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(NON)SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Abstract: The aim of the study is to compare the current situation of early childhood education and care (ECEC) for children under 3 years of age in Slovakia and the Czech Republic to identify the important areas for sustainable development in relation to the social, educational and economic needs of both countries. Ensuring quality and accessible ECEC is a current priority for EU member states (Barcelona targets for 2030) as well as a goal in support of sustainable development (Education 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, SGD 4.2). The research presented is based on comparative research methods and qualitative content analysis. The study analyses significant milestones in ECEC provision for children under 3 years of age after the division into two separate countries. It characterises the current situation in terms of structural quality, i.e. legislation, staff conditions, the organisation of ECEC facilities, the conditions of admission and availability of care, as well as the objectives of service provision. The study analyses the planned reforms in the ECEC systems. The paper contextualises the findings within the context of international discourse on strategies for the sustainable development of quality early childhood education and care.

Keywords: early childhood education and care, young children, ECEC organizations, sustainable policy, Czech Republic, Slovakia

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Streszczenie (abstrakt): Celem opracowania jest porównanie stanu edukacji przedszkolnej i opieki nad dziećmi do lat trzech na Słowacji i w Czechach oraz wskazanie kluczowych obszarów, niezbędnych dla zrównoważonego rozwoju tego sektora, odpowiadających potrzebom społecznym, edukacyjnym i gospodarczym obu krajów. Zapewnienie wysokiej jakości i dostępności instytucjonalnej edukacji i opieki nad dziećmi od

najmłodszych lat jest jednym z aktualnych zagadnień polityki państw członkowskich Unii Europejskiej (cele barcelońskie na 2030 r.) oraz celów globalnych wspierających zrównoważony rozwój (Education 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, SGD 4.2). Prezentowane badania oparte są na metodach badań porównawczych, a zastosowano metodę jakościowej analizy. Opracowanie analizuje istotne kamienie milowe w zapewnieniu ECEC dla dzieci poniżej 3 roku życia po podziale obu republik. Analizuje planowane reformy systemów wczesnej opieki nad dzieckiem w obu krajach. Podkreśla istniejące problemy, które są immanentne w obu systemach, takie jak brak miejsc w placówkach przedszkolnych, bariery w dostępie do opieki, niewystarczające finansowanie, niesystemowe podejście w zapewnieniu jakości i ciągłości kadrowej i pedagogicznej itp. Kontekstualizuje ustalenia w perspektywie międzynarodowego dyskursu na temat strategii rozwoju jakościowej i zrównoważonej wczesnej edukacji i opieki nad dzieckiem.

Słowa kluczowe: wczesna edukacja, małe dzieci, organizacje ECEC, zrównoważona polityka, Republika Czeska, Republika Słowacka

Admission

European countries have been focusing on the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) for several years. This sector is classified under the international education qualification framework as ISCED 0. It is primarily associated with providing a "good start" to children, which lays the basis for a successful future life and integration into society¹. According to the European Pillar of Social Rights² every child in the EU has the right to affordable and high-quality ECEC. The period of early childhood is considered by experts to be the most important for the development of a child's cognitive, social and emotional abilities, which they will apply in later life in society³. In childhood, the core of human value orientation is formed, and the further sustainable development of society will depend on these values. However, only people who are creative, imaginative, committed, and value-oriented can meet current and future societal challenges.

In general, early childhood refers to the time period encompassing a child's birth until they start their primary school education. The overall structure and nature of ECEC are shaped by unique factors that vary from one country to another. It is formed by the historical context, present societal needs and conditions, commonly held beliefs about education, social values, labour market requirements, and the needs of families. In the Slovak Republic, as well as in the Czech Republic, the topic of ECEC resonates in political, professional, and even public discourse. The parents of children are interested firstly in ECEC in terms of availability, because of their return to the labour market. However, this is an unsustainable approach in the long-term perspective, as the quality of ECEC services determines the

¹ OECD, Starting Strong IV; M. Taguma, I. Litjens, and K. Makowiecki, *Quality Matters in Early Childhood Education and Care*, Slovak Republic 2012, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/content/publication/9789264175655-en>.

² European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – Establishing a European Pillar of Social Rights*, 26 April 2017. Brussels. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52017DC0250&from=EN>.

³ Y. Kaga, J. Bennett, and P. Moss, *Caring and Learning Together: A Cross-National Study on the Integration of Early Childhood Care and Education within Education*. UNESCO 2010.

later educational outcomes and social consequences for society. In terms of future benefits, there is a need to provide high quality ECEC services for all children from birth. The sustainability of the future system will depend on the quality of services and programs to meet the diverse needs of children and their families⁴. The quality of the ECEC depends on the degree of its system inner integrity, especially on the state administration, conditions and curricula guidelines, and the requirements for professional workforce. In European countries, the ECEC systems are divided into five groups⁵: 1.) Integrated systems, 2.) Somewhat integrated systems, 3.) the Mid-way, 4.) Somewhat split systems, and 5.) Split systems, which are typical for Slovak and Czech Republics. It differs in settings and environments which are provided to children (ISCED 010, usually for children under 3 provides care, ISCED 020, usually for children over 3 focuses on pre-primary education). Since 1948 in the former Czechoslovakia, the ECEC system was built on a common educational and social policy. Since the division into two separate states in 1993, both systems have developed independently. For this reason, it is very interesting from the perspective of comparative pedagogy to observe the different development of the ECEC concepts in both countries.

Methods

This study aims to compare the current state of ECEC for children under 3 years. Important similarities and differences will be identified. Therefore, the following research questions were stated:

- RQ1: What are the social, educational and economic contexts of contemporary ECEC provision for children under 3 years?
- RQ2: Which currently implemented reforms correspond to the recommendations of the European Union in the field of quality development and sustainability?

The study is based on comparative research methods according to the Bereday's four-stage model⁶ Qualitative content analysis⁷ focused on legislative and conceptual documents, statistical data and research reports were conducted. The data sources focused at children up to 3 years of age. The secondary sources of the study included research papers and reports by the ministries governing ECEC. Individual elements of both ECEC systems from a diachronic perspective were examined⁸. In terms of the reference model and the objectives of the study, we examined aspects featuring coordinated and consistent policies. In the study, based on deductive approach, the following categories were analysed.

⁴ D. Greger et al., *Srovnávací Pedagogika: Proměny a Výzvy*, Praha 2015.

⁵ European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, *Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: Eurydice Report*. 2019 ed. Luxembourg: Publications office of the European Union, 2019, 17-19.

⁶ G. Z. F Bereday, *Comparative Method in Education*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1964.

⁷ J. Hendl, *Kvalitativní Výzkum*, Praha 2012, https://www.library.sk/ar1-sldk/sk/detail-sldk_un_cat-0073518-Kvalitativni-vyzkum/.

⁸ C.H. McLean et al., *A Scoping Review of Quality in Early Childhood Publicly-Funded Programs*, "Early Childhood Education Journal", 28 July 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01372-9>.

Table 1. Observed categories for comparison of ECEC systems

<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>
System settings	Types of institutions providing ECEC
Access conditions	Accessibility, admission, affordability, statistics in the system
Personnel conditions	Qualification requirements for workforce, staff ratio

Social, Educational and Economic Indicators of comparison

The *system settings* of **Slovak ECEC model** are characterised by fragmentation and separation of services for children under and over 3 years of age. This split system started to develop after 1990, as nurseries for children up to three years of age were gradually dismantled⁹. The reasons for the network's breakdown can be attributed to a certain societal rejection of these facilities, also it was caused by the birth rate drop¹⁰. The main reason for the nursery closure was the design of 3-year parental leave, tackling unemployment rates. Despite the ongoing transformation of social and childcare system, the funding of the nurseries was insufficient. Until 1994, the nursery operated as a health care facility, which was also a form of pre-school education¹¹. In 1995, the state administration was reorganised, and the Ministry of Health was no longer responsible for these institutions.¹² At that time the nurseries completely abandoned their educational function which corresponded with missing requirements for the staff. That situation lasted until 2017, when the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family took over the governance over the services for children under 3 years of age¹³. ECEC for children up to 3 years of age has become a subject of social state policy, while ECEC for children over 3 years of age emphasizes an educational role. This was strengthened in 2021 with the introduction of compulsory pre-primary education for 5-year-olds¹⁴. There is no link between the sectors. There is a lack of common goals and vision for education, as illustrated by the absence of a national curriculum for children under 3.

⁹ Z. Baďuríková, *Nurseries – Educational or Social Institutions?*, “Lifelong Learning 3” 2013, no. 1 73-84. <https://doi.org/10.11118/lifele2013030173>.

¹⁰ J. Filadelfiová, *Demografická situácia a správanie rodín vz. verejná politika v SR*, “Sociológia Slovak Sociological Review/ Časopis Sociologického ústavu SAV 37” 2005. no. 5, p. 387-418.

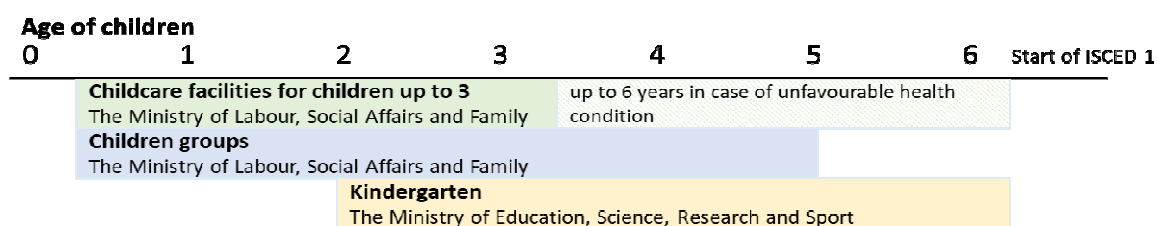
¹¹ Ministerstvo školstva Slovenskej socialistickej republiky, *Vyhláška č. 118/1980 Zb. – Vyhláška Ministerstva školstva Slovenskej socialistickej republiky o materských školách, spoločných zariadeniach jasle a materská škola a detských útlkoch*. Slov-lex, 1980. https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/1980/118/vyhlasene_znenie.html.

¹² NR SR, *Zákon č. 578/2004 Z.z. – Zákon o poskytovateľoch zdravotnej starostlivosti, zdravotníckych pracovníkoch, stavovských organizáciách v zdravotníctve a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov*. Slov-lex, 2004. <https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2004/578/20150901.html>.

¹³ NR SR, *Zákon č. 448/2008 Z.z. – Zákon o sociálnych službách a o zmene a doplnení zákona č. 455/1991 Zb. o živnostenskom podnikaní (živnostenský zákon) v znení neskorších predpisov*, 2008. <https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2008/448/>.

¹⁴ NR SR, *Zákon č. 245/2008 o Výchove a Vzdelávaní (Školský Zákon) a o Zmene a Doplnení Niektorých Zákonov*, 2008. <https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2008/245/2008/245/#poznámky>.

Picture 1. ECEC facilities in the Slovak republic



Source: Own illustration

Access conditions. The main service providers are *childcare facilities for children up to 3 years of age*. They are founded by municipalities, higher regional units, or individual persons¹⁵, administered by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic. The network of these facilities also fails to meet all requests for admission and the number of rejected requests is increasing. In 2021, there were 49 public facilities providing services for 855 children (109 rejected applications) and 157 non-public providers offered places for 1,796 children (405 rejected applications)¹⁶. *Children groups* are new type of provider under the governance of the same ministry. These settings might include children from birth up to the beginning of their compulsory pre-primary education (0-5 years of age). Statistical data on the number of children groups are not available, nor is any other form of quality assurance and monitoring of provided services implemented. *Kindergartens*, governed by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport, also admit children under 3 years. However, they mainly provide services for children 3-6 years old, and the capacity options are limited. The compulsory pre-primary education for 5-year-old children is one of the reasons for not accepting younger children.

Table 1. Children under 3 in Slovak kindergartens between 2020 and 2023

<i>School Year</i>	<i>ProvisionType</i>	<i>N facilities</i>	<i>N unsatisfied</i>	<i>Under 3</i>	<i>3- years old</i>
2022/2023	Public	2,793	19,055	6,573	4,313
	Private	232	773	1,276	2,593
	Church	112	1,263	297	1,457
2021/2022	Public	2,781	17,431	5,739	35,856
	Private	212	810	1,063	2,502
	Church	109	985	324	1,469

¹⁵ NR SR, Zákon č. 448/2008 Z.z. – Zákon o sociálnych službách a o zmene a doplnení zákona č. 455/1991 Zb. o živnostenskom podnikaní (živnostenský zákon) v znení neskorších predpisov, 2008. <https://www.slovlex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2008/448/>.

¹⁶ MPSVR SR, 'Národný Štatistický Systém – Rezortné Štatistické Výkazníctvo'. Ministerstvo práce, sociálnych vecí a rodiny Slovenskej republiky. Rezortné štatistické výkazníctvo, 2023. <https://www.employment.gov.sk/sk/ministerstvo/vyskum-oblasti-prace-socialnych-veci-institut-socialnej-politiky/narodny-statisticky-system.html>.

2020/2021	Public	2,754	16,776	6,565	36,318
	Private	189	224	1,012	2,147
	Church	99	1,038	336	1,351

Source: *Own study, based on CVTI SR* ¹⁷ (The figure on unsatisfied applications is indicative, as parents can apply for admission to several kindergartens simultaneously)

Personnel conditions. The childcare facilities for children up to 3 years of age are regulated by Act No. 448/2008 Coll.¹⁸, according to law, facilities can provide care for 12 children in one room that serves as both a playroom and a bedroom. According to Sec. 13 Par. 2, the founding subject is required to provide services within the minimum range of 8 hours during a workday, a shorter range can be agreed upon based on the proposal of the service recipient. The amendment to this law modified the qualification conditions of the statutory representative. Since 2017 the second-level university degree is required. Care is provided by caregivers who should have completed secondary education in the field of expertise, specializing in preschool education, or in the field of healthcare and day care (ISCED 354). General secondary education (ISCED 344) is also accepted after completing a specialized study course taking 220 hours. *Children groups* have set minimum requirements for performance. Care providers in children's groups are exclusively individual persons who are not allowed to hire other employees. There are no requirements in terms of their professional competence, they only need to prove their personal integrity and that they are older than 18. Care is provided in a home environment for up to 4 children. *Kindergartens* also accept 2-year-old children¹⁹. The law specifies 18 children between the ages of 2 and 3 per group for one teacher. A classroom for children aged 2 to 6 years can include up to 21 children in total. A minimum of a secondary school education (ISCED 354) is required for the position of kindergarten teacher. The number of teachers qualified at level ISCED 655 (Bc. degree) and ISCED 767 (MA degree) is gradually increasing.

The system settings in the Czech Republic undergone a similar development in the 1990s. ECEC was primarily provided by kindergartens and nurseries and the first private kindergartens were established. The prevailing opinion that mothers should stay with children as long as possible in their home environment was supported by social policies, as the duration of parental leave was extended to 4 years. In the 1990s, a significant demographic decline²⁰ has resulted in a reduction of the number of ECEC facilities. After 2000, the pos-

¹⁷ CVTI SR, *Štatistická Ročenka – Súhrnné Tabuľky (1999-2023)*, 2022. https://www.cvtisr.sk/cvti-sr-vedecka-kniznica/informacie-o-skolstve/statistiky/statisticka-rocenka-publikacia/statisticka-rocenka-suhrnne-tabulky.html?page_id=9603.

¹⁸ NR SR, *Zákon č. 448/2008 Z.z. – Zákon o sociálnych službách a o zmene a doplnení zákona č. 455/1991 Zb. o živnostenskom podnikaní (živnostenský zákon) v znení neskorších predpisov*, 2008. <https://www.slovlex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2008/448/>.

¹⁹ NR SR, *Zákon č. 245/2008 o Výchove a Vzdelávaní (Školský Zákon) a o Zmene a Doplnení Niektorých Zákonov*, 2008. <https://www.slovlex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2008/245/2008/245/#poznacky>.

²⁰ Český statistický úřad, *Demografické ročenky (pramenná díla) 2020-2010*. Demografické ročenky (pramenná díla) 2020-2010, 2022. https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/casova_rada_demografie.

sibility of establishing *childcare facilities* (targeted mainly at children under 3) under the Trade Licensing Act was launched under the Ministry of Industry and Trade. Until 2013, nurseries for children under 3 were the responsibility of the Ministry of Health²¹. These were in 2014 replaced by so called *children's groups* (for children from 6 months up to the beginning of primary education²²) and additionally since 2016 by *micro nurseries* (for children from 6 months to 4 years), both in the auspices of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. *Kindergartens* also provide services for children under 3, but not younger than 2 years²³. These institutions are under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. A legal entitlement to a place for children from 3 years old was applied from 2018²⁴ and the compulsory pre-primary education was introduced for five-year-olds from 2017. The ECEC sector has undergone several reforms, however, it remains a split system governed by three ministries. Pre-school education and care for children under 3 years of age is the subject of state social policy, while pre-primary education for children over 3 years of age emphasizes an educational role. There is only limited political coordination between the two sectors, There is a lack of common goals and vision for education, as evidenced by the absence of a unified national curriculum applicable to all types of ECEC for children under 3.

Access conditions. The ECEC services for children under 3 are mainly provided by *childcare facilities for children up to 3 years of age, children's groups, micro nurseries* and individual *childminders* with a trade licence²⁵. These facilities are not registered in the register of schools and educational institutions, and only places in children's groups and micro-nurseries are registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. As of April 1st, 2023, there have been 1,496 *children's groups* registered providing services for 20,141 children²⁶. The 98 *micro nurseries*²⁷ (number of children not available) are a public service for providing childcare, which is not yet fully legally based. The regulating act and hygiene regulation are being drafted. Their operation is governed only by legal guidelines for the

²¹ Česká národní rada, *Zákon č. 390/1991 Zb. – Zákon České národní rady o předškolních zařízeních a školských zařízeních*. Slov-lex, 1991. <https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/1991/390/>.

²² Parlament ČR, *Zákon č. 247/2014 Sb. – Zákon o poskytování služby péče o dítě v dětské skupině a o změně souvisejících zákonů*. Zákony pro lidi, 2014. <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2014-247cs/2014-247>.

²³ Parlament ČR, *Zákon č. 561/2004 Sb. Zákon o předškolním, základním, středním, vyšším odborném a jiném vzdělávání (školský zákon)*. Zákony pro lidi, 2004. <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2004-561>.

²⁴ Parlament ČR, *Zákon č. 178/2016 Sb. Zákon, kterým se mění zákon č. 561/2004 Sb., o předškolním, základním, středním, vyšším odborném a jiném vzdělávání (školský zákon), ve znění pozdějších předpisů, a zákon č. 200/1990 Sb., o přestupcích, ve znění pozdějších předpisů*, 2016. <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2016-178/zneni-20201101>.

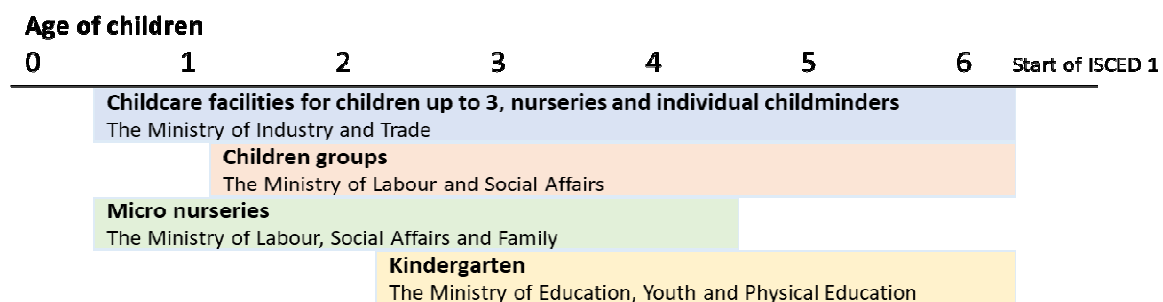
²⁵ Federálne zhromaždenie Českej a Slovenskej Federatívnej Republiky, *Zákon č. 455/1991 Zb. – Zákon o živnostenskom podnikaní (živnostenský zákon)*, 1991. <https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/1991/455/20151101.html>.

²⁶ Ministerstvo práce a sociálních věcí, *Evidence Dětských Skupin*. e-EDS, 2023. <http://evidence.mpsv.cz/eEDS/>.

²⁷ Ministerstvo práce a sociálních věcí, *Statistiky o mikrojeslích*, 2023. <https://mikrojesle.mpsv.cz/index.php/statistiky-o-mikrojeslich>.

protection of public health, hygiene guidelines, etc. A micro nursery can also be set up in the home of a childcare givers, who are at the same time taking care of their children. The space is allocated exclusively for the daily rest time of children, covering at least 3m² per child. There is a maximum of 4 children in a group. The location of the facility must allow for outdoor activities. *The children's groups* are falling under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, and registered within the records of Child Care Service Providers in Children Groups. As of April 1st, 2023, there have been 1,496 facilities registered providing services for 20,141 children²⁸. The admission of *kindergartens* are limited, especially in larger agglomerations (44,325 applications for nursery places rejected on the basis of lack of capacity in 2022)²⁹. As a result, the participation of 2-year-olds in kindergartens has been declining in recent years due to the high number of 3 to 6-year-olds in the population (2019: 12.5%, 2022: 9.1%).

Picture 2. ECEC facilities in the Czech Republic



Source: Own illustration

²⁸ Ministerstvo práce a sociálních věcí, *Evidence Dětských Skupin*. e-EDS, 2023, <http://evidence.mpsv.cz/eEDS/>.

²⁹ Česká školní inspekce, *Kvalita a Efektivita Vzdělávání a Vzdělávací Systavy ve Školním Ruce 2021/2022 (Výroční Zpráva České Školní Inspekce)*, 2022. https://www.csicr.cz/CSICR/media/Elektronick-e-publikace/2022/Vyrocní_zprava_Ceske_skolni_inspekce_2021_2022/html5/index.html?pn=5.

Table 2. Children in Kindergartens in the Czech Republic in 2020 to 2022

<i>School Year</i>	<i>Provision type</i>	<i>N facilities</i>	<i>Facilities together</i>	<i>N children</i>	<i>Under 3</i>	<i>3- years old</i>
2021/22	Public	4,874	5,349	360,490	32,714	94,403
	Private	425				
	Church	50				
2020/21	Public	4,863	5,317	357,598	34,586	93,075
	Private	404				
	Church	50				

Source: Own study, based on Statistics³⁰

Personnel conditions. Childcare facilities for children up to 3 years of age, children's groups, childminders and micro nurseries accept the qualification of general nurse, health assistant, caretaker, midwife, pre-/primary teacher, teacher's assistant or social worker (qualifications in the field of pedagogy, health and social services). The lowest qualification is a nanny for children in a children's group are allowed to work in children's groups or for children under school age (short term course: 160 hours). *Childcare facilities* do not have a maximum ratio for the number of children per caregiver. The qualification requirements of a childcare giver working in a children's group are based on a range of professional competences found in educational, health, social and professional qualifications³¹. From 2022, it is obligatory to ensure care by at least 1 person with medical education, or a caregiver for children's groups throughout the whole day. If a children's group includes children younger than 1 year of age, the maximum number of them in that group is 4 out of the group total, which is 24 children. For a group of up to 6 children, the care is to be provided by 1 person, groups of 7-12 children require two people, groups from 13 to 24 children at least 3 workers per group. Since 2021, in children's groups caring for children older than 3 years, the care provider have to ensure at least 20 hours of care provided by a childcare worker with pedagogical qualifications. *In kindergarten*, the maximum number of children per class is 24³², where for each child under 3 years of age, the total number of children is decreased by 2. The minimum qualification requirements is a secondary education degree in the Pedagogy of Pre-School Education (ISCED 354). However, in recent years, professional discussion has highlighted the necessity to raise the qualifications to university level. Qualifications can also be obtained at the tertiary professional schools (Diploma in pre-primary education ISCED 655) and higher education institutions (B.A. in pre-primary education, ISCED 645). The proportion of university-educated teachers is gradually increasing.

³⁰ Český statistický úřad, *Školy a školská zařízení – školní rok 2019/2020*. Školy a školská zařízení – školní rok 2019/2020, 2022. <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/skoly-a-skolska-zarizeni-skolni-rok-20192020>.

³¹ Parlament ČR, *Zákon č. 247/2014 Sb. – Zákon o poskytování služby péče o dítě v dětské skupině a o změně souvisejících zákonů*. Zákony pro lidi, 2014. <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2014-247>.

³² MŠMT ČR, *Vyhláška č. 14/2005 Sb. – Vyhláška o předškolním vzdělávání*, 2005. <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2005-14>.

Current Development Issues for Future Sustainability

Both countries currently show an increasing trend of the political and public interest in ECEC. The issue belongs to the current societal challenges, whose future sustainable direction is determined by the current implemented reforms and political decisions. In both countries, the direction is determined by strategic plans (SK)³³, (CZ)³⁴. Political steps and procedures have mostly a common line, but we also register some differences. In both countries the **quality monitoring** is the highest in *kindergartens*, because there is systematic in-depth control for structural and procedural conditions. However, the quality control in *children's groups* is only developing. The basic standards quality framework in the Czech Republic has been introduced in 2021. In the Slovak republic standards for quality assurance of education and care are missing. This is valid for all the other types of child-care settings for children under 3 years. These settings are obliged to respect only minimum hygienic and workforce requirements.

- In both countries, the system remains split with several ministries in charge. Both countries have **low requirements for the quality of the workforce**. There is still a discrepancy in the requirements for staff in kindergartens and in other facilities. These settings facilitate children of the same age but provide different quality of care³⁵. Efforts to raise qualification requirements, at least at bachelor's level, have long been unsuccessful.
- Key quality aspect is a **curriculum**³⁶ (European Commission, 2019), which is absent for this age group. Since 2017, the Czech Republic has ensured a **legal entitlement** to a place in kindergarten for children from 3 years of age, but the entitlement is not exercised by families. In cases of non-placement, parents do not litigate with the state. In the Slovak Republic, the legal entitlement to kindergarten will be introduced gradually, firstly for all 4-year-olds from September 2023, and a year later for all 3-year-olds. At the moment, it is impossible to say whether municipalities will provide sufficient capacity in such a short time.
- The focus in both countries is mostly on **expanding capacities**. New forms of services are being developed (**quantitative development**), but less consideration is given to the quality of services provided. There is a prevailing effort to create places for children up to 3 years of age. This trend has been reinforced in recent years by increment of birth-rate and the economic problems associated with state expenditure related to the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact of the war in Ukraine.

³³ Ministerstvo financií Slovenskej republiky, *Plán Obnovy a Odolnosti*, 2021. <https://www.mfsr.sk/sk/verejnost/plan-obnovy-odolnosti/>.

³⁴ *Národní Plán Obnovy Plán pro Oživení a Odolnost České Republiky*. Ministerstvo průmyslu a obchodu, 2021. <https://www.planobnovycr.cz/dokumenty>.

³⁵ B. Loudová Stralczyňská, *Czech Republic – ECEC Workforce Profile*, In *Workforce Profiles in Systems of Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe*, edited by Pamela Oberhuemer and Inge Schreyer. 2017, n.d. www.seepro.eu/English/Country_Reports.htm.

³⁶ Early Childhood Workforce Initiative, *Proposal for Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care – Report of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the Auspices of the European Commission*. Leiden. ISSA, 2014. <https://www.earlychildhoodworkforce.org/node/214>.

- The current economic situation is forcing the governments to develop instant solutions to solve the lack of places. An example from the Czech Republic is a "*Neighbourhood Childcare*" service (in piloting), which offers care for children by unqualified persons, receiving a very generous allowance from the state. The conditions thus combine almost no quality requirements for providers and generous financial remuneration. Additionally, the government is proposing to abolish the tax relief for the parents of pre-school children. However, the support system for families in Western European countries is based on comprehensive measures (combining entitlement to a place, tax credits and efforts to favour children with special educational needs).
- The problem with the current situation is the pursuit of **quick solutions**, which in the long perspective may **threaten sustainable development** in both countries and **increase obstacles to family wellbeing and children's future outcomes**. Insufficient tax benefits for ECEC in Slovakia and the Czech Republic are part of the barriers to quality and affordability. This is particularly a risk for families from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. At the same time, both countries have very rigid ECEC **funding arrangements**. Unlike the Scandinavian countries, Germany or Austria, the fee for ECEC services is not graduated according to the total income and social status of families. This represents a substantial barrier to families' access to ECEC and its transformation towards a truly sustainable development. We do not consider this change feasible within the next few years, as there remains a rather strong animosity in both countries towards disadvantaged groups and prejudices towards minorities in society.

Summary

The transformation of social policy generates a wider range of ECEC formats, especially for children under 3 years of age. In order to ensure the sustainability of ECEC services in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, it is desirable to ensure support for these dimensions in particular:

<i>Category</i>	<i>Current Development Issues for Future Sustainability</i>
System settings	Limiting the plurality of ECEC facilities, establishing quality standards mandatory for all types of institutions regardless of the founder and the responsible ministry
Access conditions	New funding settings based on family's income status; ensuring fulfilment of legal entitlement; ensuring sufficient places meeting quality standards in ECEC.
Personnel conditions	Increase of qualification requirements for kindergartens (main teaching staff min. ISCED 6), requirements for staff in children's groups and centre-based childcare facilities for children up to 3 years for teaching staff (min. ISCED 3), to introduce minimum qualification of childminders upon qualification course and subsequent CPD; reduction of child ratio following recommendations followed in Western EU countries.

The future development and sustainability of the system will depend on the countries' ability to create well targeted programs covering the diverse needs of families.

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