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Comparative Analysis of the Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum of the European Union Member States

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Abstract: Early childhood education and care (ECEC) policies in the European Union increasingly emphasise inclusiveness and quality, recognising ECEC as a crucial foundation for children's development and lifelong learning. Although comparative research in this field has expanded, existing studies often provide only partial insights, focusing on a limited number of countries or isolated thematic aspects. As a result, a comprehensive, empirically grounded comparative analysis encompassing all EU Member States remains lacking. Addressing this gap, the present study conducts a systematic qualitative-comparative analysis of national ECEC documents and curricula across all 27 Member States of the European Union. The study aims to identify similarities and differences in key systemic dimensions of ECEC, including starting points, educational goals, guiding principles, and legal foundations. Methodologically, the research employs a qualitative-comparative approach, using deductive content coding of 27 national curricula. Thematic and conceptual analyses complement structural and content analyses to explore dominant educational orientations and their interrelationships with legal frameworks. The findings indicate that national ECEC documents can be grouped into three main categories: integrated curricula covering ages 0-6, separate curricula for ages 0-3 and 3-6, and curricula designed exclusively for children over three years of age. Across Member States, the most frequently identified foundational principles include a holistic approach to child development, the promotion of key competences, inclusiveness, sustainability, equality, democratic

values, partnership with families, and respect for diversity. Despite differences in legal status and national governance structures, EU recommendations consistently serve as a common normative reference for ECEC curricula. The study's conceptual contribution lies in its integrated analytical framework, demonstrating how curricular models, educational orientations, and legal foundations mutually shape one another rather than functioning as isolated dimensions. Empirically, the findings provide new insights into the Europeanisation of ECEC policies. Practically, the results offer valuable guidance for policymakers and curriculum developers seeking to strengthen the coherence, quality, and sustainability of early childhood education and care systems across Europe.

Keywords: curriculum, European Union, early childhood education and care, national documents.

Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a cornerstone of educational equity and a powerful driver of social justice. It reduces poverty and social exclusion while strengthening the bonds that bind communities together. Investing in high-quality ECEC is the first step towards ensuring a fairer, more competitive, more cohesive and inclusive Europe. The legislation obliges the European Union (EU) to ensure that every child, regardless of their background, has access to affordable and high-quality ECEC. This commitment is an essential part of the European Education Area, which aims to provide more opportunities for all children.

According to the classification of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), ECEC is classified as "ISCED 0" in the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). Programmes at ISCED level 0, or early childhood education, usually adopt a holistic approach to supporting the early cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development of children. ISCED level 0 refers to early childhood programmes that have an intentional educational component. These programmes aim to develop socio-emotional skills and the skills needed for academic readiness and preparation of children for entry into primary education (UNESCO, 2012). ISCED level 0 programmes are aimed at children below the age of entry to ISCED level 1 (primary compulsory education), and are therefore divided into two categories. The first category offers educational content for younger children (up to 2 years of age), while the second is for children from 3 years of age through the beginning of primary education. The duration of the ISCED 0 programme and the coverage of children vary in the EU Member States. Not all Member States have equal access and foreseeable duration to ECEC, and each Member State determines them independently. Compulsory ECEC, what is most commonly implied by that is the year before starting primary school, or the year at the transition to primary education. To obtain an overview of the quality of ECEC in the Member States, the European Commission has asked the Eurydice network to process and review annual data. The annual data reflect the structural characteristics of education systems and certain fundamental aspects that define the quality of ECEC (Motiejunaite, 2021). The report „Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe – 2025“ provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of ECEC in Europe (Eurydice, 2025). Guevara (2022) points out in a comparative study that, in ECEC and research, the state is often assumed to be the natural unit of analysis, and the state's internal complexity can condition multi-level relationships within the state itself, which shape ECEC curricula. The curriculum is not only found as a normative document but also as a dynamic system of meaning realised through the relationships among regulations, institutions and practices. Ooms et al. (2025) indicate the degree of integration of ECEC, the pedagogical continuities and implementation of curricular policies, considering that the integration of ECEC as a system should be a continuum, connectivity and not a binary division (Norway and Finland as integrated systems, and Flanders and the Netherlands as almost dividing systems).

According to Niu et al. (2024), conducting comparative research during educational reforms is important because it offers deeper and more specific insights into the educational systems of individual countries. Gunnestad et al. (2022) state that values represent what people perceive as good or bad, right or wrong. Among various definitions of general values, principles, core beliefs, and behavioural guidelines, the clarity and simplicity of their definition is particularly notable. Erbay et al. (2021) compared the ECEC curricula of five countries and concluded that all the curricula covered strive for the holistic development of the child while differing in values. Comparative analysis provides an insight into the scientific understanding of the structure of national documents – curricula through their approaches and transnational harmonisation, as well as specifics in the field of ECEC. The benefits of this analysis contribute to the development and awareness of fairer, more inclusive, and more equal ECEC, and, in the long run, encourage social justice and support the development of children's lifelong competencies.

Research Problem

ECEC systems in EU Member States are undergoing significant changes and harmonisation. Recent recommendations (Eurydice, 2025) redefine the quality and inclusiveness of early childhood and preschool education. Comparative analysis of the provides insight into how National Documents – Curricula respond to these challenges and how they are aligned with contemporary EU educational goals. The differences in the legal foundations, curricula, terminology, and the degree of educational integration are significant. Significance in differentiation is given to the specifics of the Member States themselves and to their nurturing. Still, in the pursuit of equal opportunities for all children, it is necessary to continue comparative research to achieve strategic goals.

Research Focus

The research focus of this paper conceptualises how EU Member States apply the basic principles of ECEC. Comparative analysis of the early childhood education and care curricula of the European Union Member States reveals patterns of the approach to integrated curricula (0 – 6). It points to the terminological and structural diversity and to the way EU recommendations are implemented at national levels, as well as to the pace of change and the harmonisation of curricula.

Research Aim and Research Questions

This research aims to determine the basic frameworks and settings on which the ECEC curricula of the 27 EU Member States are based. The focus is on research and comparison of key principles, goals, starting points, legal foundations, and curriculum types. The formulated objectives address the research question.

The objectives of this paper are:

- to determine the basic assumptions, structure and legal foundations of the curricula of the EU Member States and compare them with each other,
- to consider the differences and similarities in the national documents of the EU Member States that regulate ECEC.

Specific research objectives are:

- to analyse the specifics and differences in the curricula of the EU member states,
- to classify the concepts and types of curricula,
- to identify the most common values and principles,
- Thus, to contribute to the scientific understanding of comparative pedagogy by providing an empirical basis for further research in this field.

Literature Review

The EU Member States and EU institutions are considering, defining, constantly analysing and offering improvements to the system and documents that determine, direct and upgrade ECEC. The ECEC curricula of the EU Member States differ in certain aspects and systemic approaches, and this is analysed and presented in the paper through the starting points, goals, principles, and legal foundations of the curricula. The analysis is based on European Union documents such as "Early Childhood and curricula in Europe 2023" (Eurydice, 2023) and "System level indicators for monitoring education and training systems in Europe 2025" (Eurydice, 2025). Among the most important documents analysed is the "Framework for Early and Preschool Curricula of the EU Member States" (OECD, 2024). It harmonises the EU's objectives and policies in the field of ECEC. Namely, it offers guidelines and visions for creating educational systems that encourage the achievement of common goals: holistic development of children and preparation for lifelong learning. The approach is aligned with EU policies that foster the well-being and holistic development of the child (European Commission, 2021). The document "Learning Compass 2030" (OECD, 2017), on the other hand, emphasises the need to develop basic competencies such as literacy, numerical and digital skills, and socio-emotional competencies.

One of the most important EU documents, which for serves as the basis for curricular reforms across Member States, defines eight key competences for lifelong learning from an early age (European Commission, 2018). The OECD reflects on the importance of adapting educational systems to children, i.e., their needs, but also encourages open and flexible curricula that follow EU policies, as well as the individual needs of ECEC and children of member states. Early childhood education policies today increasingly focus on inclusiveness and quality, with ECEC being recognised as a key factor for the development of a child's abilities and lifelong learning. Despite political consensus on the importance of ECEC, many countries still face problems of unequal access, insufficient quality, and inaccessibility (UNESCO, 2021). Curricula are at the heart of the Council Recommendation for High-Quality ECEC Systems (European Commission, 2019) because they define children's experience and directly impact the interaction among children, families, and educators (i.e., ECEC experts). Curricula should follow children's interests, be more inclusive, and nurture each child's well-being. Curricula, i.e., documents, must ensure a balance between the physical, social, emotional, cognitive and motor growth and development of children. Curricula are socio-epistemological spaces in which different forms of knowledge have different functions (Campbell-Barr, 2025).

Furthermore, early childhood curricula are composed of what is considered important for children's development and learning at the national level. They are influenced by international policy developments, as reflected in EU guidelines and recommendations (Brogaard-Clausen et al., 2022). The ECEC curriculum sets out the core features of early learning, but it requires several considerations, including defining the curriculum and identifying its components (Murray, 2022). The curricula reflect the values and assumptions, goals and intentions of ECEC in the national environment (Kuusisto et al., 2021). Vujčić (2021), on the other hand, refers to humanistically oriented research on the creation and application of curricula, in which analysis, discussion, and proposals regarding theoretical foundations and principles are addressed.

Likewise, ECEC curricula should strive for a holistic approach and appropriateness for all children and families (Eurydice, 2023). It is the curriculum that aims to consolidate the right to equal-quality education across the Member States. For these reasons, the EU pays great attention to ECEC's education policy. Education policy has been recognised as the basis for improved competencies of future EU citizens (European Commission, 2014). Key competencies serve as reference points to ensure that children reach their full potential. They are essential for personal fulfilment, healthy and sustainable lifestyles, active citizenship and inclusion (European Commission, 2018). In efforts to introduce a common quality framework for ECEC in Europe, which is often viewed through unique cultural, historical, and economic-

political specificities, Europe is also recognised in the field of ECEC (Kascak and Koch, 2022). Judijanto, Mustopa and Suryadi (2024) argue that curriculum reform changes at the national level are driven by the desire to improve the quality of education and to reflect local values, needs and goals. A dynamic and flexible curriculum fosters the development of responsible citizens who are aware of their rights and obligations. Reports such as "Structural indicators for monitoring educational systems in the EU" (Eurydice, 2023) and "Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe" (Eurydice, 2025) provide insight into the development and implementation of ECEC curricula in the EU and, of course, in the Member States. The document published by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency, "Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe" (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2025), provides insight into countries' approaches to children's education. It offers guidance for the development of ECEC education policies. ECEC is recognised and defined as a key factor in child development and the basis for quality lifelong learning and personal development, with positive effects on general well-being. The report points out that the curriculum, along with other educational guidelines, is a tool for ensuring high standards and uniformity of access to education. The report, which covers all EU countries (38) and not just the member states (27) covered in this paper, is based on national curricula and educational guidelines, legal regulations, obligations, and the age groups and populations covered from birth to entry into primary compulsory education. At the same time, it also records ongoing changes (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2025).

Materials and Methods

The research approach is qualitative and employs a comparative document analysis methodology. This approach is particularly suitable for examining education systems in multiple contexts and allows the identification of structural similarities and differences. A comparative analysis in this research will identify differences among the national curricula of the 27 EU countries. It covers documents, i.e., national curricula available on the Eurydice website, as well as secondary sources such as reports and/or frameworks published by the European Commission, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. The selection criteria include national ECEC documents covering children aged 0 to 6 years, regardless of the document's formal title (curriculum, framework, guidelines, programme). The methodological framework provides a comparative overview of how EU Member States conceptualise, implement and develop their ECEC systems, reflecting common priorities as well as local specificities (European Commission, 2011). This analysis contributes to a broader discourse on educational equity and transnational policy coordination in ECEC, as well as to the analysis of other very important components of the curriculum, such as values and key competences for lifelong learning.

Sample and Participants

The sample research includes the curricula of the 27 EU Member States, one document for each country, containing key elements: values, legislative framework, and goals. Representative samples of national ECEC documents are available in official sources. The sample was deliberately selected (purposive sampling) to consider only EU Member States, enabling a comparative analysis within a single European educational context.

Instrument and Procedure

The analysis was carried out through a comparison and a matrix developed according to the criteria defined by the research and the curriculum's form. The analysis process consists of four phases: document collection, deductive coding, descriptive statistics, frequency analysis and data presentation through tables and graphs. The methodological framework enables an in-depth, systematic, and comparable analysis of the basic settings of the ECEC curriculum across EU Member States.

Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to identify patterns and trends in ECEC curricula of EU Member States.

The deductive coding method was used to classify and compare documents according to the following categories: type of curriculum (integrated, separate curricula for groups from 0-3 and 3-6-year-olds or for children aged 3+), curriculum foundations, principles and objectives, legal basis (constitution, law, regulation), use of different terminology in the title of documents (presence or absence of the term curriculum), and year of adoption of documents. Deductive coding was chosen because the research systematically compares how pre-defined theoretical and normatively defined educational determinants appear in national ECEC curricula. In this context, comparative research on ECEC curricula does not aim to identify new categories, but to analyse predefined determinants of documents. The deductive approach enabled the application of a common analytical framework, thus achieving greater comparability and methodological transparency, which would not be possible with inductive coding (Havu-Nuutinen et al., 2022). Deductive coding, as an appropriate approach in theoretically oriented research with predefined analytical categories, enables consistent and comparable analysis (Szabó et al., 2025). Documents and educational guidelines are based on European strategic documents, thereby enabling transparency and reliability in coding the categories listed in the paper. Using deductive coding, documents are grouped into thematic categories that reflect standard guidelines and national specificities.

Descriptive statistics were used to assess the distribution and prominence of curriculum components and the frequency and distribution of individual variables. The results for the analysed variables are presented as percentages and frequencies in graphs and tables.

Visual representations (graphs and tables) were used to quantify differences and similarities between Member States.

Results

Classification and duration of ECEC

Table 1 presents data on the duration of ECEC from birth, compulsory preschool, the age range covered by compulsory preschool, and the age of enrolment in compulsory primary education for EU Member States.

Table 1

Duration of ECEC, preschool obligation, age of compulsory preschool coverage and age of entry into primary education of EU Member States (Eurydice, 2025)

	EU MEMBER COUNTRY	DURATION OF ECEC (from birth)	MANDATORY PRESCHOOL	AGE INCLUDES COMPULSORY PRESCHOOL	AGE OF ENTRY INTO COMPULSORY PRIMARY EDUCATION
1.	Austria	5 years	Yes	5 years	5 years
2.	Belgium	7 years	Yes	5 years	6 years
3.	Bulgaria	6 years	Yes	4 years	7 years

4.	Cyprus	6 years	Yes	4-5 years	6 years
5.	Czech Republic	6 years	Yes	5 years	6 years
6.	Denmark	6 years	No	N/A	6 years
7.	Estonia	6 years	No	7 years	7 years
8.	Finland	6 years	Yes	6 years	7 years
9.	France	6 years	Yes	3 years	6 years
10.	Greece	6 years	Yes	4 years	6 years
11.	Croatia	6 years	Yes	6 years	7 years
12.	Ireland	6 years	No	6 years	6 years
13.	Italy	6 years	No	N/A	6 years
14.	Latvia	6 years	Yes	5 years	7 years
15.	Lithuania	6 years	Yes	5 years	7 years
16.	Luxembourg	5 years	Yes	4 years	6 years
17.	Hungary	6 years	Yes	3 years	6 years
18.	Malta	5 years	No	5 years	5 years
19.	Netherlands	5 years	No	N/A	6 years
20.	Germany	5 years	No	N/A	6 years
21.	Poland	6 years	Yes	6 years	7 years
22.	Portugal	6 years	No	N/A	6 years
23.	Romania	6 years	Yes	4 years	6 years
24.	Slovakia	6 years	Yes	5 years	6 years
25.	Slovenia	6 years	No	5 years	6 years
26.	Spain	6 years	No	N/A	6 years
27.	Sweden	6 years	Yes	6 years	7 years

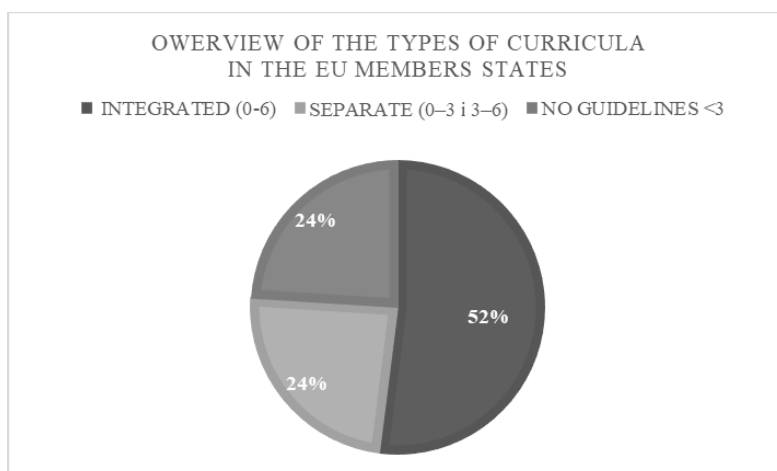
Source: author's development.

The heterogeneity of the ECEC system in terms of preschool obligations across EU Member States reflects the specifics of each Member State. Of the total number of EU Member States, 22% do not have a specified age for compulsory preschool coverage. As many as 26% of Member States do not have compulsory preschool, which may mean that the decision to attend preschool is left to families. In 19% of EU Member States, children start compulsory preschool at the age of 5. 15% of Member States have 4-5-year coverage, while 11% of countries set 5-6 years of age as the compulsory threshold, indicating a more flexible approach to compulsory preschool. For 15% of Member States, mandatory ECEC starts at age 6, and for 11% of Member States, between ages 6 and 7.

Types of Curriculum in EU Member States

Figure 1

Overview of the types of curricula in the EU Member States



Source: author's development.

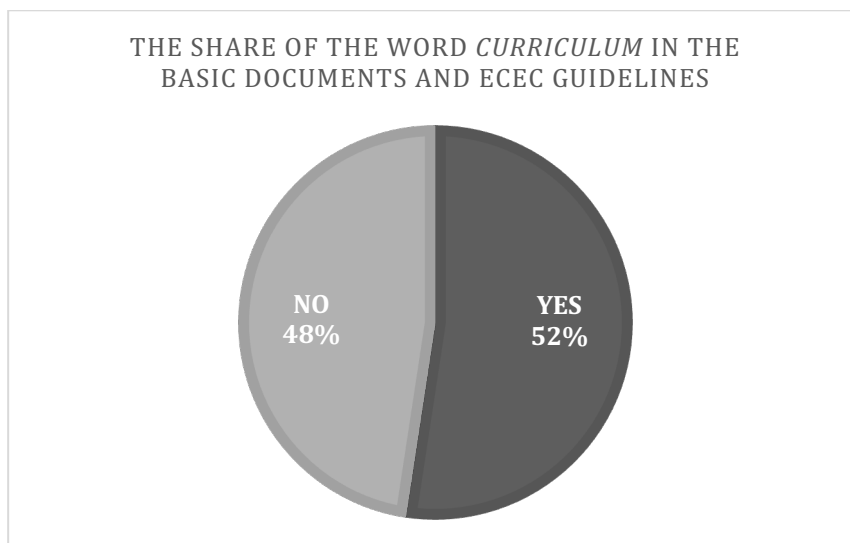
Curricula, i.e., educational guidelines for ECEC in the EU Member States, can be divided into three categories: integrated curricula, separate curricula (0-3 and 3-6 years of age), and curricula for children over 3 years of age. Based on the analysis of available reports (Eurydice, 2025), the countries with an integrated ECEC curriculum are Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, Spain, Croatia, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Austria, Romania, Slovenia, Finland, and Sweden (N=15). Member States with separate curricula (0-3 and 3-6 years of age) are Belgium (French and Flemish Communities), Hungary, Poland, France and Portugal (N=7). In contrast, the countries that do not have guidelines for ECEC of children under the age of three are Belgium (German community), Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Cyprus, the Netherlands, and Slovakia (N=7).

Basic assumptions of the ECEC curriculum in the EU member states

Educational guidelines can take the form of an educational programme, a skills reference framework, care and education plans, educational standards and criteria for the development of local curricula or practical guidelines for educators (Eurydice, 2025:116). In the analysis of the basic settings of the *ECEC curriculum* across EU Member States, the names of the documents for each Member State were identified to extract the frequency of the word "*curriculum*". The word *curriculum* is used in 52.4% of ECEC documents or frameworks in EU Member States, whereas it is absent from 47.6% of such documents or frameworks.

Figure 2

Presentation of the share of the word *curriculum* in the basic documents and ECEC guidelines of the EU Member States



Source: author's development.

The word *curriculum* appears in the most significant number of documents (n=8), indicating the prevalence of the curricular approach in structuring early childhood education and care. It is followed by the term *programme* (n=5), which is often used to describe the content and organisation of educational activities. The number of documents in which keywords appear in combinations, such as *the Framework Curriculum* and *the Curriculum Guidelines*, is also significant, which implies a tendency to integrate curricular content with normative and guideline documents. Such combinations testify to the effort to harmonise theoretical and practical frameworks in the planning of educational practice. Other keywords, including *Plan*, *Guidelines*, *Framework*, *Standards* and the category *Other*, appear in smaller numbers, suggesting terminological diversity and possible contextual specificity of education systems. The Member States whose basic documents have the word *curriculum* in their titles are Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Croatia, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden. The word *curriculum* is not used in the names of documents of countries such as Belgium (French, Flemish and German communities).

Table 2

Nomenclature of Documents and Years of Adoption for EU Member States

STATE	DOCUMENT NAME (ENGLISH)	DOCUMENT NAME (ORIGINAL LANGUAGE)	YEAR OF ADOPTION
Austria	Statewide Framework Curriculum for ECEC Services in Austria	BildungsRahmenPlan für elementare Bildungseinrichtungen in Österreich	2009
Belgium (FL, NJ, FR)	Quality Code for ECEC Centres / Activity Plan / Pedagogical Framework	Code de qualité / Activiteitenplan / Pedagogisch raamwerk	2007
Bulgaria	Law on Preschool and School Education	Закон за предучилищното и училищното образование	2016
Czech Republic	Framework Educational Programme for Pre-primary Education	Framework Educational Programme for Pre-school Education	2025

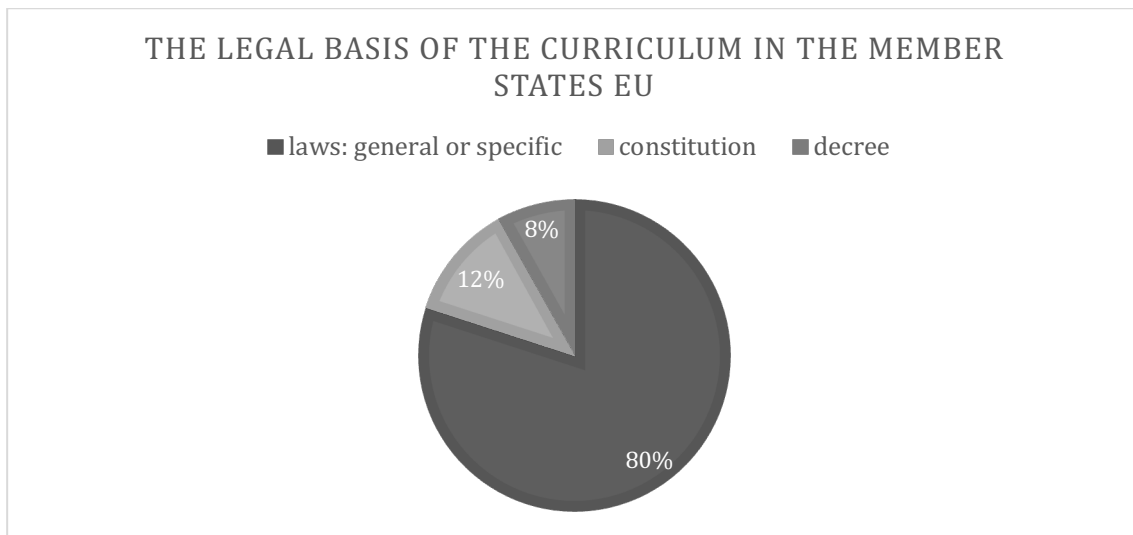
Cyprus	Preschool Education Curriculum	Αναλυτικό πρόγραμμα προσχολικής εκπαίδευσης	2019
Denmark	Executive Order on pedagogical objectives and content	Den styrkede pædagogiske læreplan Rammer og indhold	2021
Estonia	The national curriculum of preschool institutions	Koolieelse lasteasutuse riiklik õppekava	2008
Finland	National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education	Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman perusteet	2022
Greece	Educational Plan and Programme for Preschool Education	Πρόγραμμα σπουδών για την Προσχολική Εκπαίδευση	2023
Croatia	National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education	National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care	2015
Ireland	Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework	Aistear: Framework on Luath-Oideachais	2009
Italy	National guidelines for the curriculum of pre-primary education	Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo d'istruzione	2009 (update 2024)
Latvia	General Curriculum for pre-primary education	Ikimokyklinio ugdymo programų kriterijai aprašas	2022
Lithuania	Regulations and model pre-school education programmes	Noteikumi par valsts pirmsskolas izglītības vadlīnijām un programmu paraugiem	2023
Luxembourg	Plan for Preschool Education	Plan d'études pour l'éducation préscolaire	2018
Hungary	National Core Programme of Kindergarten Education	Óvodai nevelés országos alapprogramja	2012
Malta	A National Curriculum Framework for All	Il-Qafas tal-Kurrikulu Nazzjonali	2012
Netherlands	Core objectives for primary education	Kerndoelen primair onderwijs	2006
Germany	Common Framework of the Federal States for Early Education	Gemeinsamer Rahmen der Länder für die frühe Bildung in Kindertageseinrichtungen	2004
Poland	Core Curriculum for Preschool Education	The core curriculum of preschool education	2017
Portugal	Curricular Guidelines for Preschool Education	Orientações Curriculares para a Educação Pré-Escolar	2016 (update 2024)
Romania	Curriculum for early childhood education	Curriculum pentru educația timpurie	2019
Slovakia	Curriculum for the preschool	State Educational Programme for Pre-Primary Education in Kindergartens	2022 (update 2023)
Slovenia	Kindergarten Curriculum	Curriculum for kindergartens	(new) 2025
Spain	Organic Law on Education	Ley Orgánica de Educación	2020
Sweden	Curriculum for the pre-school	Läroplan för förskolan	2018

Source: author's development.

Legal bases

Figure 3

The legal basis of the curriculum in the Member States EU



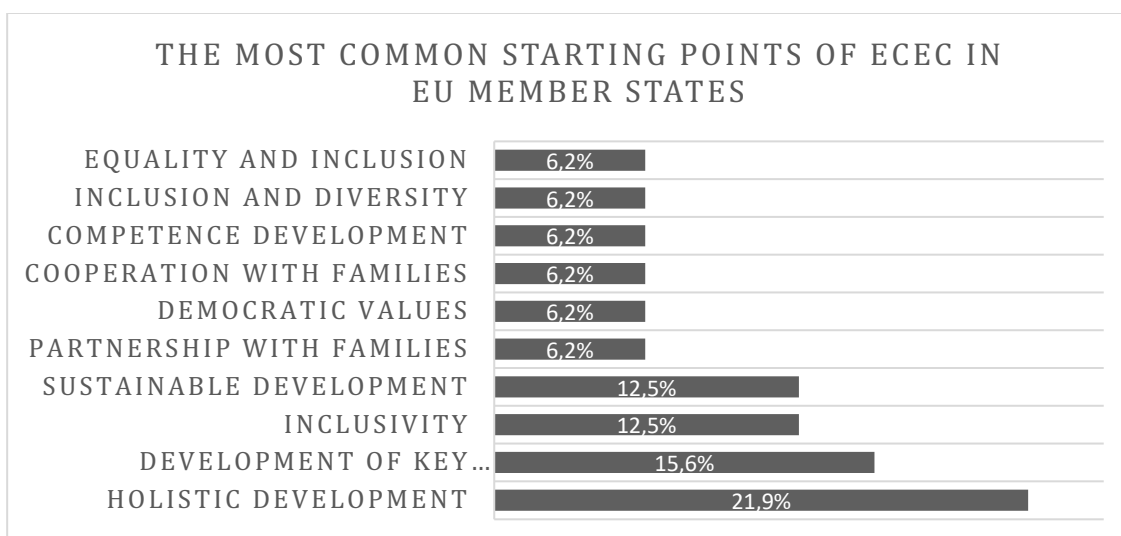
Source: author's development.

The legal basis of a document or *curriculum* varies by country. They can be divided into documents whose starting point is in the constitution, laws, and decrees. The laws differ from each other: there are Education Laws (Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, and Sweden), Pre-Primary and Primary Education Laws (Bulgaria), and a Pre-Primary, Primary, Secondary, and Vocational Education Act (Czech Republic). In Croatia, Slovenia, Germany, Finland and Estonia, there are Laws on Preschool Education. In Slovakia, ECEC is regulated by the Education Act, while in Denmark, this function is carried out by the Local Government Act. Constitutional laws are clearly stated in the Austrian and Italian documents, whereas decrees have defined the Belgian and Spanish *curricula*. It is essential to point out that the legal starting points in all Member States are found in EU and European Commission documents and the 2030 Agenda, as well as OECD and UNESCO documents and EU strategies, national general strategies, and specific strategies. In 80% of Member States, the legal basis of the *curriculum* is the laws, whether general or specific; in 12% of countries, it is the constitution; and in 8% of countries, the *curriculum* is determined by decree.

Starting points, principles and objectives of the curricula of the EU Member States

Figure 4

The most common starting points of ECEC in EU Member States.



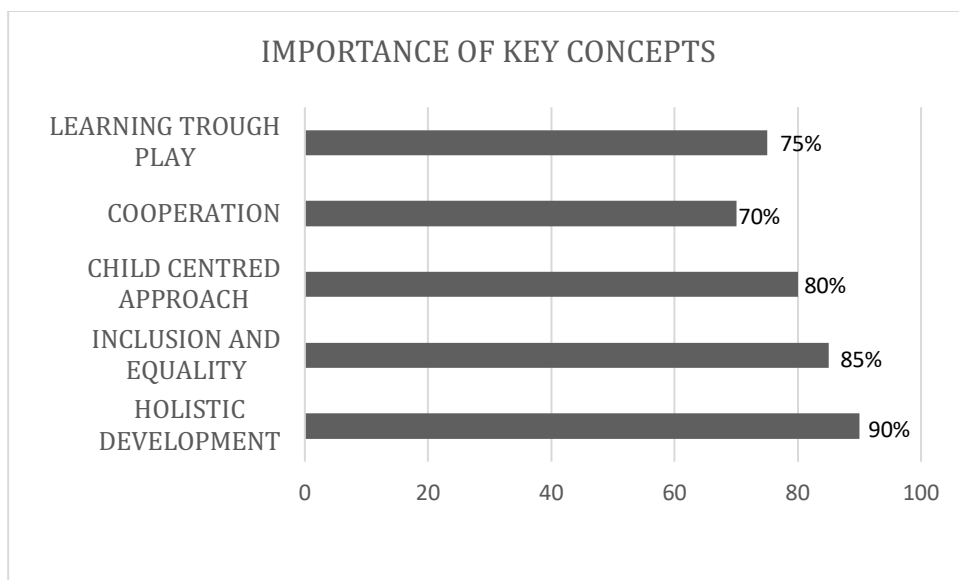
Source: author's development.

Figure 4 shows that holistic development (21.9%) has the highest importance among Member States, which view the child as a unique being. EU Member States recognise the development of key competencies (15.6%) as the second most crucial starting point. The focus is on providing basic knowledge and skills that children will use and develop throughout their lives, and on emphasising the importance of developing and encouraging critical thinking, problem-solving, and specific literacy skills. The concept of literacy in early childhood education and care encompasses several dimensions that contribute to the child's holistic development. Different forms of literacy are increasingly being integrated into early childhood education and care curricula across Europe, promoting inclusive, future-oriented education that prepares children for the demands of modern society and defines them by competencies. Inclusivity and sustainable development take third place at 12.5%, indicating a concern for ensuring equal opportunities for all children and promoting environmental awareness through responsible behaviour. Inclusion, diversity, competence development, cooperation and partnership with families, and the promotion of democratic values altogether account for 37.2% of the importance among the core starting points of the *curriculum*.

Principles and objectives of the curriculum

Figure 5

Importance of key concepts



Source: author's development.

Figure 5 presents the five most important aspects or goals: holistic development, inclusion and equality, child-centred approach, cooperation and learning through play-based. Based on these, the importance of different aspects of education in ECEC can be analysed. A whole 90% of the importance is attributed to holistic development, and it is positioned as the most crucial dimension or objective of ECEC. Inclusion and equality are second in importance (85%), indicating a growing recognition of the need to provide and ensure equal opportunities for all children. This percentage reflects global initiatives such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals or SDG 4 – Quality Education (UN, 2015). The representation of the child-centred approach, together with cooperation (families, society, stakeholders) and learning through play, ranges from 70% to 80%, indicating that the ECEC system in the EU Member States emphasises and encourages the holistic development of the child.

Discussion

The analysis of the data clearly shows a tendency to harmonise national curricula with EU policies and values, while maintaining the specifics of the member states (legislative and cultural). Based on the coverage analysis, we can group the coverage of mandatory preschool into: early, later and more flexible coverage by mandatory ECEC. A more flexible scope can be considered the one that enables access to primary compulsory education in ways that take into account the child, i.e., their needs and all aspects of their developmental characteristics. The obligation to attend preschool in the EU Member States for children aged 5 to 7 years reaches 56%, which can be interpreted as reflecting uniformity in the approach to the obligation to attend preschool. Such a uniform approach suggests alignment among EU Member States' priorities in ECEC. Deviation from the above may be related to the specificities of national strategies, programmes or adjustments within the national system. Among the fundamental values that can be linked to the uniform duration of ECEC are reducing social inequalities and providing equal opportunities for all children to develop basic skills for future schooling and lifelong learning. The duration of ECEC in the EU is a very important indicator of educational policies and social priorities.

The curricular reforms taking place in EU member states have an important goal: to enable equal access to ECEC for all children, promote the child's overall development, and guarantee a quality transition to primary education. The application of the integrated *curriculum* is likely to be prevalent in EU Member States in ECEC, which aims to emphasise the importance of the educational approach in early childhood. However, the differences in the systems of the EU Member States indicate the need for further reforms to ensure the equality and quality of ECEC. Recently, some Member States have implemented important reforms in ECEC systems, such as Portugal, which in March 2024 introduced new guidelines for the education of children up to three years of age to strengthen competences and equity in education. In 2024, Italy adopted an integrated approach that includes guidelines for different age groups, with the intention of alleviating inequalities in education in the first years of life (Eurydice, 2025).

In the analysis of the nomenclature of basic educational documents, keywords containing the word *curriculum* or derivatives, such as *curriculum framework*, are used. In contrast, individual documents are titled with words such as *program*, *plan*, *guidelines*, *standards*, *act*, or *regulation*. According to the authors of the Eurydice report, Educational guidelines are official documents intended for the management of ECEC service providers. They may include the main principles, values, goals for development and learning, or areas of learning, competencies, educational/pedagogical approaches, proposed activities, and evaluation methods. Such documents can be national curricular frameworks or criteria for developing local curricula. More than one ECEC document can be applied in a given country. Still, they all contribute to establishing a basic framework in which ECEC staff are asked (or advised where there are no mandatory conditions) to develop their own practices to meet the developmental needs of children (Eurydice, 2025). The analysis indicates the dominance of curricular discourse in document titles, with a range of terminological variations reflecting the heterogeneity of approaches and educational policies at the international level.

Countries that have the word *curriculum* in the name of the document link it to the words *national*, *basic*, *framework*, *guidelines*, *general* or *programme*. Often, the word *curriculum* does not appear in the itsdocument's original language, but only in the official English translation (Eurydice, 2025). According to the data, the reforms took place, i.e., the curricula were adopted, between 2004 and 2024, a full twenty-year period. A broad timeframe indicates differences in the implementation of educational reforms in the Member States. The year of adoption of the *curriculum* reflects the different approaches of the Member States and the dynamics of reforms in the EU Member States. Italy and Slovakia frequently update curricular documents. Italy adopted the original *curriculum* in 2009 and last updated it in 2024, and Slovakia supplemented its 2008 *curriculum* in 2023. Slovenia published its latest national *Curriculum for Kindergartens* in February 2025. Other EU countries are thoroughly and consistently updating and

upgrading their curricula to harmonise with educational policies and social changes, as well as to meet the needs of ECEC. The largest number of curricula was adopted after 2015, which can be interpreted as a growing awareness of the importance of ECEC at the national level. Examples are Finland and Latvia (2022), Greece (2023) and Portugal (2024), and the above confirms the need to adapt to modern challenges in ECEC. Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Denmark implemented curricular reforms not long ago (2018 and 2021). Central European countries such as Austria and Croatia adopted curricular reforms earlier (in 2009 and 2015 respectively), with or without incremental revisions, which may indicate differences in educational priorities or available resources.

The starting points of the basic document, regardless of the name in the EU Member States, are aligned with the recommendations of EU bodies and the needs of modern European society. Vekić-Kljajić (2020) analyses the structural and content determinants of the ECEC *curriculum*, referring to Anić (2007), who defines the structure as one that shows the way in which the whole is composed of components that do not lose their recognizability, while the content is the core, an integral part of a substance. "If the curriculum is discussed and it is to be presented in a picturesque way, the content would be the inner part that fills the structure. The content forms the core of any structure and gives it meaning and sense" (Vekić-Kljajić, 2020, p.27). In the substantive part of the analysis of the curricula of the EU Member States, there are starting points, principles and objectives.

The most common starting points of the curricula of the EU Member States are in accordance with EU documents and legislative documents of the countries themselves, with the recommendations of the European Commission (2019), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the European Quality Framework for ECEC (2019) as well as the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee (European Union, 2021). The recommendations address key aspects, including the *curriculum*. It is recommended to create curricula that will support and encourage the socio-emotional and cognitive development of children, and an inclusive and participatory educational environment. Member States are suggested to "in accordance with national and European legislation, national circumstances and resources, and in close cooperation with all stakeholders, to create a quality framework or equivalent document that will be an effective element for good ECEC governance" (European Commission, 2019, p.8). The recommendations aim to create an ECEC system that is equal for all children, provides equal opportunities, and contributes to the development of society, economic growth, and social cohesion in the EU. Regardless of the type of legislative document, it needs to be flexible, open and adaptable to needs. Bučević and Somolanji Tokić (2021) emphasize that when developing a modern legislative framework, it is important to avoid rigidity, lack of regulation, or ambiguity. According to the authors, this will be achieved by harmonising and modernising the legislative frameworks.

Thus, curricula can be characterized as contemporary, open and child-centred. Regardless of their different priorities, the link that connects all EU countries is the aspiration, intention, and goal of creating a fair, inclusive, and sustainable ECEC system.

In accordance with the recommendations of the European Commission (2019), the starting points for ECEC in the EU Member States are: holistic development, development of key competencies, inclusion, equality, sustainable development, democratic values, partnership and cooperation with families, and diversity. From the above, it can be concluded that the European Commission's recommendations have been accepted and implemented in the curricula or equivalent ECEC documents in the Member States.

The objectives reflect the diversity of priorities that shape national education policies. Given the values of preserving the identity of the Member States, diversity in understanding the key educational guidelines of the Member States in relation to ECEC is also acceptable. The most prominent and guiding goals are a holistic approach and sustainable development. Each of these goals has been recognised in

several countries, and it is clear that sustainable development is increasingly present. Key competencies are well represented, as is partnership with families. The need to strengthen basic skills and to involve families in ECEC through partnership and cooperation is emphasised. Inclusion, diversity, equality, and individualisation, which are particularly emphasised, indicate that the child is at the centre and that efforts are made to ensure equal access for all children. These guidelines indreflect heightened awareness of the importance of equity in ECEC, and the creation of a stimulating environment for all children. In a smaller number of curricula in the EU Member States, goals such as participation, quality assurance, and a safe environment are represented, which can be interpreted as a gradual integration of the principles of participatory learning and quality assurance, key components of modern ECEC. The analysed data indicate the Member States' focus on the holistic development of the child, on sustainability, inclusion, and cooperation with the family. In accordance with the analysis of starting points and goals, the European Commission, in its documents, discusses the relationship between a universal and inclusive approach to ECEC, which should be of high quality, capable of involving families, and balancing the social position of children (European Commission, 2011 and 2013).

The values reflect modern scientific knowledge and global initiatives to create high-quality ECEC systems that prepare children for lifelong learning and support each child's growth and development.

Conclusions

The results of this research show that ECEC curricula can be divided into three main models: integrated (0-6 years) in 15 Member States (55.6%), separate curricula (0-3 and 3-6 years) in 7 countries, and child-only curricula for 3-6 children in 7 countries (25.9%). The most common integrated model indicates a growing trend of a holistic approach to ECEC. Variability in the compulsory program has been observed: 26% of countries do not have an obligation to attend ECEC, 56% of countries prescribe compulsory attendance (from 5 to 7 years), while 19% prescribe 5 years, and the rest define boundaries flexibly. Terminology in document terminology varies, but 52.4% of documents use the word curriculum in a combination of names. The terminological diversity reflects different approaches to education policies across EU Member States. Of all the analysed documents (N=27), 80% are based on laws (general or specific), 12% on the constitution and 8% on decrees or decrees, which confirms a very high level of institutional regulation of ECEC within the EU. Terminological diversity reflects not only linguistic, but also differences in the level of management autonomy and doctoral directions within the educational policies of states.

The content analysis clearly highlights the following values: holistic development (21.9%), key competences (15.6%), inclusion and sustainability (12.5%) and partnership with family, diversity and democracy (9.4%). ECEC thus confirms the foundation of the educational process, in which the developmental and social dimensions of children's growing up are integrated. Holistic development has been consistently confirmed as a fundamental guideline of most curricula.

A comparative analysis of the national ECEC curricula of the 27 EU Member States indicates a progressive harmonization with the guidelines of EU policies in the field of ECEC which focus on the child. The child and their well-being, equality and holism are deeply woven into the educational documents and curricula of the EU member states. Regardless of differences in educational systems across EU Member States, there is a need to harmonise the basic documents, approaches, inclusiveness, social justice, participation and connection with families, as well as the quality of ECEC itself, which is ensured through quality curricula. The results indicate that most Member States include in their curricula the development of key competencies and skills necessary for lifelong learning, which complement each other and keep pace with modern life. The differences observed between the national ECEC documents/curricula of the EU Member States do not indicate a lack of harmonisation but confirm the adaptation of EU guidelines within

national systems and comparative policy. Curricula in the EU Member States are evolving, upgrading and complementing. The EU, it is obvious, strives for integrated curricula that include a complete ECEC, i.e., children from 0 to 6 years of age. Curricula are more flexible and better equipped to ensure that the needs of children growing up in a rapidly transforming society are met. The very strong influence of the basic EU documents on the quality of ECEC, the recommendations of the ECEC, as well as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other important documents at the EU level confirm the importance of a *curriculum* that goes beyond formal education to encompass the global, sustainable and modern development of ECEC. The harmonisation of curricular documents across EU Member States does not imply standardisation, but rather convergence towards values that recognise ECEC as a fundamental right, a strategic factor in reducing inequalities, and an investment in the development of an inclusive and resilient society and the EU itself. The conclusions of this research are based on a comparative analysis of curricula/national documents in ECEC and reflect the value orientation of ECEC in EU member states, with limitations arising from the heterogeneity of the documents and the lack of insight into implementation in practice.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the comparative analysis, several directions for further research were identified. Given the fact that countries adopt, introduce new or update existing curricula, it is possible to focus research and comparison on the impact of changes on ECEC in individual countries, as well as to monitor harmonisation among countries that do not have integrated systems or do not have guidelines/curricula for children up to 3 years of age. Comparison and analysis of individual domains of Key Competences can help in understanding the thematic priorities as well as the specifics of the Member States or their regional specificities. Such research can identify levels of compliance with EU competence frameworks and specific fields of the curriculum. A segmented analysis of the curriculum would provide insight into the areas of special interest of each member state, thereby affecting the values of the curriculum itself, but also those of the EU member states.

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