



WORKSHOP BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

Early Childhood Education



Societal and economic changes are having a great influence on the early childhood education sector and its staff especially following the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on education budgets, staff, teaching conditions and tools.

The [ETUCE Policy Paper on Early Childhood Education](#) (2012) defines Early Childhood Education (ECE) as education which takes place before compulsory education. "The term refers to education in its broadest sense, including childcare and development. This includes early childhood services provided in kindergartens, nurseries, pre-school classes, child-care centres and other similar institutions. It goes beyond what some refer to as pre-school education, as it is an education in its own right, having not only the purpose of preparing children for school, but for life in the same way as all other parts of the education systems contribute to this process. Accordingly, the term ECE 'teacher' is used in its generic form to refer to professional staff comparable to educated teachers in schools, and includes various categories of early childhood professionals, such as pre-school teachers, pedagogues and other professionals working in various categories of ECE centres, described above."¹

The ongoing and new challenges the ECE teachers face still link to the **professionalisation and initial and continuous development of ECE teachers**. The staff is not sufficiently qualified, or not qualified at all in most European countries and this can have serious impacts on children.² In the EU most European education systems require teachers working with a group of children under age 3 to have a Bachelor's degree qualification³, a Master's degree is required in very few countries. Moreover, assistants may be employed without any initial qualification related to their profession in most countries.⁴ OECD TALIS *Starting Strong Teaching and Learning International Survey* shows that the top continuous professional development needs of the ECE teachers are to

1 ETUCE Policy Paper on Early Childhood Education, 2012 <https://www.csee-etuce.org/images/attachments/ETUCEPolicyPaperonECEEN.pdf>

2 OECD (2017), *Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

3 European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019. *Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe - 2019 Edition*. Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

4 *ibid*



work with children with special needs and working with dual language learners, however the main barriers to participation are that there is not enough staff to compensate for absence, conflicts with work schedules and that it is too expensive.⁵

There is a **high gender imbalance** in early childhood education staff. Across OECD countries, 95% of pre-primary education staff and 96% of staff in education institutions serving children under age 3 are women⁶. Recruiting more men into the profession is important to provide children with a (other) male role model. OECD and the EU recommends that countries find new and creative recruitment strategies, offer dynamic and motivating career pathways, improve **working conditions**, ensure better staff/child ratio, and improve salaries, the contractual status and working hours of the staff. A good step forward towards ensuring better working conditions for ECE staff is the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems which suggests a list of 22 quality indicators to the ministers of education in the EU countries, among these, the recommendation mentions that “improved working conditions, including more adequate wage levels, can make employment in early childhood education and care a more attractive option for better-qualified staff, looking for proper careers.”

Teachers' salaries have a direct impact on the attractiveness of the teaching workforce, and therefore on recruitment and retention.⁸ However, in the OECD countries, less than two in five staff members report being satisfied with their **salary**.⁹ Pre-primary teachers only earn 78% of the salaries of workers with tertiary education in other fields.¹⁰ In most EU countries, ECE teachers also earn less than primary or secondary school teachers. This is often due to different qualification requirements, but in some European countries ECE teachers might earn less than their colleagues despite having the same level of qualification.¹¹

ECE systems must only be of **high quality and inclusive**. The [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) adopted by the EU leaders in 2017 was a great achievement as it laid down the right to quality and inclusive education for all, but at the same time it divided ECE from education shifting it to childcare. ECE is the first step for children to socialise, to decode culture and to be a legitimate participant of in a group. It is furthermore crucial for language learning and integration. Unfortunately, children who come from a poor socio-economic and/or migration background have lower participation rates in early childhood education.¹² Early childhood education staff report a high need for working with dual/second language learners and working with children from diverse backgrounds (multicultural, economically disadvantaged or religious).¹³ Inclusive ECE environments are based on flexibility e.g. a flexible curriculum, unstructured play, a child centred approach and structural supports for inclusion at all levels. To create such environments, adequate funding and resources are crucial.

The **role of the ECE sector** is rapidly changing due to demands in society that regard the sector as a service for working parents, a preparation to school, and being part of lifelong learning focusing on learning outcomes, instead of ensuring quality childhood education to the children. This trend puts ECE structures and teachers under enormous pressure and often results in reduced professional autonomy and less value given to **socialising and the role of play**. Free play is a way of expression and exploring creativity, a way to experiment and to learn to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, to deal with successes and failures and to learn about diversity.

5 OECD (2019). Providing Quality Early Childhood Education and Care: Results from the Starting Strong Survey 2018 <https://doi.org/10.1787/301005d1-en>.

6 Ibid.

7 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2019.189.01.0004.01.ENG

8 Ferguson, R. F. (1991). Paying for public education: New evidence on how and why money matters. Harvard Journal on Legislation, 28: 465-498; Filgio, D. N. and Stone, J. A. (1997). School Choice and Student Performance: Are Private Schools Really Better?. Institute for Research on Poverty Working Paper: 1141-97.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 These countries are: Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Liechtenstein and North Macedonia. In: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019. Teachers' and School Heads' Salaries and Allowances in Europe - 2017/18

12 OECD (2017). Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care, OECD Publishing, Paris.

13 OECD (2019). Providing Quality Early Childhood Education and Care: Results from the Starting Strong Survey 2018, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/301005d1-en>.



There are concerns that the transition of ECE institutions to primary school might lead to an over 'schoolification' of early childhood settings, with more attention given to academic content and less play time.¹⁴ The following figure from OECD (2017) provides an overview of the implementation of free play in early childhood education and primary school curricula, showing that certain contents are both covered both in ECE and in primary schools to a great extent, e.g. literacy and language, numeracy, physical education, arts, music, science:



In order to improve the quality and inclusiveness of the ECE sector and attractiveness thereof for staff, **more international and national level research** is needed. The [OECD TALIS Starting Strong 2018 report](#), for example, focuses on ECE and yet there is only a limited number of countries¹⁵ that financially contributed and participated in the survey.

Therefore, the Workshop aims at exchanging around the following questions:

- **What kind of supports do ECE teachers need in the different countries in order to meet the necessities of the constantly changing societal and economic environment and the growing pressures to change the role of ECE?**
- **What examples from education trade unions are there in improving the status of ECE teachers and in fighting against the impact of the COVID-19 crisis?**
- **What should be the response of education trade unions to the increasing demands on ECE teachers?**



¹⁴ OECD (2017), Starting Strong V: Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education, Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264276253-en>.

¹⁵ Chile, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Japan, Korea, Norway and Turkey