



## Country profile: Slovenia

A report for the cross-European programme *Working for inclusion: the role of the early years workforce in addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion*



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**This report forms part of *Working for Inclusion: the role of the early years workforce in addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion*. It is a European Union-wide programme funded by the European Commission and supported by the Scottish Government.**

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### The programme

*Working for Inclusion* is examining how improving the qualifications and skills of those working with our youngest children is helping to reduce poverty and improve social inclusion.

Taking place from February 2009 - January 2011, the programme encourages and facilitates discussion and debate over the role of the early years workforce. It will enable greater, more extensive and effective dialogue between local and national governments, education and qualification providers, employers, practitioners and policymakers.

### Programme partners

The programme is led by Children in Scotland in partnership with:

La Bottega Di Geppetto, Italy  
Nordland Research Institute, Norway  
Comenius Foundation for Child Development, Poland

### Research

The programme encompasses research, which offers a clear picture of early years services and their workforce across the EU and how these relate to levels of poverty and social inclusion.

In addition, country profiles of Scotland and the UK, Poland, Norway, Italy, Slovenia, France, Denmark, Portugal, Sweden and Hungary have been produced. This data will contribute towards policy development at EU level as well as Scotland and the rest of the UK. The research is led by Professor Peter Moss and Dr John Bennett.

### Study visits

Study visits in the four partner countries will address four key themes relating to poverty and social inclusion and the early years workforce. These visits will form the basis of a report on each theme, published by Children in Scotland on the project website ([www.childreninscotland.org.uk/wfi](http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/wfi)), and publicised throughout member states at local and national levels.

Each partner country will provide the context for exploring particular key challenges within the early years workforce:

- Working with the child as an active agent in their own learning (Italy)
- Working with diversity, in particular ethnicity, language, disability and gender (Scotland)
- Inclusive workforce models for rural and remote areas (Norway)
- Exploring the role of the pedagogue in working in an inclusive way with children and families, across agencies and age groups (Poland).

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## Glossary of key terms

### **Main services**

*Vrtec* (preschool institution)

*Vzgojno-varstvena družina* (education-based childminder's family)

### **Main occupations**

*Vzgojitelj predšolskih trok* (Preschool teacher)

*Pomočnik vzgojitelja* (Preschool teacher assistant).

# The social context of early childhood

## At a glance (all figures from EU sources)

Population: two million. Population density: 99.6 Total fertility rate: 1.37; Children in lone parent households: 7%  
*Employment rates (2008):* Men 72.7%; Women 64.2%. 11% of women and 7% of men were in part-time employment, 2007 (EU average: 31% and 8%).  
*GDP per capita in PPPs (compared to EU average =1):* 0.89; Children 'at risk of poverty' 12% (EU average 19%);<sup>1</sup> Gini coefficient: 0.23 (EU average = 0.30); *S80/S20*, that is, the income of top 20% compared to bottom 20%: 4 (EU average 4.8)<sup>2</sup> *Gender Gap Index:* 51<sup>st</sup> (2008)  
*Tax receipts:* 38.3% GDP (OECD average: 35.9%); *Public expenditure on education:* 5.3% of GDP (EU average 4.72%); *Public expenditure on social protection:* 23.4% GDP (EU average is 27.2%);  
*Period of leave after birth:* 12.5 months, of which 11 are paid at two-thirds or more of previous earnings

### Government

The Republic of Slovenia has been a democratic parliamentary republic since 1991 and a member of the EU since 2004. It covers an area of 20,273 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 2,032,608 citizens. Since independence in 1991, Slovenia's economic development has been very successful, making it a thriving transition country. Following economic growth, there was also an increase in employment, which has exceeded the European average since 2004. Since the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, Slovenia has instituted a stable, multi-party, democratic political system, characterised by regular elections, a free press, and an excellent human rights record. Within its government, power is shared between a directly elected president, a prime minister, and a bicameral legislature (Parliament). Parliament is composed of the 90-member National Assembly – which takes the lead on virtually all legislative issues – and the National Council, a largely advisory body composed of representatives from social, economic, professional, and local interests. The Constitutional Court has the greatest power to review legislation to ensure its consistency with Slovenia's constitution. Its nine judges are elected by the National Assembly for

a single nine-year term. Slovenian society is built on consensus, which has converged on a social democrat model. Though small in size, Slovenia enjoys a growing regional profile and plays a role on the European stage that is out of proportion to its size.

### Demography

Slovenia has a population of just over two million, a low total fertility rate of 1.37 and continued inward immigration, particularly from former Yugoslavia. According to the *Population Census of 2002*, the population declared their ethnic affiliation as follows: Slovenes – 83.1%, Serbs – 2%, Croats – 1.8%, Bosnians – 1.1%, other and non-declared – 12%. Most of the immigrants speak Croatian (2.8%), followed by Serbo-Croatian (1.8%), Serbian (1.6%) and Bosnian (1.6%). Roma, Albanian, Macedonian, German, Italian and Hungarian language is spoken by slightly less than 1% of the population. In 2006 there were altogether 53,555 immigrants in Slovenia, 31,097 of them with a permanent residence and 22,458 with a temporary residence. There were 1,825 immigrant children aged up to six, 1,183 of them with a permanent residence and 642 with a

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temporary residence.

The official language of Slovenia is Slovene. Hungarian and Italian are spoken in the border regions, and these groups have the status of indigenous minorities under the Slovenian constitution, which guarantees them seats in the National Assembly. German fluency is common near the Austrian border, and Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian are spoken by a sizable (6% of the population) minority. Upon achieving independence, Slovenia offered citizenship to all residents, regardless of ethnicity or origin, avoiding a sectarian trap that has ensnared several central European countries. Like most European societies, the Slovenian population is ageing and the low birth rate is a cause of concern.

### **Employment of women**

The overall employment rates in 2007 for men and women in Slovenia are as follows: 72.7% male employment and 64.2% female, compared to the EU average of 71.7% and 58.3%. The majority of women are employed full time, but 11% work part-time, compared to 8% of men (EU average: 31% and 8%). The employment rate for women with a child under three is 73%, which rises to an 89% employment level for women with a child aged from three to six (EU average: 57% and 67%). Lone mother employment was 87%, only a point below overall maternal employment.

### **Tax receipts and social expenditure**

Slovenia has a GDP per capita of 89% of the EU average (\$32,400). In terms of income inequality it does much better than most European countries, with a Gini coefficient of 0.23 (EU average is 0.30), and an *S80/S20* (income of top 20% compared to bottom 20%) of 3.4 (EU average 4.8) It spends more on education (5.31% of GDP) and less on social expenditure (23.4% of GDP), compared to the EU averages of 4.7% and 27.2%. Tax receipts account for 38.3% of GDP compared to the EU

average of 40.5%.

### **Child and family poverty**

Child and family poverty are relatively low in Slovenia. Social analyses from across the world agree that children in workless families, sole parent families, and large families are those most likely to be poor. Only 6% of Slovenian children live in lone parent families, compared to the EU average of 13%, and only 12% of children are considered to be at risk of poverty compared to the EU average of 19%. Expenditure on families with children is, however, relatively low at 2% of GDP and less than the OECD average of 2.3%.

### **Leave policies**

The total length of leave associated with the birth of a child is over a year, most of which is remunerated at full replacement of the beneficiary's wage. Leave is divided between maternity leave, paternity leave and parental leave, some of which is overlapping or can be used by either parent, eg maternity leave lasts for 115 days, of which the father can take 77 days. Fathers also benefit from 15 days of personal paternal leave – at that time, both parents can stay with the child at the same time. The parental leave for caring and nursing the child lasts for 260 days, and can be taken by either the mother or the father.

Flexibility is also a feature of parental leave in Slovenia. Leave may be taken as half-time leave (520 days in total) combined with part-time work, the benefit being reduced accordingly. Up to 75 days may be taken at any time up to the child's eighth birthday, as full-time or part-time leave or in individual days. In this last case, the length of the leave is equal to 70 per cent of the eligible calendar days. Leave may also be taken to care for a sick child or other co-resident family member. In the case of a child, seven days are allowed in case of emergency, and 15 days altogether up to the child's seventh birthday.

## The social context of early childhood

### Current cultural attitudes to child-rearing

In Slovenia, public opinion ascribes high importance to modern theories about children's upbringing and education and preschool teachers value progressive modes of learning.

#### Slovenian Public Opinion Surveys

Since 1992 there has been regular analyses of the World Values Survey and ESS data on the question of which qualities children need to learn at home. According to ESS data for the year 2006 independence (83 %), tolerance and respect for others (75 %) and responsibility (74 %) are the characteristics of children valued by three quarters (or more) of the Slovenians. Those progressive characteristics are valued among preschool teachers. In contrast, traditional and/or religious characteristics of children, such as obedience (31 %), faithfulness (16 %) and hard work (33 %) receive a lower priority. In addition, characteristics such as unselfishness (38 %) and imagination (16 %) have also a low priority.

#### The Slovene preschool teachers' attitudes survey

The data on the teachers' attitudes, beliefs and preferences indicate that the majority of Slovene teachers support the following:

#### **Child-centred approach to curriculum**

(a majority of teachers emphasise the importance of quality educational processes rather than outcomes; the importance of fostering social-emotional aspects of child development rather than solely cognitive development; and a balance between various aspects of child development)

#### **Autonomous conceptions of preschool institutions and the curriculum**

(a majority of teachers support the key role of preschools in providing high quality education rather than the role of preparing children for school achievements or preschools being a means for achieving societal goals and policies).

#### **Parents/family involvement in preschools**

(a majority of teachers support a partnership model of cooperation - assuming parents' active role within preschools decision making, or parents active involvement in preschool activity)

#### **Active role of children in learning process and in socialisation**

in general. (more than three quarters of teachers agree that the role of adults is to enable children to participate in decision-making about the things which are important for them in preschools. For more than 50 % of the teachers children's active participation in preschools is a key indicator of high quality preschools).

**State measures aimed at raising preschool standards of education**, such as lowering the number of children in preschool units, providing new facilities and ensuring a greater number of places. There is not support for private for-profit preschools or the decentralisation of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) network. A majority of teachers are satisfied with the quality of teacher's training programs.

Source: Turnšek, Nada (2008, 2009)

## Historical overview (history of early childhood services in Slovenia)

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were no systematic initiatives regarding the care and education of preschool children in Slovenia. Separate charities, Catholic institutions and private individuals established and financed different forms of preschool care and education, for example children's sanctuaries (the first of which opened in the capital city of Ljubljana in 1834) and play centres, in which care activities were predominant. The *Law on public schools* (1869) defined, that in several towns, children's sanctuaries and the play centres could be joined to primary schools and placed under the care of the land and municipal school boards. In general, these services were established only in the larger cities and industrial towns and included older preschool children, whose parents were employed.

In 1958, after the formation of Yugoslavia, a General Law on Education was passed which defined the place of pre-school education in the different republics. In Slovenia, day care centres were placed under the responsibility of the Secretariat for Family and Social Protection (Slovenian Community of Childcare), which from 1977, financed the services in association with the municipalities. The Secretariat for Education (Community of Education of Slovenia) cooperated with childcare centres in preparing the statutory acts and the *Programme for preschool education and care*. This was the first national document addressing the contents of working with young children from eight months to seven years. In 1980, the *Law on preschool education and care* was passed, which introduced an obligatory year of school preparation for children aged six to seven years. A highly structured program - *Programme for the child's preparation for compulsory schooling* (1981) - based on content areas was prepared for these children. A similar curriculum concept can be seen at work in the *Programme for preschool education and care*, which outlines specific learning content for each year of age, based on normative concepts of child development. A division of services for children aged one to three years and three to six years in preschools is also reflected both in the

organisation of groups and in the curriculum.

The Slovene early childhood system expanded in the 1970s and 1980s. In many cases, the public preschools were built with citizens' solidarity or voluntary contributions on the part of the local residents. The statistical data shows that the percentage of children in pre-school institutions gradually increased until 1987. In 1976, 20.2% of preschool children were in pre-school institutions; in the year 1980 the percentage was 38%, and in the year 1998, it rose to 58.9%.

The 1980s were influenced by the "philosophy" of 'socialising the area of care and education' as a central socio-political aim of former Yugoslavia. At the time, the social role of preschools was intended primarily to provide care for the children of employed parents, as well to create 'all-round developed personalities' in children according to the socialist 'self-governing' values (the concept has since been strongly criticised). Other social goals were also explicit, such as encouraging employment of women and equalising educational opportunities of children – particularly those living in poor and single-parent families. At the time, the institutionalisation of the early childhood was characterised by centralisation and regulation, manifested in state agencies' control over the standards regarding the facilities, health care, nutrition and other living conditions, as well as assuming control over preschool institutions and teachers' practices. The professionalisation process was reinforced by introducing the first National programme for care and education of preschool children (*Vzgojni program za vzgojo in varstvo predšolskih otrok* 1985), and by establishing the higher-level teachers' training study programme.

At the end of the 1990s the movement for democratisation of Slovene Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) began and was formalised in the foundations and principles of the new National curriculum for preschool institutions (*Kurikulum za vrtce*, 1999). Re-conceptualisation of the curriculum was part of the whole educational system reform (White

## Historical overview (history of early childhood services in Slovenia)

Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia, 1996) within the context of the independent democratic state. The key underlying curriculum principles are 'democracy and plurality of value systems, cultures and knowledge'. The national curriculum is in line with current world trends and in many ways contrasts with the socialist concept of preschool education and didactically oriented programmes prevalent in the 1970s.

The new concept of education and the legislation all emphasized the rights of children (including cultural rights as well as respect for and protection of their individuality) as opposed to the former "same to all" system. The authority over pre-school education was transferred from the then Ministry of Health, Family and Social Security to the Ministry of Education and Sport. Before the general educational reform (1996), which introduced nine years of compulsory schooling instead of eight, the pre-school education period concluded with a one-year programme of compulsory school-preparation, colloquially called "little school". After the reform the enrolment in elementary schools began to take place one year earlier (at six years of age rather than seven) and the compulsory school-preparation has been cancelled. A linkage between programmes of pre-school education and the beginning of compulsory education is ensured with a uniform system of education and schooling and with preparation and acceptance of educational or schooling programmes.

## Key concepts and important influences in ECEC

On the whole, the curriculum's principles and foundations reflect democratic concepts and values. The key concepts are: developmental process-oriented curriculum, open curricula, teacher's autonomy, autonomy of preschool curricula vs. elementary school curricula, deconstructing institutional hidden curricula, child's freedom of choice, equal opportunities and respect for children's individuality and cultural rights.

The curriculum is declared as 'open', stimulating the teachers' autonomy (accompanied by a high level of professional responsibility) as well as plurality of pedagogical approaches. In the national curriculum the process-oriented curriculum obligates teachers to exercise critical thinking and professional self-reflection (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999, 10–11). Child's play, especially symbolic play, is regarded as the 'natural way of the child's learning and development' (19–20). In addition, the role of preschools is to 'guide the children towards new experiences and knowledge', involving them in '...active ways of learning based on intrinsic motivation, concrete problem solving and reflection' while '...gaining social experiences' (19). 'Positive group climate' and '...quality of peer interactions and interactions between adults and children have to be stimulated' (10). Preschool education is seen as autonomous to later schooling; it is emphasised that preschools should not become school-like, but rather 'preserve the specifics of the preschool period' (10).

Special attention is paid to the elements of institutional 'hidden curricula'. The recommendations have been primarily directed towards encouraging flexibility and discouraging a lack of individual treatment or over-collectivism. Systematic 'removal of the conditions causing [the negative manifestations of] the hidden curricula' is considered as an important goal of democratisation (20). Children are regarded as individuals making choices and it is emphasised that exercising choices 'means a variety of alternative activities and contents, not

[merely] a choice between joining or non-joining the [teacher's initiated] activity', or '...a choice between activity and free-time' (12). In addition, it is stressed that children '...have the right to be different', '...to retreat from group-oriented routines' and '...enjoy privacy in intimacy' inside the institution (10). 'Re-conceptualisation and re-organisation of the space, time and equipment' in preschools (10) require providing 'a variety of learning and playing spaces with toys and materials accessible to children at any time', '...restraining the amount of time children spend without being active, in waiting and tidying up', and '...enabling children's choices regarding sleeping and eating routines' (21).

Preschool education is considered a supplementation to family education, however, 'the division of responsibilities and the different competences' are emphasised (24). The preschool institution has to 'respect the privacy of the family and the parents, their culture, identity, language, values, convictions and habits', while the parents '...have to respect the limits of their decision-making, which should not interfere with the institution's professionalism' (24). The rights of parents are 'to receive written and other forms of information, as well as to exchange information', '...to be informed about their rights and responsibilities', '...to be involved in curriculum planning and to participate actively', '... to receive gradual admission to institution [parents accompany the child in institution for a certain period]', '...to expect in-depth discussion with the teachers on issues concerning their child', and '...to choose a public or a private setting' (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999, 15).

Respect for human rights, especially those connected with cultural (language, religious, ethnical) identity and gender, is the key novelty of the curriculum. It emphasises the importance of 'raising awareness of the individual and group differences' and '...non-discriminatory treatment' (10). Cultural differences have also been embedded in the new, equal opportunities principle. 'Implementation of the equal

# Key concepts and important influences in ECEC

opportunity principle' is explained as 'providing conditions for permanent or periodic inclusion of children with special needs' and for 'multi-language development of children living on the Italian or Hungarian nationally mixed areas' (8). It is also stated that 'although Roma people are not an autochthonous [traditional] minority', '...it is important that the coexistence of the two cultures should be interactive, not only one-way' (8). The general goals of multicultural education are stated in the chapter 'Society'. In addition, the two special documents, *Supplement to the Curriculum for Preschool Institutions in Nationally Mixed Areas* and *Supplement to the Curriculum for Working with Roma Children*, determine the curriculum's goals and examples of practices for teachers working in ethnic mixed areas.

## The structure of ECEC

### Overview

Slovenia, like the Nordic countries, has a unitary system of provision for all children aged one to six years, preceded by a generous maternity and parental leave system of just over one year. The Ministry of Education and Sport is the line ministry, in charge of the formation of personnel, programmes and aids to particular groups of children. The municipalities are the main funders and direct providers of services. Pre-school education can be performed by autonomous public preschool institutions, organisational units of preschool institutions at primary schools, private pre-school institutions and private persons (teachers).

### Preschool institutions (*vrtec*)

Preschool institutions are established and financed by municipalities and regulated by different laws and regulations. The most important acts are the Organization and Financing of Education and Training Act, which regulates all levels of education, and the Pre-school Institutions Act, which regulates preschool education in public and private preschool institutions. The last act defines the duties of preschool institutions, the kinds of possible preschool programmes, financing, demands for the education of professional workers, the work of preschool teachers and assistant teachers and the gathering and protection of personal data in preschool institutions. The legislation defines the legal basis for establishing public and private preschool institutions.

- *Public preschool institutions* are established by municipalities; private preschool institutions can be established by Slovenian or foreign legal individuals or private individuals.
- Public preschool institutions and private preschool institutions with a concession implement the publicly valid programme, based on the national preschool curriculum. Municipalities can establish:

- Independent preschool institution (*samostojni vrtec*) – public institution, if it includes at least 10 groups of children. It can include a maximum of 30 groups.
- Preschool institution as an organisational unit of a public educational institution eg primary school (*vrtec pri osnovni šoli*) or any other institution with at least eight groups, and in special cases with six groups.
- For the implementation of educational work in one or more locations the independent preschool institution or the preschool institution at the primary school can have one or more units.
- Pre-school institutions can be public or private. Public pre-school centres are established and financed by the municipalities. Private pre-school centres are established by individuals or group of individuals. There are two types of private pre-school centres:
  - Private pre-school centres with concession agreements (granted by the local community) which must meet regulatory requirements for public pre-school centre and implement the national curriculum
  - Private pre-school centres without concession agreements, which must also meet requirements concerning the staff, premises, equipment and acquire a positive recommendation from the Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for General Education.

In the school year 2006/2007, 18 private preschool institutions were active in Slovenia, including six of those with concessions. In September 2009, 26 private preschool institutions are active in Slovenia, including seven of those with a concession.

A private preschool institution may receive the municipality's concession if a need is established

# The structure of ECEC

for preschool education. That means that the private preschool institution with granted concession is executing a public service and will have the same curriculum as a public preschool institution. The concession defines the amount of financial means guaranteed by the municipality. Private preschool institutions can also implement a programme, which follows special pedagogic principles (such as Montessori or Steiner for example), after it has gained a positive opinion of the Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for General Education. Private preschool institutions are still underdeveloped. The reasons may be that these services are expensive due to all kinds of regulations. In addition, private services do not have any tradition and parents still trust public services.

### ***Education-based childminder (vzgojno-varstvena družina)***

Preschool institutions also organise child education and care at a childminder's. This form of education and childcare is performed by pre-school teachers and their assistants employed at a pre-school institution, or by private pre-school teachers. This education and care scheme can be provided to first-age group children by the providers with qualification requirements for preschool teachers or their assistants; for second-age group children, it can be provided by individuals meeting the qualification requirements for preschool teachers, provided that the premises and equipment comply with respective standards and criteria. The conditions required for organising are the interest expressed by the parents and an insufficient number of free places at a public preschool institution. The share of children enrolled in those services is less than 1 %. The majority of them are children up to three years old.

### ***Occasional childminding (občasno varstvo na domu)***

Preschool institutions can also organise childcare in the home of the child. This is a special service, which can be performed by pre-school teachers

employed at a pre-school institution or by external contractors with at least secondary education or five years work experience in the field of education and schooling. This service is entirely paid for by the parents.

### ***Registered childminder (registriran varuh predšolskih otrok)***

The Preschool Institutions Act (March 2008, Article 24a), provides the possibility for un-registered childminders to register at the Ministry of education and sport under the following condition: the group must not exceed six children, the housing must comply with the set standard, a childminder must have at least secondary education or qualification required for a pre-school professional, and they must not have a criminal record. In September 2009 there were 42 childminders registered, and the number is growing. The Act provided minimum standards and controls for un-registered childminders already caring for children who had been refused a place in pre-schools or those whose parents had chosen informal care. It can be regarded as a temporary solution in the face of a lack of places in pre-school institutions.

### ***Providers***

Slovenia has a broad and easily accessible network of preschool institutions. The majority of places are provided by public preschool institutions as only 1.7 % of children attend private preschool institutions. The law stipulates that the public network should be organized in such a way as to enable parents and children to have access to a choice of programmes. If the sufficient number of children to fill at least one class-unit request places but there is no public preschool institution nearby or there are no places available in existing provision, then the local community is obliged to initiate proceedings to ensure additional free places or issue a public concession or formal contract to a private provider. Private providers contracted in this way receive 85 % of the funds that a local community reserves for salaries and material

## The structure of ECEC

costs per child in a public pre-school institution. They must meet the following conditions:

- that they carry out at least a half-day programme
- that they have at least two units of children
- that their premises and staff meet regulatory requirements
- that they are accessible to *all* children.

Being a unitary system under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Sport, there is one main service system in Slovenia, namely the public preschool service. At the request of parents, the local community preschool institution, staffed by professional personnel, receives children from their first to their sixth birthday, when compulsory school begins. Care needs of parents during the first year of their child's life are covered by a generous maternity and parental leave system. The law stipulates that the public network should be organised in such a way that it enables parents and children to have access to and the option of choosing the programme. Should there be no public preschool institution in the area of the child's residence, or there are places available – but sufficient children to fill at least one class unit - the local community is obliged to initiate the proceedings of ensuring additional free places or to issue a public concession.

### **The governance of early childhood services**

Independent preschool institutions are administratively and pedagogically managed by the preschool institution's head teacher. They are appointed for the period of five years and can renew their term of office as many times they want. A head teacher is appointed by the Preschool Institution Council based on the opinion of the Preschool Institution Council of Staff and the preschool institution's founder (the municipality). All head teachers have to finish the program of the National School for Leadership in Education consisting of five or six training modules over 144 hours. The content of modules focuses on team work, introduction to

management in education, theory of organisations and management, planning and decision-making, people in organisations, head teacher as a pedagogical leader, legislation in education and one optional theme. The preschool's head teacher is responsible for ensuring quality work in the preschool institution and must therefore conduct monitoring in groups (at least 21 per year) and have individual discussions with preschool teachers.

The **Preschool Council** includes five representatives of the pre-school institution staff, three representatives of parents, and three representatives of the municipality. The board appoints, discharges and assesses the effectiveness of the head teacher's work, approves the programme of development, the annual work plan and the report's realization, decides about the implementation of programmes above standard and deals with reports on educational problems etc.

Control over preschool institutions including control over the implementation of laws and acts, which regulate such organisations, realisation of preschool education in preschool institutions and the use of public funds is the responsibility of the **Inspectorate of the Republic of Slovenia for Education and Sport** (forming part of the Ministry of Education and Sport). Parents, guardians or foster parents, the parents' council, employed workers or representatives of the trade union can inform the inspectorate about irregularities and raise concerns. The inspector is obliged to inform them about the performed work and measures, on their request. The inspectorate performs periodical inspections (every fifth year), exceptional inspections (based on the initiative) and repeated inspections (after the expiration of the deadline for the remedy of infringement). Inspections also refer to the planning of preschool work and annual and continuous planning of educational work, preschool enrolment, execution of children's rights, the rights and responsibilities of parents and staff, price setting, cooperation with parents,

# The structure of ECEC

organisation of children, keeping of pedagogical documentation, appointing and discharging of head teachers and their assistants, the work of the Council of staff and execution of rights of children with additional support needs. The control of private preschool institutions, which implement public programmes, refers to the organization, financing and implementation of public programmes.

Developmental and counselling work in educational institutions for the field of preschool education is done by various professional institutions in support of pre-school institutions:

- The **Ministry of Education and Sport** (MES) is responsible for the implementation of the education policy. Its prime responsibility is to enforce educational legislation. It has the authority to decide on administrative matters related to the following:
  - pre-school education, basic education, secondary general, technical and vocational education
  - higher vocational education (other higher education is the responsibility of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology)
  - education of children with additional support needs
  - music education
  - adult education
  - education of the Italian and Hungarian ethnic minorities in Slovenia
  - education of Roma
  - education of the Slovenian ethnic minority in Italy, Austria and Hungary
  - supplementary Slovenian language and

culture courses for Slovenian nationals abroad

- supplementary courses for Slovenian citizens with other ethnic backgrounds in their respective languages and cultures.

**MES** also supervises the operation and management of public educational institutions and other institutions in the field of education. The administrative supervision primarily focuses on whether the requirements concerning human resources and facilities for educational provision are being met. The Ministry provides funding in compliance with standards and criteria stipulated by the Minister having jurisdiction over education. The ministry includes the **Preschool Education Division**, which is responsible for legislative and financial matters in the field of preschool education. The **Education Development Office** is planning the strategies of educational development and is coordinating the developmental work in this field, which includes preschool education as well.

The **Department for Human Resource Management in Education** at the **MES** is responsible for the planning, organization, implementation and co-financing of the school, staff development and professional development human resource support. Their activities are included in the Programming Document of the Republic of Slovenia 2004-2006 and are part of long-term strategy and goals of the European Union in the field of education and training. The financing of activities is executed by the European Structural Fund and by funds from the Ministry. The department for Human Resource Management in Education at the Ministry of Education and Sport is responsible for arranging in-service training. They also deal with activities in the field of internship, scholarships and grants, as well as vocational training qualifications. To support professional development and personal growth of teachers and to stimulate quality and efficiency of the pedagogical process, they organize open tenders for in-service training. Several kinds of

## The structure of ECEC

programmes exist; the most common ones in the field of preschool education are upskilling of the workforce (individual participants from preschool institutions can apply) and programmes for preschool staff councils, which are designed for the whole preschool teacher's staff. The chosen programmes are published on the Internet and most programme providers give extra notice about their training to preschool institutions. Programme participants receive an attendance certificate, which can be used for career advancement. A special committee also deals with other in-service training, (which are not included in the training catalogue), and awards them points if their goals are in accordance with in-service training policy.

- The **National Education Institute** is a central institution, which cooperates in conceptualisation, implementation and monitoring of innovative programmes and practices in preschool and other educational institutions. It strives to achieve the goals set by the reform – increase the accessibility of education for everyone, open up the education system globally and ensure the highest possible degree of quality in education. They plan, test, develop and implement new elements together with the professional staff and heads at preschool institutions. The National Education Institute has eight offices in different regions.
- Preschool institutions receive professional support from the **Educational Research Institute**, the Slovene central institution for conducting developmental and applicative research in all fields of education and for developing educational sciences and their interdisciplinary connection.
- The **Association of Preschool Institutions** consists of independent preschool institutions and preschool institutions at primary school. The council consists of different working groups, of

which the consulting workers' working group is especially important. The working group solves professional problems and questions, monitors the profession's development and findings in preschool education, develops professional work in preschool institutions, cooperates in the development of professionally planned work on current topics and forwards findings to the public. Head teachers gather at the head teachers' working group. Among institutions which defend the professional interests of preschool teachers and teacher assistants, the Trade Union of Educational Workers and the Association of Educational Societies should be mentioned.

### *The role of municipalities*

The role of the local community (municipality) is to ensure a sufficient number of places in pre-school institutions, to finance pre-school institutions and to grant subsidies for parents. According to the law, the local community is obliged to increase capacities in a public pre-school institution or to issue a concession, if there is sufficient need for extra pre-school places. In case parents want to enrol their child in a programme, but there are no available places or no pre-school institutions in the local area, the local community is obliged to find other options.

The local community budget provides funds for staff wages, material costs in accordance with norms and standards, real estate maintenance and investments and equipment for public pre-school institutions or pre-school institutions with concessions. Funds are provided from the difference between the cost of the programmes and the parents' contribution. The national budget provides funds for pre-school institution departments in hospitals and in institutions for education and schooling for children with additional support needs, as well as for the higher costs and investments in Italian, bilingual and Roma departments.

# The structure of ECEC

Local communities are the main founders and fund providers of pre-school. They also decide on the cost of a pre-school place, considering the national regulations on pricing of pre-school education programmes, the income and property of the parents and the real expenses. When there is no public preschool institution in a child's local area or the existing public preschool institution has no places available and there are sufficient children to fill an additional class, the local community is obligated to provide additional places within a public preschool institution or launch a tender for granting a concession within 30 days of the parental request.

### **System financing**

Public expenditure on ECEC in Slovenia is above the OECD average, with 0.6% expended on pre-school education. Most public funds are provided by the municipalities, which are responsible for establishing pre-school services and for all funds necessary for investments, maintenance and repairs. Funds are provided in the central government budget for pre-school units in educational institutions for children with additional support needs, pre-school units in hospitals, of which the activity is carried out within the public sector, and a part of the funds for pre-school education of children of the recognized Italian and Hungarian minorities and for Roma children.

An important contribution to preschool funding is made through parental fees, the sale of services and products, donations and other sources. The basis for the parental payment is the cost of the programme attended by the child, which must include the costs of education, child care and nutrition. Parents' payments are set by the local community according to the family income in comparison with the average salary in Slovenia. Since January 2000 parents are asked to pay no more than 80 % and no less than 10 % of the cost of the pre-school programme attended by their child. Subsidies for pre-school education are granted to needy families in the form of lower contribution rates. Lower income families

can be exempt from payment.

The funding of recognised private pre-school institutions (1.7% of total) is regulated through a formal agreement between the grantor (public authority) and the concessionaire. As a rule, these institutions are regulated and funded in a way similar to public pre-school institutions. Private pre-school institutions without a concession are also eligible for public funding.

16. Other forms of financial benefits for children and families (such as child supplements, compensation for childbirth leave, parental supplement, childcare supplement, and the package for newborn children) are the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs.

### **Data collection, monitoring and research**

In Slovenia, data is collected on a regular and official basis on:

- The supply and distribution of early childhood services across the country
- Enrolments and profiles of children enrolled (eg age, disability, age groups, programmes)
- The workforce - numbers, qualifications, pay and profile (eg age, gender)
- Structural standards, (eg ratios and group sizes) Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, publishes these details on their website and in statistical publications.
- A national evaluation of the early childhood system was undertaken in the last 5 years by experts from the Faculty of Arts, Department of Psychology (Marjanovič Umek, Zupančič, Kavčič, Fekonja Peklaj, Podlessek). The reports are published by the Ministry of Education and Sport and the Agency for Research in the Republic of Slovenia.

## The structure of ECEC

### Monitoring

The monitoring of educational programmes is carried out by public institutions, such as the National Education Institute (Zavod RS za solstvo), the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training (Center za poklicno izobrazevanje), the Slovenian Institute for Adult education (Andragoski center RS) and the

National Examination Centre (Državni izpitni center). The National Education Institute is concerned with the monitoring of programmes in pre-school institutions, primary schools and general upper-secondary schools. At the international level the evaluation of educational programmes is carried out by various international studies such as TIMSS, PIRLS, and PISA.

## The evaluation of preschool institutions in Slovenia

The evaluation of preschool institutions in Slovenia is implemented in the form of targeted research programmes funded by the Ministry of Education and Sport and by the Agency for Research in the Republic of Slovenia. In the context of targeted research in the period from 2002 to 2005, a model for assessing the quality in preschool institutions was generated. This model takes into account both aspects of system organisation and the contents of preschool care and education. Within this model, three levels of quality in the preschool institution are examined: structural quality (the organisation of work and life in preschool institution, space and materials), process quality (cooperation between the employees, cooperation between preschool institution and parent, professional development and satisfaction of workers, cooperation with other preschool and other institutions) and curriculum quality (curriculum planning, implementing the curriculum, routine activities, involvement of children in the process of implementing the curriculum). Indicators, questionnaires and rating scales have been designed for each level and area of quality, aimed at different target groups (parents, preschool teachers and their assistants, headteachers, counsellors). A semi-structured interview was designed for children from around the four years of age. With the introduction of a system of experts (external experts from different institutions, which have the role of the critical friends) and by gradually building up a network of preschool institutions involved in the process of self-evaluation, the identification and provision of the quality in preschool institutions has become a part of the developmental work of most preschool institutions.

**Source:** Professors Ljubica Marjanovič Umek and Urška Fekonja Peklaj

### Research

The government finances *contracted research programmes* in the early childhood field, that is, specified research projects to be carried out with identified aims and objectives. In recent decades, some pieces of research in the field of preschool education were prepared:

- The daily routine from the point of view of the hidden curriculum in preschool institutions and the first year of schooling

(comparison of the situation before and after the curricular reform);

- Language development and the development of early literacy;
- Self-evaluation of preschool education: establishment of quality;
- The effects of pre-school on child development and school achievement.

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## Slovenian longitudinal study on the effect of preschool

The first Slovenian longitudinal study on the effect of preschool on child's development and learning was carried out in the context of targeted research programmes in the period from 2002 to 2006. The researchers wanted to establish the effect of preschool on different areas of child's development and learning, eg language and intellectual development, development of personality, academic achievement in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade of compulsory schooling. In addition to different areas of child's development, the quality of preschool was assessed once while the quality of home environment was assessed twice during the duration of the study. The sample included approximately 350 children aged three years, of whom approximately half entered preschool at the age of a year and the other half when they were three years old. After three years of assessment, when children were six years old and had entered the compulsory school, the sample was expanded to a group of children who did not attend preschool prior to entering the compulsory school. The authors conclude that children who entered preschool early (between 10 and 15 months of age), displayed fewer internalising problems (eg they were less depressive, anxious, excluded from the peer group and less dependant on the preschool teacher), more powerful will (eg they were more assertive, they wanted to lead a peer group, they were more manipulative and frequently "got what they wanted") and also were more social (they actively searched for friends, had many friends, involved in social interactions without major difficulties) than children who entered preschool later (between 31 and 45 months of age). Early (around the first year of toddler's life) or late (around the third year of child's life) entry into preschool had significant effect on children's language development, which was assessed when children were three, four, five and six years old. Early entry into preschool acted as a protective factor of language development of

children whose mothers had a low level of education. The findings suggest that preschool has contributed to reducing the differences in language competence of children whose mothers differed in their levels of education. The results in the area of children's pragmatic ability (storytelling) are slightly different: early entry into preschool did not have a positive effect on child's storytelling as the six year old children, who entered preschool at the age of three or did not attend preschool before entering the compulsory school, expressed a higher level of storytelling than children who entered preschool at the age of one and therefore attended preschool for five years. Considering the obtained results, the researchers conclude that there are some unused potentials offered by different preschool activities (along with the play and routine activities) to support the development of child's pragmatic ability, especially in the first age period (toddlers aged from one to three years). The quality of preschools on the process level, which was assessed when children were five years old, had no significant effect on the language development of five year old children. The established interactions have shown that early entry into a high-quality preschool reduces the differences in language development of children whose parents differ in their level of education. On the basis of the obtained results authors also note that Slovenian preschools meet the appropriate and, in comparison with the European preschools, relatively high quality on the structural level (eg the number of children in a class, the ratio between the number of children and professional workers, the education of professional workers); while on the process level, which refers to the quality of implementation of the curriculum, the differences between preschools and between different classes within the same preschool are relatively high, irrespective of structurally identical or comparable conditions to work.

**Source:** Professors Ljubica Marjanovič Umek and Urška Fekonja Pekljaj

## Access levels and strategies

### Overall access

With an enrolment level of 49% (Statistical Office of Slovenia, 2009), access levels to preschool institutions for Slovenian children aged one to three years are among the highest in Europe. Yet, they do not match the high numbers of Slovenian women at work. Access levels of children aged three to six years are within the European average, reaching 90%. Some concern is expressed about identifying the 10% or so of children who do not attend a preschool institution before entering primary school.

### Access for different age groups

The percentage of children enrolled is 70% (Statistical Office of the RS, 2008/2009). 34% of one-year olds; 55% of two-year olds; 76 % of three-year olds; 82% of four-year olds and 90% of five-year olds now access early childhood programmes (Statistical Office of the RS, 2007/2008). Compulsory schooling begins at six years of age (children younger than five years and eight months cannot be included in first grade). Twenty percent of the children enrolled attend preschool institutions situated at primary schools. In the school year 2006/07, 95.2% of all children enrolled attended full-time programmes, operating six to nine hours per day.

### At a glance

Home-based care	% of all children cared for 2008/09
Parental or family care	From 50% for children 0-3 years to 15% for children 3-6 years *
Preschool services 0-6 years	Percentage enrolment
Registered childminder	** <1%
Preschool institutions 1-3 years	49 %
Preschool institutions 3-6 years	84 %

\* No data available; in the year 2008 there were 42 childminders registered but there is no data available on the percentage of children.

\*\* Estimation; in the year 2008 there were 132 children in education-based childminder's family in Slovenia which represent 0.2 % children of first-age group children

# Access levels and strategies

### *Admission criteria and procedures*

Public preschool institutions register and admit children to their programmes on the basis of applications during the whole year. If the number of children registered exceeds the number of places available decisions concerning admission are made by the admission committee. The composition of and work procedures for an admission committee and admission criteria are set forth by the council of a preschool institution in agreement with the founder. The committee is appointed by the principal. Upon a child's admission to a preschool institution, parents submit health certificate for the child issued by a paediatrician. In admitting children to a preschool institution, preferences are given to children from economically disadvantaged families submitting the appropriate certificate of a welfare centre. Children with additional support needs are given priority in admission to preschool institutions by law as well.

### *Strategies to expand access*

The potential barriers to accessibility are:

- A limited availability of places in the local community of residence. In that case, the parents have a right to choose any preschool institution in any other community. The local community authority of child's residence is obliged to pay subsidy if needed.
- A limited variety of preschool programmes (eg in case parents wish to enrol their child in a programme based on alternative pedagogical concepts such as Steiner's, or Montessori, but there is no such programme available nearby)

In order to tackle these limitations, preschool institutions of different local communities cooperate among themselves when enrolling children. The local community authorities are obliged to find alternative options, if there is a

lack of placements. The State facilitates the enrolment of children by encouraging the establishment of private settings and co-financing of private programmes.

### ***Rights of children with additional support needs***

#### *Children from low-income families*

The child poverty rate in Slovenia is about 12%, after the effect of fiscal transfers and social policies. Measures for broadening access of at-risk children to preschool institutions are the following:

- ***Subsidised payment.*** According to the Preschool Institution Act, the parents' payment for preschool institution is determined according to family income. Parents pay from 10% to 80% of the whole programme costs; the rest is covered by the municipal budget.
- ***Exemption from payment.*** Parents who receive financial social assistance benefits are exempted from payment for a preschool institution. Recently the law regulating parents' payment for preschool institution (Preschool Institution Act) changed; parents are now exempted from payment for the subsequent child enrolled (from September 2008). The new legislation also anticipates a reduction of the payment for the children attending preschool institutions in the next few years (in 2010 the payment for five year old children will be reduced by 50%, in 2012 the fee for four year old children will be decreased by 50% and in 2014 the same will happen for three year old children) In the case of more than one child attending preschool institution the law guaranteed parents a lower price according to family income for the older children.
- ***Consideration of special circumstances.*** In special cases and based on the opinion

## Access levels and strategies

given by the competent tax authority or social service, the local community authorities can determine the payment of parents by considering not only the income and property of the family, but also other facts and circumstances which reflect the actual social situation of the family.

In 2006 slightly less than 50% of the children were classified in the three lower payments categories. As far as possible, the government prioritises subsidised childcare places for infants and toddlers in particular need of early development services, eg children with additional support needs and children in poverty, including indigenous, second-language, travelling, immigrant or other groups. Costs are highly subsidised for these families.

### *Children with disabilities and additional support needs*

Children with additional support needs have priority in enrolment in preschool institutions. In addition, special instructions to teachers caring for these children have been issued, which describe the adjustments and supports required to ensure that children with additional support needs can be included successfully in preschool classes. Recommendations for the preschool teachers and additional professional workers, who occasionally work with children, were also designed. For children with additional needs who are included in special classes, a *Curriculum for the adjusted programme for preschool children* has been prepared, deriving from the *Preschool Curriculum* but emphasizing certain principles of working with children (especially the principle of individuation and the principle of cooperation with parents). Some goals on certain activities in preschool institutions - and the proposed activities - are also adjusted, modified or replaced. An effective public network of health and family support services has been established, accessible to all families at community level and with outreach services to families with young children.

### *Ethnic and bilingual children*

The Pre-school Institutions Act provides the possibility of establishing groups of children with a more favourable staff to child ratio. In the school year 2002/2003, 157 Roma children attended preschool programmes, most of them full-time programmes. The following are measures adopted in local communities to receive these children:

- *Favourable standards and criteria, subsidies by the local community authority.* Preschool class units of Roma children are financed from the municipal budget, state budget and parents' payments. The State relaxes normal criteria in the case of Roma families, eg, a Roma class unit can be set up when there are only 5 Roma children enrolled. (In main-stream class units, the standard is at least nine children of one to three years of age for one homogeneous class unit, and 17 children aged from three to six years of age);
- *A more favourable child/adult ratio.* In Roma class units with at least three hours of teaching per day, the ratio between the number of children and the number of educators should be four to one in the first age-group, and seven to one in the second-age group.
- *Reinforcement of the staff.* In class units of the first age group, one preschool teacher assistant is included in the educational programme when there are at least six children in the class unit, and another preschool teaching assistant when there are at least 12 children in the class unit. In class units of the second age group, one preschool teaching assistant is included in the educational programme when there are at least 11 children in the class unit, and another preschool teaching assistant when there are at least 21 children in the class unit.
- *Organised transport.* Preschool Roma

## **Access levels and strategies**

children mostly attend preschool institutions in the local community. Should the preschool institution be further away, transport is organised accompanied by a preschool teacher, and in some cases also by a higher grade elementary school pupil.

Similar systems are in place for children of migrants and for children in nationally mixed areas, including the right to instruction in the mother tongue.

## Conditions for quality improvement and assurance

### The workforce

#### Composition

The pre-school institution's staff consists of pre-school teachers and pre-school teaching assistants. Depending on the pre-school institution's size, staffing may include specialised staff, such as counsellors and other professional

staff (psychologists, educational specialists, social workers, specialists of social  
*Pre-service training*

Pre-school teachers should hold an advanced (formerly tertiary two-year of study) or (today) a higher education degree (at least three years of study) in pre-primary education or a university degree (four years of study) from some other

### At a glance

Type of provision	Title of lead staff	Pre-service education	Qualifications
Family day care	Registered child-minder	At least, upper secondary vocational level	Information not available
Pre-school	Preschool teacher <i>Vzgojitelj predšolskih otrok</i>	At least, 3 years tertiary	Three-year tertiary degree in preschool education, or a 4-year Bachelor's degree + a specialisation in early education. Master degree 2-years (starting 2009).
	Pre-school teacher assistant <i>Pomočnik vzgojitelja</i>	At least upper secondary vocational level	A secondary vocational 4-year level with a qualification for pre-school

# Conditions for quality improvement and assurance

field (pedagogy, art, humanities, sociology) with a specialization in pre-primary education. Assistants should hold an upper secondary technical qualification (four years of study) and be qualified for the field of pre-primary education. Education counsellors should have a university degree in psychology, pedagogy, social work, social pedagogy or special and rehabilitation pedagogy.

Pre-primary institutions in Slovenia mainly employ pre-school teachers who have obtained a higher education degree in the field of pre-primary education and have a proper professional qualification. These programmes include theories of education, methodology of teaching pre-school children, didactics, developmental and pedagogical psychology, sociology, philosophy, special pedagogy, health education and practical training in pre-school institutions. The students – future pre-school teachers – also obtain practical and theoretical knowledge from various fields of education such as languages, social environment, natural science, mathematics, physical education, dance, music and other ways of artistic expression. The attainment of a degree entitles pre-school teachers to teach children in the first year of compulsory primary school (the law on primary school prescribes that the education in the first year of primary schooling should be carried out by a class teacher as well as by another pre-school teacher).

### *Professional development*

Regulations require that contact staff in all licensed early childhood services (including family day care) have pre-training in the care and education of young children and participate in regular in-service training. Pre-school institutions must set aside free days for professional development training, at least five days per year or 15 every three years, and cover the expenses: wage compensation, possible travel expenses, participant fees, and accommodation expenses. When new reforms that demand additional training of the

employees are introduced, such training shall be obligatory. Professional training is stimulated and rewarded. Some professional training programmes – those assessed by the school authorities and other competent bodies as being of priority – are awarded points and the achieved number of points is taken into account with regard to job promotion. Professional training is one of the conditions for promotion of pedagogical workers. The programmes which have to be accredited by the Minister's Programme Council are mainly carried out by higher education institutions, development advisory agencies, research institutes and pre-school institutions themselves, as well as by other public and private training organisations. (Eurydice, Slovenia, 2007). In addition, the pedagogical staff (and the headteacher) can be involved, on a voluntary basis, in innovative projects which improve their work skills. Their work in the projects is also rewarded with points, which can be taken into account at interviews for promotion. In addition to this training, pre-school teachers also participate in teachers' circles, which meet several times a year and deal with various topics. Assistant teachers also join these teachers' circles. pedagogy, or specialists for children with additional support needs). Specialised staff provide counselling for children, parents and professionals of the pre-school institution. They may also co-operate in the preparation and implementation of individualised programmes for children with additional support needs, and for management, administrative and auxiliary staff.

### **Work conditions and salaries**

96% of pedagogical staff in pre-school institutions work full time and have employment contracts of indefinite duration as public officials. According to the law they have the right to continuing professional training. Pre-school institutions should enable free days for professional training, at least five days per year or 15 every three years, and cover the expenses: wage compensation, possible travel expenses, participant fees, and accommodation

## Conditions for quality improvement and assurance

expenses. When new reforms that demand additional training of the employees are introduced, such training shall be obligatory. Professional training is stimulated and rewarded. Some professional training programmes – those assessed by the school authorities and other competent bodies as being of priority – are awarded points and the achieved number of points is taken into account at interviews for promotion. Professional training is one of the conditions for promotion of pedagogical workers to titles.

Normally, headteachers offer new posts, choose the candidates and conclude employment contracts. Working conditions (wages, working hours etc.) are generally determined by national regulations and are being negotiated in greater detail every year by the Ministry of Education and Sport and the representative trade unions.

### *Workforce recruitment and evidence of shortages*

There is no evidence of a shortage of candidates to become a preschool teacher. Every school year the number of candidates exceeds the places available at the secondary vocational teacher's training level as well as at the tertiary level. There are no official data on ethnic origin of the staff working in pre-schools.

*Trade unions and other workforce organisations*  
The Educational Science Trade Union of Slovenia (ESTUS) is an independent, democratic and non-party organization which employees in education, training, science and culture can join on a voluntary basis in order to:  
express and implement their interests in an organized way;  
safeguard their economic and social position;  
protect the employees' rights;  
enforce the role and the importance of education, culture and science as fundamental carriers of successful future of our country;  
influence the policy set-up in education, science and culture.

ESTUS is a very active stakeholder in education policymaking; it signs and supervises the implementation of the general collective public

sector agreement; the collective agreement on education; the collective agreement on research and the collective Agreement on Culture. In September 2009, 5,806 teachers and other preschool professionals were members of the largest trade union of workers education in Slovenia (SVIZ) which represents 66 % of all work-force in the preschool field and 14 % of all members of trade unions.

### **National standards**

#### *Child: staff ratios and group sizes*

According to data for the school year 2006/07, there were 7,116 educators (3,509 preschool teachers and 3,607 preschool teacher assistants) working in 3,375 preschool class units in Slovenia. For the 57,134 children enrolled in 2005, this employment rate gives a ratio of one trained adult for every eight children. The Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (2006/07) calculated the ratio children/educator as being 7.9 children per preschool teacher or assistant. There is no national ratio set per year of age, but normally, the child: staff ratio is higher for four to six year old children than for younger pupils. According to regulations, groups of children aged between one and three years should be monitored for at least six hours by two pedagogical workers; groups of children aged between three and six years should be monitored for at least four hours (afternoon programmes less: two or three hours).

The number of children per teaching group is defined by national regulation. Teaching groups can be homogenous or heterogeneous, that is, focussing on one age group only or combining children of both age groups. Teaching groups of the first age group (from age one to three years) should comprise of no more than 12 children (10, if there is age mixing). Teaching groups of children aged from three to six years should comprise of no more than 22 children. Teaching groups are smaller if they are age-heterogeneous (19) or if they include children aged from three to four years of age (17). According to the condition and situation of the

# Conditions for quality improvement and assurance

pre-primary education in the local community, the community can raise the prescribed number of children in a teaching group by no more than two children (flexible group size). The number of children in a teaching group is smaller if the group includes children with additional support needs or Roma children.

### *Curricula for children aged from zero to six years*

A national curriculum for pre-school institutions was formulated in 1999 (*Kurikulum za vrtce*). It is based upon appreciation of the child's integral and balanced development and takes into account individual differences in development and learning. It is supplemented by guidelines for educational work in mixed ethnic areas in Slovenia (Italian and Hungarian national communities), or with Roma children and children with additional support needs. The latter work requires both didactic and methodological adaptations/modifications or different organisation of work, schedule, space etc. The objectives, contents and activities are designed separately for the first and the second age-group of children. There are six areas of activities: movement, language, art, nature, society and mathematics. In addition to these areas of activity the global objectives and the objectives of individual activity, examples of activities for individual age groups and the role of adults are all defined. Interdisciplinary activities like ethics, health care, safety, traffic education are incorporated into all those fields. The suggested curriculum themes extend over the stringent limits of a single field and are placed into the context of the children's everyday life in a pre-school institution. It is an open framework curriculum that enables child initiative and the implementation of various programmes. Children's individuality, right to choose and distinctiveness must be respected, and the classroom should be flexible, diverse, safe and stimulating.

The educational work of the early childhood centre and its daily routines are considered important for the development of the child's

personality (not only as a preparation for the next educational level). Children's play is central to the curriculum and seen as the most natural way to aid their development and learning. At the same time, the curriculum contains the objectives and principles of pre-primary education, which importantly affect every-day activities, communication and classroom arrangement. In planning routine activities (eating, resting, sleeping, tidying up), differences between children are also taken into account (gender, social and cultural origin, philosophy of life) and conditions must be created by the centre so that those differences can be expressed. In parallel, the importance of communication for social learning is especially emphasized.

In formulating the new curriculum, special emphasis was put on the main principles that had contributed to the re-conceptualisation of preschool care and education in Slovenia:

- equal opportunities and consideration of diversity among children
- The principle of democracy, pluralism and multiculturalism (different programmes; different theoretical approaches and models; different methods and ways of working with preschool children in preschool settings; flexibility in the organisation of living and working in preschool institutions considering the space and time organisation; diverse selection of content and activities);
- The principle of openness of the curriculum, autonomy and the professional responsibility of preschool and professional workers. The curriculum should be flexible enough to adapt to individual personalities of children and their parents and the environment of the institution.
- The principle of different developmental periods; respecting individual differences in development and learning; respecting the

## Conditions for quality improvement and assurance

differences between groups, eg regarding gender, social and cultural origins and the global outlook). To ensure equal conditions for the optimal development of each child and while taking into account individual differences in development and learning, additional instructions and contents were prepared for children with additional support needs in preschool institutions, for children of the nationally mixed areas and for Roma children;

- The principle of providing choice and otherness (different programs between which parents can choose; the choice between different activities in preschool institutions, which may not mean the choice between cooperation and non-participation or directed activity and free play);
- The principle of respecting the child's privacy and intimacy (an organisation of space and time, which allows the child to withdraw from the group routine and to express his/her individuality during different preschool activities);
- The principle of balance (the balance between the child's development and curriculum; between different aspects of the child's physical and mental development and between different activities in specific areas);
- The principle of professional justification of the curriculum (in terms of the specific characteristics of development and learning of preschool children; in terms of scientific knowledge, which defines the areas of the curriculum; in terms of knowledge of educational sciences and cultural studies);
- The principles of horizontal and vertical linkage (linking the various areas of activity in preschool institutions);
- Cooperation between the family and preschool institution as well as between

preschool institution and primary school);

- The principle of cooperation with parents (written and oral notices of the various programmes of preschool institutions should be publicly available to parents; parents have the right to gradually introduce their children into preschool programmes; parents should have a right to a continuous and real-time exchange of information. While cooperating with parents, a private realm of family, culture, language, life philosophy, values, views and traditions should be respected);
- The principle of critical evaluation;
- The principle of a developmental-process approach. In the various areas of activities within the preschool curriculum, in addition to the objectives and examples of different activities, the role of parents is specially emphasised. The parents' responsiveness; ability to communicate and sensitivity; continuous observation, monitoring and encouragement of children to cooperate and involvement (at least indirectly) in various children's activities.
- The principle of creating a supportive, symbolically rich and interesting environment for children;
- The principle of having constant concern for the safety and welfare of children.

### **Licensing and inspection**

The founding of private pre-school institutions was instituted in 1991. Since that date, parents have the right to choose a public or private programme according to their interests and needs. *The Organisation and Financing of Education Act* (1996) and the *Pre-school Institutions Act* (1996) lay down in more detail regulations concerning the establishment of private pre-school institutions, their types, conditions of their operation, the pre-school programmes to be followed and their funding.

# Conditions for quality improvement and assurance

*The Organisation and Financing of Education Act* specifies two types of private pre-school institutions. The first type are those with a concession, granted by the local community, which must meet regulatory requirements for public pre-school institutions and implement the *Curriculum for Pre-school Institutions*. They are funded and regulated similarly to public preschool institutions.

The second type is private institutions without a concession, established by the private initiative of an individual or groups of individuals. Private pre-school institutions without a concession are also required to meet regulations concerning the staff, premises and equipment. In addition, they need a positive recommendation from the Slovenian Council of Experts for General Education. Pre-school institutions carrying out programmes according to specific pedagogic principles are an exception and are only required to meet the spatial requirements. Before issuing a positive recommendation, the Council of Experts must verify if the programme has been recognised by a corresponding international association.

The inspection of preschool institutions is carried out by the Inspectorate, an independent body within the Ministry of Education and Sport. Support in the working process is provided by the Preschool Unit of the National Education Institute (NEI), to separate departments within the geographical regions of the country. These advisors provide professional support to teachers in the process of introducing the new preschool curriculum into preschool institutions. They are also responsible for monitoring of the curriculum and the quality of the work in preschool institutions as well as providing assistance in resolving professional issues. Preschool institutions are organised in networks within geographical areas to facilitate study groups and meetings of professional workers to discuss implementation, innovations and other current challenges.

## **Attention to children's outcomes**

Slovene ECEC contains no obligatory or systematic evaluation of the children's learning outcomes since the quality concept is not based exclusively on the outcome indicators but rather on a balance between process indicators, intermediate indicators, structural, and outcome indicators. However, in past ten years preschool researchers made extensive longitudinal studies assessing children's outcomes as a good background database for policy and professional decision-making on the field of ECEC. For instance, they have assessed the effects of preschool curriculum on communication and children's socioemotional development (Ljubica Marjanovič et al, 2003), on children's language development, as well as the overall impact of quality preschool learning on child development (Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja Peklaj, 2008).

In principle, quality assessment is under the responsibility of the individual preschool institution; it is usually performed as self-evaluation study. Development of a specific plan ('vision') for individual preschool institutions has been encouraged, with goals and criteria set for monitoring quality. Team evaluation of pedagogical work is preferred, carried out in pairs (a preschool teacher and a preschool teaching assistant), in small groups (eg all educators of class units of the same age-group or of one preschool institution unit or a group of educators interested in a specific problem) or as a whole group of staff. Self-evaluation thus involves educators, education counsellors, heads, parents and children, as well as representatives of the local community and external advisers.

Ljubica Marjanovič Umek et al. (2002) developed a model of quality assurance intended for self-evaluation of preschool institutions at the structural level (institutional organisation, facilities, educational materials...), process level (planning and carrying out the curriculum) and at the intermediate level (team work, partnerships with families, cooperation with

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other institutions, professional development of educators and satisfaction of the staff). The analysis of the self-evaluation results of preschool institutions are presented in publications (Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja and Bajc, 2005 Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja Peklaj, 2008).

### **Family and community involvement**

An important quality element of a pre-school institution is cooperation with parents. Parents have the right to take part in planning the life and work of a pre-school institution. Parents should consider the professional autonomy of the pre-school institution workers, who – on the other hand – should consider the culture, identity, language, world view, values and convictions, customs and habits of parents. There are two councils in pre-school institutions: the pre-school institution councils and the council of parents.

- a) *Pre-school institution councils* are composed of five representatives of the pre-school institution staff, three representatives of parents, and three representatives of the municipality. The duties of the pre-school institution council

consist of appointing and dismissing the head of the pre-school institution; adopting the development programme of the pre-school institution, the annual work plan, and the report on its realisation; approving the introduction of non-standard and other programmes; discussing the reports on educational issues; deciding the appeals concerning the rights, obligations, and responsibilities of the staff, complaints by parents concerning educational provision; and performing other tasks as provided by law and the founding act.

- b) *The council of parents* is formed to implement parents' interests in an organised manner. Councils of parents are composed of one representative from each class elected by the parents at their meetings. The duties of the parents' councils are: to propose the highest quality programme of work, approve the headteachers' proposals for the highest quality of services, issue opinions on proposed development plans and annual programs of work, discuss headteachers' reports on educational problems, discuss parents' complaints concerning education, elect their representatives to councils of

# Relationship and transitions between ECEC and school

With the introduction of the national curriculum (1999) the understanding of the relationship between the ECEC and schools changed significantly; it is stressed that pre-school institutions are not seen as the means for preparing preschool children for (primary) schools. The new philosophy is in contrast with the socialist concept of preschool education and didactically oriented preschool institutions and their programmes prevalent in the 1970s. Preschool education is seen as independent of later schooling; it is emphasised that the preschool period has a value on its own, and should not become school-like, but rather preserve their specifics (Kurikulum za vrtce, 1999 :10). A high quality preschool education is regarded as the best preparation for later schooling. Preparation for compulsory school-work is indirect – by activities aiming at developing pre-reading and pre-mathematical skills, problem solving and thinking and developing children’s communication skills. Each preschool institution or preschool class plan and implement special activities aimed at smoothing the transition to school, especially in the last year prior to entering school. Those activities include visits to the local pre-school (in order to familiarise children with the routines and rhythms of school life, with the staff and surroundings) as well as joint projects involving preschool children in school life (such as going on class trips or assisting with special events such as school fairs).

## Out-of-school services

In the formal system of preschool institutions, there are so-called "additional activities" which are performed in the facilities of the kindergarten after the preschool programme is finished. This arrangement is appropriate for parents so they do not need to take the child to another institution after they finish. These programmes can be provided by the preschool teacher (after she/he has finished his/her job in the preschool institution; therefore s/he is paid additionally) or by private institutions. The Council of parents and the Council of the preschool institution make the decision with the headteacher, depending on the interests of the parents). When the pre-school organises additional activities (such as English lessons, dancing lessons, sports activities, community celebrations and the like), the activities are usually conducted in the afternoon (after day-time programme) in pre-school facilities or school facilities. The full price of those programmes is paid by parents. Private organisations also prepare several programmes for preschool and school children but there is no record of the number of children enrolled in different activities (dance, drawing classes, sport, language courses...).

The activities/programs may also be organised as so-called **curricula enrichment activities** (such as camping, swimming and skiing courses, other sports activities, dancing activities, visits of museum and other cultural institutions etc) usually conducted during the preschool day-time programme. The costs associated with these activities are paid entirely by pre-school institutions or partly from municipal budget and sometimes by parents. In all cases, the preschool institution should get the parents' approval through the Council of parents and activities should be included in the annual work plan. Even if the parents do not pay, children should be able to participate. Different activities and programmes are also organised for children who are not enrolled in preschool institutions.

# Current issues and development

Current issues: A balance between the supply and demand for places in preschool institutions has historically characterised Slovene ECEC. This balance has come under strain in recent years due to a rise in the birth rate and the law that provides a place in pre-school for every child, with exemptions from payment for subsequent children in the family. All this has raised demand and caused higher enrolment rates. In some municipalities the demographic trends have been monitored, and successful planning of investments in new preschool institutions have been successful in meeting demand. However, some municipalities currently have to refuse admittance to preschool institutions to some young children.

The demand for state investment in building new preschool institutions or increasing capacity in existing institutions is high. Demands for admitting more children and raising child:staff ratios are present as an option for solving the shortage in capacities. The ministry and professionals are opposed to lowering ECEC standards but in 2009, a short-term solution has been adopted: the preschool institutions will be allowed to admit two additional children in all class-units. At ministry level, preschool education has been acknowledged as a priority area and ECEC will receive a greater share of state budgets.

### *Current developments*

The following strategies are being adopted at the state/ministry level, aimed at raising the quality of Slovene ECEC:

- Diversification of ECEC programs is a priority. In addition to public, full-time programs performed by public preschool institutions, other ECEC programs such as short-time programs, programs for special groups of children and their needs are supported (children from low-income families and children with additional support needs due to their linguistic or cultural background), as well as

programmes providing alternative curricula.

- A special role of ECEC is recognised in promoting children's academic performance in schools as well as in tackling social and cultural inequalities. Lowering the amount of parent's payment for preschool programmes, and potentially providing every child with a free of charge place in preschool institution is a long-term state policy. Additional measures aimed at supporting Roma children's usage of preschool institutions are being prepared.
- The theoretical and value foundations of ECEC being publicly discussed. A White Paper on Education is being prepared to re-evaluate and reform the system.
- The system of financing ECEC is being reformed in several directions. The share of state budget for financing ECEC will be raised; in addition European resources will be used to a greater extent. A more transparent and unified system of financing of ECEC for all state regions and municipalities is in preparation, aimed at reducing the current variations in total prices for a child in a preschool institution and parents payments among municipalities.

Special attention is being paid to high quality of ECEC by preserving (or improving) the existing standards for structural quality and by providing high quality teachers' training programs. In the school year 2009/2010, a university Masters degree program (a two-year training program) has been initiated at the Faculty of Education in Ljubljana (in addition to a previous three-year bachelor degree program), providing the students with specialisation in inclusive, inter-cultural education, social justice, and other aspects of democratisation of ECEC.

### ***Effective quality initiatives 2006-08***

After the reform of the Slovenian educational

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system as a whole, the issues of quality assessment and assurance became important. The Ministry of Education and Sport linked numerous institutions and projects reputed for their high quality of educational process. The aim was to establish a system of quality assessment and assurance with emphasis on self-evaluation. Several projects were carried out.

In 2006, the National Commission for Quality Assessment and Assurance (the commission was established in 2003) together with the Ministry of Education and Sport, put out a call for tenders for the co-financing of networks of educational institutions for quality assessment and development (January 2006). The selected networks are co-financed by the Ministry and the European Social Fund. The aim is to encourage educational institutions to form networks, test and develop various instruments and methods of self-evaluation, thus incorporating self-evaluation into their practice.

All networks (the preschool network includes 15 preschool institutions with 2,441 children and 400 educational and management staff) nominated quality teams and presented their projects to parents, local communities, social

partners and other stakeholders. The teams defined the fields of self-evaluation, prepared questionnaires, carried out surveys, interpreted the data, and so analysed the present situation. The next step was to define the aspects which needed improvement, choose instruments and methods of further work, discuss quality indicators and design action plans. Action plans included objectives, activities, time frames, and the monitoring and evaluation of individual phases. Several materials were prepared for work with students; seminars for in-service teacher training were selected; leaflets for parents and other stakeholders were written; several web sites were designed to present the projects and their progress. Conferences and workshops were organised, where the interested parties could discuss the issues and possible solutions, share experience and examples of good practice, exchange information and opinions.

The final results of the projects has helped to set up the quality indicators both at national and institutional levels, create bases for legislative changes and for the anticipated implementation of self-evaluation as an integral part of the curricula in Slovenian preschool institutions and schools.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The definition of 'children at-risk of poverty' used here follows the EU definition, that is, children living in households with less than **60%** of the national equivalised equivalent median household income for a couple with two children.

<sup>2</sup> *The Gini co-efficient* measures the extent to which the distribution of income among individuals or households within a country deviates from a perfectly equal distribution. Perfect equality has the value of 0 and perfect inequality the value of 1. The higher the decimal number assigned to a country, the greater the inequality that exists in a country. The EU average is 0.31. *S80/S20* is the ratio of the total income received by the 20% of the population with the highest income compared to the income received by the 20% with the lowest income; the higher the ratio, the greater the income inequality between the rich and poor in a country. The EU average is 4.8.

## **Acknowledgments**

Children in Scotland would like to thank the programme researchers, Professor Peter Moss and Dr John Bennett.

We are also grateful to the Working for Inclusion team, led by Children in Scotland, for compiling this report.

This publication is funded by the European Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity (2007-2013).

The *Working for Inclusion* programme is funded by the European Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity (2007-2013) and the Scottish Government.