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UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO

Participation in Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe. A focus on Children with Disabilities

Daniela Bulgarelli*, Marta Pelitti & Carmen Solimando

Abstract

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is the provision for children from birth to compulsory primary education that falls within a national regulatory framework. This paper aims at describing ECEC services in 32 European education systems and describing the measures to foster the participation of children with disabilities, during the years 2017-2018. The sources of information were documents drafted by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education and SEEPRO-R. The share of private providers of settings for children under three years was higher compared to pre-primary settings. Often the settings for children under three came under the auspices of ministries of welfare and social affairs, while the pre-primary settings were overseen by the ministries of education. In several education systems, settings for children under three years lacked a National Curricular Framework. Several education systems had targeted measures for the participation of children with disabilities in both regular and integrative settings: the enrolment of additional staff, individual education plans, reduced group size. This paper shows that further policy actions are needed to fully include the provisions for children under three years within the education systems in their countries. Further research is needed to address the constructs of participation and inclusion in different countries.

Keywords: education systems, daycare, kindergarten, pre-primary education, ECEC

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1 Introduction

During early infancy, children participate in two main types of care: exclusive parental care and/or formal childcare, i.e., regulated childcare provided away from the child's home. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is the “provision for children from birth through to compulsory primary education that falls within a national regulatory framework, i.e., which must comply with a set of rules, minimum standards and/or undergo accreditation procedures (European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, 2019, p. 24)”. Despite the specific legislation in each country, three main types of services are present: nursery schools for children under three years; kindergartens, that commonly welcome children from 3 years up to primary school; and services for children from a few months of age up to mandatory school. Depending on each country's legislation, compulsory school starts from 3 to 7 years of age (European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, 2021). Commonly, across Europe, compulsory school starting before the age of 5 is provided at the level of ISCED 0¹, i.e., “early childhood programmes that have an intentional education component. ISCED level 0 programmes target children below the age of entry into primary education (ISCED level 1). These programmes aim to develop cognitive, physical and socio-emotional skills necessary for participation in school and society. Programmes classified at ISCED level 0 may be referred to in many ways, for example: early childhood education and development, play school, reception, pre-primary, pre-school or educación inicial. For programmes provided in crèches, daycare centres, nurseries or guarderías, it is important to ensure that they meet the ISCED level 0 classification criteria specified. For international comparability purposes, the term ‘early childhood education’ is used to label ISCED level 0” (OECD, European Union, UNESCO-UIS, 2015, p. 19).

The definitions of participation usually involve the themes of 'being present', 'attending', and 'involvement in' the activity. Accessing activities that are perceived as important or that are voluntarily chosen, the possibility to acquire or exercise our skills and the development of self-efficacy are other features of authentic participation (Imms et al., 2016). Participation is a key element of inclusion. According to Canevaro (2013), inclusion happens when all people participate in a context with equal dignity and rights. In this perspective, there is no need for a special education that meets the needs of particular individuals, but there is a necessity for education methodologies and tools designed to be accessible to everyone, despite their characteristics. According to this vision, inclusion is an ever-evolving process, together with the changes of people and cultures.

¹ International Standard Classification of Education–ISCED 2011 has nine levels of education, from level 0 to level 8: ISCED 0: Early childhood education; ISCED 1: Primary education; ISCED 2: Lower secondary education; ISCED 3: Upper secondary education; ISCED 4: Post-secondary non-tertiary education; ISCED 5: Short-cycle tertiary education; ISCED 6: Bachelor's or equivalent level; ISCED 7: Master's or equivalent level; ISCED 8: Doctoral or equivalent level (OECD, European Union, UNESCO-UIS, 2015).

1.1 Participation of children in ECEC in Europe

Several factors contributed to the choice of enrolling children in ECEC services, e.g., cultural and socio-political contexts, public economic support to families, women participation in the workforce, and availability of daycares in the area (Krapf, 2014; Mamolo et al., 2011; Morgan & Zippel, 2003). Also, the socio-economic status of parents, their profession, and their educational level play a role (Bulgarelli & Molina, 2016). Higher educational levels of mothers were associated with center-based care usage in several countries, both in Europe and US (Del Boca et al., 2005; Krapf, 2014; NICHD ECCRN, 2006; Sylva et al., 2007; Vandembroeck et al., 2008; Zachrisson et al., 2013). Also, parents' values about their children's need for socialization and stimulating education, and parents' own need to be supported facilitated children's participation in ECEC (Grogan, 2012; Kim & Fram, 2009; Musatti & Picchio, 2010).

In 2019, on average, 47.1% of the European children aged less than three years were cared for exclusively by their parents. Great variations were present, from the lowest shares in the Netherlands (21.2%) and Portugal (22.6%), and the highest in Bulgaria (69.9%), Latvia (63.8%), Slovakia (61.2 %), and Croatia (60.8 %) (Eurostat, 2021). The participation of children in formal care drastically changes in the first six years of life. In 2019, 35.3% of the children under three years of age was involved in formal care, 13.9% for a number of hours varying from 1 to 29, and 21.5% for more than 30 hours per week; in Denmark and the Netherlands, the shares reached 66.0% and 64.8% respectively, whereas the lowest percentages were reached in Slovakia (6.6%) and Czech Republic (6.3%) (Eurostat, 2021). From three years up to compulsory school, in 2019, 89.6% of the children attended kindergartens, 29.9% from 1 to 29 hours a week, and 58.7% for more than 30 hours a week. The highest shares were reached in Spain (98.3%) and Belgium (99.4%), the lowest in Croatia (56.9%) and Switzerland (55.1%) (Eurostat, 2021).

1.2 International policies for the participation of children with disabilities in ECEC

In several countries worldwide, children with disabilities or special education needs usually attend special (or segregated) provision that is a separate education system for people with special needs. Under specific conditions, children with disabilities are included in mainstream or regular settings. The UNESCO acknowledged that ECEC was a priority area of intervention to support the education and inclusion of children with disabilities through the “Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education” (1994), the “Dakar Framework for Action” (2000), and the “Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education” (2009). It is also worth noting that the Salamanca Statement

valued the participation of children with disabilities in mainstream schools as an “integral part of national plans for achieving education for all” (UNESCO, 1994, p. 9).

On a general level, the United Nations published the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which states that children with disabilities should be provided with age-appropriate assistance to achieve all human rights, including education. The “2030 Agenda Sustainable Development” included 17 goals, calls to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and improve the lives and prospects of all people; specifically, goal #4 "Quality Education" is meant to ensure that both girls and boys have access to quality ECEC (United Nations, 2015).

In the last 15 years, the European Union firmly stated that all children should be involved in high-quality education systems since early in life (see also Silva et al., 2018). The communication “Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems” acknowledges that ECEC has the highest returns in terms of the achievement and social adaptation of children (COM(2006) 481 final; European Commission, 2006). Thus, EU countries should invest more in pre-primary education to improve learning and personal and social competencies, and to foster social inclusion. The Recommendation on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning stressed the importance of participation in an enduring education from an early age for all, including disadvantaged people (2008/C 111/01; European Parliament and Council, 2008). Specifically, the Communication “Early Childhood Education and Care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow” addressed the commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, stating that ECEC is crucial in fostering inclusion of children with special education needs, by facilitating their later integration in mainstream schools (COM(2011) 66 final; European Commission, 2011). The “Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems” reaffirmed this principle in 2019 (2019/C 189/02; European Commission, 2019).

2 Measures for the participation of children with disabilities in European ECEC

The objective of this paper is to describe the nature of ECEC services in 32 education systems belonging to 27 European countries and to describe the measures for the participation of children with disabilities or special education needs in ECEC in 32 European education systems during the years 2017-2018. In this study, the term participation is used to refer to the meanings of 'being present' and 'attending' ECEC services.

2.1 Method

To evaluate the participation of children with disabilities or special education needs in ECEC, a qualitative content analysis was run, i.e., “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). The sources of information were four types of document: ‘Legislation and Policy’ and ‘Systems of support and specialist provision’ by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education² updated to 2018 (N = 31 for each document), and ‘Key Contextual Data’ and ‘ECEC Workforce Profile’ drafted by SEEPRO-R³ updated to 2017 (N = 32 for each document; Oberhuemer & Schreyer, 2018); we decide to analyze these documents as we expected them to show common and comparable information about the 32 education systems.

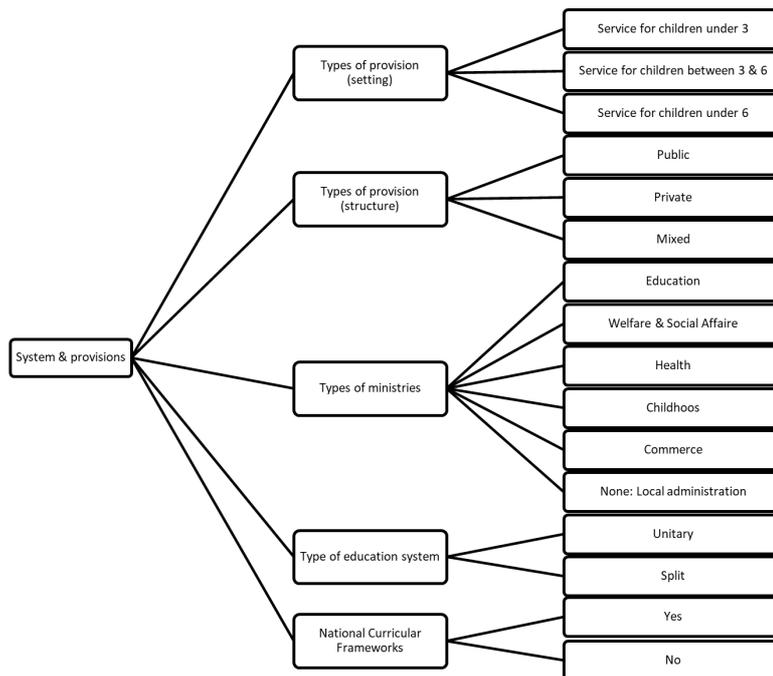
We performed a deductive content analysis (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). The researchers worked collaboratively, both to advocate the value of dialogue and to prevent coding bias. The extraction matrix of the main category “system and provisions” is presented in Figure 1. The extraction matrix of the main category “measures for participation of children with disabilities” include 6 general categories whose sub-categories were all “yes/no”: ‘special schools or classes’, ‘inclusion in mainstream settings’, ‘mainstream chosen by parents’, ‘additional specialist staff’, ‘reduced group size’, and ‘individual educational plan’. It also included 5 general categories about the ISCED level to ‘work as Special needs teacher’, ‘work in 0-3 settings’, ‘work in 3-6 settings’, ‘work in 0-6 settings’, and the ‘N max of children with special needs’, that were noted (see also Table 1 in the result section).

We analyzed the ECEC systems and the measures for participation of children with disabilities in the following countries and education systems: 1. Austria; 2. Belgium–Flemish Community; 3. Belgium–French Community; 4. Belgium–German Community; Bulgaria; 5. Cyprus; 6. Croatia; 7. Czech Republic; 8. Denmark; 9. Estonia; 10. Finland; 11. France; 12. Germany; 13. Greece; 14. Hungary; 15. Ireland; 16. Italy; 17. Latvia; 18. Lithuania; 19. Luxembourg; 20. Malta; 21. Poland; 22. Portugal; 23. Slovak Republic; 24. Slovenia; 25. Spain; 26. Sweden; 27. the Netherlands; 28. United Kingdom–England; 29. United Kingdom–Northern Ireland; 30. United Kingdom–Scotland; 31. United Kingdom–Wales.

² The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education is an independent organization that acts as a platform for collaboration for the ministries of education in its member countries. The association aims at supporting the development of inclusive education systems: <https://www.european-agency.org/>.

³ Seeepro-R was a project financed by the German Federal Ministry for Family and Youth Affairs, aiming at reviewing and analyzing the professional education and training, occupational profiles, and work settings of early childhood personnel in ECEC systems in 30 European Union countries: <http://www.seeepro.eu/English/Projekt.htm>.

Figure 1: Extraction matrix for the main category “System and Provisions”



3 Results

First, we analyzed the types of provision that were present in each education system, obtaining the information from the “Seepro-R Key Contextual Data”. The age of starting and ending the frequency of the service varied from system to system, thus we grouped the different settings into three categories: services for children under 3 years (0-3 in the following), services for children between 3 and 6 years (3-6 in the following), and service for children from birth to 6 years (0-6 in the following). Five systems only provided 0-6 settings, 12 systems provided separated 0-3 and 3-6 settings, and 13 systems included all kinds of services (see Figure 2).

The providers of ECEC were mainly public (state- or municipality-maintained), with a participation of the private non-profit or for-profit sector, whose share hugely varied from system to system. Privately-run provisions were more common for settings for children under 3 years and absent for settings for children from 3 to 6 years (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Types of provision (setting) for children from 0 to 6 years of age

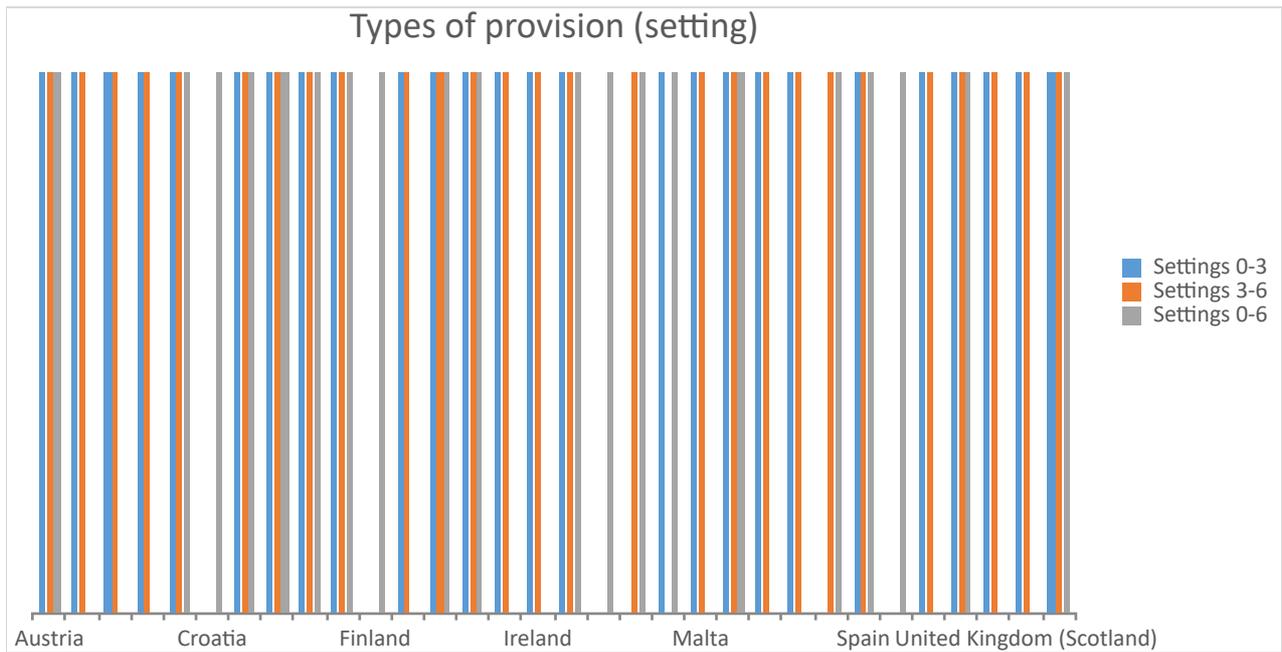
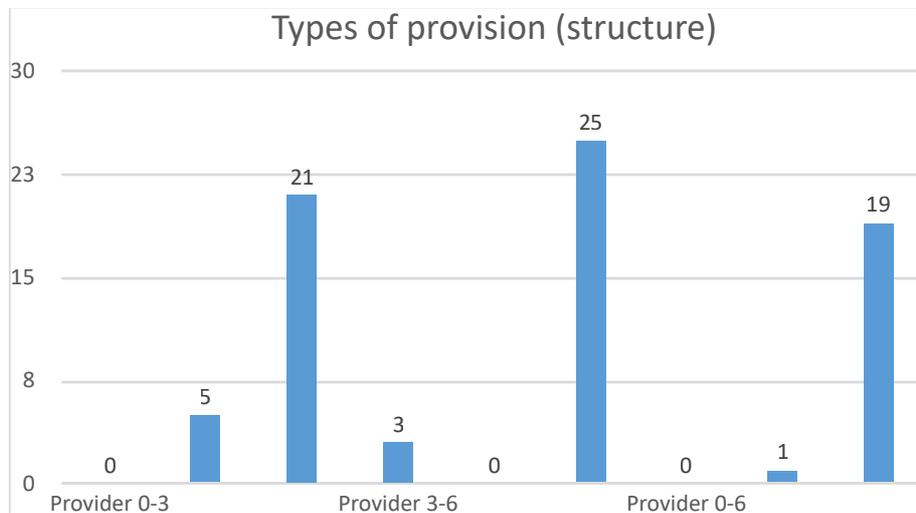


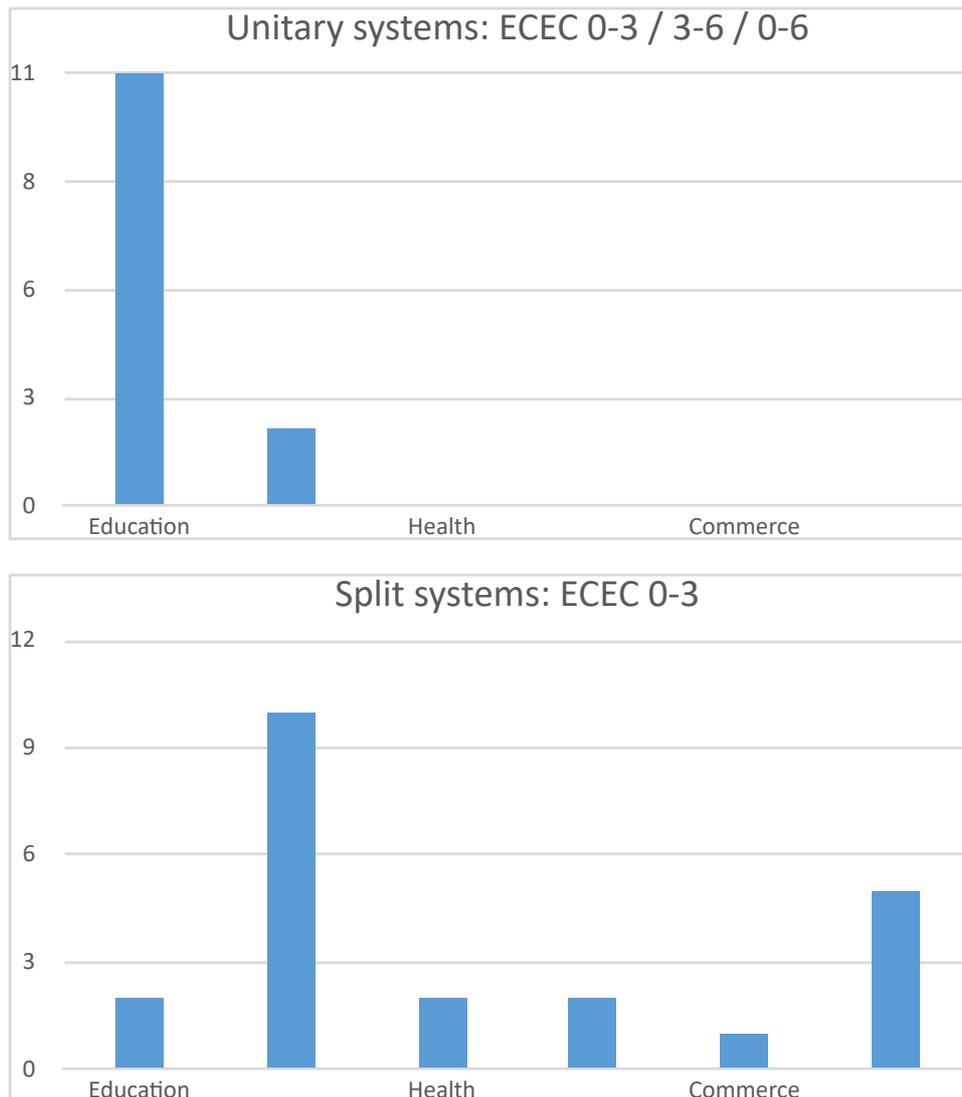
Figure 3: Types of provision (structure) for children from 0 to 6 years of age



The second aspect we were interested in was the types of ministry/ies that was/were in charge of the provisions (see Figure 4). The information was taken from the “Seepro-R Key Contextual Data” reports: ‘split’ was used for those systems whose 0-3, 3-6, and/or 0-6 settings were under the responsibility of different ministries, and ‘unitary’ for those whose services were under the same ministry. Nineteen systems (i.e., Belgium, Flemish, French, and German); Bulgaria; Cyprus; Czech Republic; Estonia; France; Greece; Hungary; Ireland; Italy; Poland; Portugal; Slovak Republic; the

Netherlands; Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales in the UK) were split or at least partially split, as some childcare provisions fell under different administrative bodies. Thirteen systems were unitary (i.e., Austria; Croatia; Denmark; Finland; Germany; Latvia; Lithuania; Luxembourg; Malta; Slovenia; Spain; Sweden; England in the UK).

Figure 4: Ministries responsible for ECEC provisions in the unitary and split systems



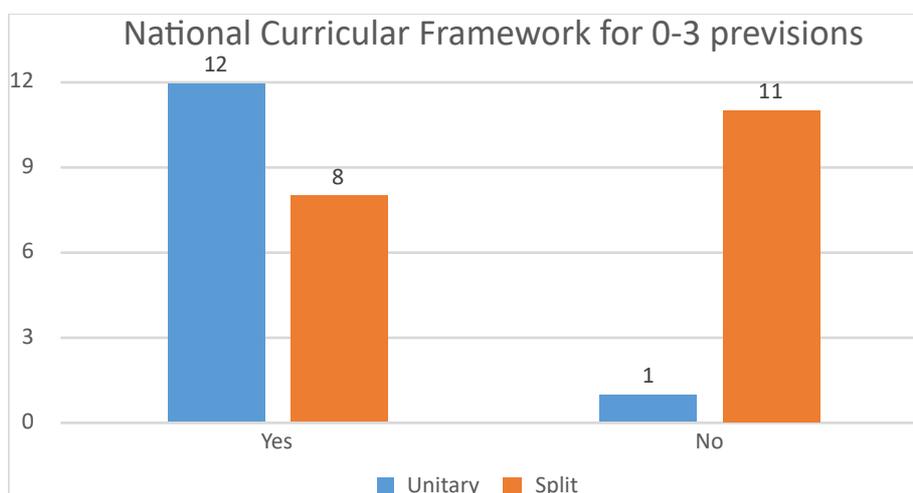
* In the split systems, all the settings for 3-6-year-olds fell under the ministries of education

In the unitary systems, the ministries of education had the responsibility for 85% of ECEC provisions and the ministries of family or social affairs for the 15%. In the split systems, the picture is hugely

different: in fact, the 0-3 services fell under the responsibility of different ministries across the systems, while the ministry of education was in charge of all the 3-6 services (see Figure 4).

In most of the education systems, National Curricular Frameworks (NCFs) were present. The NCFs usually state the educational principles which should be at the basis of the services and list central learning goals for children; depending on the education system, NCFs have to be followed in strict or loose ways. According to the “Seepro-R Key Contextual Data”, in all the education systems taken into consideration, the provisions for children from 3 to 6 years had to follow an NCF, that was specific for the 3-6 settings or generally addressed to 0-6 settings. On the contrary, the picture was different for the provisions for children from 0 to 3 years: in 58% of the split education system, the 0-3 provisions lacked an NCF to follow (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: National Curricular Framework for 0-3 provisions in unitary and split education systems



With regards to the participation of children with disabilities in ECEC, data were retrieved from ‘Key Contextual Data’ and ‘ECEC Workforce Profile’ by SEEPRO-R, and ‘Legislation and Policy’ and ‘Systems of support and specialist provision’ by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (Table 1). Alongside the inclusion in mainstream education, all the systems provided forms of special education, such as segregated settings or integrated settings, in which children with and without disabilities attended the same unit or class.

Table 1. Measures for supporting the participation of children with disabilities in ECEC*

Education system	Unitary system	Special school or classes	Inclusion main-stream settings	Main-stream chosen by parents	Additional specialist staff	ISCED level to work as Special needs teacher	ISCED level to work in 0 - 3 settings	ISCED level to work in 3 - 6 settings	ISCED level to work in 0 - 6 settings	N max children SEN	Reduced group size	Individual educational plan
Austria	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	5			5	4	Yes	
Belgium (Flemish)	No	Yes	Yes		Yes		4 or 5	6				Yes
Belgium (French)	No	Yes	Yes		Yes		4 or 5	6				
Belgium (German)	No	Yes	Yes				4 or 5	6				
Bulgaria	No	Yes	Yes		Yes				6 or 7			Yes
Croatia	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	7			6	1	Yes	Yes
Cyprus	No	Yes	Yes		Yes	6 or 7	6	6			Yes	Yes
Czech Republic	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		3	3				Yes
Denmark	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes				6			
Estonia	No	Yes	Yes		Yes	5			4		Yes	Yes
Finland	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	6			6			Yes
France	No	Yes	Yes		Yes				6		Yes	Yes
Germany	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	6			6			
Greece	No	Yes	Yes					6	6			Yes
Hungary	No	Yes	Yes		Yes		4 or 5 or 6		6		Yes	Yes
Ireland	No	Yes	Yes		Yes		4	6	4			
Italy	No	Yes	Yes		Yes	7	3	7			Yes	Yes
Latvia	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	6			5			
Lithuania	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes				6		Yes	
Luxembourg	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	6		6				Yes
Malta	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		4	4				
Poland	No	Yes	Yes				3	6			Yes	
Portugal	No	Yes	Yes		Yes	7			7	2		Yes
Slovak	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	4	3	3		2	Yes	Yes
Slovenia	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes				6	2	Yes	Yes
Spain	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes		4		6			
Sweden	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes				6		Yes	Yes
the Netherlands	No	Yes	Yes	Yes			4	6				
UK (England)	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes		3	6	4			Yes
UK (Northern Ireland)	No	Yes	Yes		Yes		3	6				
UK (Scotland)	No	Yes			Yes			6				Yes

UK (Wales)	No	Yes			Yes		3	6	3			
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*Blank cells represent both the absence of the measure and missing data.

In some countries, such as Italy or Sweden, the segregated settings were most unusual and welcomed children with highly severe disabilities. In general, the possibility for children to attend mainstream settings depended on their health conditions; interestingly, in four systems (Czech Republic, Malta, Slovak, and the Netherlands) parents express the final decision upon their children's attendance of mainstream or integrated settings. In 28 systems additional specialist staff was allocated to give support to children with disabilities; when the information was reported, the additional staff were required to have the same ISCED level as educators or teachers had, or a higher one. In 12 systems, the group size was reduced when a child with disabilities or special education needs was included in the class; in 5 systems, a maximum number of children with disabilities were integrated into a group, varying from 1 to 4. In 18 out of 32 systems, an individual educational plan for the child with special needs was developed, usually in collaboration with the family. The different types of measures appeared not to be related to the unitary or split organization of the education systems.

4 Discussion

The paper described the types of provision for children from 0 to 6 years, that were present in 32 European education systems in 2017-2018. In most cases, the setting providers are both public and private, with a higher share of private providers for the daycares addressed to children under three years. Nineteen out of 32 systems were split, meaning that often the settings for children under three came under the auspices of ministries of welfare and social affairs, while in all systems, the ministries of education were in charge of the settings for children between 3 and 6 years. This might be due to a different cultural approach toward ECEC in early infancy: the 0-3 settings, in fact, were usually conceived as a crucial part of work-family conciliation, while the preprimary settings were considered the first step of education. For instance, this was the case of Italy, where the settings for children from birth to 3 years of age were created in 1925 mainly as a health provision and in 1928 kindergartens were recognized as educational settings. In 1968, Law n. 444 established the state-run *scuola materna* (kindergarten) for children from 3 to 6 years, within the education system. In 1971, Law n. 1044 established the *nido* (nursery school) for children from 0 up to 3 years, under the responsibility of the health ministry and local administrations, with two-fold goals: the work-family conciliation and the promotion of the full development of the child. Only recently, Law n. 107 in 2015 and Legislation n. 65 in 2017 established an integrated system of education from birth to six years of age, moving the responsibility of ECEC for children under three under the auspices of the ministry of education.

Also, signs that the ECEC provisions for children under three years still suffered from exclusion from broader coordinated education systems were the fact that 0-3 settings showed a higher percentage of private management across countries and that, in several systems, the 0-3 settings had not to rely on a National Curricular Framework. This paper shows that further policy actions are needed to fully include the provisions for children under three years within the education systems in their countries, as this would foster the quality of ECEC.

Several education systems had targeted measures for the participation in ECEC of children with disabilities or special education needs. In several countries, the possibility for children to attend regular settings depends on the severity of the disability/ies. Interestingly, in some countries the decision between mainstream or integrative settings is up to the parents: in these cases, the education systems are acknowledging that parents are the best decision-makers for their children. Very common measures for participation across education systems were the enrolment of additional staff to give support to children with special needs and the draft of an individual education plan, prepared in collaboration with the families.

A first limitation of the current study consists in the lack of clarity, in the information sources, about possible differences between the participation measures in 0-3 and 3-6 settings: if not specified, we gave for granted that the measure was carried out in both type of provisions, but we were not fully sure that this interpretation was correct. A second limitation was that, sometimes, the documents that we analyzed presented contradictory or missing information, thus misinterpretations were potentially present. Finally, we decided to analyze 'objective' indicators of participation to take a picture and compare different education systems in Europe. Yet, further research is needed to address the concepts and constructs of participation and inclusion in different education systems and countries.

Declaration of Competing Interests

No.

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