



Policy recommendations

HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN EUROPE

*Policies and practices based on
scientific research for reducing
underachievement and early
school leaving in Europe.*



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 101061288



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WHY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE MATTERS

The early years are critical for laying the foundation for both immediate well-being and future success. Quality early childhood education programmes not only support the development of essential social-emotional resilience, cognitive abilities, and positive behaviour patterns but also foster a child's sense of self and agency as a valued member of society. By nurturing a broad range of skills across diverse areas, including literacy, numeracy, science, and socio-emotional development, these programmes address the holistic needs of young learners. Overlooking the importance of early childhood education can result in significant educational and societal issues, such as long-term underachievement, premature school dropout, and related issues such as juvenile delinquency and unemployment. Conversely, high-quality early education is crucial for academic success and overall development, and can particularly help prevent early school leaving among vulnerable populations. It also supports children's right to a well-rounded, fulfilling educational experience, and contributes to building equitable and sustainable societies.

THE CHALLENGE

Despite the growing number of children in early years attending early childhood education and care in the EU - 92% of children between the age of 3 and the starting age for compulsory primary education based on 2021 statistics [1], the challenge remains in addressing quality provision [2]. Indeed, it has been found that high-quality early childhood education and care services are essential for generating benefits, while low-quality programmes can adversely affect both children and society. In this scenario, guaranteeing quality is just as important as ensuring its availability and affordability [3], and investments have to be focused on high-quality early childhood education and care [2].

SCIREARLY'S RESPONSE

Addressing these challenges, the European Commission has made improving quality early childhood education a top priority, setting a target for at least 96% of children between the age of 3 and the starting age for compulsory primary education to participate in early years education and care by 2030 [4]. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 also aims to ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education. In line with this objective, one of the priorities of the SCIREARLY project is to map the current landscape of early childhood education and care provision in Europe and generate a clear and actionable roadmap for enhancing its quality across the region through a co-creation process with children, families, and schools.

[1] Eurostat (2021). Early childhood education statistics.

[2] Council of the European Union. (2019). Council recommendation of 22 May 2019 on high-quality early childhood education and care systems.

[3] Council of the European Union. (2011). Council conclusions on early childhood education and care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow.

[4] European Commission (n.d.). Education and Training Monitor 2023.

BRIDGING DIVERSITY TOWARDS QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN EUROPE

There is significant diversity in how early childhood education and care is defined, implemented, and understood in Europe. It may be centre- or home-based and publicly or privately provided. Across Europe, childcare for younger children and pre-primary education for older children may occur in separate or unitary settings, or a mix of both. Early childhood education and care programmes in some contexts also emphasise the role of “pedagogues” or “childminders”—professionals who focus on child development and play-based learning—whereas others employ teachers who are trained in instructional approaches in a more formal setting. The age at which children attend early years education also differs widely, with some countries offering programmes from birth while others focus on ages three and above. Additionally, there is a fundamental divide in the pedagogical approach: in certain European nations, early childhood education and care is predominantly seen as a time for children to engage in play-based learning, nurturing their social and emotional skills; meanwhile, other countries prioritise structured educational content, aiming to introduce young children to foundational academic concepts early on.

While there is no one-size-fits-all configuration for high-quality education and care in early years, **our work seeks to offer a systematic understanding of existing evidence by identifying common quality indicators to enable policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to discern trends, pinpoint best practices, and address disparities in quality provision across Europe.** This fills the gap in the global understanding of early childhood education and care quality in Europe and also equips stakeholders with actionable strategies to enhance outcomes for children across the continent.



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE AT A GLANCE [5, 6, 7]

Country	Terms used for early childhood education and care	Stage	Age range	Terms used for teachers	Place guarantee
Belgium: French	Enseignement maternel	Pre-school education	2.5 to 6	Enseignant(e) de maternelle	3+
Belgium: Flemish	Kleuterschool/ Kleuteronderwijs	Pre-primary education	2.5 to 6	Kleuterjuf / Kleutermeester	3+
Belgium: German	Kleuterschool/ Kleuteronderwijs	Pre-primary education	2.5 to 6	Kindergärtnerin/ Kindergärtner	3+
Denmark	Vuggestuer	ISCED level 010: Day care	0* to 3	Childminder (if home-based), Pedagogues (Pædagog)	From 6 months
	Børnehave	ISCED level 020: Kindergarten	3 to school entry		
Finland	Varhaiskasvatus	Päiväkoti: Early childhood education and care	0* to 7	Lastenhoitaja (daycare worker)	From 6 months
		Esiopetus - pre-school education	Typically 5 to 6	Varhaiskasvatuksen opettaja	
Greece	Vrefikoi stathmoi, vrefonipiakoi stathmoi, paidikoi stathmoi	Pre-school education and care	0* to 4	Pedagogue	None
	Nipiagogeio	Primary education	4 to 5	Nipiagogos	4+
Ireland	Crèche, nursery, pre-school, naíonraí, playgroup, daycare services	Pre-primary education	3 to 5	Teacher	None
Italy	Sistema integrato	Servizi educativi per l'infanzia	0 to 3	Insegnante, maestra/o d'asilo	None
		Scuole dell'infanzia (pre-primary schools)	3 to 6		
Malta	Childcare centres	Childcare	0* to 3	Childcare educators	None
	Pre-primary school	Kindergarten	3 to 5	Kindergarten educators	
Portugal	Creche	Creches	0 to 3	Educador de infância	Last two years of early years education provision
	Jardim de Infância	Pre-primary education	3 to 6		
Spain	Educación infantil	Primer ciclo	0* to 2	Educador/a infantil Maestro/a de infantil	3+
		Segundo ciclo	3 to 5		
England	Nursery	Educational day care	0* to 5	Teacher	3+

* starting month may vary

[5] Eurydice. (n.d.). National education systems. European Commission. <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems>

[6] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. (2019). Eurydice brief: Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

[7] Vlaamse overheid. (n.d.). Onderwijs Vlaanderen. <https://www.onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/>

A ROADMAP FOR POLICY MAKERS

SCIREARLY engaged in an open dialogue with children, families, and schools to discuss the results of our scientific work on the elements driving high-quality early childhood education and care in Europe. This document outlines the common themes that emerged from this process, outlining a roadmap for policy action that is backed by science and reflects the lived experiences of those they aim to support. More specifically, it seeks to answer the question: “What key elements should an effective, science-informed early childhood education and care policy promote?”

KEY ELEMENTS OF HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Promote whole child development through a nurturing and responsive learning environment

Foster an environment where emotional safety, empathy, friendships, and positive relationships and dialogic interactions thrive, ensuring children’s agency is protected and that they feel listened to, valued, and supported in their learning journey.

Create a rich, purposeful and stimulating learning space

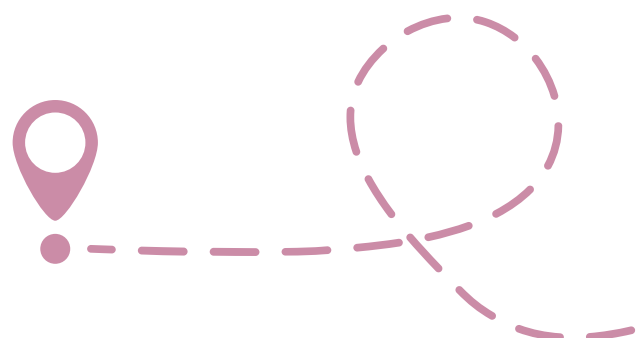
Create stimulating, accessible spaces rich in sensory, cognitive, social, and creative resources that invite exploration and foster children’s independent and collaborative learning.

Foster shared activities between schools and families

Encourage shared and dialogic activities such as storytelling and dialogic reading between children, teachers, and their families, promoting curiosity, active listening, and shared thinking. Peer work that enables opportunities for mutual support and autonomy from the teacher is also found to be crucial.

Harness building blocks of learning for well-being and success

Develop children’s essential skills, creativity, and physical and socio-emotional development through dialogic-based actions, learning-in- context, and playful approaches. Digital skills are also important, supported by thoughtful and intentional use of technology in the classroom.





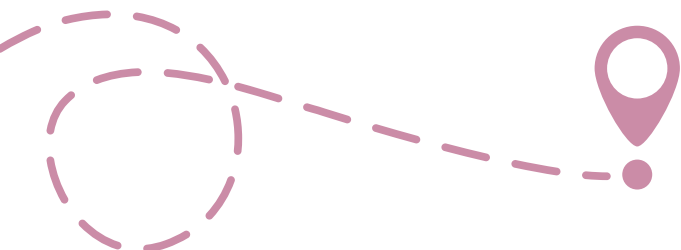
Invest in a thriving early years education workforce

Invest in educators' ongoing training, empowering them with tools and strategies to deliver high-quality education and care while maintaining personal well-being.

Establish pathways for inclusive involvement and decision-making

Involve families, educators, and community members in collaborative and egalitarian decision-making, ensuring diverse voices shape policies that reflect equity and inclusivity.

Our work from the scoping review, European-wide survey, and focus groups with various stakeholders revealed the **common key elements of high-quality early years provision**. They are embedded in the immediate learning context, community, and structural environments surrounding young learners. At the **immediate environment level**, fostering a nurturing and responsive learning environment, fueled by high-quality interactions where children feel engaged, safe, and valued; leveraging learning moments in purposeful and carefully designed contexts to enhance skills development; and creating a rich and stimulating learning space all set the stage for children's future success and enable them to thrive across the lifespan. **At the community level**, involving families and the wider community meaningfully and organically in shared educational activities not only enhances children's skills and development but also the school's overall capacity to generate impact on a wider scale. Meanwhile, **the structural level** plays a vital role in supporting a thriving education workforce and establishing pathways for inclusive participation and decision-making in schools, ensuring that all stakeholders have a voice in shaping educational practices and priorities. By understanding and enhancing these interconnected environments, we can create a holistic framework that promotes high-quality early childhood education and care that supports the development and success of every child.



PROMOTE WHOLE CHILD DEVELOPMENT THROUGH A NURTURING AND RESPONSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Instructional support and affective bonds support the development of children's well-being and foundational skills for future success. This can be fostered through:

High-quality, responsive and dialogic interactions with teachers

Creating high-quality, responsive and dialogic interactions in the classroom fosters learning, wellbeing and sets up the basis for quality relationships. These relationships are also characterised by increased opportunities for conversations, tailored feedback, constant attunement, sensitive responsiveness, and interactional synchrony and exchanges.

Scaffolding and mindful feedback

Appropriate scaffolding and instructional support are also crucial in early childhood education and care contexts. This involves teachers providing appropriate prompts to encourage reasoning, explore ideas, consider different viewpoints, and build related topic knowledge in a dialogic space.

Inclusive classrooms

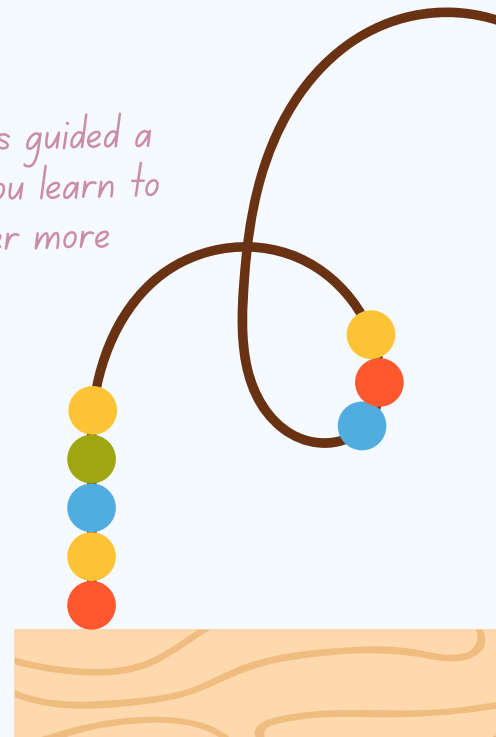
Inclusive settings have been more effective in positively influencing academic and social outcomes compared to less integrated or segregated ones. Fostering an inclusive environment that increases children's dialogic interactions with each other in a safe and supportive environment, is crucial for learning and development, as shown by successful educational actions.

Children's agency

Children's voices allude to the desire for greater involvement in decision-making processes. Children do not only have the right to be heard, but also to see that their contributions are taken seriously into account and actions are put in place consequently.

"I try to notice every child individually every day. Every child is guided a bit differently, it is key to know them all individually. When you learn to know all children, you can guide and teach them all together more comprehensively."

(Teacher, Finland)



"They won't remember what I taught. They will remember, maybe, all the moments I tossed them up in the air or when I played with them. I think that's what matters."

(Teacher, Portugal)

"Sometimes, children who say 'I don't know' set a larger goal than what you are actually asking. It's about helping them to understand that you are only asking for something small, and see, they do know how to do it. Supporting learning, for me, is not about giving the solution right away but breaking down the problem step by step into what they need to do to reach the goal."

(Teacher, Spain)

"I like school because I learn a lot of things."

(5-year-old child, Spain)

"At the school, we say no to violence. Zero violence... No hitting, no pushing, no hurting."

(5-year-old child, Spain)

FOSTER SHARED AND DIALOGIC ACTIVITIES BETWEEN CHILDREN, TEACHERS, AND FAMILIES

Shared and dialogic activities have been effective in enhancing children's basic skills alongside their socio-emotional development, as well as the overall capacity of the school to generate impact on a wider scale.

Dialogic reading with families. The Motherread/Fatheread program teaches caregivers, even those with limited literacy, to engage children actively in reading through techniques like dialogic reading, story expansion, and guided reading. This approach promotes vocabulary growth, comprehension, and a positive reading culture by increasing the frequency and enjoyment of storytelling. Evidence shows that joint teacher-caregiver efforts, supported with materials and guidance, enhance reading success across settings.

"We share this goal with the families and the community. For instance, although Sara's mum did not finish school, she is very keen to see how her 5-year-old daughter does better than her from an early age. So she volunteers, she comes to the meetings, she invites other mums to come volunteer in interactive groups and in dialogic gatherings."

(Programme coordinator, Spain)



IN FOCUS

DIALOGIC LITERARY GATHERINGS

A successful educational action for dialogic reading is exemplified by the Dialogic Literary Gatherings. Based on the dialogic learning concept, they bring together participants from diverse backgrounds to learn by sharing personal experiences and perspectives on classic literature. Even young children join in, often with help from adults, who can be teachers or volunteers from the students' families and communities. The group discusses selected passages of one of the greatest literary works of humankind, in an appropriate version for the children, in an egalitarian dialogue moderated by a trained facilitator. Moderators ensure that discussions remain inclusive, respectful, and free from coercion, fostering a supportive, egalitarian learning environment, grounded on the seven principles of dialogic learning.

CREATE A RICH, PURPOSEFUL AND STIMULATING LEARNING SPACE

A stimulating and responsive learning environment—encompassing both social and physical spaces—combined with intentional, high-quality interactions and learning opportunities, can enhance children's foundational and transversal skills while promoting their overall well-being and development.

Purposefully designed physical spaces. The arrangement of physical space can enhance pedagogical strategies, fostering meaningful interactions between children and their environment. Study data highlight that creating distinct “learning environments” within the classroom and ensuring access to the early years curriculum promotes quality teacher-child and peer interactions. Ultimately, the teacher's intentional design of the learning environment plays a critical role in creating a rich and stimulating space for thriving.

Availability of multiple resources. Providing hands-on, exploratory, and multisensory activities that provide varied stimuli to the learning child. In this scenario, there appears a need to adapt the classroom materials and spaces to each group and specific context to ensure that children make the most of their time in school, and where experimentation, dialogues, play, and songs play a central role. To achieve this, materials and resources should be curriculum-aligned and offered with clear purpose. Additionally, the capacity of teachers to tailor these resources to each child, task, and moment is crucial.



HARNESS THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF LEARNING FOR WELLBEING AND LIFELONG SUCCESS

Harnessing essential skills in early years is vital as it sets the groundwork for children's future success. Basic skills—such as literacy, numeracy, and science—and transversal skills—such as thinking skills, creativity, and socio-emotional competencies—enable children to navigate and enjoy their educational journeys effectively, adapt to new challenges, and thrive in a rapidly changing world. For this, guided participation in contextualised settings allow teachers to leverage and maximise learning moments that not only attend to children's well-being but also their overall development and their inherent right to a well-rounded educational experience.

Dialogic educational actions

Reading, literacy, and socio-emotional skills in children significantly improved through interventions using a dialogic approach. Dialogic and shared reading, in particular, demonstrated notable benefits for children with disabilities and those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. This approach has also been shown to positively impact children's perspective-taking and empathy which are essential skills for navigating today's social challenges.

Play and learning-in-context

Naturalistic and contextualised instruction has been shown to lead to improved outcomes in the development of basic and transversal skills especially among students from disadvantaged backgrounds such as children with disabilities or in foster care. Formal instruction time, transitions, and breaks should be taken as an opportunity to stimulate foundational concepts, language, curiosity, creativity, problem solving, and self-regulation skills.

Purposeful and evidence-informed use of digital technologies

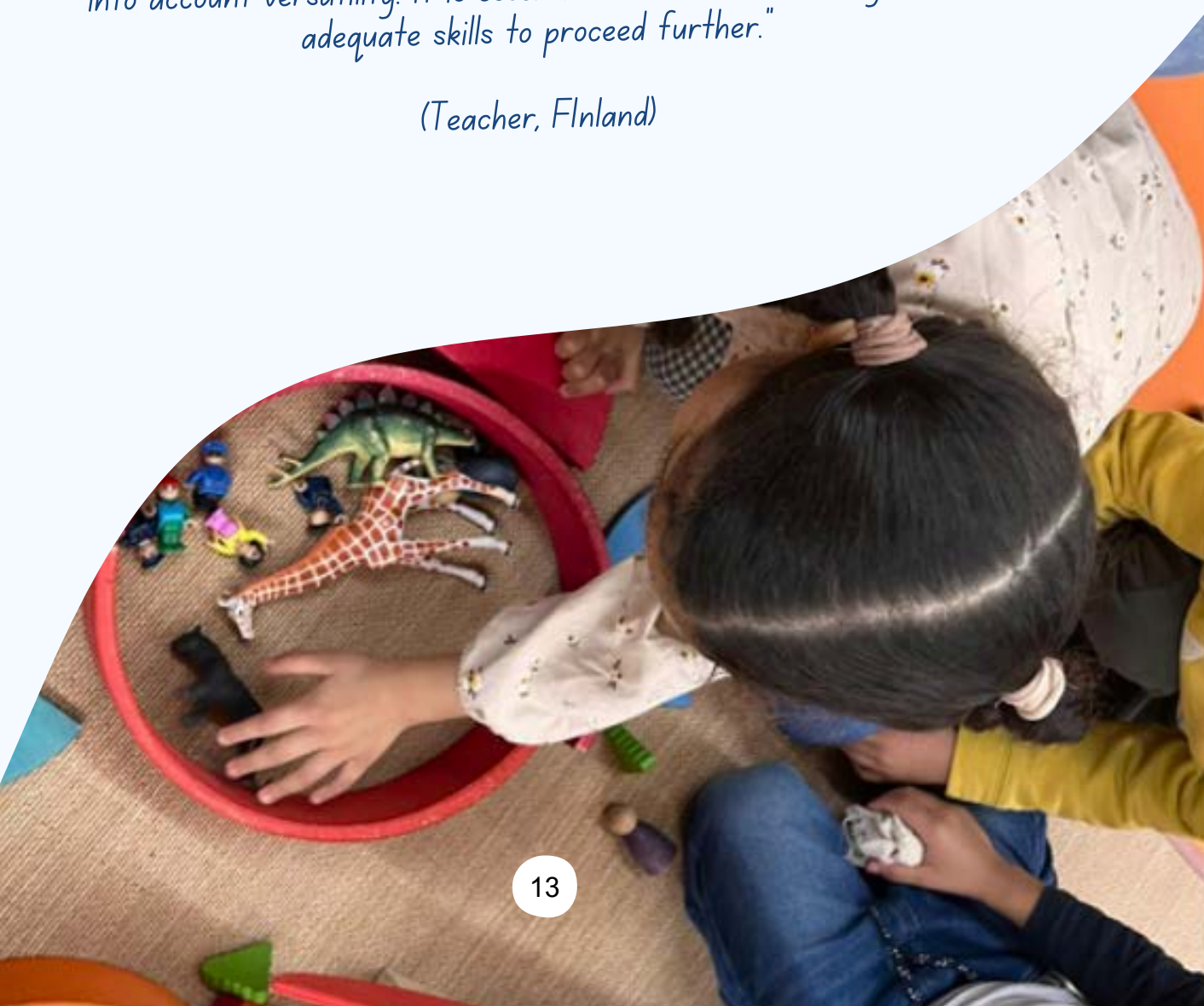
The use of digital learning tools among children has been shown to support the development of basic skills and help with children's engagement and motivation. Families and teachers highlighted the need for an approach to their use that is purposeful, intentional, and evidence-informed.

"Science and mathematics are subjects that you cannot exclude from the knowledge process, however, they must be age- appropriate for children. For example, [at my son's pre-school] they went through the entire life cycle of the butterfly ... the life cycle of the bee. Discovery, exploration, observation of the world around us."

(Parent, Italy)

"It is essential to provide basic skills on a grassroots level, that can be reached by children with different backgrounds. It is essential to take into account versatility. It is essential to assure that everyone has adequate skills to proceed further."

(Teacher, Finland)



INVEST IN A THRIVING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE WORKFORCE

High-quality early years programmes recognise the importance of continuous teacher professional development. Along with learning environments, it has shown to be the most consistent in influencing early years education practices, showing significant positive associations with a wide array of child outcomes such as basic and transversal skills. Specific elements of teacher training and development have been shown to be effective in this regard.

Evidence-informed teacher training

Investing in evidence-based in-service teacher training is essential for high-quality ECEC. Teacher quality is widely recognized as a major factor in student outcomes, and grounding decision-making in scientific evidence benefits children's achievement, well-being, and community development. Evidence-based training equips ECEC educators with the tools to support every child's success and fosters skills like critical thinking, communication, and democratic engagement—core competencies across diverse EU professional pathways.

Supportive work atmosphere

Teachers highlight the importance of a work atmosphere characterised by team cohesion, professional support, and positive relationships - supported by a shared vision to provide the best possible education to all children. A supportive work atmosphere enables them to share resources, strategies, and advice that can enhance both teaching quality and job satisfaction. This environment also encourages open communication and mutual respect, which can reduce stress and promote a sense of belonging.

Policies for teacher recruitment and retention

Concerns over teacher turnover among stakeholders underscore the importance of continuity in teaching staff in supporting routines and practices that foster a sense of safety in the learning environment.

"Here for instance, since we became a Learning Community back in 2019- 2020, our training focuses on scientific evidence, dialogic learning approach and so on. So whatever we implement at home has a scientific backup, it's not just me saying that this or that works, but it is scientifically proven, we know that works and it's good to know we are heading in the right direction."

(Teacher, Spain)

"Stability, continuity and safety are highly important. This is important to guarantee during the early years. Minimizing the changes and challenges is important."

(Guardian, Finland)



ESTABLISH PATHWAYS FOR INCLUSIVE INVOLVEMENT AND DECISION-MAKING IN SCHOOLS

Families' participation in children's learning

High-quality ECEC contexts strive to cultivate structures and practices that meaningfully involve families and caregivers in the children's educational lives, which enables not just mutual learning but for families to also feel valued. This is particularly relevant in schools that serve families from vulnerable backgrounds, as literature signals the important barriers that they encounter to be actively involved in school. For instance, a school in Spain that participated in the focus groups has recently become a Learning Community, which has been shown to serve as a driver to achieve meaningful family involvement and where families lie at the forefront of their ethos and transformation. This involvement in their children's educational activities not only enhances their relationship with the teachers but also makes it easier for them to gain an understanding and appreciation of their children's learning.

A tradition of active communication

Biweekly, monthly, or daily check-ins give families a chance to express concerns, celebrate milestones, and provide feedback, fostering a collaborative relationship. Open and regular communication based on honest principles with no power relationships is key to promoting high-quality early childhood education and care provision. Qualitative data from the study show that being well-informed about school practices contributes to a sense of connection and trust between families and the school, allowing them to feel welcome, respected, and valued..

Democratic structure of school governance

Stakeholders alluded to the crucial role of school leadership in providing support for teachers and families, not only in providing professional development and training opportunities but also in cultivating a culture where teaching staff and the wider community are able to shape the vision of the school. This runs parallel with existing evidence on the importance of community's involvement in decision-making for educational transformation.

"It is very easy to be heard in this school... It's easy because we are very engaged, we are in constant communication... So if something happens in my class that makes me feel uncomfortable or not really prepared to address that issue, I immediately run to the team and share this. And maybe request a training session on something that I might feel weak or less prepared for. We've done that recently with feminism, and prevention of violence at school..."

(Teacher, Spain)

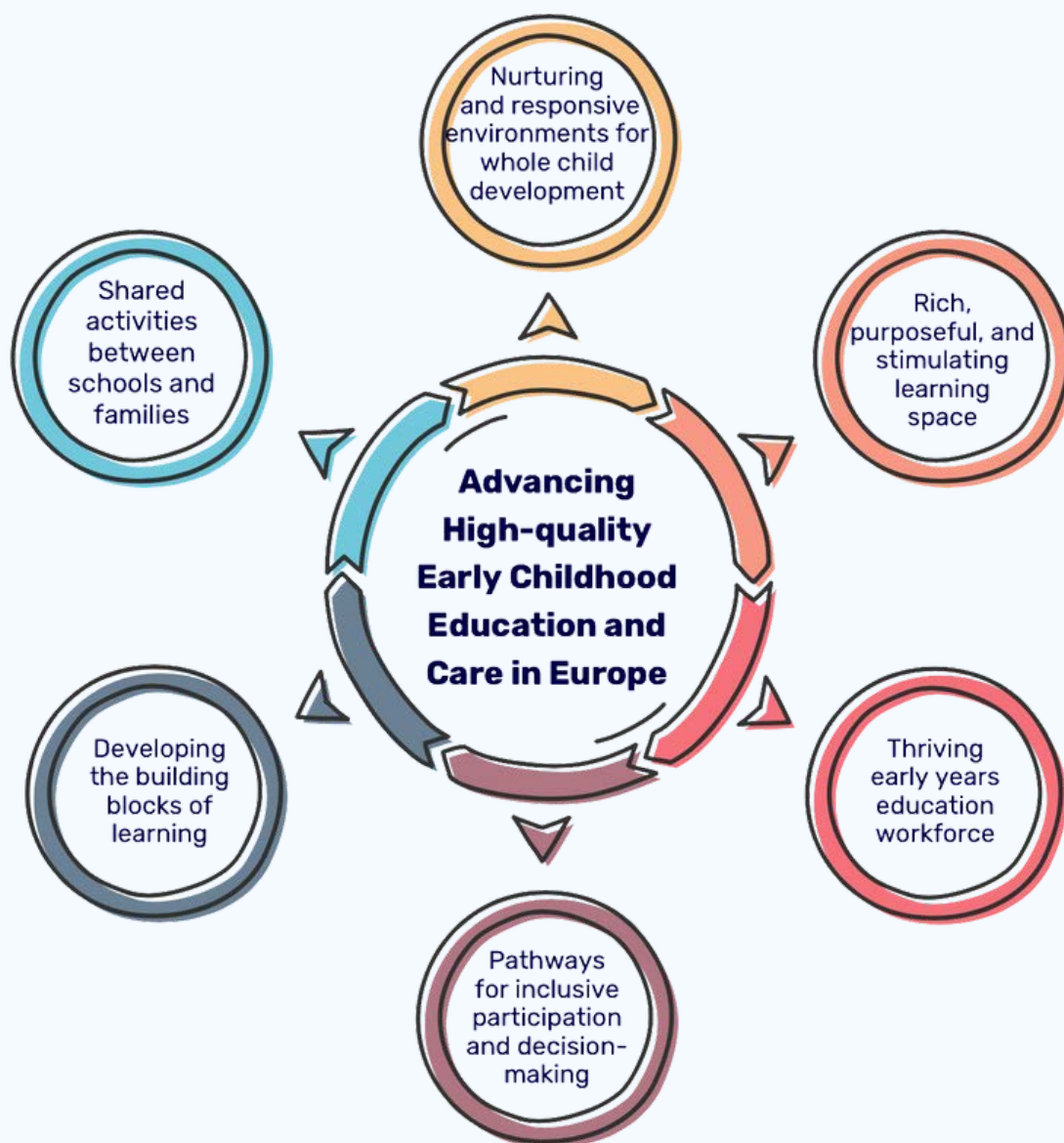
"Communication connections are important to maintain between school and home, to be in touch easily, communication is professional and reciprocal."

(Guardian, Finland)



TOWARDS A HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN EUROPE

A comprehensive approach to high-quality early childhood education and care across Europe requires integration across multiple levels. Addressing each of these drivers will foster an ecosystem that supports and amplifies benefits through synergistic effects, while aligning the roles of educators, families, policymakers, and communities. Such a coordinated approach will maximize optimal learning and lay a stronger foundation for the lifelong success and well-being of children for generations to come.



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