges they face in their daily lives. Psychologists and child protection officers have been brought into the facilities to stabilise the situation. They are responsible for building the resilience of care staff and supporting them in dealing with physical aggression from children. Successful programmes exist at management level, such as the “talent pool”. in

which young colleagues are screened by external firms such as Deloitte to create a support network even before they take on a management role. Structured evaluation and feedback sessions are also planned for the first 18 months to provide stability for these young professionals. Nevertheless. many feel that the support they receive in their first year of employment is too sporadic and that a shared understanding among professionals is also just as necessary as the completion of pedagogically appropriate training in order to ensure high quality early childhood education. That being said. there is still an enormous need for specialised further training and professional development, particularly in the areas of inclusion. dealing with challenging behaviour. overcoming language barriers. and working with parents. There are also the acknowledgement that cross-disciplinary and subject-specific competencies should be imparted through formal tertiary education so that professionals can be better equipped to handle any complex situation in their ever day work. A foundation in pedagogy and didactics. training phases that are professionally supervised and expanded upon, preparation for multiprofessional collaboration and cooperation with parents. and the integration of inclusion, diversity and individualized support are the most important areas that are mentioned in terms of developing high educational standards for new and experienced educators. Supporting the transition from training to the workplace through stronger mentoring and advisory systems is of great importance.

ENVIRONMENT AND RESOURCES

A stable staffing structure and a suitable physical environment are crucial to the success of inclusion. While new buildings often provide the ideal conditions for inclusion and equal opportunities, older buildings (some of which are up to 60 years old) require a great deal of creativity, staff planning and coordination to address these aspects, In rural areas, property prices per square metre are often low enough to allow for the creation of more spacious premises. One successful approach is to view the rooms from the children's perspective with the staff. Often, simple yet effective adjustments, such as rearranging bulky furniture or creating easily visible quiet corners, can greatly encourage children's play. A significant step forward would be to move away from rigid guidelines, such as having exactly 22 children per group. Instead, the allocation of resources should consider which systems and capacities are needed to support the children in a given setting. Furthermore, materials often lack differentiated approaches to the different realities of life in urban and rural areas.

COLLABORATION

Effective collaboration across all sectors is crucial. Ongoing communication is essential to finding suitable solutions for children who are struggling to settle into a particular group, whether the organisations involved are public or private. A particularly sensitive issue is cooperation with parents. Conflicts often arise from differing cultural approaches to child-rearing or religious reservations, such as when parents insist that their child should not play with children of other faiths. Providing interpreting services and language support has proven to be an extremely effective way of strengthening educators' ability to engage with parents. In future, we must not lose sight of very young children (under one year of age); the network between families, educational institutions, and other support systems must be emphasised much more strongly in this regard.

RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE

Scientific knowledge is a central pillar of early childhood education. Evidence-based materials, such as those for settling in or meal planning, are shared with colleagues in the field via platforms like ElementarPro or Elementar+. We have strong links with research institutions, universities and teacher training colleges. Current specialist literature, mostly in German, is also used extensively to redesign play support in terms of both space and content. Experience has shown that evidence-based planning is most effective when professionals discover its benefits through positive role models, rather than having strict guidelines imposed from above. However, the immediate implementation of major policy decisions, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, can quickly overwhelm staff in practice. Currently, there is a lack of well-founded overview of how inclusion is being implemented structurally across Austria's various federal states as the different approaches are not widely known or easily comparable. It is therefore recommended that international best practice examples are shared more widely, and that planned reforms are translated into concrete, actionable, phased plans, to enable well-founded political decisions to be made. Tertiary educational institutions establishing a research-based relationship with governmental actors is a much-desired action. Working in tandem with existing policy instruments to produce results about specific target groups and presenting said results in a transparent and concise manner would be particularly useful for the ECEC sector to develop into itself.

Czech Republic

INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION	The concept of inclusion is increasingly understood as education for all children, encompassing not only children with disabilities, but also children with specific learning needs, health-related limitations, giftedness, a different first language, or a temporary need for social support. In Czech preschools, support is primarily provided by teaching assistants as part of the system of support measures. More recently, social pedagogues have also been introduced as an important professional role, particularly in settings working with children from socially disadvantaged, culturally diverse or linguistically diverse backgrounds. A model inspired by Finland, in which support professionals are not permanently assigned to a single classroom but move flexibly between classes, has been discussed as a possible direction for Czech support services. In the current Czech reform context, this logic is reflected mainly in primary education, particularly through the parametrisation of teaching assistants in first grades of primary schools from September 2026 and the new financing framework for school psychologists, special educators and social pedagogues in primary schools. It should therefore not be presented as an implemented measure in preschool education. In Czech preschools. support continues to depend mainly on teaching assistants provided through support measures, local staffing capacity and, in some contexts, emerging roles such as social pedagogues. Pre-school education lays the foundation for a child's entire life, helping them learn to cope with individual weaknesses or 'gaps' in this foundation so they can succeed later on.
CURRICULUM AND POLICY	Although the Framework Educational Programme (FEP PE) for Czech pre-school education provides support in the context of professionalisation in ECEC, critics argue that the current guidelines are too formal and resemble legal texts. Instead, dynamic formats such as short videos should be used to help teachers visualise educational concepts and inclusion. Play is the most important pedagogical tool and is deeply ingrained in teachers' consciousness. In mixed-age groups, free spontaneous play is a vital form of learning for children and should not be undermined by too many teacher-led activities. Politically, the idea of abolishing deferred school enrolment was discussed but rejected, as the developmental differences between children would otherwise place too great a burden on primary schools. In the early years of school, the aim is to reduce pressure to perform and focus more on individualisation. There is also consideration being given to merging pre-school and primary school

administrations so that specialist staff. such as psychologists, can be shared.

QUALIFICATION AND COMPETENCE

A key principle is pedagogical presence: teachers should act as facilitators rather than seeking absolute control. However, there is a gap in the training landscape. Although upper-secondary preschool teacher education provides substantial practical experience, respondents suggested that it may also reproduce more traditional views of teaching, with a stronger emphasis on maintaining control over children and classroom routines than on facilitating children's autonomous play, exploration and decision-making. There is a call for pre-school heads to hold at least a bachelor's degree, although this has not yet been implemented for financial reasons. Another significant aim is to provide teaching assistants with comprehensive training in SEN and play-based teaching approaches so they can actively and professionally support children rather than merely being present. Pedagogical observation was identified as a fundamental professional skill that enables teachers and teaching assistants to understand children's behaviour, interpret classroom situations appropriately and respond to children's individual needs. Respondents also emphasised that preschool teachers should be supported in developing professional confidence and a stronger sense of the value of their work, particularly by recognising the educational importance of preschool education and children's play.

ENVIRONMENT AND RESOURCES

The design of the physical space significantly influences the quality of education. Teachers are advised to avoid sensory overload by avoiding clutter such as overly colourful stencils on windows and untidy displays of materials. Materials should be stored in cupboards and brought out as 'treasures', rather than being displayed chaotically. Gardens and outdoor areas are valuable learning spaces where children can play with natural elements, such as soil, and engage in creative play. Inclusive spatial design enables focused building projects or quiet spaces through the use of distinct zones. Respondents criticised that preschool premises are often designed and regulated in ways that prioritise hygiene, safety and standardisation over pedagogical flexibility. In their view, this can limit the creative use of indoor and outdoor spaces and restrict opportunities for more exploratory, messy or nature-based forms of play. They contrasted this with more flexible approaches found in settings such as forest kindergartens, where outdoor and nature-based learning is more central to the pedagogical concept. Spatial issues can be resolved through thoughtful architecture, such as

centrally located, partitioned washrooms, which create more play space in group rooms.

COLLABORATION

Respondents suggested that resources could be used more effectively through stronger cooperation or joint administration between preschools and primary schools, particularly where this enables shared access to specialists such as school psychologists, special educators or social pedagogues. However, such organisational arrangements need to be accompanied by clear funding mechanisms and sufficient staffing capacity. Respondents also emphasised the importance of close cooperation between universities and partner preschools in teacher education, so that future preschool teachers receive systematic practical guidance, mentoring and constructive feedback during their professional preparation. Professional development programmes supported by the National Pedagogical Institute bring together preschool and primary school teachers for joint training on key topics such as formative assessment, educational strategies, and communication with parents. Interdisciplinary collaboration is also considered important when redesigning outdoor spaces, such as when educational institutions, architects and foundations work together to plan nature-oriented nursery gardens.

RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE

Respondents perceived a lack of systematic research, analytical feedback and evidence-informed policy development in Czech preschool and early childhood education. Although state institutions collect extensive administrative and statistical data, for example on capacity, attendance and children receiving support measures, these data are not always made available in a form that would support deeper conceptual analysis, evaluation of practice or evidence-based decision-making. Respondents therefore called for stronger links between data collection, research, policy development and practical feedback to schools. Universities could seize this opportunity: Master's and PhD students could process and synthesise these large volumes of data to produce examples of best practice that could enrich the education system. Furthermore, universities and international initiatives (such as those by the OECD) should help introduce new trends into teacher training and address research gaps regarding teachers' actual competencies. Clear manuals are also needed to help teachers understand abstract scientific terms (such as digital competence or the theory and pedagogical concept of play) in relation to their everyday practice.

Greece

INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION

The sample for Greece included two national stakeholders. The qualitative findings presented in this section are derived from the contributions of both individuals. providing key insights into the structural dimensions of the Greek system. One illustrative example of inclusive practice emerging from the interviews concerns the use of hand puppets, such as class mascots or persona puppets, which were perceived as supporting participation among children . These playful tools create a stable emotional atmosphere, Supporting children in overcoming language and developmental barriers while encouraging the participation of children who would otherwise be hesitant, since there is no 'right or wrong' when playing with the puppet. According to participants, children often demonstrate high levels of engagement , even if they do not express themselves verbally. Complex social issues and discrimination can also be discussed in a safe environment using persona puppets. Play generally offers children the opportunity to make sense of things and re-enact events, enabling equal participation for those from different socio-cultural backgrounds or with SEN. Participants also emphasised the need for qualitative indicators capable of capturing meaningful participation, interaction and communication, rather than relying solely on children's physical presence in activities.

CURRICULUM AND POLICY

The curriculum and specific teacher guidelines emphasise play-based learning, establishing it as the primary means of education and inclusion. The curriculum identifies emotional stability and children's engagement as important indicators. The new curriculum (for kindergartens) is based on three pillars: differentiated teaching, culturally sensitive pedagogy, and joint schooling for children with and without disabilities. This provides an important policy and pedagogical foundation for inclusive play-based learning. The main challenge is therefore not the absence of relevant curricular principles, but their consistent translation into everyday practice through resources. Training, specialist support and shared professional terminology. In practice, however, these objectives often encounter difficulties due to a lack of resources and persistent misconceptions about pedagogy , such as the common misconception that play scenarios restrict free play or that inclusion is solely the responsibility of SEN teachers. There is also a lack of common terminology and clear guidelines defining what 'inclusive play' actually means in everyday life. This highlights the need to translate curriculum principles more effectively into practice, and social skills

and a sense of belonging should be included as clear indicators in the curriculum.

QUALIFICATION AND COMPETENCE

The training of educational advisers, who act as multipliers and promote the concept of play-based learning, has been actively promoted, particularly in teacher training. Professional development is also promoted through individual assessments and exchanges within professional learning communities and teacher networks. At the end of the school year, the self-evaluation processes of schools determine the professional development needs of teachers. However, there is a lack of specialised training courses aimed specifically at using play as a means of inclusion. T However, participants noted that teachers are often expected to have already mastered the use of play for inclusion, despite frequently lacking the specialised knowledge and practical strategies required to implement it effectively. Therefore, continuous, practice-oriented professional development is necessary to show teachers how they can subtly intervene in play to support children with SEN while respecting their autonomy.

ENVIRONMENT AND RESOURCES

In order for teachers to be able to successfully apply their professional qualifications, a supportive environment and adequate resources are essential. In reality, however, participants reported considerable variation in the physical conditions across settings : a lack of play materials and suitable rooms and sometimes even a lack of playgrounds. . Participants associated these differences with the fact that responsibility for school infrastructure lies with local authorities, resulting in considerable variation in the quality of facilities across settings. These widely varying physical conditions significantly hinder the implementation of inclusive play. In public kindergartens, one teacher may be responsible for up to 25 children, leaving limited opportunities to work in small groups or closely observe and support children's play. to work in small groups or closely observe and support play. Improving the staff-to-pupil ratio, for example through co-teaching with two teachers, would allow the learning environment to be tailored specifically to the children’s needs, thus enabling genuine inclusion to be put into practice in everyday school life by creating the necessary time and space for it.

COLLABORATION

This collaboration has proved highly effective on many levels, particularly through the network of teachers, which facilitates the dynamic exchange of best practice and peer observation. Furthermore, collaboration with universities and research groups is highly valued by educational advisers and actively sought after. It is

important not to view curricula as rigid documents, but rather to engage in a cooperative dialogue that enables us to continually revise and update them through shared insights, data, and experiences gained from collaboration.

RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE

The transfer of scientific findings into ECEC practice is currently inconsistent because there are no formal mechanisms in place to systematically provide educational advisers with new research data. Access to knowledge is often difficult because research databases require paid subscriptions. Furthermore, research priorities do not always align with education policy priorities, leading to tensions between a research-based focus on children's autonomy and policy-driven learning objectives. To improve this situation, it is important that scientific findings are collected and made available in open-access databases, and that they are translated into practical tools for schools and policymakers. A permanent feedback mechanism is also needed to provide research teams with practical experience from the implementation of curricula, thereby ensuring continuous development. Generalisations in education policy should wherever possible, be informed by smaller, well-founded studies to ensure that the measures are valid. For Greece, an important future priority would be the establishment of systematic research-practice-policy feedback loops linking universities, curriculum developers, municipal ECEC services and practitioners. Such mechanisms could help ensure that curriculum reforms are continuously informed by evidence from implementation. Taken together, the interviews suggest that Greece already possesses an important policy framework for inclusive play-based learning. The main challenge identified by participants is therefore not the absence of policy intentions, but the consistent implementation of these principles through adequate resources, specialised support, intersectoral collaboration and continuous professional development.

Norway

INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION

Norway places great emphasis on including children with diverse needs. As a result, special childcare centres and schools have largely been phased out in recent years to integrate these children into mainstream education. Significant staffing resources and additional teaching hours are required to adapt the environment to meet individual needs and remove barriers. In this context, inclusion is viewed as a values-based approach that recognises diversity and

ensures all children can participate in the community. Play is a key means of inclusion for children; educational professionals must actively intervene to facilitate it and prevent exclusion. Norwegian policy strongly emphasises inclusive communities in ordinary childcare centres and schools. Most children requiring special support receive this within mainstream settings, although concerns remain that inclusion is not always realised in practice. In particular, staff report a need for more competence in special education and work with multilingual children.

CURRICULUM AND POLICY

Norwegian childcare policy is governed by the Kindergarten Act and the Framework Plan, which promote a holistic approach to care, play, learning and formation. Current policy does not simply call for more resources everywhere, but for stronger competence, better staffing where needs are greatest, and a more targeted steering and financing system. Play is recognised as having fundamental intrinsic value in supporting social and emotional development. Some policy stakeholders emphasise that future quality improvements may need to combine targeted funding with more needs-based use of existing resources. There is criticism that the legal framework is sometimes too vague, leaving too much room for interpretation and meaning that children's rights are not always fully upheld when local authorities lack funding. At the political level, expert reports (known as NOUs) and research summaries provide an important basis for drafting policy white papers, which are then adopted by Parliament (the Storting). In order to counteract staff shortages and structural deficits, the state is increasingly providing targeted financial grants to local authorities, giving institutions more scope for high-quality educational work.

QUALIFICATION AND COMPETENCE

Competence is a central policy concern. Norwegian authorities aim to increase the share of childcare teachers, strengthen further education, and encourage more childcare teachers to obtain master's-level competence. However, the effect of competence development depends on its orientation: some pathways appear to qualify teachers out of the sector, while childcare-specific competence development may support retention. A significant issue is the lack of time for personal professional development due to rigid timetables and the demands of day-to-day care. To address this. internal training modules, microlearning and collective professional development are being integrated into daily routines. It is also suggested that roles and responsibilities should be differentiated more clearly. For example, by introducing the role of 'preschool lecturer' (a teacher with a master's degree) to provide targeted support to the team. This suggestion is

countered by Norwegian culture, which values equality within the team highly.

ENVIRONMENT AND RESOURCES

The success of educational work depends heavily on the structural framework and the physical environment. In Norway, facilities for pre-school children often have very good physical conditions: they provide space for open-ended play and natural materials, creating a sense of security and inclusion. Norwegian childcare centres operate under statutory staffing and pedagogue norms. However, some childcare centres rely on temporary dispensations from the pedagogue norm or educational requirement, especially where qualified applicants are difficult to recruit. High sickness absence further weakens everyday staffing, making formal compliance a poor indicator of the actual number of adults present with children during the day. To alleviate the staff shortage and make better use of resources, discussions are taking place regarding relieving qualified staff of daily routine tasks such as cooking. In addition, the long opening hours and widespread full-time attendance patterns place pressure on staffing and continuity across the day.

COLLABORATION

Parent-childcare collaboration is a statutory and pedagogical obligation in Norway. In increasingly diverse parent groups, collaboration may require strengthened professional communication competence, especially where language barriers, different expectations of childcare, or unfamiliarity with the Norwegian system affect dialogue. Working with parents is often perceived as challenging and time-consuming, especially when language barriers exist or families who speak minority languages lack an understanding of the Norwegian system. Staff have been shown to find it easier to work with parents who are similar to them in terms of culture and social background. However, parents differ in educational resources, language proficiency, system knowledge, expectations and previous experiences with institutions. This demands a high degree of professionalism and specific communication skills from staff. To improve the situation for everyone, some settings are making structural adjustments to routines and traditions. For example, at parent events, parents stay with the youngest children throughout to avoid unnecessary stress, rather than coming and going constantly.

RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE

A continuing challenge is to translate research into sustainable changes in everyday practice. For this reason, local, practice-based development work and childcare-based competence development are important mechanisms for knowledge mobilisation. In Norway,

there is a strong emphasis on basing educational practice on current research and best practice. National authorities, including the Directorate for Education and Training and knowledge centres, produce statistics, guidance and research summaries, but translation into everyday practice remains uneven.

- Multi-method research approach: This chapter examines barriers to and facilitators of inclusive, play-based learning through a systematic literature review (2020–2026), an online survey of 443 professionals, 13 focus groups and nine stakeholder interviews in Austria, the Czech Republic, Greece and Norway.

- Parental perspectives and the dilemma of school readiness: Whilst parents value play-based learning as central to social inclusion, many (particularly in lower-income groups) experience a significant tension between free play and societal pressure to prepare academically for school. In the Norwegian empirical material, the strongest issue was not generalised school-readiness pressure, but the time and competence required for cooperation with increasingly diverse parents' groups.

- Results of the quantitative survey: The data reveal a strong child-centred approach, but also highlight deep country-specific divides – whilst Czech professionals rate their training as providing a solid practical foundation, their Norwegian counterparts call for significant improvements; furthermore, Greek professionals perceive migration-related and inclusive diversity as the greatest burden due to a lack of resources.

- Country-specific qualitative barriers (focus groups): Day-to-day inclusion suffers from structural shortcomings: Austria struggles with bureaucratic federalism and a lack of legal certainty in healthcare; the Czech Republic with a lack of autonomy for Czech graduates in play supervision; Greece with chronic underinvestment, resulting in shortages of facilities, equipment and specialist support; and Norway with high levels of sickness absence and unqualified substitute staff.

- Strategic governance and knowledge transfer (policy interviews): Political stakeholders emphasise the need for evidence-based reforms, but point to the disconnect with practice – calls are being made for more flexible resource allocation formulas rather than rigid group sizes (Austria), visual rather than purely legal curriculum formats (Czech Republic), structured feedback loops (Greece) and practice-oriented 'micro-research' carried out directly within the institutions (Norway).

The literature review reveals that, whilst parents generally recognise that playing in a group is important for making friends and social inclusion, parents from educationally disadvantaged or lower-income backgrounds in particular often view free play as a leisure activity that does not really teach anything. They often reject play-based approaches out of a deep-seated fear that their child will fall behind at school, and instead demand direct academic instruction. such as the formal teaching of spelling. This stands in contrast to the Nordic perspective, where parents have great confidence in play-based pedagogy, view ECEC settings as socialisation institutions, and are far less anxious about poor academic performance.

The qualitative field research (focus groups and stakeholder interviews) not only confirms this tension but also highlights the significant challenges that practitioners must overcome in their day-to-day work:

The perspective from practice (focus groups): Regarding the recognition of play, the focus groups, the focus groups with early years educators show that everyday parental pressure is a major obstacle. In the Czech Republic, professionals report that parents exert significant social pressure when they demand school-style preparation (such as English lessons or afternoon clubs) and mistakenly view free play as mere 'childminding'. To confidently meet parents' expectations and defend the value of play, teachers must possess a high level of expertise. In Norway and Austria, it is also clear that working with an increasingly diverse parent body - particularly when language difficulties, a lack of contextual knowledge or extreme behavioural issues among children are added to the mix, is very time-consuming and challenging.

The systemic perspective (interviews with stakeholders): In Austria, stakeholders emphasise that conflicts with parents are often deeply rooted in differing cultural approaches to upbringing or religious reservations. Norwegian policymakers have recognised that staff urgently need more expertise in the areas of diversity and inclusion, as the cultural and linguistic diversity of children continues to grow. In Greece, there is an implementation gap: although the curriculum calls for inclusive play, there is often a lack of highly specialised training for professionals that would help them to use play specifically as an opportunity for inclusion when working with diverse families.

An equitable, inclusive ECEC environment (as a 'safe haven') can only succeed if we involve parents as key educational partners. The quality of education is determined by direct dialogue and the building of trust, and empirical evidence reveals significant gaps in staff qualifications precisely in this area. Basic training at specialist colleges and universities is often criticised as being too theory-heavy; whilst it teaches creative skills, it does not adequately prepare young graduates for conducting difficult conversations with parents, for leadership skills, or for dealing with cultural differences. Continuing professional development (CPD) urgently needs to be made more practice-oriented, rather than pushing staff into competitive 'points chases' for formal language certificates.

Taken together, the findings from the literature review, questionnaire survey, focus groups and stakeholder interviews reveal a remarkably consistent picture across countries. While national systems differ in their governance structures, resources and professional traditions, all three

methodological components converge on a common conclusion: inclusive play-based learning depends not only on curriculum intentions but on the interaction between well-qualified professionals, supportive organisational conditions, sustained professional development, meaningful partnerships with families and coherent policy implementation. Differences between countries therefore appear to reflect variations in implementation capacity rather than differences in commitment to inclusive play-based learning itself. There is a need for robust mentoring schemes for new entrants to the profession, culturally sensitive communication training and the development of leadership skills. The intergenerational cycle of disadvantage (the Matthew effect) can only be broken in the long term if we equip professionals with the methods and arguments to convey the value of play-based learning to parents with limited educational backgrounds.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Systemic failure of modern, play-based curricula is primarily due to macro and meso-level issues such as funding shortages, bureaucracy, and staff shortages, rather than methodological problems.
- The Matthew effect raises concerns that without targeted investments, educational inequality will worsen, benefiting only children in well-resourced environments.
- Cultural pressures in certain countries, like Austria, the Czech Republic, and Greece, inhibit progress due to socioeconomic anxieties and parental success pressures, in contrast to the prioritization of free play in Scandinavian countries.
- An inclusive educational system relies on the synergy of reliable financial structures, practical training, and interdisciplinary teams.
- Constructing a genuine, secure educational space requires recognizing families as partners rather than obstacles, moving beyond mere political declarations.

To ensure equitable, inclusive and high-quality ECEC policy and educational measures must be coordinated across all levels of the ecological system. Based on the empirical findings, the following evidence-based recommendations for action can be derived:

Austria

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS (MACRO LEVEL)	In Austria. federalism is the biggest obstacle. Because each federal state can enact its own laws, there is a lack of uniform quality standards. with the result that educational opportunities vary depending on where one lives. Poor staff-to-child ratios (sometimes two qualified staff members for 25 children) and extremely long waiting times for diagnosis also place a massive strain on the system. Policymakers are grappling with a 'third group' of children who, despite lacking a formal diagnosis. present significant challenges due to behavioural issues (e.g., high media consumption) and for whom there are no support systems in place.
INSTITUTIONS & STAFF (MESO LEVEL)	High staff turnover and sick leave have a significant negative impact on team-building and relationship-building. Often. the inclusion assistants who are appointed have no training in education and are overwhelmed by challenging children, which places an additional burden on the group leaders. The basic training (BAfEPs) is frequently regarded as too theory-heavy, which is why there is an urgent need for mentoring schemes for those new to the profession.
INTERACTION & RECOMMENDATIONS (MICRO LEVEL)	Children with behavioural difficulties attract so much attention that quieter children are often overlooked in everyday life. To prevent relationships from breaking down or users from dropping out of the system. binding step-by-step plans are urgently needed. Mobile psychologists and other multi-professional teams are proving very successful and should be further developed and expanded.

Czech Republic

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS (MACRO LEVEL)	Although the revised national curriculum framework for early years education clearly supports a flexible, child-centred and play-based approach, there is a significant gap between theory and practice. Due to a lack of methodological support in their day-to-day work, many early years practitioners resort to rigid routines, worksheets or school-like preparation methods. This trend is exacerbated by the massive structural and financial disadvantages faced by nursery schools compared to primary schools: large group sizes and a lack of access to support staff, in particular, the absence of a statutory right to support

staff, make the practical implementation of an open, flexible curriculum noticeably more difficult.

INSTITUTIONS & STAFF (MESO LEVEL)	Preschool teachers face a structural pay disadvantage within the Czech public-sector salary system. They are usually placed in salary grade 9, whereas primary school teachers typically start in salary grade 12, which contributes to lower professional status and staff retention challenges in preschool education. There is a call for a proper career progression system that financially rewards further training and specialisation.
INTERACTION & RECOMMENDATIONS (MICRO LEVEL)	The social pressure from parents who demand school-style academic preparation and dismiss free play as mere "keeping children occupied" is considerable. This pressure is reinforced in some cases by expectations from primary schools regarding school readiness. Therefore, strengthening preschool teachers' professional self-confidence is essential: they need to be able to explain and defend the developmental and educational value of play, movement. outdoor learning and child-led activities in communication with parents and primary schools. As an educational measure, preschools should be supported in reducing the dominance of single-purpose or over-structured toys and complementing them with open-ended and natural materials. Outdoor environments should be used more systematically for play, movement, exploration and learning.

Greece

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS (MACRO LEVEL)	The Greek early childhood education and care (ECEC) system suffers from severe, structural underfunding, which has a significant impact on day-to-day life in the centres. The situation is particularly acute in in public kindergartens in urban centres such as Athens, where one teacher may be responsible for up to 25 children. This makes it virtually impossible to provide individual support or even to achieve successful inclusion. To counteract this overload, participants recommended reducing the staff-child ratio to approximately 10–15 children per educator, Participants also highlighted the value of an additional staff member in groups with the youngest children to better support inclusion and respond to staffing shortages. In addition to staff shortages, the physical infrastructure is a major problem. Many childcare centres operate in buildings that were not originally designed for ECEC settings. There is a lack of accessibility for children with

	disabilities, a lack of safe outdoor spaces for physical activity, and a lack of sufficient space to create flexible play areas that support children's development. This shortfall is compounded by the glaring lack of suitable and inclusive play and learning materials.
INSTITUTIONS & STAFF (MESO LEVEL)	At the institutional level, f ECEC leaders and pedagogical staff are struggling with an enormous bureaucratic burden. On average, kindergarten leaders only have around 50 minutes a day left for educational leadership and planning work, because administrative tasks take up so much of their time. The current professional development system tends to place greater emphasis on the accumulation of formal qualifications than on sustained, practice-oriented professional learning. There is an urgent need for state-funded., continuous and practice-oriented professional development (CPD) that specifically enhances staff expertise in the areas of inclusion, intercultural education and play-based learning. To date, there has been no uniform, coherent framework covering the entire age range from 0 to 6 years, and one should be established as a matter of urgency.
INTERACTION & RECOMMENDATIONS (MICRO LEVEL)	In the day-to-day running of the groups and in interactions with the children, these structural shortcomings have a clear impact. Large group sizes deprive the educators of the capacity for targeted observation, so-called scaffolding (the educational support of learning processes) and individual attention. Instead, the staff's role in day-to-day life is often reduced to a purely supervisory function and crisis or safety management. Despite these adverse circumstances. However, there are examples of successful practice: the use of so-called Persona Puppets (identification puppets) has proven to be an outstanding and highly effective method for putting inclusion into practice. These hand puppets offer a playful, stress-free way to overcome language barriers, integrate shy children and discuss even complex topics such as discrimination and diversity sensitively in a circle. To strengthen such approaches in the long term, there needs to be close integration between research, practice and policy, so that the educational programme can be continuously evaluated and flexibly adapted in day-to-day practice.

Norway

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS	Norway has strong statutory entitlements, national regulation, and high public investment, but equal quality still depends on municipal implementation, funding decisions, and access to qualified staff. Policy

(MACRO LEVEL)	should therefore focus less on creating new universal rights and more on ensuring that existing rights are realised through needs-based resource allocation, transparent monitoring and stronger support for municipalities and providers with high inclusion demands.
INSTITUTIONS & STAFF **(MESO LEVEL)**	Childcare centres need more stable everyday staffing. Formal compliance with staffing norms is not sufficient if sickness absence, substitute use, meetings, opening hours and practical tasks reduce actual adult presence with children. Policy and provider-level measures should therefore prioritise qualified substitute pools, better planning time, reduction of unnecessary documentation, and local competence development for whole staff teams.
INTERACTION & RECOMMENDATIONS **(MICRO LEVEL)**	The strongest professional development needs concern diversity-sensitive parent cooperation, multilingual children, SEN and adult support for play without over-directing it. PLEOS should translate the Norwegian findings into OER cases on parent cooperation, inclusive play facilitation, multilingual communication and childcare-based practitioner inquiry.

As this study summarises. the concept of equitable, inclusive and play-based early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Europe is caught in a complex, multidimensional tension. A synthesis of literature, practice and policy reveals that overcoming the Matthew effect is not merely a methodological issue at the micro-level. Instead, the implementation of modern, play-based curricula in everyday educational practice repeatedly fails internationally due to the harsh realities of the macro and meso levels. While the Scandinavian approach emphasises the importance of free play in socialisation, a closer look at Austria, the Czech Republic and Greece reveals the significant impact of socio-economic anxieties and parental pressure on early childhood education practices. Without structural investment, practice-oriented professional development and stronger partnerships with families, there is a risk that the benefits of play-based learning will be more readily accessible to children in better-resourced settings, while children in disadvantaged contexts may not fully benefit from its inclusive potential. However, the Norwegian case also illustrates that universal access and strong regulation are necessary but not sufficient conditions for inclusive quality. The main challenge lies in implementation: ensuring qualified staff, sufficient adult presence, relevant competence and meaningful participation for all children across municipalities and providers. In terms of future ECEC policy and practice, this means that a genuine 'safe haven' cannot be created through mere words alone, but rather through the synergistic interplay of reliable structural frameworks, multidisciplinary support, and educational relationship-building that views parents as partners in education rather than as an obstacle.

Table 2 Evidence-Based Strategies for ECEC System Reform

	Recommendation	Responsible actor	Time horizon	Resource implication	Evidence basis	Indicator of success
ALL COUNTRIES	Reducing group sizes and staff-to-child ratios: Structural changes to enable genuine educational work rather than mere 'supervision'.	Ministries, local authorities	Long-term	High	Focus groups (acute staff shortages and time constraints)	Maximum group sizes reduced by law
ALL COUNTRIES	Targeted mentoring programmes: Introduction of programmes for new entrants to the profession to ease the transition to the workplace and embed knowledge of inclusion in day-to-day practice.	Training institutions, management	Medium term	Medium	Focus groups (theory-heavy nature of the training)	Fixed mentoring slots established in the duty rota.
CZECH REPUBLIC & GREECE	Abolition of the split system: Overcoming the strict administrative separation (crèches vs. nursery schools/preschools under different ministries) to facilitate transitions between educational stages.	Governments, ministries	Long term	Medium (reorganisation)	System analysis (fragmentation)	An integrated ECEC system under a single Ministry of Education
AUTRIA	Nationwide quality standards & mobile teams: Overcoming federalism (currently 9 different state laws) through uniform nationwide standards and a massive expansion of mobile, multi-professional teams.	Federal and state governments.	Medium term	Very high	Macro data & focus groups	Staff-to-child ratio of 18 children achieved.
CZECH REPUBLIC	A better career progression system: financial rewards for further training and pay scale upgrades (currently often Grade 9 versus Grade 12 for primary school teachers), as well as policy measures to protect children from early academic pressure.	Ministry of Education	Short to medium term	Low to medium	Interviews (research often fails to reach practice)	Regular 'micro-research' projects in everyday life; better monitoring of implementation
GREECE	Strengthen ECEC infrastructure and reduce staff–child ratios: Address chronic structural underfunding (<0.30% of GDP) by improving ECEC infrastructure, expanding outdoor learning environments and increasing the availability of specialist inclusion staff.	Ministry of Education, local authorities	Medium to long term	medium to high	System comparison & interviews	National 0–6 ECEC framework; nationwide availability of multidisciplinary mobile support teams
NORWAY	Adopt a flexible, practice-oriented framework, introduce needs-based professional development in inclusive pedagogy, and strengthen professional empowerment. Support collaborative researcher-practitioner partnerships and research-informed policy for evidence-informed practice and the enhancement of educational quality beyond childcare.	Ministry of Education and Research, municipalities, ECEC providers	Short to medium term	Medium	Focus groups & Interviews (need for practical inclusion competence and stronger links between research and practice)	Increased staff participation in practice-based professional development; documented micro-research projects; improved staff confidence in inclusive practice

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Methodological note on the use of AI-assisted tools and translation tools

To ensure linguistic precision and the efficient processing of complex data. modern digital tools were utilised to support this work:

Grammar and style optimisation: During the final drafting of the text. artificial intelligence (AI) was used to check grammatical correctness and ensure the stylistic consistency of the computer-generated summaries. Intellectual control and responsibility for the content remained entirely with the author at all times.

Synthesis of text modules: AI-supported methods were used to process and summarise the extensive specialist literature researched. as well as the contents of the minutes. This served to structure and condense the information modules in order to precisely highlight the key findings of the literature review.

Translation (DeepL): As the research sources spanned five different languages (English. Norwegian. German. Czech. Greek). the neural translation service DeepL and UniYou was used. This ensured a technically accurate rendering of country-specific specialist terminology into the target language of the thesis.

This combined use of human expertise and technological tools ensured a methodologically sound and linguistically high-quality documentation of the research results.

ANNEX

Sample Focus Group

Country	FG-ID	CODE	Profession	Regional Context	Social Context	Highest qualification	Work experience	Play-based learning – Rating*	Inclusions-Rating**
Austria	FG-1	P1	Head of ECEC	Small town (5k–20k)	Not socially disadvantaged	Bachelor (B.A.)	15 years	5	3
		P2	Teacher in ECEC	Mid-sized town (20k–100k)	Socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	5 years	4	4
		P3	Teacher in ECEC	Mid-sized town (20k–100k)	Socially disadvantaged	Bachelor (B.A.)	1 year	3	2
		P4	Teacher in ECEC	Small town (5k–20k)	Socially disadvantaged	Mature	1 year	4	4
		P5	Educational consultancy	Metropolis (>300.000)	Socially disadvantaged	Bachelor (B.A.)	9 years	5	5
		P6	Teacher in ECEC	Small town (5k–20k)	Socially disadvantaged	Bachelor (B.A.)	6 years	3	4
	FG-2	P1	Educational consultancy	Small town (5k–20k)	Socially disadvantaged	Mature	3 years	4	4
		P2	Social worker in ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	1 year	-	-
		P3	Teacher in ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	1 year	-	-
	FG-3	P1	Teacher in ECEC	Small town (5k–20k)	Socially disadvantaged	Not socially disadvantaged	20 years	3	3
		P2	Teacher in ECEC	Small town (5k–20k)	Not socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	17 years	4	5

		P3	Educational consultancy	Metropolis (>300.000)	Socially disadvantaged	Bachelor (B.A.)	1 year	-	-
		P4	Teacher in ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Totally socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	27 years	5	5
		P5	Teacher in ECEC	Mid-sized town (20k–100k)	Socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	30 years	3	3
	FG-4	P1	Head of ECEC	Small town (5k–20k)	Not socially disadvantaged	Mature	6 years	5	5
		P2	Head of ECEC	Small town (5k–20k)	Socially disadvantaged	Mature	17 years	5	4
		P3	Head of ECEC	Small town (5k–20k)	Socially disadvantaged	Bachelor (B.A.)	26 years	5	5
		P4	Head of ECEC	Small town (5k–20k)	Not socially disadvantaged	Bachelor (B.A.)	24 years	4	4
		P5	Teacher in ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Socially disadvantaged	Mature	7 years	5	5
		P6	Teacher in ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Socially disadvantaged	Mature	9 years	5	4
	FG-5	P1	Social worker in ECEC	Small town (5k–20k)	Socially disadvantaged	Mature	4 years	4	4
		P2	Social worker in ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	1 year	-	-
		P3	Social worker in ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	1 year	1	1
Czech Republic	FG-1	P1	Head of ECEC	Rural (<5k)	Not socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	More than 10 years	4	4
		P2	Head of ECEC	Rural (<5k)	Not socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	More than 10 years	4	4
		P3	Head of ECEC	Mid-sized town (20k–100k)	Socially disadvantaged	Bachelor (B.A.)	More than 10 years	5	5

	FG-2	P1	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Not socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	More than 10 years	4	3
		P2	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Not socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	More than 10 years	4	3
		P3	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Not socially ged	Master (M.A.)	Less than 5 years	4	4
		P4	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Not socially ged	Master (M.A.)	More than 10 years	3	4
		P5	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Not socially disadvantaged	Doctor (Ph.D.)	Less than 5 years	5	5
Greece	FG-1	P1	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Not socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	13.5 years	3	3
		P2	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Not socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	25 years	2	2
		P3	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Not socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	28 years	3	3
		P4	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Not socially disadvantaged	University degree (TEI/AEI)	5 years	4	4
	FG-2	P1	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	1.5 years	3	3
		P2	Head of ECEC	Small town (5k–20k)	Socially disadvantaged	Doctorate (PhD)	7 years	5	4
		P3	Head of ECEC	Small town (5k–20k)	Socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	3 years	5	4
		P4	Head of ECEC	Small town (5k–20k)	Socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	4 years	5	4
		P5	Head of ECEC	Small town (5k–20k)	Socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	7 years	5	4

	FG-3	P1	Head of ECEC	Mid-sized town (20k–100k)	Not socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	30 years	4	4
		P2	Head of ECEC	Mid-sized town (20k–100k)	Not socially disadvantaged	Bachelor (B.A.)	23 years	5	5
		P3	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Not socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	17 years	5	4
	FG-4	P1	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	30 years	4	5
		P2	Head of ECEC	Mid-sized town (20k–100k)	Not socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	20 years	5	5
		P3	Head of ECEC	Small town (5k–20k)	Socially disadvantaged	Bachelor (B.A.)	26 years	5	5
		P4	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	10 years	5	5
Norway	FG-1 (N=6)	P1	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Not socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	30 years	4	5
		P2	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Not socially disadvantaged	Bachelor (B.A.)	15 years	3	4
		P3	Head of ECEC	Small town (5k–20k)	Cannot be assessed	Bachelor (B.A.)	29 years	4	5
		P4	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Socially disadvantaged	Bachelor (B.A.)	9 years	3	4
		P5	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	17 years	5	5
		P6	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	25 years	4	4
	FG-2 (N=5)	P1	Head of ECEC	Small town (5k–20k)	Socially disadvantaged	Bachelor (B.A.)	28 years	-	4

P2	Head of ECEC	Rural (<5k)	Socially disadvantaged	Master (M.A.)	26 years	-	-
P3	Head of ECEC	Mid-sized town (20k–100k)	Cannot be assessed	Bachelor (B.A.)	18 years	5	5
P4	Head of ECEC	Rural (<5k)	Socially disadvantaged	Bachelor (B.A.)	26 years	3	5
P5	Head of ECEC	Metropolis (>300.000)	Not socially disadvantaged	Bachelor (B.A.)	20 years	3	4

*__Note: Play-based learning:__ To what extent do you feel that the staff at your institution put play-based learning methods into practice? Rating (1 = Not at all; 2 = Minor extent; 3 = Moderate extent; 4 = on a large extent; 5 = very large extent).
**__Note: Inclusive practices:__ To what extent do you feel that the staff at your facility are trying to create an inclusive environment? Rating (1 = Not at all; 2 = Minor extent; 3 = Moderate extent; 4 = on a large extent; 5 = very large extent).

Sample – Policy Maker

	LOCAL	REGIONAL	NATIONAL
AUSTRIA	X	X	X
CZECH REPUBLIC*			X X
GREECE	X	X	
NORWAY		X	X

* Both respondents work in national institutions. However, due to their close cooperation with the regions (including Prague) and their role in providing methodological support, their responsibilities have direct regional implications.

Sample Questionnaire

		AT	CZ	GR	NO	TOTAL
Regional context	***Under 5.000 inhabitants (rural community / village)***	54	35	8	3	100
	5.000 to under 20.000 inhabitants (small town)	26	11	23	39	99
	20.000 to under 100.000 inhabitants (medium-sized town)	4	8	33	18	63
	100.000 inhabitants and over (urban centre)	13	3	14	4	63
	300.000 inhabitants and over (metropolis)	31	78	35	3	147
Social disadvantage	***Yes***	16	11	31	5	63
	No	93	114	47	49	303
	I cannot say	19	10	35	13	77
Migration background	***0 % – 10 %***	64	90	94	43	291
	11 % – 25 %	28	25	16	16	85
	26 % – 50 %	20	14	1	6	41
	More than 50 %	16	6	2	2	26
Diagnosed additional needs	***none***	41	40	35	32	148
	1–2 children	68	79	59	31	237
	3 or more children	19	16	19	4	58
Facility	***Nursery (0–3 years)***	18	2	85	-	105
	Kindergarten (3–6 years)	93	125	20	-	238
	Mixed-age groups	17	8	8	-	33
Provider	***Public***	47	106	100	26	279
	Private / non-profit	16	11	4	38	69
	Private for-profit	2	16	9	3	30
	Religious / denominational	63	2	0	0	65
Professional role	***Head***	46	25	19	45	135
	ECEC	60	97	66	11	234
	Assistant	22	13	28	11	74
Highest professional qualification	***Secondary School***	81	70	23	15	189
	BA	19	22	54	43	138
	MA	28	43	36	9	116

Questionnaire

INCLUSIVE PLAY-BASED LEARNING

		I completely agree	I tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	I tend to disagree	I completely disagree	N
The national curriculum (or another formal educational framework) contains clear guidelines on inclusive play.	AT	(18%) 21	(42%) 49	(8.7%) 10	(25.2%) 29	(5.2%) 6	115
	CZ	(13.2%) 17	(46.5%) 60	(17.1%) 22	(21%) 27	(2.33%) 3	129
	GR	(19.3%) 21	(22 %) 24	(23.4%) 26	(26.6%) 29	(8.25%) 9	109
	NO	(59.1%) 39	(3.03%) 2	(4.5%) 3	(33.3%) 22	(0%) 0	66
At my workplace. there is a shared approach to working with children with different needs or starting points.	AT	(46.4%) 58	(44.0%) 55	(4%) 5	(4.8%) 6	(0.8%) 1	125
	CZ	(24.6%) 32	(46.9%) 61	(10.0%) 13	(13.8%) 18	(4.6%) 6	130
	GR	(34.2%) 38	(19.8%) 22	(18.0%) 20	(16.2%) 18	(11.7%) 13	111
	NO	(43.3%) 29	(7.5%) 5	(7.5%) 5	(41.8%) 28	0	67
My initial professional training has given me a solid foundation for recognising inequalities and discrimination in everyday life.	AT	(26.6%) 34	(40.6%) 52	(5.5%) 7	(20.3%) 26	(7.0%) 9	128
	CZ	(33.6%) 45	(44.8%) 60	(12.7%) 17	(8.2%) 11	(0.7%) 1	134
	GR	(40.5%) 45	(30.6%) 34	(16.2%) 18	(10.8%) 12	(1.8%) 2	111
	NO	(31.3%) 21	(6.0%) 4	(10.4%) 7	(52.2%) 35	(0%) 0	67
My initial vocational training has given me a solid foundation for dealing with inequalities and discrimination in everyday life.	AT	(20.6%) 26	(36.5%) 46	(11.1%) 14	(20.6%) 26	(11.1%) 14	126
	CZ	(16.0%) 21	(46.6%) 61	(20.6%) 27	(15.3%) 20	(1.5%) 2	131
	GR	(26.8%) 30	(35.7%) 40	(20.5%) 23	(14.3%) 16	(2.7%) 3	112
	NO	(35.8%) 24	(7.5%) 5	(19.4%) 13	(37.3%) 25	(0%) 0	67
Through regular professional development and further training. I am able to recognise inequalities and discrimination in everyday life.	AT	(49.6%) 62	(38.4%) 48	(8.8%) 11	(1.6%) 2	(1.6%) 2	125
	CZ	(28%) 37	(51.9%) 78	(11.4%) 15	(1.5%) 2	(0%) 0	132
	GR	(31.5%) 35	(50.5%) 56	(11.7%) 13	(4.5%) 5	(1.8%) 2	111
	NO	(41.8%) 28	(3.0%) 2	(14.9%) 10	(38.8%) 26	(1.5%) 1	67
Through regular professional development and training. I am able to deal with inequalities and discrimination in everyday life.	AT	(40.5%) 51	(46.8%) 59	(7.9%) 10	(4.0%) 5	(0.8%) 1	126
	CZ	(15.9%) 21	(61.4%) 81	(19.7%) 26	(3.0%) 4	(0%) 0	132
	GR	(30.9%) 34	(40.9%) 45	(19.1%) 21	(7.3%) 8	(1.8%) 2	110
	NO	(41.8%) 28	(3.0%) 2	(1.5%) 1	(38.8%) 26	(1.5%) 1	67
	AT	(47.6%) 60	(38.1%) 48	(2.4%) 3	(11.1%) 14	(0.8%) 1	126

I have regular access to professional development and training courses that help me to flexibly adapt and design educational programmes for all children.	CZ	(40.3%) 54	(48.5%) 65	(5.2%) 7	(5.2%) 7	(0.7%) 1	134
	GR	(26.6%) 29	(31.2%) 34	(18.3%) 20	(17.4%) 19	(6.4%) 7	109
	NO	(41.8%) 28	(3.0%) 2	(20.9%) 14	(32.8%) 22	(1.5%) 1	67
The layout and environment of my group enable all children (including those with disabilities) to participate fully in daily play and educational activities.	AT	(30.2%) 38	(31.3%) 47	(6.3%) 8	(17.5%) 22	(7.9%) 10	126
	CZ	(43.3%) 58	(34.3%) 46	(6.7%) 9	(9.7%) 13	(6.0%) 8	134
	GR	(16.5%) 18	(22.0%) 24	(19.3%) 21	(28.4%) 31	(13.8%) 15	109
	NO	(10.4%) 7	(23.9%) 16	(20.9%) 14	(37.3%) 25	(7.5%) 5	67
I have a wide range of materials at my disposal to meet the children's diverse needs during play.	AT	(48.4%) 62	(29.7%) 38	(6.2%) 8	(12.5%) 16	(3.1%) 4	128
	CZ	(42.5%) 57	(38.1%) 51	(11.9%) 16	(6.7%) 9	(0.7%) 1	134
	GR	(17.0%) 19	(29.5%) 33	(24.1%) 27	(16.1%) 18	(13.4%) 15	112
	NO	(32.8%) 22	(9.0%) 6	(4.5%) 3	(50.7%) 34	(3.0%) 2	67

Educational practice and everyday challenges

		I completely agree	I tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	I tend to disagree	I completely disagree	N
Decisions made during play activities in my group are primarily influenced by the needs and abilities of each individual child.	AT	(37.5%) 48	(52.3%) 67	(3.9%) 5	(5.5%) 7	(0.8%) 1	128
	CZ	(51.9%) 70	(40.0%) 54	(5.9%) 8	(2.2.%) 3	(0%) 0	135
	GR	(54.0%) 61	(34.5%) 39	(10.6%) 12	(3.5%) 4	(0%) 0	113
	NO						
I make a point of seizing opportunities to support the learning and development of all children.	AT	(60.2%) 77	(36.7%) 47	(1.6%) 2	(1.6%) 2	(0%) 0	128
	CZ	(57.0%) 77	(39.3%) 53	(3.7%) 5	(0%) 0	(0%) 0	135
	GR	(56.6%) 64	(40.7%) 46	(2.7%) 3	(0%) 0	(0%) 0	113
	NO	(44.8%) 30	(44.8%) 30	(1.5%) 1	(9.0%) 6	(0%) 0	67
I find linguistic diversity in my daily work to be a challenge.	AT	(28.1%) 36	(20.3%) 26	(18%) 23	(2.3%) 3	(8.6%) 11	128
	CZ	(21.5%) 29	(30.4%) 41	(20.7%) 28	(22.2%) 30	(5.2%) 7	135
	GR	(38.1%) 43	(33.6%) 38	(20.4%) 23	(6.2%) 7	(1.8%) 2	113
	NO	(4.5%) 3	(19.4%) 13	(25.4%) 17	(20.9%) 14	(29.9%) 20	67
	AT	(18.0%) 23	(21.9%) 28	(21.1%) 27	(27.3%) 35	(11.7%) 15	128

I find cultural diversity in my educational work to be a challenge.	CZ	(12.6%) 17	(27.4%) 37	(21.5%) 29	(31.1%) 42	(7.4%) 10	135
	GR	(41.6%) 47	(40.7%) 46	(15.0%) 17	(2.7%) 3	(0%) 0	113
	NO	(3.0%) 2	(11.9%) 8	(13.4%) 9	(29.9%) 20	(41.8%) 28	67
I find religious diversity in my educational work to be a challenge.	AT	(10.9%) 14	(16.4%) 21	(25.0%) 32	(27.3%) 35	(20.3%) 26	128
	CZ	(8.9%) 12	(17.0%) 23	(29.6%) 40	(30.4%) 41	(14.1%) 19	135
	GR	(25.7%) 29	(30.1%) 34	(29.2%) 33	(7.1%) 8	(8.0%) 9	113
	NO	(3.0%) 2	(17.9%) 12	(6.0%) 4	(20.9%) 14	(52.2%) 35	67
I find working with children with SEN to be a challenge in my educational work.	AT	(39.1%) 50	(33.6%) 43	(10.2%) 13	(13.3%) 17	(3.9%) 5	128
	CZ	(24.4%) 33	(33.3%) 45	(16.3%) 22	(23.0%) 31	(3.0%) 4	135
	GR	(41.6%) 47	(35.4%) 40	(17.7%) 20	(5.3%) 6	(0%) 0	113
	NO						

PROMOTING INTERACTION AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

		I completely agree	I tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	I tend to disagree	I completely disagree	N
I consider it an important part of my role as an early years educator to ensure. on a daily basis. that children take part in group games.	AT	(49.2%) 63	(35.9%) 46	(5.5%) 7	(8.6%) 11	(0.8%) 1	128
	CZ	(75.6%) 102	(18.5%) 25	(2.2%) 3	(3.0%) 4	(0.7%) 1	135
	GR	(79.6%) 90	(13.3%) 15	(7.1%) 8	(0%) 0	(0%) 0	113
	NO	(94.0%) 63	(4.5%) 3	(1.5%) 1	(0%) 0	(0%) 0	67
I encourage interaction between children with different abilities or SEN.	AT	(62.5%) 80	(34.4%) 44	(1.6%) 2	(0.8%) 1	(0.8%) 1	128
	CZ	(71.9%) 97	(26.7%) 36	(1.5%) 2	(0%) 0	(0%) 0	135
	GR	(77.9%) 88	(17.7%) 20	(3.5%) 4	(0.9%) 1	(0%) 0	113
	NO	(70.1%) 47	(26.9%) 18	(1.5%) 1	(1.5%) 1	(0%) 0	67
I encourage interaction between children of all genders.	AT	(84.4%) 108	(14.1%) 18	(1.6%) 2	(0%) 0	(0%) 0	128
	CZ	(92.6%) 125	(7.4%) 10	(0%) 0	(0%) 0	(0%) 0	135
	GR	(86.7%) 98	(11.5%) 13	(1.8%) 2	(0%) 0	(0%) 0	113
	NO	(88.1%) 59	(10.4%) 7	(0%) 0	(1.5%) 1	(0%) 0	67
I encourage interaction between children from	AT	(74.2%) 95	(16.4%) 21	(8.6%) 11	(0.8%) 1	(0%) 0	128
	CZ	(85.2%)	(12.6%)	(2.2%)	(0%)	(0%)	135

different cultural backgrounds.	GR	115 (79.6%)	17 (15.9%)	3 (2.7%)	0 (1.8%)	0 (0%)	113
	NO	90 (80.6%)	18 (13.4%)	3 (6.0%)	2 (0%)	0 (0%)	67
The children in my group are actively involved in deciding which play materials we use.	AT	54 (54.7%)	9 (35.9%)	4 (5.5%)	0 (3.1%)	0 (0.8%)	128
	CZ	70 (48.9%)	46 (37.8%)	7 (11.1%)	4 (2.2%)	1 (0%)	135
	GR	66 (42.5%)	51 (38.9%)	15 (16.8%)	3 (1.8%)	0 (0%)	113
	NO	48 (40.3%)	44 (47.8%)	19 (10.4%)	2 (1.5%)	0 (0%)	67
The children in my group are actively involved in deciding which activities they would like to take part in during the day.	AT	27 (49.2%)	32 (43.8%)	7 (3.1%)	1 (3.1%)	0 (0.8%)	128
	CZ	63 (48.9%)	56 (35.6%)	4 (11.9%)	4 (3.7%)	1 (0%)	135
	GR	66 46.9%)	48 (32.7%)	16 (17.7%)	5 (1.8%)	0 (0.9%)	113
	NO	53 44.8%)	37 (38.8%)	20 (7.5%)	2 (9.0%)	1 (0%)	67
I regularly reflect on my educational approach to play and adapt it as necessary.	AT	30	26 (25.0%)	5 (1.6%)	6 (0%)	0 (0%)	128
	CZ	(73.4%) 94 (60%)	32 (31.1%)	2 (8.9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	135
	GR	81 (63.7%)	42 (30.1%)	12 (5.3%)	0 (0.9%)	0 (0%)	113
	NO	72 (55.2%)	34 (32.8%)	6 (7.5%)	1 (4.5%)	0 (0%)	67
		37	22	5	3	0	