



# Inclusive Early Childhood Education

New Insights and Tools  
Final Summary Report



**EUROPEAN AGENCY**  
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



# **INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

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SAMUEL E



MARTA





# INTRODUCTION

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Quality in early childhood education is a prominent concern for policy-makers and has recently become a priority for many international and European organisations. These include the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the European Commission, Eurydice and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency), among others. More recently, the Council of the European Union (2017) highlighted the need to prioritise high-quality early childhood education and care to address inequalities in lifelong learning.

Given these international concerns, the Agency undertook a three-year project (2015–2017) entitled Inclusive Early Childhood Education. It aimed to identify, analyse and subsequently promote the main characteristics of quality inclusive early childhood education (IECE)<sup>1</sup> for all children<sup>2</sup> from three years of age to the start of primary education. This provided an opportunity to examine more closely how, within an inclusive perspective, IECE provisions across Europe are addressing the quality principles already identified by the European Commission (2014) and the OECD (2015).

The project was grounded in the relevant research and policy literature, data collected through observations of example IECE settings<sup>3</sup> in several countries, descriptions of examples from practitioners across Europe, and questionnaires on national developments in IECE in all Agency member countries. Sixty-four IECE country experts from across Europe contributed to the project. They participated in data collection and analysis, in observations and discussions during eight case study visits to different countries, and in other project meetings. These led to the project’s final insights and contributions to IECE.

This report is a summary of the synthesis report (European Agency, 2017a) that brings together the main project findings. It focuses on the project’s three new contributions to policy-making, research and practice in IECE. These are:

- a rationale for and implications of adopting an inclusive vision and goals as the main standards of IECE policy and provision;

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<sup>1</sup> This document uses the term ‘inclusive early childhood education’ (IECE) for the project findings and recommendations, while using ‘early childhood education’ (ECE) or ‘early childhood education and care’ (ECEC) when referring to the relevant literature.

<sup>2</sup> ‘All children’ refers to each and every child.

<sup>3</sup> IECE settings or pre-schools refer to facilities for the education of children from three years old to the start of primary education in the different European countries.



- the development and use by practitioners of a Self-Reflection Tool for improving IECE settings;
- adaptation of an Ecosystem Model of IECE within the setting, community and national levels.

This report concludes with a set of recommendations mainly directed at policy-makers. They are presented within the framework of the new Ecosystem Model of IECE.

## BACKGROUND

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Quality in early childhood education (ECE) is a prominent concern for policy-makers. A growing number of European and international studies have shown that the positive benefits of ECE directly relate to and depend upon 'quality'. The European Commission (2014) identified and reviewed five key policy actions which have improved ECE quality and access. They are:

- Access to quality ECE for all children
- Workforce quality
- Quality curriculum/content
- Evaluation and monitoring
- Governance and funding.

This Agency project developed new insights about IECE firstly by bringing together the experience and expertise of its members across Europe. At the same time, the project process was enhanced through a new creative combination of three theoretical frameworks that were previously only used separately for describing high-quality ECE provision:

- **Inclusion framework:** This is a core component of quality provision for the Agency and its member countries, which seek to:

*... ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers (European Agency, 2015, p. 1).*

- **Structure-process-outcome framework:** **Structure** focuses on the legal framework and the national, regional and local conditions that influence the quality of children's



experiences in the ECE setting. **Process** represents the interactions between children and the staff and peers and the ECE setting's physical environment. **Outcome** reflects the impact that the structures and processes have on the children's well-being, engagement and learning (European Commission, 2014; OECD, 2015).

- **Ecological systems model:** This model considers the complex evolving influences on children, arising from their interactions and interrelations with all the surrounding systems in the school/home, community and region/country – termed micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems – in which they function and grow (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

Each of these has been applied separately to improving ECE quality in policy, research and practice. However, in this project they were intertwined into the ecosystem model that constitutes one of the new insights and tools produced by the project.

## PROJECT FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO IECE

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The analysis and discussion of all project data led to three new contributions to policy-making, research and practice in IECE.

### 1. Enabling all children to belong, be engaged and learn

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The analysis of the project data strongly suggests that, from an inclusion perspective, the most important outcome of quality provision is to enable all children to actively participate in IECE. In this way, all children – including those vulnerable to exclusion – are equally valued, supported and enabled to progress along with their peers.

The first obvious requirement of participation is to be present in the setting during the daily social and learning activities. This is greatly influenced by national and regional statutory provisions for accessible IECE. These include entitlement to and availability of affordable IECE places. The project found that universal attendance is only possible if the local setting pro-actively reaches out to all parents in the community. In addition, the IECE settings ensure that each child not only attends, but is also actively involved in the social and learning activities, with relevant supports as necessary.



From the point of view of inclusion, each child is unique. It is essential to attend to each child's progress, rather than to merely focus on attaining national standards of competence. This allows all children – whatever their level of achievement – to be valued equally as active participants and learners with their peer group and to get the support they need to progress. The example IECE settings explicitly sought this by firstly welcoming and valuing each child within a creative, supportive learning community where everyone belongs and enjoys positive relationships with both staff and peers. Within this welcoming atmosphere, children are then invited and enabled to:

- use their strengths;
- make choices, particularly in play;
- exercise their curiosity and self-direction;
- express interests and goals and engage in problem-solving accordingly;
- be motivated for and engage in valued activities alongside and in interaction with their peer group.

## 2. Development of a Self-Reflection Tool

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The project's second contribution is the development of a Self-Reflection Tool. The project team combined the inspirations from existing instruments that focus on the ECE educational environment (see references in European Agency, 2017b) with the project's quest to describe the main characteristics of quality IECE for all children.

The Self-Reflection Tool focuses on the pre-school as a place for participation and learning. It pays attention to process and structural factors within the setting that influence the children's experiences. The tool addresses eight aspects:

1. Overall welcoming atmosphere
2. Inclusive social environment
3. Child-centred approach
4. Child-friendly physical environment
5. Materials for all children
6. Opportunities for communication for all
7. Inclusive teaching and learning environment
8. Family-friendly environment.



A set of questions covers each aspect. They aim to support practitioners' reflection. They include space for noting strengths and weaknesses in the service's inclusiveness, as well as for setting improvement goals.

The Self-Reflection Tool may be used for several purposes. These include:

- to provide a picture of the setting's state of inclusiveness;
- to serve as a basis for stakeholder discussions about inclusion;
- to identify and describe problem areas, set improvement goals and plan interventions to ensure inclusive provision;
- to evaluate the different ways of working inclusively;
- to develop inclusion indicators in national standards for quality IECE.

The questions' relevance, appropriateness and usefulness were assessed during the eight visits to example IECE settings in different countries. They were also assessed through focus groups and cognitive interviews with practitioners, parents, student teachers and academic staff in teacher education in three other countries. The results suggest that this could be a useful tool for pre-school practitioners all over Europe and beyond to improve the inclusiveness of their IECE settings.

### **3. Adaptation of an Ecosystem Model of IECE**

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The project's third contribution is the development of an Ecosystem Model of IECE. It can serve as a framework for planning, improving, monitoring and evaluating IECE quality at local, regional and national levels (please refer to Figure 1).

The model brings together all the important IECE issues that emerged from the data obtained from the different example IECE settings. However, not every setting equally highlighted or showed evidence of every issue. For this reason, and as suggested for the Self-Reflection Tool, the model is best used as a framework. Using this framework, policy-makers and practitioners can consider their own priority needs and goals within the model's comprehensive picture of the relevant issues for quality IECE.

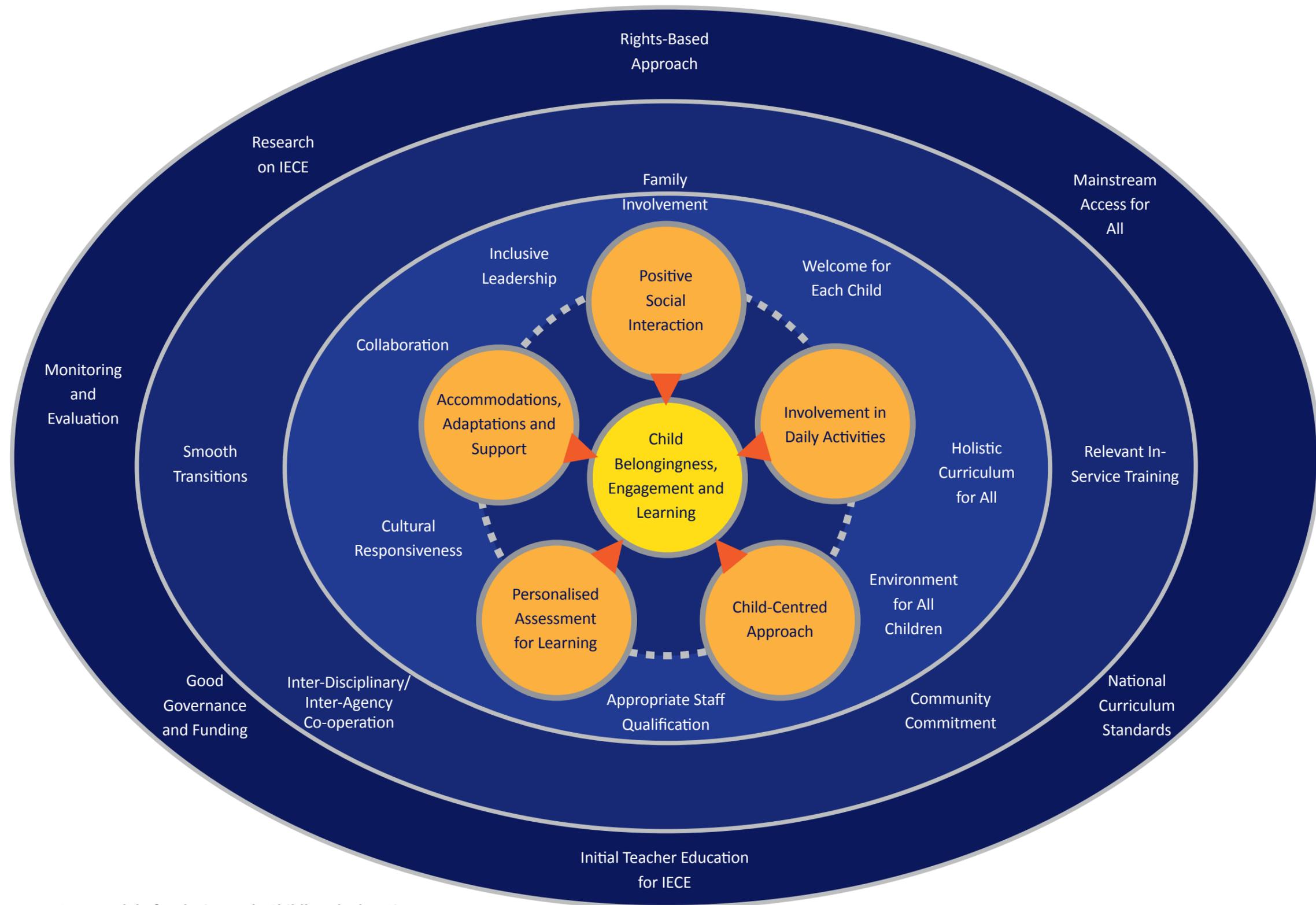


Figure 1. The Ecosystem Model of Inclusive Early Childhood Education



Figure 1 presents the outcomes, processes and structures of quality IECE in an ecosystem model clustered into five dimensions:

### Dimension 1: Outcomes

The centre of the model contains the three main **outcomes** of IECE, namely 'Child belongingness, engagement and learning'.

### Dimension 2: Processes

Directly surrounding the outcomes are the five major **processes** that the child is directly involved in within the IECE setting, from positive social interaction to active participation in learning and social activities with enabling support as necessary.

### Dimension 3: Supportive structures within the IECE setting

The major processes are, in turn, supported by **structures within the setting's physical, social, cultural and educational environment**. These include structures that enable each child to be valued, an accessible and holistic learning environment, and inclusive leadership and collaboration.

### Dimension 4: Supportive structures within the community

In addition, more distant **structural factors in the home and community** surrounding the IECE setting affect the inclusive processes that the child experiences. These include collaboration with families and support services, as well as procedures for smooth transitions to and from the IECE setting.





### **Dimension 5: Supportive structures at regional/national levels**

Finally, the model's outer layer presents **structural factors operating at regional/national levels** that also influence what goes on within the setting. They include rights-based national policies as well as evaluation systems, good governance and relevant research policies.

### **Collaborative use of the model by policy-makers and practitioners**

The model can enhance collaboration among policy-makers and practitioners for developing and promoting quality structures and processes at all levels directed at enabling all children to actively participate in IECE.

The Ecosystem Model clarifies the overlap of local and regional/national responsibilities. For instance, regional/national policy-makers are mainly responsible for a rights-based approach to legislation and funding that entitles all children to access mainstream provision (outer circle). However, for all children to be truly able to join their peers in the mainstream setting, the setting's staff must welcome all children and their families and make the necessary effort to ensure that all children from the locality can take an active and meaningful part in the setting (inner circle).

Similarly, national policy-makers must ensure that there are programmes of initial teacher education for IECE (outer circle). However, the local setting is responsible for ensuring that its staff are fully trained teachers (as far as possible) and that they have constant opportunities for upskilling to meet the diverse needs of all children that access the setting (inner circle).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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This project aimed to identify, analyse and then promote the main characteristics of quality IECE for all children from three years of age to the start of primary education. The project builds on existing understandings of IECE and adds new insights in its recommendations.

The project recommendations are organised according to the Ecosystem Model. They are mainly addressed to policy-makers in terms of how they can support practitioners to ensure quality IECE.





**To ensure that children’s active participation and learning in IECE becomes a main goal of IECE provisions, policy-makers should:**

1. Support local IECE providers to reach out pro-actively to children and families and to listen to their voices.
2. Create the conditions for IECE settings to secure not only children’s attendance, but also their engagement once they are there.

**To ensure that children’s active participation and learning in IECE becomes a main goal and process of IECE provisions, policy-makers should:**

3. Ensure that a holistic national curriculum sets as its primary goal and standard that all children are enabled to belong, be engaged and learn, both independently and with peers.
4. Ensure that assessment of children also accounts for the level of child participation in learning and social activities and of social interaction with adults and peers and for any support needed for this to take place.

**To ensure that IECE settings have the capacity to welcome and involve all children, policy-makers should:**

5. Ensure that initial and continuous education for teachers and support staff allow them to develop the competences necessary for welcoming and engaging all children in the IECE daily activities.
6. Ensure that practitioners are prepared to understand the cultural backgrounds of children and families as a factor for enabling their active participation in IECE.
7. Create the conditions for leaders of IECE settings to adopt an inclusive approach, to have the competence to create a welcoming, caring ethos and to enable collaborative responsibility for the benefit of each child’s engagement.
8. Prioritise the development and use of tools for improving the inclusiveness of the IECE physical and social environment, as exemplified in the Self-Reflection Tool.

**To ensure that IECE settings have the capacity to meet all children’s additional needs, policy-makers should:**

9. Ensure that the local community provides the expertise and resources to ensure that every child is able to attend, be part of the peer group and participate actively in the learning and social activities.



10. Promote collaboration among all sectors and disciplines, together with practitioners, families and local communities, to enhance the quality of all children's belongingness, engagement and learning.

**For quality assurance to really centre on ensuring quality service to children in IECE, policy-makers should:**

11. Ensure that statistical information collection includes an account of the number of children who are denied entitlement to quality IECE and of the types of barriers that prevent them from accessing it.

12. Ensure that service evaluations account for how far all children have opportunities for active participation, independent, self-initiated and social play and other activities.

13. Ensure the development of *inclusion* quality indicators for early childhood education by using, among other resources, the IECE project's Ecosystem Model and Self-Reflection Tool.

**To ensure that policy-making impacts on the quality of IECE practice, policy-makers in different sectors and at different local, regional and national levels should:**

14. Collaborate among themselves and with service providers to guarantee the quality and inclusiveness of IECE services through a shared understanding of inclusive quality issues, as exemplified in the Ecosystem Model of IECE.

## PROJECT OUTPUTS

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This report has focused on the project's new contributions to policy, practice and research on IECE. These were the final outcomes of a three-year cross-European process that included the following activities and outputs:

- A literature and policy review, which provides the project's conceptual framework and includes a review of international and European research literature and policy papers on IECE (European Agency, 2017c)
- The collection and qualitative analysis of 32 examples of IECE settings from 28 Agency member countries (European Agency, 2016)
- Detailed individual site visits to examples of IECE settings in eight different countries
- Individual country questionnaire responses, providing information on policy and practice in IECE for all children at national level in the Agency member countries



- A Self-Reflection Tool for improving IECE settings: this was constructed through stakeholders' participation in each of the eight visits to example IECE settings and through additional ecological validation studies in three different countries. It is available in 25 languages. (European Agency, 2017b)
- The synthesis report, *Inclusive Early Childhood Education: New Insights and Tools – Contributions from a European Study* (European Agency, 2017a), of which this report is a summary.

All these project outputs are available on the IECE project web area:

[www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/inclusive-early-childhood-education](http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/inclusive-early-childhood-education)

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