

STUDY ON QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN GEORGIA

SUMMARY | 2018



vbjk

Centre for Innovation
in the Early Years



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გამოცდების ეროვნული
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Cover photo: Tamar Gurgenidze, 2015

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BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

This condensed report is based on data derived from the Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Georgia. The study was jointly implemented by UNICEF Georgia and the National Assessment and Examination Centre (NAEC) under the leadership of an international consultant. The European Quality Framework (EQF¹) for Early Childhood Education and Care was used to analyse the quality of public ECEC services in Georgia using five dimensions: Accessibility, Workforce, Curriculum, Monitoring, and Governance. Additionally, new national ECEC standards (National Early and Preschool Education Standards, and Professional Standards for Caregiver-Pedagogues) were also used in the study to reveal main challenges on the way to their implementation. The methodology utilised included policy-level analysis of the ECEC field (review of national standards, interviews with policy-makers and focus groups with key stakeholders), a quantitative survey of all municipalities (64), and 22 focus groups in diverse geographical areas (a total of 124 participants including preschool managers, caregivers, special educators, psychologists, methodologists, parents, and teacher trainers).

WHY THIS STUDY? QUALITY IN ECEC ON THE INTERNATIONAL AGENDA

A recently published literature study on the role of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in preventing early school leaving has shown that quality ECEC can yield substantial benefits, even lasting up to adolescence (Dumcius, Peeters, et al., 2015²). In other words, quality ECEC is the start of lifelong learning; it plays an important role in creating positive attitudes for children regarding learning throughout the rest of their school career. Early and preschool education is also extremely important to ensure sustainable development of society and to provide equal opportunities for all children as citizens. There is a broad consensus among researchers, organizations, and policy makers that the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC), and ultimately the outcomes for children and families, depends on well-educated and competent staff (Dumcius, Peeters, et al, 2015).

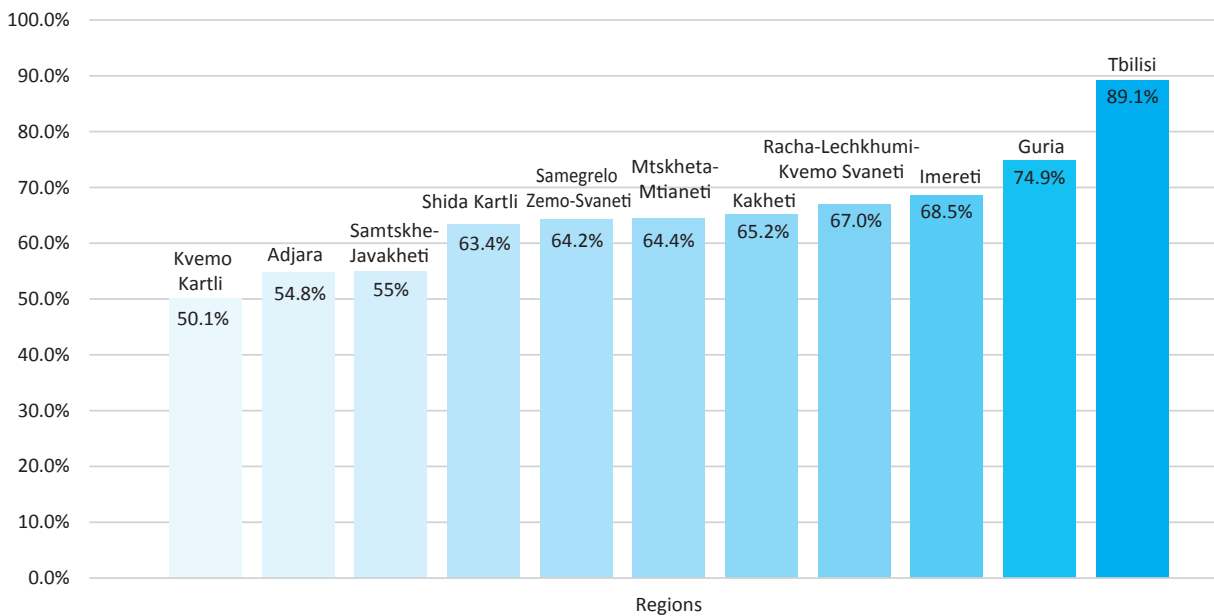
The importance of quality early education has been reiterated by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda of the UN. Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 seeks to ensure that by 2030 “all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education” and calls for at least one year of pre-primary education prior to school entry.

1 ACCESSIBILITY

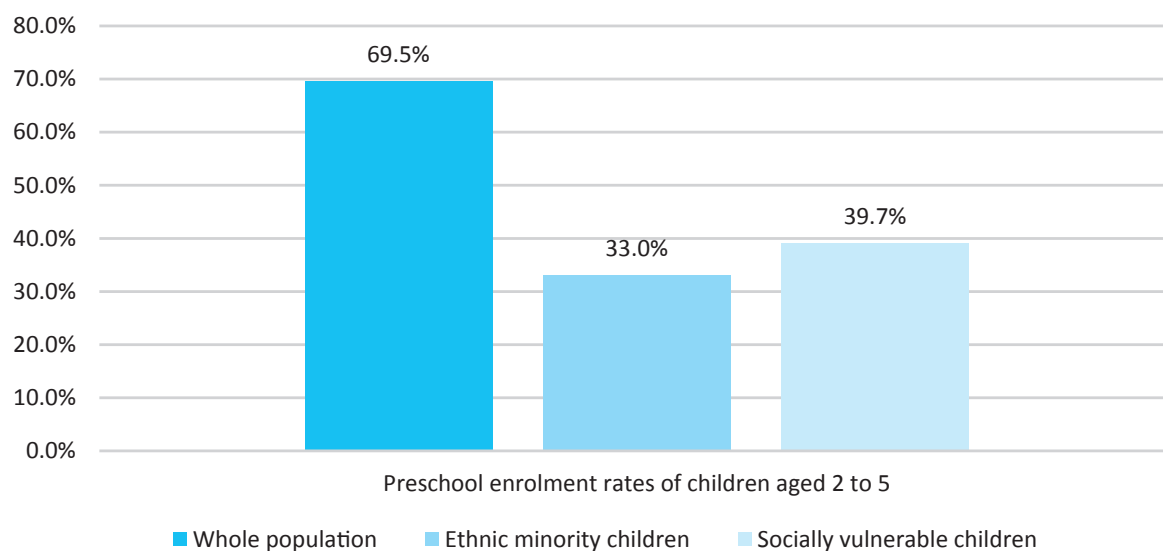
ENROLMENT

The total enrolment of young children in preschool (69.5 per cent) in Georgia is low compared to the European target (95 per cent of children aged 4 to 6). Enrolment rates are lower for children of ethnic minorities (33 per cent), those who are socially vulnerable (39.7 per cent), and those who live in rural areas (46.8 per cent). Where children with special needs are able to enroll in ECEC services, they face significant challenges in terms of their full inclusion and participation in related programmes. Even though the enrolment rates are high in urban areas, the number of children per classroom is also higher (for example, in Tbilisi, there are 39 children on average per classroom, with some classrooms having up to 60 children). Large numbers of children per classroom has significant implications on process quality. Thus, to improve process quality and working conditions for the staff, the cities need more classrooms and more teachers to reduce the number of children per classroom.

Preschool enrolment rates of children age 2 - 5 across regions



Preschool enrolment rates among different groups of children



POLICY REGARDING ENROLMENT OF DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

Except from the introduction of free meals, there is no coherent policy towards the inclusion of disadvantaged children into preschools, neither on the municipal, nor on the national level. The majority of municipalities do not collect data on enrolment rates for all children or for disadvantaged groups. There is no data available on accessibility from private ECEC centres because municipalities do not collect data from private preschools; however data from other studies shows that the private sector serves only a minor share (2 per cent) of enrolled children (UNICEF, 2016³).

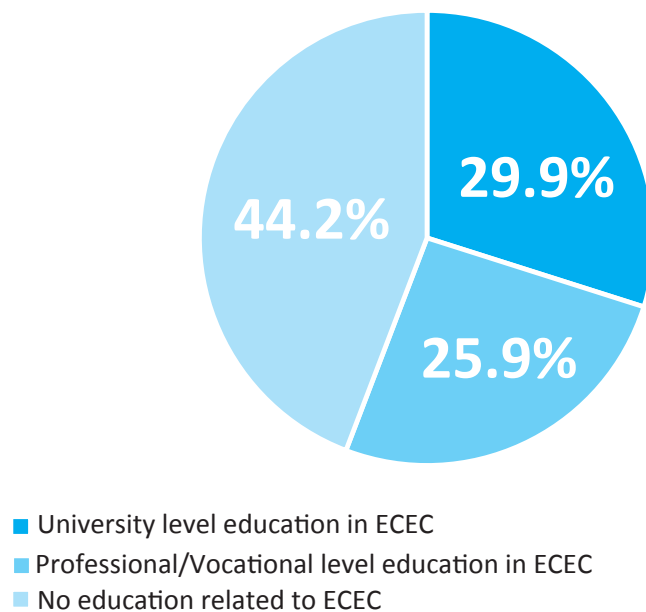
In general, the knowledge and competencies regarding working with diversity and inclusion of young children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with special needs is limited. ECEC practitioners have a certain mistrust towards parents from disadvantaged backgrounds and also towards parents that have children with special needs. The major barriers regarding inclusion of children with disabilities are the lack of adapted infrastructures, overcrowded groups, and the lack of relevant competencies among caregivers. Some children face barriers to inclusion in preschools due to social stigma against their disabilities. In municipalities (mostly cities), where specialised staff (i.e. 'methodologists', psychologists, special educators, etc.) are employed to support caregivers in inclusive teaching, often the competencies and qualifications of these professionals is not adequate to ensure inclusive practices in ECEC centres. For instance, special educators often take the children with special needs out of the classroom and work with them individually instead of supporting the teacher towards full inclusion of special needs children in general classroom activities.

2 WORKFORCE

QUALIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

The preschool institutions are facing a major problem due to the large proportion of staff being unqualified or having qualifications with no link to ECEC. Data from 57 municipalities indicates that 44 per cent of caregivers are unqualified. Similarly, 50 per cent of directors do not have an ECEC related education. The survey shows that 13 municipalities do not have a single caregiver with a relevant bachelor’s degree in ECEC. The lack of relevant qualifications of the specialized staff (special teachers, psychologists, etc.) is also an issue in many municipalities.

Qualification of Preschool Caregivers



INITIAL TRAINING

Although all interviewees highlighted the importance of high-quality initial training, only a small part have pursued specialised ECEC training at the university level. In the case of those few with relevant university level ECEC training, the majority of training took place around 20 to 25 years ago. Their initial training mostly consisted of theoretical courses without practice-based learning. However, as research shows, the link between theory and practice is essential to acquire the necessary competencies for working with young children (CoRe, 2011⁴).

For the moment, there are vocational training programmes that focus more on practical skills and, according to the interviewees, there is a strong need for training on the bachelor's degree level, specialised in ECEC. Of the existing initial training that exists on a university level, ECEC is only offered as a minor course (only in one university), which is not enough to prepare teachers for a job in ECEC.

CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The majority of preschool staff members have not received continuous professional training in the last ten years. In Georgia, mentoring and coaching are unknown or new approaches to continuous professional development (CPD), and there is a lack of methods of coaching that have proven to be successful and that are scientifically based.

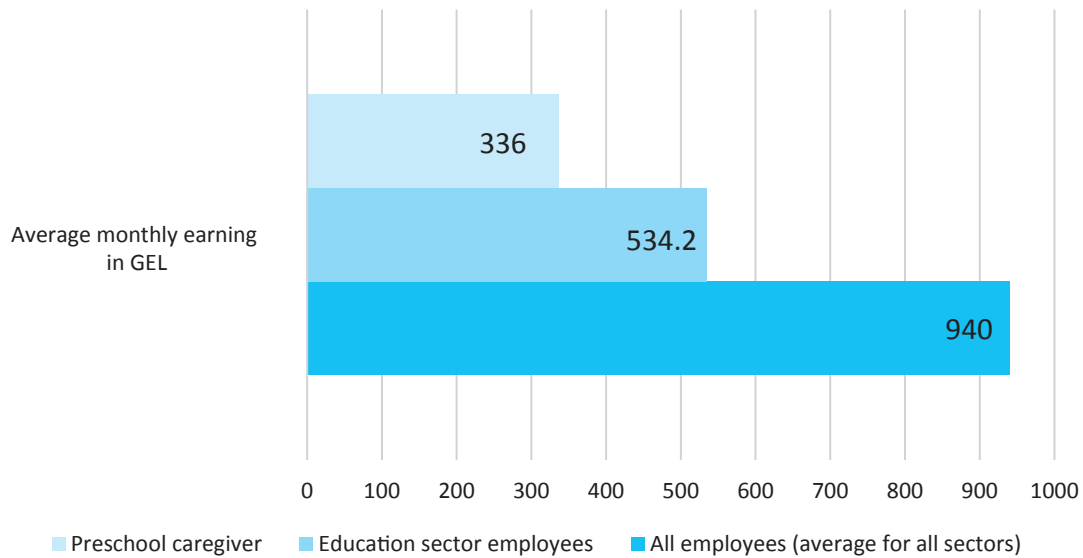
Most of the caregivers and teachers are very motivated to attend courses to improve their professional competencies, but the institutions do not have the financial resources to pay the continuous professional development fees for their staff. And since staff salaries are very low, it is not possible for practitioners to attend those courses independently. Additionally, many municipalities do not allow for child-free hours allocated for professional development.

Because so few practitioners attended CPD in recent years, they are not aware of contemporary approaches in ECEC. Therefore, it is a serious concern that a policy towards CPD (courses and coaching) be put in place and financed by the government, as CPD is essential in guaranteeing a quality ECEC educated workforce (Eurofound, 2015⁵; Peleman, et al, 2018⁶).

WORKING CONDITIONS

In Georgia, the social status of a caregiver working in the ECEC field is extremely low. The salaries for all workers in ECEC, including directors, are also extremely low. The average monthly salary for a full-time caregiver is GEL 336, which is almost three times less than the average monthly earnings of the employed population in Georgia (GEL 940)⁷. There is no system in place for salary increase.

Average monthly earning of a preschool caregiver



The size of children’s groups in most ECEC centres are too large and this leads to poor practice. Caregivers are not able to meet the individual needs and interests of children and instead apply pedagogical and behavior management practices that are not child-friendly. Other problems that have emerged as a result of the study include the long working hours and the lack of child-free hours (for planning, CPD, self-evaluation) that exist in most centres.

We can conclude that overcrowded classrooms, long working hours, low salaries, together with a lack of initial and continuous training are the main causes for the low quality of ECEC in Georgia.

3 CURRICULUM

THE NEW EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS

The focus groups revealed that the Standards and relevant resources are accessible for ECEC municipal agencies in most municipalities, however some municipalities do not have any information on the Standards or the available resources. It is important to note that ECEC staff in high mountainous regions and regions with ethnic minorities are not familiar with the Standards and do not have access to supportive resources. Moreover, not all ECEC staff are aware of the new Standards (e.g. specialised staff), and parents are not aware of the curriculum with which preschools work.

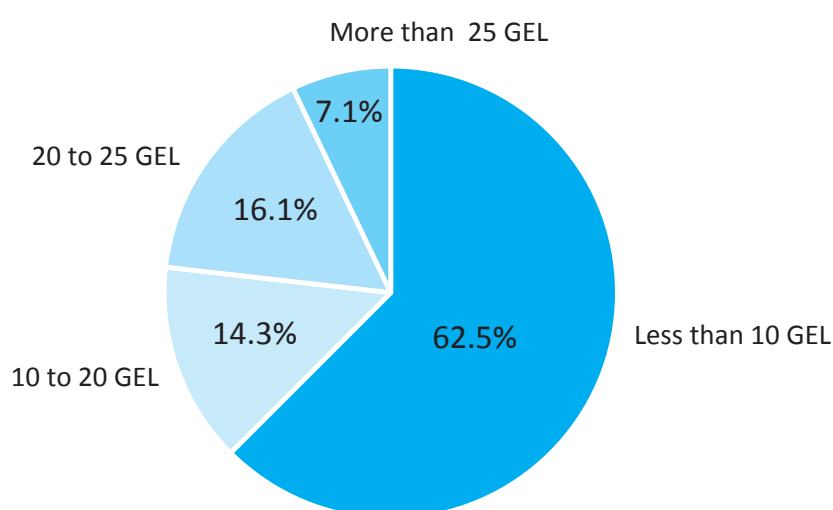
Also, study findings suggest that those practitioners who claim to use the Standards, are not fully familiar with their contents and principles. Another critical point is the lack of qualified staff, and thus, the need for continuous professional development. Practitioners consider the scarce resources and the need for a resource-rich environment as the main challenges in implementing the Standards and curricula.

Some ECEC centre managers, directors and related NGOs warn against a too technical approach for caregivers in implementing the Standards and curricula. Due to the lack of specialised training in ECEC on a university level, and little or no in-service training on specific curricula, the caregivers are mainly focused on implementing specific sample activities suggested in the supportive activity books rather than on the pedagogical approaches behind the Educational Standards and the curriculum.

EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

Studies have shown that resources to support child development and learning are lacking in preschools. In some cases, parents are responsible for bringing such resources, or teachers will buy them with their own money as there is almost no budget allocated for toys, consumables (such as pencils, papers, etc.), books or other educational materials. There is minimal annual spending on these resources per child: data from 56 municipalities shows that 62.5 per cent of municipalities spend less than 10 Georgian Lari per child annually on educational resources (some spend as low as GEL 0.73 and 1.11).

Annual Budget for educational resources per child across municipalities



ACTIVITIES

Practitioners believe that it is important to tailor activities to the interests of children and to focus more on children-led initiatives and play for supporting child development. However, this is a challenging task in overcrowded classes providing ECEC services, and there is a lack of sufficient autonomy to be flexible in adapting the curriculum.

SHORT PRE-SCHOOL PROGRAMMES

None of the interviewed ECEC service providers offer a short pre-school programme. Some municipalities believe this could be a positive option because it allows providers to focus on the educational process and could increase access to services due to the fact that less material resources are required; it could also be more convenient for vulnerable groups. However, others claim that a programme with only educational activities would disregard the importance of playing and caring activities. This perspective on separation of play, education, and care is problematic as it contradicts current theoretical and practice-based understanding of early child development that views play, learning, and care as inseparable dimensions of ECEC practice (Broström, 2003⁸; Pramling-Samulesson & Johansson, 2006⁹). Parents' main criticism of the short programme is that it is not tailored to their needs and is not in line with their working hours.

PEDAGOGICAL VISION AND APPROACH

Preschools in 52.2 per cent of municipalities surveyed have not developed a guiding vision or pedagogical approach. Although some ECEC services use specific strategies, it is rare for any of them to have visions or mission statements based on scientific theory. Some respondents recalled specific pedagogical approaches, but they could not specify the content or their use in educational practice. This can be explained by the limited autonomy on pedagogical issues that is given to ECEC directors and also to the limited in-service training received.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The communication with parents mostly happens prior to a final celebration event (so called "Zeimi"), and thus, is related only to a 'final' moment in ECEC service, and not the daily practice throughout the year or the general preschool policy. There is a lack of communication and a certain mistrust between ECEC practitioners and parents. In addition, the large group sizes have negative impacts on communication with families, as the practitioners are not able to give the necessary attention to each parent.

Parental involvement is a crucial aspect of quality in ECEC. It demands a systematic approach, a clear policy on the level of all ECEC staff (especially caregivers and directors) and also on the level of the municipality.

COLLABORATION WITH COLLEAGUES

The study revealed that formal or informal collaboration between colleagues is extremely rare. Collaboration with colleagues is limited to professional advice provided to a caregiver by a director, a methodologist of a municipal agency, or a preschool psychologist. None of the participating centres reported any precedent of sharing and discussing professional dilemmas or curriculum-related issues between colleagues. Despite the fact that collaboration between colleagues is limited, all those surveyed believe that common reflection on their professional practice is crucial.

Being self-reflective and being reflective with colleagues requires an atmosphere of trust at different levels, and it requires specific competencies, which should receive attention in pre- and in-service training. Hence, we know from published research (Sharmahd, et al., 2017¹⁰) that some critical conditions have to be met to stimulate collaboration among colleagues in order to change pedagogical practice.

4 MONITORING

OBSERVATION AND DOCUMENTATION ON THE LEVEL OF THE CHILD

Observation and documentation on the level of a child is a common practice in the majority of municipalities, however not all caregivers are informed about the necessity of recording notes. Those who are informed are somewhat skeptical about the utility of notes (i.e. extra paperwork, a pure formal activity, instead of an instrument to support their work and hence the pedagogical quality). Working conditions sometimes make it hard to use the individual evaluation system comprehensively (e.g. in large groups). Also, the focus groups revealed that parents are not always involved in or informed of their child's progress and needs.

The private ECEC services are not obliged to monitor quality, and monitoring will depend on the good will of the managers. Also, in some municipalities with ethnic minorities, there is no systematic monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring children's progress is not conducted in regions where the availability of qualified staff is problematic.

SELF-EVALUATION

Although observation and documentation are seen as common practices, self-evaluation is not common. Only 43.5 per cent of the municipality representatives reported that ECEC services evaluate themselves. Only six municipalities mention that ECEC staff systematically discuss their professional life.

EXTERNAL EVALUATION AND MONITORING

The majority of municipality representatives confirm the existence of external evaluation. This is usually done by the ECEC municipal agencies. However, 14.4 per cent of the municipalities admit that they do not have the relevant capacity to do so, again mostly due to the lack of qualified staff.

The main challenges reported by the municipality representatives are the costs and transportation problems for monitoring purposes, the lack of a unified document that would serve as a guide for monitoring processes, the lack of financial and human resources, and the lack of communication between the different organizations involved. ECEC staff members claim that fear of constant inspections create a stressful environment, which is then reflected in the quality of their work, and subsequently on to the children.

ECEC practitioners criticise the frequent evaluations and high amount of monitoring bodies and agencies, and identify the need for a more trustworthy relationship between auditors and practitioners. The audits and monitoring are seen as a formality, as a bureaucratic and superficial system, and as something that does not help practitioners (because often they are not authorized to, nor do they have the resources to, follow through with the recommendations given or solve the problems addressed).

5 GOVERNANCE

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT ON THE MUNICIPAL LEVEL

It is a challenge for the Georgian ECEC sector to attract qualified staff. Therefore, a human resource management system on the municipal and institutional level is crucial to attract and retain a motivated and qualified workforce. 40 per cent of municipalities do not have an elaborated policy on human resource management (HRM). On the institutional level, the majority of public preschools (83 per cent), cannot select or hire personnel; this is the responsibility of the municipalities. However, in the larger cities (Tbilisi, Batumi, and Gori) and Oni municipality, preschools are autonomous in their hiring of staff.

INTEGRATED WORKING

The surveyed municipalities were asked if ECEC services cooperate with other local services. Preschools actively cooperate with local health service centres and in some cases with the food agency, sport complexes, museums, theatres, libraries, cultural centres (artists) and the Club of Young Scientists. There was no collaboration mentioned between ECEC centres and primary schools, day care centres for children with disabilities, the Social Service Agency, or any other type of early childhood intervention service. This

is indicative of poorly-handled transition processes for all children (from preschool to primary school), but particularly for children with special needs.

FINANCING OF ECEC

The budget for ECEC is distributed by the municipal agency, and this budget depends on the size of the ECEC service provided. There are great differences in annual budgets between ECEC services in Georgia. Huge differences can be observed on the budget allocated for educational resources between regions, but also within regions. For example, in Adjara Region, Batumi (city) allocates on average 20.8 GEL annually per child for educational resources, but in nearby Khelvachauri municipality only 5.4 GEL is allocated. ECEC services located in high mountainous or ethnic minority communities in particular do not have access to the resources necessary to meet children's needs or to plan respective developmental activities. This implies that the quality of preschools differ depending on where children grow up. This means that not all children have the same access to opportunities. In summary, there is very low funding for educational/play resources in the majority of preschools, and low salaries are a major problem.

CAPACITY OF GOVERNANCE ON THE MUNICIPAL LEVEL

The main functions of staff working in municipal agencies are: allocation and control of the budget (31.5 per cent), management and administrative tasks (14 per cent), and providing pedagogical support to preschools (12.6 per cent). Some staff members are responsible for the sanitary/hygiene and nutritional norms of preschools (6.3 per cent), while others are in charge of monitoring the quality of educational activities and the care provided by preschools (6.4 per cent).

ECEC centre managers question the capacity of governance on the municipal level. They believe that the Ministry of Education should be responsible for monitoring pedagogical quality and for supporting the sector in attaining this quality, while local municipalities should be responsible for the financial support. However, participants acknowledge the risks associated with latter because the municipalities' budgets vary by region in Georgia, and this leads to underfinanced preschools, especially in poor rural areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACCESSIBILITY

- **Increase enrolment.** ECEC has an important role in the development of the child, in breaking the cycle of disadvantage, and in stimulating the employment of parents. Actions must be set up to increase the number of open places for children in pre-school (ages 3 to 5) and also in the nurseries (ages 0 to 3).
- **More attention given to inclusion of disadvantaged children in ECEC.** Further actions have to be taken to increase the accessibility to programmes for disadvantaged children. To do so successfully, representatives from the communities must be involved, and the preschools will need extra support in working with disadvantaged and special needs children. The advantages of ECEC programmes for children and families must be emphasised, especially towards disadvantaged families, so that enrolment by these groups increases.
- More of a focus on attracting ethnic minority children in preschool and investment in a **'respect for diversity approach'** in the preschools that work with these children. Bilingual education programmes that value the home languages of the children must be developed.
- **Setting up short programmes that take up half a day**, as in many other ECA countries. This is a cost effective model for municipalities with low enrolment. We know from the EPPE research¹¹ that half-day programmes of 500 hours a year can have the same positive impact as full day programs. These half-day programmes can be very useful in increasing enrolment of disadvantaged and ethnic minority children.

WORKFORCE

- **New initial training must be instituted urgently.**

The content of initial training at the university level must be based on the professional competencies profile (Professional Standards for Caregiver-Pedagogues) that was adopted in 2017. The initial training should link theory and practice, focus on child-centred learning (experimental or natural learning), and on working in a context of diversity. The focus of the initial and in-service training must be on acquiring reflective competencies.

Collaboration with the European Erasmus Plus projects can be very inspiring for participants who get the opportunity to meet colleagues from other European countries and exchange information about new pedagogical approaches.

The new Professional Competence Profile must be the basis for reform of initial training. The training sector must be involved in developing the new Training Competencies Profile.

- **Pathways to qualification for the non-qualified workforce.** A group of researchers, trainers and representatives in the related sector should come together to create pathways to bachelor's degree qualification that are adapted to caregivers who are already working in preschools (for further information, refer to NESETII study on this topic¹²).
- **A training programme for preschool directors¹³** should be developed because effective leadership is seen as a 'major factor in shaping the overall teaching and learning environment, raising aspirations and providing support for children, parents and staff' (Council of the European Union, 2009).
- Child-free hours should be available for all caregivers (pedagogues). This, along with support from different specialised experts can create possibilities to improve practice and to implement the new National Standards for Early and Preschool Education through **pedagogical coaching**.
- Measures must be taken to **avoid overcrowded classrooms**. The number of children per classroom needs to be reduced; this is one of the major challenges for preschools in Georgia.
- Investments should be made in different pathways to professionalism because there is ample evidence, both from literature and from the case studies, that **comprehensive and long-term in-service professional development** initiatives can yield beneficial effects equal to those of initial professional preparation. Short-term in-service training courses (e.g. a few days per year), however, are not sufficient. This demands a re-think of existing approaches to continuing professional development towards more sustained and comprehensive approaches based on pedagogical mentoring and on learning from practice.
- Georgia needs to invest in Continuous Professional Development programmes that are **intensive and are implemented for at least two years, because – as the Euro-found study shows – those mentoring programmes within teams** have an impact on increasing the quality of ECEC and have a positive impact on outcomes for children.

CURRICULUM

- **Training tools** for practitioners based on the new National Standards for Early and Preschool Education for ECEC have to be developed. This includes instructive videos that depict examples of practice in preschools that are already using the Standards, brochures, and websites that illustrate how practitioners can implement the Standards. Reflecting on these materials with colleagues and experts can be very inspiring. Existing videos and brochures on new pedagogical approaches can also be translated into Georgian. Standards and supporting resources should be made accessible to everyone involved in ECEC (such as ECEC staff, psychologists, and parents) in all regions of Georgia, including in preschools with ethnic minorities and in geographically remote rural and mountainous areas.
- It is important that caregivers have **access to resources and materials** (toys, books, and didactical materials) that can help them to implement the new curriculum, create a stimulating environment for all the children, and support parental involvement.
- **Parental involvement** needs more attention. All parents should feel welcome, and ECEC staff should perceive parents as equal partners in raising children. The DECET-principles¹⁴ can be an inspiring guideline.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

- A broad discussion on how to monitor quality of the whole ECEC sector has to be set up by a **group of stakeholders** (including parents), researchers, training professionals, and NGO representatives. This discussion should be chaired by a respected person who is independent from the government. The new National Standards for Early and Preschool Education must be the source of inspiration of this working group. It is important that monitoring is regarded by stakeholders as a process that supports the improvement of ECEC practice, rather than merely a punitive or bureaucratic procedure.
- **Developing a monitoring system** for ECEC that measures the overall quality of ECEC and that is able to help the inspectors evaluate the quality of preschool institutions. This must be developed on the national level.
- **A self-evaluation instrument for caregivers (pedagogues)** based on the new National Standards for Early and Preschool Education must be developed by training organisations, resource centres and other partners who were originally involved in the development of the new National Standards.
- Municipalities need to invest in the capacity building of inspectors who are in charge of monitoring ECEC services.

GOVERNANCE

- Initiatives must be enacted to develop a **competent system that has the capacity to implement necessary innovations** formulated in the new National Standards for Early and Preschool Education on multiple levels (individual, team, institution, government, international networks/organisations). To realise this, a concrete plan must be instituted regarding how innovations will be implemented on different levels of the competencies system. It is important to make use of the existing experience of NGOs and international organisations like UNICEF.
- **Preschool institutions should be granted more autonomy** in human resource management, budgetary allocations for daily practice, and choosing their pedagogical approach and vision (any approach that is compliant with National Standards).
- **The national government** needs to support municipalities with limited human and financial resources, so that they can achieve the capacity to develop a policy for inspection, HR management, adequate financing, and are able to develop a system of CPD.
- Guidelines must be developed to **guarantee smooth transitions** from home to ECEC and from preschool to primary school, especially for children with special needs and those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

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