



EMBRACE

Fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in early childhood education and care

EMBRACE – FOSTERING INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

TRANSNATIONAL REPORT: MAPPING THE TERRAIN: INITIAL AND CONTINUOUS TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE STAFF

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1. INTRODUCTION

The project *'EMBRACE – Fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in early childhood education and care'* is funded under the Erasmus+ Programme, and it is implemented in five countries in cooperation with six partners: Bielskie Stowarzyszenie Artystyczne Teatr Grodzki (Poland), A & A Emphasys Interactive Solutions Ltd (Cyprus), KMOP – Social Action & Innovation Centre (Greece), Regional Directorate for Primary and Secondary Education of Attica (Greece), Family and Childcare Center – branch in Skopje (N. Macedonia) and the European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (Belgium). The project aims to contribute to the enhancement of the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and promote the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities.

The first project result, this transnational report *'Mapping the Terrain: Initial and continuous training opportunities for early childhood education and care staff'* offers in-depth insights into the state of play in each of the participating countries regarding the opportunities for initial and continued education of ECEC staff on topics concerning inclusive ECEC of children with intellectual disabilities, the knowledge and skills gaps, and needs, concluding with policy recommendations. The scope of the research also included topics related to the quality of already existing programs, practices and methodologies aiming at enhancing the involvement of staff members, children, parents and community members in nurturing inclusive environments.

The target audiences of this report include national and EU policy makers and educational authorities, ECEC settings that aim to improve the initial and continuous training of their staff, civil society organisations providing non-formal educational opportunities to ECEC staff, as well as ECEC researchers who could use it and expand on it.

Further to this, the findings of the report will be key in informing the development of the other project results, including the E-learning course (Project Result 2) and the Fostering Inclusion Handbook (Project Result 3).



Following the brief Introduction (Part One), the Transnational report is structured as follows:

Part Two – *'Methodology'* elaborates on the research methods employed (desk research and the key informant interviews), the ethical procedures followed and the research sample.

Part Three – *'Research findings'* presents the findings from the desk research and the key informant interviews with ECEC professionals.

Part Four – *'Policy Recommendations'* summarises the key policy recommendations for governments, civil society organisations, donors and other interested parties in supporting continuous professional development of ECEC staff and leaders in working with children with intellectual disabilities.

The *'Annexes'* contain the research findings from the key informant interviews per country.



2. METHODOLOGY

The activities for the development of the report included desk research, as well as interviews with key informants who have particularly informed perspectives, such as ECEC staff or leaders with long-standing work experience, professionals involved in education and training of ECEC staff and ECEC policy makers (hereinto referred to as ‘ECEC professionals’).

In conducting the desk research and key informant interviews, the partner organisations followed a common Research Protocol, which set out detailed guidelines, including the research methodology and the needed research and reporting templates.

2.1. DESK RESEARCH

Each partner organisation conducted desk research to explore the opportunities for education of ECEC staff on issues concerning inclusive ECEC of children with intellectual disabilities. In particular, partners explored whether and to what extent ECEC staff’s initial and continued education addresses relevant topics including:

- the overall philosophy and underlying values of inclusive early years education;
- the different forms of intellectual disabilities (such as autism spectrum disorder, Down's syndrome, fragile X syndrome, Williams syndrome, Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder);
- the implication of the different forms of intellectual disabilities on the learning capacities of children;
- the approaches for ensuring children with intellectual disabilities can participate in ECEC.

In addition, the partner organisations explored the already existing strategies, approaches and activities aimed at increasing the involvement of four key target groups in creating an inclusive ECEC environment for children with intellectual disabilities:

- children;
- parents;
- staff;
- community.



In conducting the desk research, the partner organisations were guided by the following definitions of the key terms:

'ECEC staff'	Educational staff, care staff and auxiliary staff/assistants, as well as leaders/heads of ECEC settings.
'Initial education'	Any formal initial education or training that prepares ECEC staff for working with children. It usually includes general education and professional training (Eurydice, 2019).
'Continued education'	Formal in-service training undertaken that allows ECEC staff members to broaden, develop and update their knowledge, skills and attitudes throughout their career. It includes both subject-based and pedagogical training through different formats, such as courses, seminars, peer observation and support from practitioner networks (Ibid)

The desk research entailed an analysis of relevant national documents, including policies, strategies and planning documents, country-level situation analysis, studies and reports, as well as peer-reviewed journal articles, books, reports from government agencies and non-governmental organisations.

2.2 KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

2.2.1. Research Methods

Non-probability sampling was utilised; thus, partner organisations aimed to include participants with different linkages to the area of focus who can bring to the table different perspectives of understanding. The participants that were interviewed were mainly recruited through the partner organisations' existing networks. Some interviews were conducted face-to-face, while some were completed online or via telephone. The COVID-19 protection measures in the respective countries were strictly followed. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes.

A formal procedure for obtaining informed consent was followed. This included the provision of an Information Sheet to potential participants, outlining information on the overall objective of the research, the duration of the interview, their rights related to participation, information on confidentiality, recording, transcription and use of data acquired, as well as a Consent Form which the participants signed before the interviews. Besides obtaining written consent, before the beginning of the interviews, the participants were once again explained the interviewing procedure, their rights and other aspects of the Information Sheet and Consent Form.

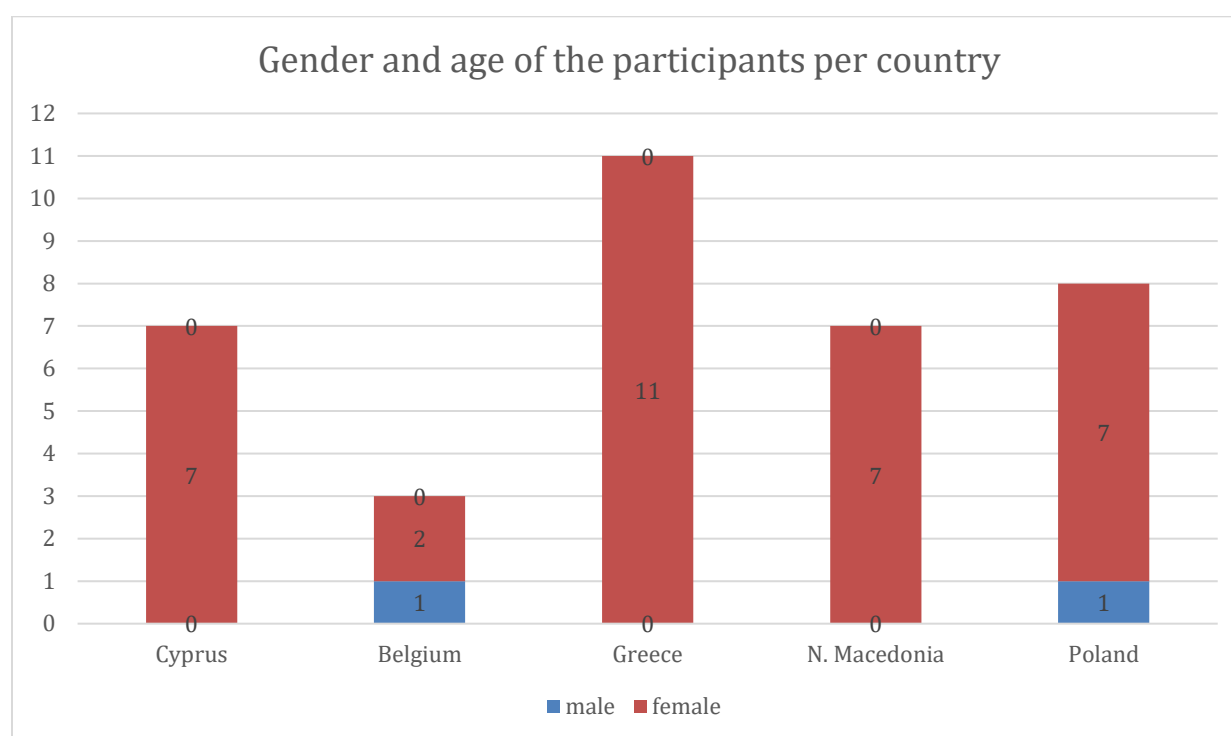
The interviews were - in most cases - recorded via audio taping or by taking written notes. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed. For the purpose of ensuring anonymity, neither participants' names nor identifiable characteristics were used in the transcripts or the Transnational Report. The raw data (audio recordings and written notes) and transcripts were kept separate from identifying information, while all information collected were securely stored on password-protected computers, ensuring confidentiality. Audio recordings were deleted after completing the transcription. All other raw data was destroyed after the completion of the Transnational Report.



2.2.2. Research participants

In total (36) ECEC professionals took part in the interviews. The interview participants were predominantly female as presented in the chart below (*Figure 1*), where the vertical axis represents the number of participants, while the horizontal axis represents the countries. The age range of the participants varied significantly, as the oldest participant was 62 and the youngest 23 years old.

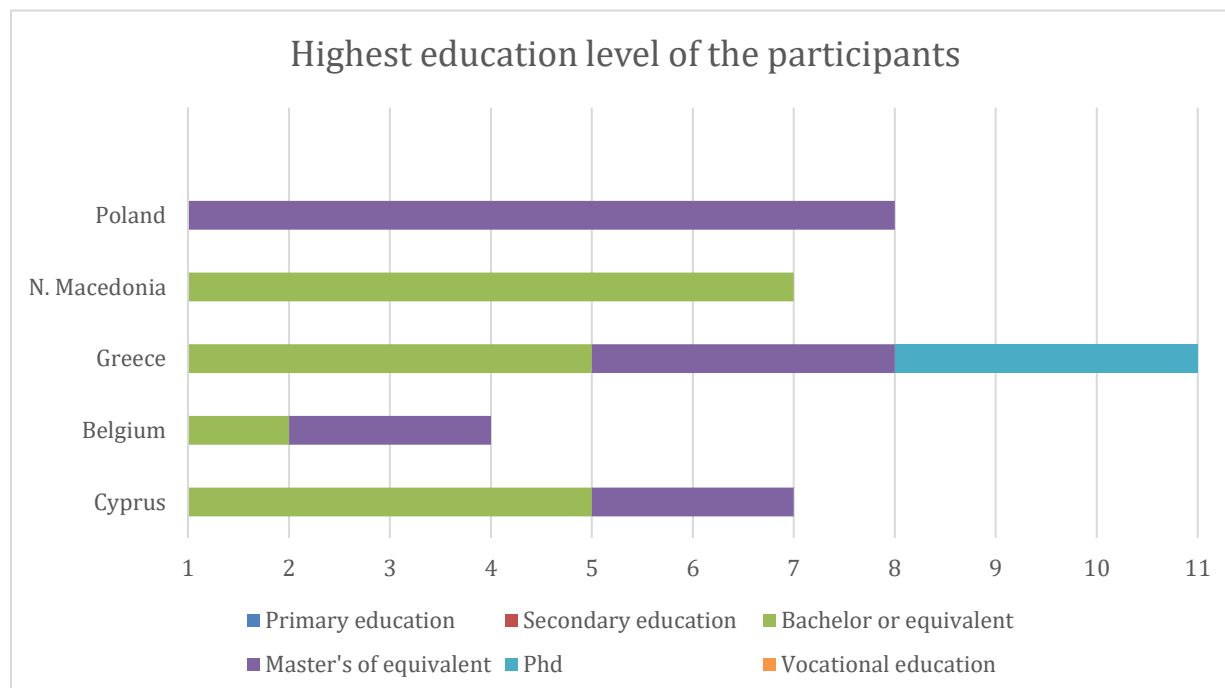
Figure 1



The participants professional backgrounds were different, with most having worked in ECEC settings – nurseries or kindergartens as teachers, pedagogues, special educators, educational coordinators or heads of the settings. Some were involved in education public authorities and policy-making.

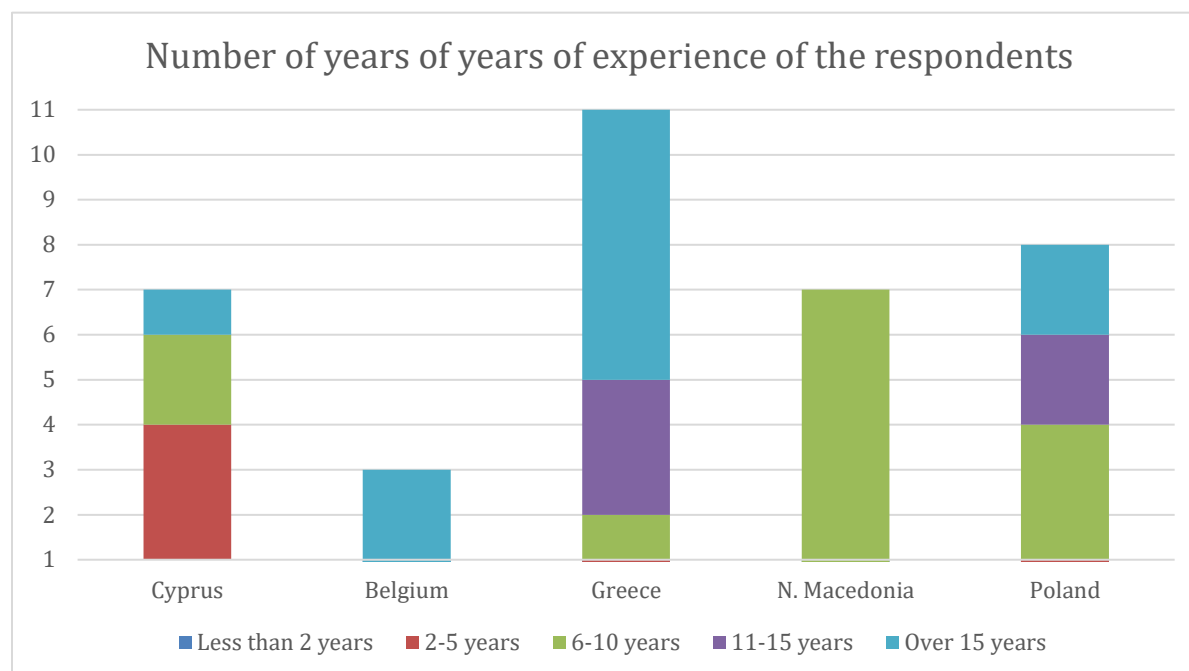
The highest education level of the ECEC professionals that took part in the interviews, is precisely presented in the bar chart below (*Figure 2*), where the vertical axis represents the countries and the horizontal axis represents the number of participants and their education level.

Figure 2



The number of years of experience of the ECEC professionals is illustrated in (Figure 3). The vertical axis represents the number of years, the horizontal axis represents the countries.

Figure 3



3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1. SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS FROM THE DESK RESEARCH

The desk research provided an overview mainly on the three following aspects:

Inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in ECEC;

Opportunities for education of ECEC staff on issues concerning inclusive ECEC of children with intellectual disabilities;

Strategies and actions that ECEC settings can take to increase the engagement of children, parents, staff and the whole communities in inclusive processes;

3.1.1. Inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in the ECEC

ECEC in Greece takes place either as a childcare-type provision for children younger than 3 years or as pre-primary education for children aged 3 and over (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2019). Greece has one of the lowest participation rates (81.5 %) in ECEC for ages 4 and over, while rates for 3-year-olds are 16 percentage points lower than the previously mentioned (Ibid). The Greek educational policy highlights the right of all students, including students with disabilities and/or special educational needs, to access education on an equal basis. Moreover, the Ministry of Education is currently implementing the Strategic Action Plan for the Equal Access of Students with Disabilities. The special education policy supports the inclusion of students with disabilities within mainstream schools by providing the necessary supporting structures and services. In specific, students with mild learning difficulties may attend ordinary mainstream school classroom, a mainstream school classroom with concurrent support-inclusive education by special education teachers when this is imperative based on their special educational needs, or integration classes operating in the general and vocational education



schools (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022a). When attendance of students with disabilities and special educational needs in schools of the mainstream educational system is difficult due to the type and degree of impediment, Special Education school units step in to provide education to these students. For preschool children, special pre-primary schools and early intervention classes within the former target students up to 7 years old (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022b).

In Poland, the Law of School Education creates an education system which provides an opportunity to learn in all types of schools and educational facilities for children and young people, according to their individual developmental and educational needs, as well as their aptitude, in the individualised process of education and care. The Polish model of education can be called 'a way of many educational paths'. The schooling system consists of solutions such as special, integrational and inclusive education. In the school year 2018/2019 4.8 thousand children attended special nursery schools. In other nursery schools and other early education facilities there were 28.2 thousand disabled children, making up 2% of all children. Most of the disabled children attended regular nursery schools (75.9%), 15.7% of whom attended integrational nursery schools and 12.7% the nursery schools with integrational units (GUS, 2018). Inclusive education is being implemented in Poland. It is made possible by law and effort of many institutions, organisations and people. What is important here is that teachers, people managing education, politicians, academia, people conducting teachers training develop an attitude promoting such an education model.

In Belgium there is a diverse and decentralised system of ECEC, regulated as a split-sector system, with the childcare sector responsible for children under 2½ years of age and the education sector for children from 2½ to 6 years old. Places in pre-primary setting are free for children from 2½ to 6; according to Eurostat (Eurostat, 2017) , nearly all children (98,7% in 2020) aged 4 to 6 years attend kindergartens in Belgium and the participation rate of under 3-year olds increased from 7% in 2005 to over 50% in 2015 (Peeters et al, 2017 p. 7). Belgium has a history of segregated education and special schools operate in all three language Communities - Flemish, French, and



German-speaking. Since 2009 and the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, there have been notable efforts in moving the different regional systems present in the country towards developing tools for the inclusion of all children. Most early intervention services support the transition to inclusive mainstreams education, however the widespread nature of special schools means that these efforts are not always obvious. The transition of children from early intervention to mainstream kindergartens is rather successful for children with sensory, physical, or motor disability, but for children with a severe form of autism or intellectual disabilities challenges remain.

In Cyprus, pre-school and pre-primary systems are the two distinct age-based organisational units that constitute the development of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Children from birth to age five are welcome in day nurseries, as there are day-care centres that are public, communal, but also private. In collaboration with the Parents' Association and the municipal authorities for the area where the institution is located, the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance establishes public day nurseries. The majority of pupils (82.3%) who attended ECEC for at least one year enrolled in those programs when they were 3 years old (30.82 percent). However, there are many parents that rely on private day-care, as in 2016/17, 53% of children enrolled in ECEC attended public facilities, while 47% attended private ones. Cyprus primarily relies on informal settings or private institutions, especially for children under 3 years old, of whom 28.2 percent attended ECEC in 2017 (EU average: 34.4%) (Rentzou, 2018). Children in preschool who were diagnosed with autism or have hearing impairments are partially incorporated into the regular educational system, by being assigned to special units connected to nurseries and primary schools, as well as spending some time in regular classes. An exemption to the integration policy is granted for children who have serious physical, mental, or emotional issues. To promote social integration between the two, every effort is made to strengthen the connections between the regular and special schools.

In N. Macedonia ECEC aims to provide care and education to children from birth until the age of 6 years, when they enter primary education. In 2019, the enrolment rate of children aged 3–6 years was 40%, which is far lower than the EU's recommended level of 95 % (UNICEF, 2019). The



key law in the area of preschool education - the Law on Child protection, recognizes that the ECEC sector should enable inclusion of the children with special educational needs, while the Program for Early Learning outlines the principle of equal opportunities and respect for differences among children. However, the legal and policy frameworks are not fully aligned with the international standards. The inclusive education process in the country began two decades ago, intensifying in recent years. Recent research found that, out of the 58 kindergartens across the country who participated, 39 (or 68%) provide care and education for children with disabilities, most of whom are children with autism or other form of intellectual disability (Ombudsperson, 2018). It is considered that preschool education does not offer the necessary conditions and opportunities for inclusion and optimal development of children with disabilities and that there is lack of a mechanism for systematic identification, recording and monitoring of children with disabilities from an early age, making it difficult for children with disabilities to stay in kindergartens and thrive in a stimulating environment (Ibid).

3.1.2. Opportunities for initial and continuous education of ECEC staff on issues concerning inclusive ECEC of children with intellectual disabilities

In regards to the opportunities for initial education of ECEC staff, the partner countries have established national standards for initial training for prospective ECEC staff. However, there are differences in the required level of qualifications between the different staff. Education staff are typically qualified at tertiary level, care staff are usually required to have a minimum qualification at upper-secondary or post-secondary level, while for auxiliary staff or assistants there is either a minimum required qualification at upper-secondary level or no initial formal qualifications at all. For instance, Greece is among the countries that require at least a Bachelor's degree (ISCED 6) from early childhood educators, which means that core practitioners must be highly qualified across the entire ECEC, while assistants who work with younger children may be employed without an initial qualification in ECEC (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2019). In Belgium, the qualification level of ECEC staff is low in comparison with other European



countries, however, there is a requirement of having at least one educator with a bachelor's degree for each group of babies and toddlers (Peeters et al, 2017). The national standards for initial training for prospective ECEC staff in some of the partner countries provide clearly defined rules on inclusive education in the curriculum of these specialisations, such as for example in Poland (Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 25 July 2019), while in others, such as N. Macedonia, there is a lack of clearly defined competencies for ECEC staff, including in the field of inclusive education (MoES, 2018).

The desk research identified several bachelor and master's degrees in early childhood education, pedagogy, special and inclusive education and related fields offered at the universities across the partner countries. These study programmes include a combination of methods, such as theoretical teaching, practical exercises, workshops, etc. The students often participate in nurseries, day-care facilities or kindergartens as part of their study programme. There are variations in extent to which inclusive education topics and such specifically related to children with intellectual disabilities are covered in the university curricula. Induction periods or internal training within the ECEC facilities on the entry to the profession were also identified across the partner countries. In Greece, there is a compulsory induction period for all staff, including core practitioners and assistants, regardless of whether they work with younger or older children.

For what concerns continuous education and professional development, there are considerable differences among the partner countries. In N. Macedonia, although ECEC staff might be occasionally invited to non-formal learning opportunities by various stakeholders (e.g., CSOs and international organisations) a formal mechanism for professional development and career advancement of these professionals is non-existent, thus, there is no guarantee that topics related to inclusive education and intellectual disabilities are encompassed (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Macedonia, 2018). In Belgium, continuous training is foreseen and decided at the level of the single establishment based on territorial available offers, which may, or may not, cover disability as a topic. Often, training can include sections around inclusion and adopting an approach that values diversity in ECEC, without going into the details



of disability and its different forms, including intellectual disabilities. In Greece, continuing professional development is mandatory only for core practitioners who work with children over 3 years old (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2019). Specifically, the Institute for Educational Policy (IEP), offers massive open online courses- MOOCs through an e-learning platform under the co-founded act titled “Universal design and development of accessible digital educational material”. The platform at the moment offers thirteen courses all regarding inclusive education. In Poland, education staff are legally obliged to continuously learn and improve their knowledge and skills in accordance with the needs of the facility they work in. In addition to the formal training offered on different levels, the system includes internal training and methodological counselling conducted by the ECEC facilities, as well as internal training whose purpose is to include the whole teaching council in the learning process encompassing the areas and issues that are important for the nursery school. Moreover, regarding the requirements in Cyprus, the individuals that wish to work with children, either with or without intellectual disabilities, must complete a three-year degree in childhood education. However, if these practitioners wish to specialise in a specific field in childhood education, they must follow the appropriate master’s degree. For example, if an individual wants to work with children with intellectual disabilities, they must complete a degree that offers this specialisation. However, other than the bachelor’s and master’s degree, practitioners have the free will to proceed or not proceed with subsequent seminars or courses.

3.1.3. Strategies and actions that ECEC settings can take to increase the engagement of children, parents, staff and the whole communities in inclusive processes

The engagement of children, parents, staff and the whole communities in the inclusive processes of children with disabilities is a process that is well developed in Belgium and Poland. In Belgium, the work with families and communities is also part of the overarching vision in Belgium for both Flanders and Wallonia as a key tool for inclusion, in line with international standards. In Wallonia, childcare facilities must develop pedagogical projects that comply with the Quality Code for Childcare. Three brochures address professionals and explain the content of the Quality Code



based on three approaches: "Meeting families", "Meeting children" and "Supporting the work of professionals" (ONE & FEDERATION WALLONIE - BRUXELLES, 2009). Elements such as developing partnership and trust with parents, inclusion, partnership, and work with the community are part of these. The ONE Continuing Education programme proposes the "Mirror workshop" about fostering reflection and the building of a family wall as a tool for inclusion and work with families (ONE, 2021, p. 72).

In Poland, the integration and inclusion of both typically developing and disabled children's parents in the nursery schools' life is essential for inclusion to be successful. The theatre technique may be a valuable addition to widely used methods of working with parents. 'Performances' which use improvisation in an outlined situation where parents are actors can be helpful. Another valid technique is a discussion method called 'metaplan'. In order to involve the local community, it is crucial to reach beyond the nursery school's walls, to participate in the community's life, to spread the nursery schools' successes, accomplishments and cares in the forms of festivals, exhibitions, parades. To cooperate with cultural centres, libraries and other institutions. It is important to exchange experiences and use the experience of others.

In Cyprus, practice offered to help ECEC educators gain knowledge about ECEC and children with intellectual disabilities, is the information provided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Youth. Similarly, in Greece, special education policy supports the inclusion of students with disabilities within mainstream schools by providing the necessary supporting structures and services.

In N. Macedonia, there are no official strategies for involving children with intellectual disabilities, parents and community members in creating a culture of inclusion in ECEC settings. The Government undertakes, in cooperation with civil society and international organisations such as UNICEF, UNDP and USAID, activities and measures for improving the inclusion of vulnerable groups in the education system.



3.2. SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS FROM THE KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS WITH THE ECEC PROFESSIONALS

The key informant interviews explored the knowledge and skill gaps, as well training needs of ECEC staff regarding practices for ensuring inclusive ECEC of children with intellectual disabilities.

3.2.1. Opportunities for initial and continuous education on issues concerning inclusive ECEC of children with intellectual disabilities

The findings demonstrated that the majority of the interviewed ECEC professionals across the partner countries have completed an initial education or training programme that adequately prepared them to work with young children, while the professionals' experience with participation in continuous education or training programme varied. There were notable differences between the countries on the extent to which the following topics have been included in the participants' education and training: different forms of intellectual disabilities; the implication of the different forms of intellectual disabilities on the learning capacities of children; the overall philosophy and underlying values of inclusive early years education and the approaches for ensuring children with intellectual disabilities can participate in ECEC. In Greece, for example, more than half of the interviewees had followed continuous training in special education, while none of the interviewees in Macedonia had done so. In Belgium, the interviewees elaborated that initial and continuous training focus more on the general values of inclusion, while the specific characteristics and needs linked with intellectual disabilities are not clearly mainstreamed. This is partly due to a vision where disability is seen as one of the many possible diversities of the children. Similarly, in Cyprus most of the participants shared these aspects related to inclusive education that have been covered within their initial education (bachelor's degrees), but with no specific emphasis on intellectual disabilities. In Poland, participants explained that even though inclusive education and intellectual disabilities related issues have been included in their formal education, their practical experience in applying the specific methods in working with children has been crucial in their learning path.



3.2.2. Experience in working with children with diverse intellectual disabilities

The majority of the interview participants were either currently working with or had past experiences of working with children with diverse intellectual disabilities, although comparative differences existed. For instance, all of the participants from Poland and N. Macedonia had such an experience, as opposed to more than half of the participants in Greece, and less than half of the participants in Cyprus. Those experienced in working with children with intellectual disabilities shared a number of challenges they have encountered, as well as the diversity of skills and competences essential for successfully supporting the children's overall development and wellbeing.

“All people working in education, including inclusive education, face a very challenging task. Many people have to leave their comfort zone... The process, certainly, takes careful observation, modification of the assumed goals and being open to the challenges that appear along the way.”

(ECEC professional from Poland)

“An educator must have patience, love, consciousness and knowledge about any type of disability to be able to work with these children.”

(ECEC professional from Cyprus)

3.2.3. Perceived knowledge on working with children with intellectual disabilities

Differences among the partner countries were also identified regarding ECEC professionals' perceived knowledge on working with children with intellectual disabilities. Although acknowledging that there is always room for improvement, in Cyprus all of the interview participants considered their knowledge on working with children with intellectual disabilities sufficient. Comparatively, four out of eight (4/8) participants in Poland, eight out of eleven (8/11) participants in Greece, and six out of seven (6/7) participants in N. Macedonia considered their



knowledge on working with children with intellectual disabilities insufficient. In Belgium, the interviewed participants shared a view that both in Flanders and Wallonia ECEC staff are prepared to deal with a great diversity of children, including with children with intellectual disabilities.

ECEC staff's perceived lack of knowledge, capacities and skills, coupled with the lack of support from other professionals, had a negative impact on their confidence in working with children with intellectual disabilities. This was especially apparent in the case of N. Macedonia, where interviewees shared that they are often concerned whether the approaches they apply are adequate.

"...We are lacking capacities and skills, so many times we are trying to figure out the approach on our own, and we are not sure if we are undertaking the right approach"
(ECEC professional from N. Macedonia)

3.2.4. Perceived needs for continuous education and training on issues concerning inclusive ECEC of children with intellectual disabilities

The interviewees consistently emphasised the need for more continuous education and training opportunities that will further advance their knowledge, skills and competences for working with children with intellectual disabilities.

"We need seminars of longer duration and frequency so that we feel adequate in dealing with cases of children with intellectual disabilities"
(ECEC professional from Greece)

"My experience so far...has shown that the increase of cases requires a serious and definitely appropriate organisation to perform to the maximum, through our participation in seminars and workshops to train to be effective with our students".
(ECEC professional from Greece)



“It would be ideal if we could obtain additional education on a variety of disabilities, in addition to learning various methods of how to approach these children.”

(ECEC professional from Cyprus)

“Yes [I do have sufficient knowledge and skills], but I constantly look for new solutions.”

(ECEC professional from Poland)

3.2.5. Perceived knowledge of strategies, approaches and practices for engaging children, parents, staff and the communities

Apart from the participants from Belgium, the vast majority of the participants from the partner countries were not familiar with any existing strategies, approaches and practices for collaboration of the ECEC settings with parents and community members. Although such strategies at enhancing the collaboration between typically developing children and children with intellectual disabilities or support of ECEC staff in fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities were considered of primary importance.

Nevertheless, several of the participants brought up the following examples on approaches which the ECEC settings can capitalise on in engaging parents, the wider community and peers with typical development in the inclusive processes of children with intellectual disabilities respectively:

“Regular communication with parents in a context that makes them feel safe and accepted, organisation of actions that include them (e.g., workshops, educational excursions, etc).”

(ECEC professional from Greece)

“Promoting collaboration in the classroom, enhancing self-esteem, organisation of group activities and appropriate layout of the space and handling of materials.”

(ECEC professional from Greece)



“The teacher has a vital role in helping typically-developed children integrate children with intellectual disabilities into their classroom. The teachers should act as role-models or archetypes in the ‘small communion’ of a classroom, and implement methods similar to differentiated teaching.”

(ECEC professional from Cyprus)

The participants from Belgium, shared that in Flanders ECEC professionals try to encourage children to identify and address differences and similarities as an element to foster the collaboration between typically developing children and children with intellectual disabilities. In terms of practices, the 'Family Wall', was mentioned, a physical space where each family is represented, usually by pictures brought by the family itself. Relevant guidance and resources, such as “Benchmarks for quality childcare for quality childcare practices” and ‘Meeting families’ (mentioned in section XX) were also utilised in practice in working, inter alia, with families before welcoming children in the everyday, in adapting spaces, ensuring the child has an active role to child and individualising the approaches to support peer interactions. Regarding programs, practices and methodologies aiming at enhancing the collaborations of ECEC settings with community members in fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities, the participant from Flanders stressed that there are packages or tips for neighbourhood-oriented working. For example the ‘Koala projects’, which are community-oriented and facilitate for parents to meet and support each other.



4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Key policy recommendations for governments, civil society organisations, donors and other interested parties on improving the quality of early childhood education and care and promoting the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities.

- ✓ Provision of educational seminars focusing on a variety of intellectual disabilities such as autism, Down's syndrome, fragile X syndrome, Williams syndrome, Foetal alcohol syndrome, autism spectrum disorder.
- ✓ Reflection and action around quality, which includes higher training requirements for staff, and practices about working with families and communities.
- ✓ Continuous education and professional development for the ECEC staff and further strengthening of the capacities with the provision of more incentives for engagement.
- ✓ Implementing parent-teacher conferences during ECEC to ensure that teachers are updated with the child's needs and the parents are informed about the child's progress.
- ✓ Promotion of inclusive ECEC and dissemination of integrational education programmes.
- ✓ Foster the exchange of good practices of inclusion between different ECEC establishments at local, national and international level.
- ✓ Create platforms for teachers and parents collecting, tips, resources and tools for the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in ECEC.



- ✓ Strengthen the availability and training in educating students with special needs, by eliminating any pedagogical barriers between special needs education and mainstream education.
- ✓ Provision of educational courses that inform about evidence-based techniques a teacher can utilise to assist a child with ID in class.
- ✓ Implement parent-teacher conferences during ECEC to ensure that the teachers are updated with the child's needs and the parents are informed about the child's progress.
- ✓ It is necessary to establish clear laws that are possible to follow, while taking into account the cost of all required measures and granting the funds necessary for their implementation.
- ✓ The potential of existing institutions and non-government organizations needs to be employed by creating and implementing the model of their cooperation and collaboration, focused on the benefit of the disabled child and their family. In other words, help, support, education and therapy should constitute a comprehensive set of actions.
- ✓ 'Mini-Max' strategy in the work of politicians and decision makers - minimum words, maximum results.
- ✓ The actions should be long-term and constant. Short-term assessment will form the basis for making corrections and improvements to the programme and its results will be evaluated on the basis of long-term (e.g., after 5 years) assessments.



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6. ANNEXES

CYPRUS

All 7 individuals responded to all the questions that they were able to fulfil and provided insightful information, as to how the completed educational programs have prepared them for their career in ECEC settings.

1. Have you completed <an initial education or training programme> that prepared you to work with young children?

- All of the 7 participants responded that they have completed a training program for working with children.

If yes, please elaborate more on the type of initial education or training programme you have completed.

- One participant stated she completed her bachelor's degree in early childhood education and her master's degree in Educational Technology.
- Two participants have received their degree from their university's department of Primary Education.
- Two participants have graduated with a degree in Early Childhood Education.
- One participant received her bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education and proceeded to complete her master's degree in Special & Inclusive Education.
- One participant received her bachelor's degree in Pre-Primary Education.

If no, please elaborate more on the type of initial education or training programme you think it is/it was missing in order to prepare you to work with young children.



Despite the fact that all the participants did receive an adequate level of education for working with preschool children, a few of them provided additional responses as to what type of training was absent, to prepare them for this position:

- Two participants stated that educational programs should offer practical work.
- One of them explained that universities should include more diverse types of bachelor's programs for early childhood education, in addition to having the opportunity to attend educational seminars.
- One individual expressed that it would be ideal if universities would provide a program that would elaborate on any form of disability.

2. Have you completed any <continuous education or training programme> that prepared you to work with young children?

If yes, please elaborate more on the type of continuous education or training programme you have completed.

- One participant shared that they have participated in a seminar that was offered by the University of Cyprus, in relation to how dramatic play and play in general can affect children in preschool.
- One individual shared that they participated in a series of seminars provided by ANAD.
- Two participants followed a master's degree, in which one of them completed a master's in Educational Technology, whilst the other followed a Special and Inclusion Education degree.

If no, please elaborate more on the type of continuous education or training programme you think it is/it was missing in order to prepare you to work with young children.

- Three participants responded no to this question.



3. If you have answered yes on the first and/or the second question, can you elaborate more on the extent to which the following topics have been included your initial and/or continuous education and training:

- the overall philosophy and underlying values of inclusive early years education;
 - the different forms of intellectual disabilities (such as autism, Down's syndrome, fragile X syndrome, Williams syndrome, Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder);
 - the implication of the different forms of intellectual disabilities on the learning capacities of children;
 - the approaches for ensuring children with intellectual disabilities can participate in ECEC.
- The plurality of the participants responded that during their time in the university they covered a related course at some point, but not with a specific emphasis on a disability. One participant shared that the university offered various courses for developmental disabilities and she managed to complete one.
 - Two participants shared that the university did not provide any related course for developmental disabilities or for children with special needs.

4. Do you work/have you worked with children with intellectual disabilities (such as autism, Down's syndrome, fragile X syndrome, Williams syndrome, Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder)?

- When asked this question, only three of the individuals involved responded that they have worked with children that were diagnosed with an intellectual disability.
- Hence, the majority of the interviewees (4 individuals), reported that they have never collaborated with these children yet.

If yes, please briefly elaborate on your experience.

- Initially, one participant shared that she collaborated with a 4-year-old child that hadn't been diagnosed yet or hadn't received the correct diagnosis. She stated that following



his symptomatology, including difficulty to speak and avoiding socialisation with his peers, the child could have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

- Another participant shared that she had collaborated with two children with ASD. She added that one of them was a male that that tended to isolate and presented limited perception of understanding, whilst the other child did depict perception of understanding, but also desired to be isolated and avoided eye-contact.
- Another individual shared that she collaborated with a male child that had an intellectual disability. She elaborated that the child required to be home-studied and reinforcement of his weaknesses in the cognitive and learning component.

5. Do you think that you have sufficient knowledge and skills to work with children with intellectual disabilities?

- All the participants expressed that they have sufficient knowledge and skills to work with children with intellectual disabilities, but did proceed to explain a few of their concerns.

If no, please briefly elaborate on the knowledge, skills and competence you think you need to help you feel better prepared to work with children with intellectual disabilities?

- One participant added that an educator must have patience, love, consciousness and knowledge about any type of disability to be able to work with these children.
- Two of the participants shared that practical experience and physical contact with these children could have helped.
- One participant shared that it would be ideal if they could obtain additional education on a variety of disabilities, in addition to learning various methods of how to approach these children.

6. Do you know any existing programs, practices and methodologies aiming at enhancing the collaboration between typically developing children and children with intellectual disabilities that foster a culture of inclusion?



- The plurality of the interviewees (6/7) responded that they do not know any methodologies for enhancing collaboration between typically-developed children and children with ID.
- One participant shared that she was familiar with such methods.

If yes, please elaborate more on how typically developing children can help their peers with intellectual disabilities feel safe and welcome at the setting, develop a sense of belonging and reach their full potential?

- One participant shared that the teacher has a vital role in helping typically-developed children integrate children with ID into their classroom. The teachers should act as role-models or archetypes in the “small communion” of a classroom, and implement methods similar to differentiated teaching.

7. Do you know any existing programs, practices and methodologies aiming at enhancing the collaborations of ECEC settings with parents (of both children with and without intellectual disabilities) in fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities?

- All the participants responded “No”.

If yes, please elaborate more on how the parents can be involved in ensuring the successful inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities.

- Even though all the participants responded “No”, one individual elaborated that it is crucial for the parent to be fully informed about their child’s condition and accept the circumstances as they are.

8. Do you know any existing programs, practices and methodologies aiming at enhancing the collaborations of ECEC settings with community members in fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities?

- Similarly, when asked all the interviewees responded “No”.



If yes, please elaborate more on how different individuals and local organisations/institutions can be involved in creating/supporting inclusive approaches in ECEC settings.

- Not applicable.

9. Do you know any effective approaches and solutions that support ECEC staff in fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities?

- Unfortunately, all the participants were not familiar with any approaches that have been implemented in the country, with the aim to support ECEC staff in fostering inclusion of children with ID

If yes, please elaborate more on how to facilitate an open discussion among ECEC staff within the workplace about challenges and solutions in relation to working with children with intellectual disabilities.

- However, one individual shared that in order to initiate open discussions about similar topics, the staff of an organisation must be highly educated in such matters, in order to be able to exchange practices and evidently provide the most adequate level of teaching to both typically-developed children, but also to children with ID.

10. Additional Comments:

- All the interviewees responded “No” and shared that it was a pleasure to help.

BELGIUM

During the interview it was it was underlined that the traditional approach to education and ECEC is rather segregating and decentralised, with different levels of quality and inclusion in different areas and establishments. The ratification of the UNCRPD did impulse action, policies and practices for quality and inclusion. At present, training requirements for ECEC staff are diverse, with efforts to increase quality, with attention to the inclusion element. However, initial teacher



trainings focus more on the general values of inclusion and not on disability as such, and same goes for the additional ones. This is seen as choice, to avoid a medical approach towards disability, which is seen as one of the many forms of diversity.

In Flanders, according to the respondents, there is teaching around the vision on inclusion. However, courses do not discuss the different forms of disabilities, nor the approaches. From the respondents' perspective, focusing too much on the various disabilities, risks to divert the attention from the individuality of each child. In practice, ECEC professionals keep track of the development of each child, and address problems when necessary. It was estimated that ECEC professionals in Flanders are prepared to deal with a great diversity of children and families, and that no other skills are needed than those needed to work with typically developing children. The increasing number of professionals with a bachelor's degree is seen as positive as they might have more advanced communication skills and be better at finding creative solutions.

In Flanders it was detailed that ECEC professionals try to encourage children to identify and address differences and similarities as an element to foster the collaboration between typically developing children and children with intellectual disabilities. In terms of practices, the 'Family Wall', was mentioned, a physical space where each family is represented, usually by pictures brought by the family itself. The building and using a family wall are also one of the trainings proposed by the ONE catalogue for continuous training.

In Wallonia, Inclusion is a cross-cutting principle for childcare, which is open to all, and that needs to ensure proper support, including medical with medical control for every child in ECEC settings. In terms of pedagogy, methodologies must be adapted to specific needs and diversity of each child. However, the diversity of profiles that can access the childcare profession makes it difficult to assess if initial trainings have inclusion and inclusion of children with disabilities in their curricula. Since inclusion of children with disabilities in ECEC and education is a political objective, ONE set up a task force for accessibility, in charge of reflecting about how to improve accessibility in ECEC. A reform of the management contracts (*contrat de gestion*) was mentioned, which sets



the requirements to be director of a nursery. At present, being director is possible for those who have a Bachelor's in social assistance of nursing. The reform is about developing a specific training path for early childhood, including modules about disabilities. The professionals that have a bachelor's degree in social assistance and nursing, do have modules about disabilities, and in the continuous training offers there is something specifically about disability, but not as a part of a compulsory programme. It was underlined that a multi-disciplinary approach with different professionals working together is a guarantee for detecting and addressing different needs.

Continuous training in Wallonia is foreseen and it is defined by each establishment in collaboration with staff, based on the ONE catalogue. Also, the above-mentioned series of tools "Benchmarks for quality childcare for quality childcare practices" provide guidance for childcare for 0 - 3 years children. *Meeting families* (ONE & FEDERATION WALLONIE – BRUXELLES, 2009) is about providing vision and tools to professionals to work with families before welcoming children in the everyday practice and preparing them to transition to kindergartens. *Meeting children* includes chapters on how to adapt spaces, how to give an active role to child, how to individualise the approaches and to support peer interactions (ONE & FEDERATION WALLONIE – BRUXELLES, 2004).

Concerning parents' involvement in the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities, the respondent from Flanders mentioned she and a colleague developed a tool to focus on the trust relationship with parents (getting to know all parents, parents as partners, parental participation, etc.), which was made available to all inclusion coaches and used to connect parents with each other.

On the question about programs, practices and methodologies aiming at enhancing the collaborations of ECEC settings with community members in fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities, the respondents from Flanders stressed that there are packages or tips for neighborhood-oriented working. For example, the 'Koala projects', which are community-oriented and facilitate for parents to meet and support each other.



GREECE

Regarding ECEC staff's perceived sufficient knowledge on working with children with intellectual disabilities, 72,7% answered "no".

Table 8. Analysis of frequency for ECEC staff perceptions on their sufficient knowledge

	Frequency	Valid Percent
yes	3	27,3
no	8	72,7
Total	11	100,0

Specifically, one participant said, *"We need seminars of longer duration and frequency so that we feel adequate in dealing with cases of children with intellectual disabilities"* (Kindergarten teacher with teaching duties, 53 years old, 6-10 years of service, BA degree). Five ECEC staff members (45,5%) replied that they do not know any existing programmes, practices, and methodologies aiming at enhancing the collaboration of ECEC settings with community members in fostering the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities (*Table 9*).

Table 9. Analysis of frequency for ECEC staff knowledge on any existing programmes, practices and methodologies aiming at enhancing the collaborations of ECEC settings with community members in fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities

	Frequency	Valid Percent
yes	6	54,5
no	5	45,5
Total	11	100,0

Specifically, one participant said, *“Promoting collaboration in the classroom, enhancing self-esteem, organisation of group activities and appropriate layout of the space and handling of materials”* (Kindergarten teacher, 46 years old, MA Pedagogical Teaching Methodology, experience 15 and over)

Accordingly, seven of the ECEC staff participants (63,6%) did not know of any existing programmes, practices and methodologies to enhance the collaboration of ECEC settings with parents (*Table 10*).

Table 10. Analysis of frequency for ECEC staff knowledge on any existing programmes, practices and methodologies aiming at enhancing the collaborations of ECEC settings with parents

	Frequency	Valid Percent
yes	4	36,4
no	7	63,6
Total	11	100,0

Specifically, one participant said, *“Regular communication with parents in a context that makes them feel safe and accepted, organisation of actions that include them (e.g., workshops, educational excursions, etc.), participation in workshops”* (Kindergarten teacher, 46 years old, MA Pedagogical Teaching Methodology, experience 15 and over).

Five of the ECEC staff participants (45,5%) did not know any existing programmes, practices and methodologies aiming to enhance ECEC settings’ collaborations with community members (*Table 11*).

Table 11. Analysis of frequency for ECEC staff knowledge on any existing programmes, practices and methodologies aiming at enhancing the collaboration with community members

	Frequency	Valid Percent
yes	6	54,5

no	5	45,5
Total	11	100,0

Totally seven $N = 7$) participants (63,6%) knew effective approaches and solutions that supported them in fostering the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities (Table 12).

Table 12. Analysis of frequency for ECEC staff knowledge on any effective approaches and solutions that support ECEC staff in fostering the inclusion of children with Intellectual Disabilities

	Frequency	Valid Percent
yes	7	63,6
no	4	36,4
Total	11	100,0

Regarding solutions for the support of the ECEC staff in fostering inclusion, one participant specifically said, *“Existence of support staff, training of ECEC staff and scientific guidance by the special education coordinators, a smaller number of students in each class, for special children’s cases have specialised support staff”* (Kindergarten teacher, 44 years old, MA Business Administration, 11-15 years of service). Another participant stated, *“There is no infrastructure and suitable staff at the station, as in Kindergartens”* (Nursery, teaching and administrative tasks, 56 years old, over 15 years of service, BA degree). All ECEC staff with a Bachelor’s degree thought they did not have sufficient knowledge and skills to work with children with intellectual disabilities (Table 13). This is in line with 2/3 of the ECEC staff having a Master’s degree.

Table 13. Crosstabulation of ECEC staff education and perceived knowledge regarding ID

Education	Frequency	Valid Percent
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Bachelor's or no equivalent	no	5	100,0
Master's or equivalent	yes	1	33,3
	no	2	66,7
	Total	3	100,0
PhD.	yes	2	66,7
	no	1	33,3
	Total	3	100,0

Interestingly, it was found that eight (8) out of total N = 11 participants thought they did not have sufficient knowledge and skills to work with children with intellectual disabilities (*Table 14*).

Table 14. Crosstabulation of ECEC staff experience and perceived knowledge regarding ID

Experience		Frequency	Valid Percent
2-5 years	yes	1	100,0
	no	1	100,0
11-15 years	yes	1	33,3
	no	2	66,7
	Total	3	100,0
Over 15 years	yes	1	16,7
	no	5	83,3
	Total	6	100,0

In the last part of the key interview, ECEC staff participants had the opportunity to make additional comments that they would like to share. Some of them were the following:

“The inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in pre-school education is currently at the discretion of kindergarten teachers. The theoretical and pedagogical framework as an



institutionalised educational practice and policy is almost non-existent". (Kindergarten teacher with teaching and administrative work, 53 years old, over 15 years of service, BA degree).

"My experience so far without having encountered difficult cases of children has shown that the increase of cases requires a serious and definitely appropriate organisation to perform to the maximum, through our participation in seminars and workshops to train to be effective with our students". (Kindergarten teacher with teaching work, 53 years old, 6-10 years of service, BA degree).

N. MACEDONIA

The pre-school institutions have a policy of accepting all children, regardless of their background. They have developed an Inclusive policy and a positive environment of acceptance which is the result of a long process of learning and change. All of the staff learned more about inclusive education through workshops and mentoring and some from their initial education on ECEC. All of them completed continuous education and training programmes that prepared them to work with young children.

All educators have children with intellectual disabilities in their class undergoing a genuine process of matching learning needs with teaching skills. Almost all of the correspondents except the Special educator stated that they lack skills and knowledge in working and dealing with children with intellectual disabilities. This is mostly because their completed continuous education didn't include topics such as: different forms of intellectual disabilities (Autism, Down's syndrome, fragile X syndrome, Williams syndrome, Fetal alcohol syndrome, autism spectrum disorder); the implication of the different forms of intellectual disabilities on the learning capacities of children; the overall philosophy and underlying values of inclusive early years education and the approaches for ensuring children with intellectual disabilities can participate in ECEC. These topics were included within their informal education such as workshops and courses but they were only included briefly and the correspondents shared their concern and willingness to increase their knowledge.



The educators stated that there is a delegation of tasks which are out of their competence, they pointed out the need for teaming up with relevant staff such as special educators, while the special educators deal with the overburden responsibilities towards the children with intellectual disabilities, because the number of staff is disproportional with the number of children with intellectual disabilities. The children with intellectual disabilities require more intense care and effort by the staff, as well as close and individual monitoring: “It’s not only to place the children with intellectual disabilities within the group, inclusion also means that the staff needs to be placed within the group together with the children with disabilities and the children with typical development, and we are lacking capacities and skills, so many times we are trying to figure out the approach on our own, and we are not sure if we are undertaking the right approach” – stated one informant.

One of the most challenging and yet very important connections in order to achieve early identification of intellectual disabilities and positive progress is the parents-staff relation. The staff ensures that they have a good relationship with parents and that they feel involved in the inclusive education efforts, but there is a barrier by the parents in providing the staff information about the disability, mostly because of stigma, which slows down the educational progress. The staff is open to reach out to them with information about inclusion, and to engage them in individual planning processes for their children, but yet the parents are lacking collaboration.

The general conclusion is that the process of inclusion on ECEC institutions is implemented officially and legislatively, but on spot the picture is different. Educators are facing problems of undertaking tasks which are out of their competence; they lack materials compatible for children with intellectual disabilities; they need team support by Psychologists and Special Educators, considering them to be more suitable to undertake the tasks related to children with disabilities; and yet the educators are acknowledging the fact that they lack skills regarding inclusion and they are very open to develop their skills, but at the same time they point out that there is a need for whole scale systematic approach in order to accommodate the children with intellectual disabilities in ECEC institutions and within the rest of the children with typical development.



POLAND

The objective, expository style is dominant in the answers. It points to “technization” of work. What is sought are tools of persuasion rather than child's development paths. Although, there are two answers that diverge from the rest: *'I'm a teacher who co-organizes the education process in an integrational nursery school. My tasks are: working with disabled children and adapting the teaching process to their needs'. '[...] Facilitating a child's development, creating a learning environment for children. Creating equal chances for each child. Facilitating the early child development – individualization of the process taking into consideration their developmental needs. Providing educational and psychological support.'*

The fact that only one respondent answered the third question of the second part of the survey signifies the narrowing of the search scope. The fact itself is as symptomatic as the answer: *'The aforementioned issues were discussed during my initial education (studies), but during my professional career I learned to use specific methods.'* It seems that the question was regarded as unimportant. It is also possible, however, that the scope of the issues it encompassed – four small paragraphs, could discourage the respondents from placing these issues within their education or courses.

All respondents have experience in working with disabled children. The following answers give an insight into working with such pupils: *'During early years of my professional career I worked with children with moderate or severe intellectual disability as well as with children who were profoundly mentally handicapped. The children had various disabilities: Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, genetic syndromes and others. The work entailed the appropriate use of specific methods, creativity and persistence in realising the educational goals.'* *'I conducted individual corrective gymnastics classes with autistic children. Working with such children takes extensive knowledge, commitment and great patience'*. The quote points to a crucial issue. Creativity, that is attention,



imagination and commitment, is equally important as the knowledge of appropriate work methods.

Only half of the respondents consider themselves prepared for working with intellectually disabled children. *'Yes (I do have sufficient knowledge and skills), but I constantly look for new solutions'*. Four negative answers suggest that the respondents are too critical towards themselves or do not feel extensively competent. It is reasonable to assume that specialised formal education (which covered issues of working with children with disabilities) did not equip them with tools necessary for realisation of this task.

The number of answers 'no' to questions six through nine is respectively: 50%, 62%, 75% and 75%. It signifies a low level of knowledge. Reflecting upon the results leads to a few conclusions. The idea of inclusive education and methods of working with disabled children are known to the staff of nursery schools. However, the knowledge is fragmentary and, most importantly, focused on the current work with such a pupil and its technicalities.

Lastly, the thing most basic. An answer of one of the respondents: *'All people working in education, including inclusive education, face a very challenging task. Many people have to leave their comfort zone and abandon their paths of organising children's education. The process, certainly, takes careful observation, modification of the assumed goals and being open to the challenges that appear along the way.'* It captures the essence of what has to be done to implement inclusive education and support the teaching staff. Otherwise, the process of professional burnout will significantly accelerate, and the feeling of being left alone along with the burden of additional duties will result in frustration. It will have a negative effect on everyone.

