

Blueprint for Enhancing Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)





Professionals and parents to Act Towards a Holistic
or Whole Approach for early YearS education

Blueprint for Enhancing Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Pathways team



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Blueprint for Enhancing Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Introduction and Context

This document is part of the PATHWAYS project, an initiative aimed at fostering a holistic and inclusive approach to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Funded by the European Union under project identifier 2022-1-IT02-KA220-SCH-000087139, PATHWAYS promotes cooperation between educators and families, alongside enhancing inclusive, digital, and green learning environments in ECEC services. This work aligns with European policy frameworks such as the European Quality Framework for ECEC (2014) and competency guidelines like LifeComp, DigCompEdu, and GreenComp, which emphasise sustainability, digital literacy, and inclusive practices.

The PATHWAYS team, comprising partners from Italy, Lithuania, Romania, Serbia, and Portugal, developed a Compendium of learning activities to involve parents in children's education and address key challenges in ECEC services. The activities aim to:

1. Foster cooperation with families for children's learning continuity.
2. Promote inclusive practices to support diversity and equity.
3. Integrate digital tools to enhance communication and educational processes.
4. Create green environments that connect children with nature and sustainability principles.

This document outlines a structured blueprint synthesizing evidence-based findings, including from the evaluation of the implemented compendium activities, and targeted recommendations to guide policymakers, educators, parents, and communities. It incorporates insights from the Pathways project's implementation and provides a comprehensive roadmap for improving ECEC quality through collaboration, professional capacity-building, and equity-focused strategies.

Key Insights and Supporting Evidence

1. Quality ECEC Improves Child Outcomes

Research highlights the positive impact of quality ECEC on cognitive, emotional, and language development. Children benefit most from enriched learning environments, stable educator relationships, and strong home-program collaboration (Melhuish et al., 2015).

2. Educator Competencies are Fundamental

Skilled, trained, and supported educators drive ECEC quality. Professional development and reflective practice significantly enhance teaching effectiveness and child outcomes (OECD, 2019). Furthermore, addressing educator well-being improves workforce retention and service delivery (Cumming & Wong, 2019)

3. Collaborative Governance Improves Implementation

Effective governance involves consultation with educators, parents, children and researchers. Transparent policies with inclusive decision-making ensure sustainable quality standards (Urban et al., 2012).

4. Parental Engagement Enhances Learning

Active parental participation—through communication, workshops, and engagement in learning activities—reinforces consistent support for children’s growth (Epstein, 2011).

5. Equity and Inclusion Remain Critical

Inclusive practices are essential for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, minority groups, and those with special needs. The equitable allocation of resources ensures access for all (UNESCO, 2020).

Recommendations by Stakeholder Group

A. Policy Makers and Regulatory Bodies

Key Objectives: Establish robust, responsive, and future-oriented policies; ensure sustainable funding and accountability mechanisms.

1. Strengthen Policy Frameworks for Quality:

- Develop comprehensive quality standards and monitoring systems aligned with research-based indicators.
- Introduce minimum qualifications and ongoing training requirements for ECEC professionals.

2. Ensure Sustainable Funding:

- Increase public investment in ECEC to improve educator compensation, reduce staff–child ratios, and maintain adequate learning materials.
- Increase public investment in ECEC to ensure that high-quality ECEC is accessible to all families, including those with fewer economic resources.

3. Facilitate Inclusive Practices:

- Enact policies incentivizing enrollment of children with diverse backgrounds and special needs, accompanied by appropriate funding for specialized support and training.
- Establish national frameworks guiding inclusive curricula, materials in multiple languages, and universal screening for early intervention.

4. Promote Collaborative Governance:

- Establish advisory councils and working groups that include ECEC professionals, parents, and community representatives in policy development and review.
- Promote data-driven decision-making by commissioning regular quality assessments and using findings to refine guidelines and resource allocation.

B. ECEC Leadership and Management

Key Objectives: Lead a culture of continuous improvement, invest in staff professional growth, ensure positive working conditions.

1. Professional Development and Support:

- Offer regular, research-informed in-service training and career advancement pathways.
- Implement reflective practice groups and mentoring systems to foster peer learning and skills enhancement.

2. Staffing Stability and Well-Being:

- Ensure competitive salaries, professional recognition, and supportive management structures to reduce turnover.
- Integrate policies for staff well-being, such as balanced work schedules, mental health resources, and opportunities for professional autonomy.

3. Quality Assurance and Curriculum Implementation:

- Use pedagogical leaders or coordinators to guide curriculum fidelity, support planning, and encourage innovation.
- Involve educators in decision-making processes regarding curriculum adaptation, material selection, and family engagement strategies.

4. **Inclusive and Responsive Practices:**

- Establish clear protocols for identifying and supporting children with diverse learning needs, including regular communication with specialized support services.
- Adapt physical environments and learning materials to reflect cultural, linguistic, and individual differences among children.

C. Training Institutions and Professional Associations

Key Objectives: Elevate the professional status of ECEC, enhance educator competencies, and support knowledge exchange.

1. **High-Quality Pre- and In-Service Training:**

- Align pre-service educator training with current research, focusing on child development, curriculum implementation, assessment, inclusive education, and family partnership strategies.
- Provide ongoing in-service professional development that addresses identified gaps, emerging research, and policy changes.

2. **Certification and Career Pathways:**

- Develop clear credentialing systems, specialty certifications, and micro-credentials to encourage continuous skill development.
- Recognize advanced competencies (e.g., bilingual education, special needs support) and reward them with professional growth opportunities.

3. **Research and Knowledge Transfer:**

- Foster partnerships with research institutions for evidence-based resource development.
- Curate practitioner-friendly resources, toolkits, and webinars that translate research into practical strategies for educators and parents.

D. Parent Organizations and Family Support Services

Key Objectives: Empower parents as primary caregivers and active stakeholders, strengthen home–service continuity, and advocate for quality.

1. **Enhancing Home–Program Partnerships:**

- Offer workshops, discussion forums, and accessible materials on child development and learning activities to support parents' roles in their children's education.
- Facilitate regular, meaningful two-way communication between educators and parents (e.g., parent–teacher conferences, digital communication platforms).

2. **Advocacy and Community Building:**

- Encourage parent associations to participate in advisory boards and policy consultations.
 - Support parents in advocating for quality improvements, inclusive policies, and better educator working conditions.
- 3. Accessibility and Inclusivity:**
- Provide culturally sensitive support to parents from diverse backgrounds, ensuring language accessibility and recognizing varying family structures.
 - Connect families with community services and specialists as needed, particularly for children with additional needs.

E. Community Organizations and Civil Society

Key Objectives: Promote community engagement, resource mobilization, and accountability.

- 1. Local Resource Mobilization:**
- Partner with local businesses, foundations, and nonprofits to provide additional resources (funds, supplies, volunteer expertise) for quality improvement projects.
 - Create localized resource centers offering parenting workshops, child play sessions, and educator training events.
- 2. Civic Engagement and Advocacy:**
- Engage in public campaigns highlighting the importance of early childhood education and the value of professional ECEC staff.
 - Hold regular public forums and community dialogues for stakeholders to discuss ECEC priorities and progress.
- 3. Monitoring and Accountability:**
- Support independent evaluation and reporting on ECEC quality and equity indicators.
 - Facilitate community-level feedback loops, capturing parent, educator and children (using child-friendly approaches to collect their views) perspectives and relaying them to policymakers and service providers.

Lessons learned

- 1. Phased, Multi-Level Approach:**
Changes should be introduced incrementally, starting with high-impact, low-cost interventions and gradually scaling to systemic reforms.
- 2. Continuous Professional Input:**
Engage educators, trainers, parents and, and children, when possible, representatives at all stages of design, implementation, and evaluation to ensure that policies and practices align with frontline realities.

3. **Sustainable Financing and Resource Allocation:**
Secure stable, long-term funding to maintain continuous improvement efforts, training programs, and inclusive enrollment policies.
4. **Data-Driven Decision-Making:**
Regularly collect and analyze data on child outcomes, educator competencies, service utilization, and parental satisfaction. Use these insights to refine strategies, improve resource distribution, and track progress over time.
5. **Cultural and Contextual Sensitivity:**
Tailor interventions to local contexts, respecting cultural, linguistic, and demographic differences. Engage community leaders and representatives to ensure that policies and practices resonate with local values and priorities.

Country specific recommendations

Lithuania

Rationale: Lithuania’s ECEC sector benefits from a growing emphasis on environmental education, digital innovation, and inclusive practices. Strengthening professional development and ensuring that educators can effectively integrate these elements will enhance quality and equity.

1. **Promote Green Environments:**
 - **Deepen Environmental Engagement:**
Beyond activities like “*Small Steps to the World of Eco*” and visits to the Kazlų Rūda State Forest Enterprise, encourage regular forest outings, school gardens, and recycling drives.
 - **Create Eco-Partnerships:**
Partner with environmental NGOs and local communities to integrate nature-based learning into the curriculum. Children can track growth of plants, learn about local ecosystems, and participate in community clean-up events.
2. **Use of Digital Tools:**
 - **Interactive Communication Platforms:**
Using Padlet and Wordwall for teacher-parent communication can be enhanced by scheduling virtual workshops and Q&A sessions. These platforms can also host collaborative projects where parents and children upload photos, artwork, or short videos related to thematic learning modules.
 - **Professional Capacity Building:**
Train educators to confidently navigate digital platforms, select age-appropriate apps, and foster children’s emerging digital literacy skills.
3. **Strengthen Inclusiveness:**

- **Awareness Campaigns and Inclusive Curriculum:**
Building on “*We Celebrate International Autism Awareness Day*”, design ongoing awareness sessions that address different disabilities, cultural backgrounds, and languages.
 - **Customized Support Plans:**
Involve specialists and parents in creating individualized support plans for children with additional needs. Educators can apply Universal Design for Learning principles to make learning accessible to all.
4. **Professional Development:**
- **Focused Training Programs:**
Offer structured training opportunities aligned with the ECEC Quality Framework focusing on inclusive practices, eco-literacy, and digital competence.
 - **Peer Networks and Learning Hubs:**
Encourage educators to form networks that share best practices, host workshops, and pilot innovative projects in collaboration with teacher training colleges.

Italy

Rationale: Italy’s rich educational traditions (e.g., Reggio Emilia) already emphasize creativity, collaboration, and child-centered learning. Enhancing parental engagement, environmental awareness, inclusive practices, and addressing territorial inequalities will amplify these strengths.

1. **Enhance Parental Engagement:**
 - **Digital Tools for Family Involvement:**
Extend the use of Jigsaw Planet and Canva not only for academic activities but also for co-creating digital family scrapbooks, language-learning games, or thematic puzzles that parents and children solve together at home.
 - **Parent-Teacher Dialogues:**
Implement regular digital roundtables to discuss curriculum goals, child progress, and ways to reinforce learning at home. Provide training for parents on using these tools effectively.
2. **Support Green Initiatives:**
 - **Outdoor Workshops and Nature Exploration:**
Build on “*Mind Up and Feel the Nature*” by establishing ongoing “green clubs” where children learn about local flora and fauna, composting, and gardening.
 - **Parental and Community Collaboration:**
Involve parents in eco-projects by inviting them to share their own environmental practices, thus reinforcing a collective responsibility for sustainability.
3. **Improve Inclusiveness:**

- **Transition Programs and Musical Workshops:**
As children move into kindergarten, introduce structured transition activities that include family visits, bilingual storytimes, and music sessions involving diverse sounds and instruments.
 - **Anti-Bias Training for Staff:**
Offer professional development focused on recognizing and mitigating cultural, linguistic, and ability-based biases.
4. **Address Territorial Inequalities:**
- **Targeted Resource Allocation:**
Utilize National Recovery and Resilience Facility funding to improve ECEC infrastructures, particularly in under-resourced regions.
 - **Mobile Learning Units:**
Introduce mobile ECEC units or traveling workshops that bring quality educational activities, materials, and technologies to remote areas, bridging urban-rural gaps.

Romania

Rationale: Romania’s ECEC landscape must tackle accessibility challenges in rural areas, strengthen inclusive environments, and enhance parental cooperation. Strategic use of digital tools and better monitoring systems will support continuous improvement.

1. **Develop Inclusive Environments:**
 - **Intergenerational and Community-Based Activities:**
Build on “*Let’s Protect the Nature!*” by involving older students, NGOs, and local community members. Intergenerational gardening projects, nature camps, and environmental clubs foster a sense of belonging and inclusivity.
 - **Cultural and Language Inclusion:**
Provide materials and activities in minority languages and celebrate cultural traditions of Roma and other ethnic communities, ensuring all children feel represented.
2. **Enhance Teacher-Parent Cooperation:**
 - **Multi-Modal Communication Strategies:**
Use Padlet not only as an information hub but also to host storytelling sessions, photo-sharing, and interactive question boards, allowing parents to contribute ideas and feedback.
 - **Parenting Workshops:**
Offer sessions on child development, nutrition, health, and safety to empower parents and help them support their children’s growth more effectively.
3. **Increase Access to ECEC:**

- **Mobile and Community Centers:**
Create mobile ECEC centers that travel to rural areas, providing early learning experiences, basic health check-ups, and referral services.
 - **Local Partnerships:**
Collaborate with local government, religious institutions, and NGOs to identify families with unmet ECEC needs and tailor outreach efforts accordingly.
4. **Improve Monitoring Systems:**
- **Data-Driven Quality Assurance:**
Implement regular internal self-assessments and external inspections based on the ECEC Quality Framework. Use digital tools to track child progress, staff qualifications, and parental satisfaction.
 - **Public Reporting and Transparency:**
Publish accessible reports for parents and communities, building trust and encouraging stakeholder involvement in quality enhancement processes.

Serbia

Rationale: Serbia’s ECEC system is progressing towards greater inclusivity, environmental awareness, and digital readiness. Strengthening leadership, governance, and professional development will ensure these improvements are consistently implemented and sustained.

1. **Promote Inclusive Activities:**
 - **Special Guest Programs:**
Expand initiatives like *“The Special Guest”* by inviting specialists (speech therapists, psychologists) and local community role models with diverse backgrounds. Involve families in co-designing activities that address children’s specific learning needs.
 - **Inclusive Curricula and Play-based Approaches:**
Include materials and games that represent children with disabilities, linguistic minorities, and refugees, making sure all children see themselves reflected in their learning environment.
2. **Green Environment Awareness:**
 - **Child-Led Eco Projects:**
Encourage children to propose and lead small eco-initiatives—like classroom recycling corners, mini-gardens, or “adopt a plant” schemes. Involving families in these activities reinforces environmental values at home.
 - **Local Eco Partnerships:**
Work with local environmental organizations to offer field trips, workshops, and interactive lessons on local ecosystems, waste management, and climate awareness.
3. **Use of Digital Tools:**

- **Digital Literacy Training for All:**
Provide targeted training for teachers, children, and parents on how to use Padlet, Canva, and similar platforms responsibly. Set guidelines on screen time, and emphasize digital citizenship and safety.
 - **Blended Learning Models:**
Develop simple, age-appropriate digital learning modules that complement hands-on experiences. This ensures children benefit from technology without losing experiential, play-based learning.
4. **Governance and Leadership:**
- **Professional Development for Leaders:**
Offer training courses and mentorship programs for ECEC leaders on quality assurance, staff management, and family engagement strategies.
 - **Clear Governance Frameworks:**
Develop formalized guidelines detailing leadership roles, accountability measures, and decision-making processes. Transparent governance fosters trust and aligns with EU standards.

Alignment with EU Quality Framework Principles:

All these recommendations for Lithuania, Italy, Romania, and Serbia align with the EU's emphasis on:

- **Accessibility:** Tailoring policies and resources to reach all children, including rural and marginalized communities.
- **Staff Professionalization:** Continuous training to ensure educators are competent in inclusivity, digital literacy, and sustainability.
- **Curriculum and Pedagogy:** Designing experiences that promote cognitive, social, environmental, and technological competencies.
- **Governance:** Establishing clear leadership roles, monitoring quality, ensuring transparency, and involving all stakeholders (families, communities, experts) in decision-making.

Conclusion:

By implementing these tailored recommendations, each country can strengthen its ECEC landscape, ensuring children benefit from rich, inclusive, green, and future-ready educational settings.

Collaborations among educators, parents, policymakers, and communities will create a cohesive ecosystem that supports every child's right to high-quality early education.

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