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Early Childhood Education and Care

Promotion of the Gifted and Talented

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Early Childhood Education and Care: Promotion of the Gifted and Talented

Presentations of the 5th Regional Meeting for the Promotion of the Gifted and Talented in Salzburg (Austria) from October 11–12, 2010

The Regional Meetings for the Promotion of the Gifted and Talented are an initiative and financed by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture.

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Printed by Laber Druck

ISBN: 978-3-9502683-5-5

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ZVR: 553896729

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Introduction

Dr. Claudia Resch, Austrian Research and Support Centre for the Gifted and Talented (ÖZBF)

From October 11–12, 2010, the 5th Regional Meeting for the Promotion of the Gifted and Talented took place in Salzburg, Austria. The participating countries were Austria, Croatia, Hungary and Slovenia. The purpose of the Regional Meetings for the Promotion of the Gifted and Talented is to promote the exchange of experiences and expertise as regards gifted education and research among Central Eastern European countries. Initiated by Austria in 2005, the meetings have since taken place in the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Poland and again in Austria. The topics discussed at the meetings ranged from provision measures, pedagogical diagnostics and teacher training. In 2010, the regional meeting focused on early childhood education and care and on the promotion of the gifted and talented in this area.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has experienced a growing interest from both policy makers and researchers in recent years and it has been widely recognized that this period is crucial for the establishment of lifelong learning.[1] An indicator for this growing interest in ECEC is the development of educational plans for ECEC institutions in countries such as Norway (1996), New Zealand (1996), Sweden (1998), Canada (1998),[2] and in 2010 in Austria and Croatia.

Equally, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) published the report *Starting Strong. Early Childhood Education and Care: Education and Skills* in 2001 in order to "strengthen knowledge of the range of approaches adopted by different countries".[3] In 2004, a second report, *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, was published, which also included the ECEC systems of Austria and Hungary.

Since *Starting Strong I+II*, the importance of providing the best education and care possible in nurseries, kindergartens and other pre-school institutions has continuously been affirmed as neuroscientific research reminds us of the crucial period for learning before entering school[4] and studies of programmes reveal that investments into ECEC are cost-effective.[5]

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1 Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Arbeit und Sozialordnung & Staatsinstitut für Frühpädagogik (2003); Fleer (2002); Fthenakis (2003); Lindsey (1998); OECD (2001); OECD (2004).

2 Fthenakis (2003).

3 OECD (2001), S. 9.

4 Fleer (2002); Lindsey (1998).

5 Fleer (2002).

In this brochure, the countries which participated in the meeting are presenting their systems of ECEC (staff qualification, child-staff ratio, national programmes etc.) and thereby also focus on the provision for gifted and talented children. In all four countries, gifted children are promoted within the regular ECEC system.
Two researchers were also invited to the meeting to speak about "managing diversity and the role of co-construction" (see pp. 29–35) and about the scientific findings behind *The Statewide Framework Curriculum for Preschool Education in Austria*. Their presentations can be found in this brochure.

The brochure predominantly uses the term 'early childhood education and care institutions' (or ECEC institutions) for public or private bodies that take care of children before their entrance into primary school. If a deliberate distinction e.g. between nurseries (usually taking care of children until the age of 3) and kindergartens (usually taking care of children between 3–6 years) was made by the authors, those terms were adopted.

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The Statewide Framework Curriculum for Preschool Education in Austria

Aspects for the Promotion of the Gifted and Talented

Dr. Waltraut Hartmann, Charlotte Bühler Institute

1. Introduction

The *Statewide Framework Curriculum for Preschool Education in Austria* was commissioned by the Austrian provincial governments and completed in 2009 by the Charlotte Buehler Institute with the collaboration of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, and the Preschool Teacher Training Colleges. The Austrian preschool curriculum also comprises several aspects for the promotion of the gifted and talented. The following paper is closely based on the original text of the *Statewide Framework Curriculum for Preschool Education in Austria*.

2. Statewide Framework Curriculum for Preschool Education in Austria

2.1 Preamble of the Framework Curriculum

Since 2009 the *Statewide Framework Curriculum for Preschool Education in Austria* (Charlotte Buehler Institute & the Austrian Provincial Governments, 2009) has become obligatory for all Austrian ECEC institutions (preschools, nurseries, and kindergartens) for children until the age of six. It is based on a profound reflection of educational principles, early learning styles and competences as well as necessary framework conditions.

The nine Austrian provinces agreed on developing a framework curriculum that would enable ECEC teachers to identify children's specific talents. Basic principles of the curriculum are lifelong learning and the connection of educational processes in ECEC institutions and primary schools.
In the curriculum play is a very important factor for self-determined, fun-oriented and motivational learning in ECEC institutions. The playfulness of children increases their motivation to learn. 'Learning through play' is also part of the Austrian curriculum in primary schools and is a most important element for the successful transition between ECEC institution and primary school.

2.2 Pedagogical orientation

2.2.1 Image of the child – role perception of ECEC teachers

The image of the child as a capable individual is the basis of the framework curriculum. Children are 'co-engineers' of their education (Fthenakis, 2003). They aid in creating the knowledge, identity, culture, and values of our society (Moss, 2008).
ECEC teachers respond to the individual needs and interests of children. They observe and follow along the child's strategies to conquer the world. A stimulating environment enables a balance between self-controlled learning and educational programmes.

2.2.2 Principles of learning processes

There are twelve principles of learning processes which provide a basis for a scientifically as well as socially relevant preschool education. At the same time, these principles support the promotion of the gifted and talented:

- *Holistic approach, learning by using all senses*
  Learning is a holistic process which involves both our body and mind. Such integrated learning processes are based on the children's personality by appealing not only to their senses but also to their socio-emotional, cognitive, and motor skills.
- *Individualisation*
  Children are unique individuals because of their personality, social and cultural background, their individual needs, their learning potential, and finally because of their pace of development. Therefore, each child has a particular learning style and rhythm. Systematic observation and documentation can be used to determine a child's individual way of learning. This could be regarded as a starting point for new educational ideas.
- *Differentiation*
  The principle of differentiation incorporates the use of different educational approaches, different ways of learning and a wide-ranging pool of educational materials. The children's individual talents, skills and interests are the basis of a differentiated educational work.
- *Empowerment*
  The concept of empowerment is based on people's strengths and potentials. It supports both children and adults to find better ways of using their scope of action

as well as their capabilities. Therefore, they are able to act more autonomously and self-reliantly.

- *Orientation in the surrounding world*
  Children have varied, individual, and diverse experiences concerning their lives and ways of learning. This is why educational processes based on children's experiences have an immediate effect on children and encourage them to reflect on these experiences. When we interrelate old and familiar experiences with new ones, we form, strengthen, and diversify neuronal networks in our brain (Hüther, 2006).
- *Inclusion*
  Inclusion involves a lot more than just integration efforts: all members of society are regarded as individuals with different needs. As a consequence, these needs are taken into consideration individually (Vollmer, 2008).
- *The teacher's expertise*
  Knowledge transfer is based on expertise not only in content and concepts but also in how to present and convey information adequately. The teacher's expertise, therefore, helps children to understand how things interrelate and to expand both their scope of action and vocabulary.
- *Diversity*
  Diversity refers to individual differences, such as gender, skin colour, physical abilities, ethnicity, and social background. Here diversity is considered as a source for learning experiences.
- *Gender sensitivity*
  Gender-sensitive education sees its goal in supporting boys and girls in developing and exploiting different potentials of their personality.
- *Participation*
  We need participation skills to be actively involved in social processes. ECEC institutions contribute to an early education of citizenship because they offer different and adequate opportunities for children to get involved, to actively participate and to have a say in matters. This is how children can learn to increasingly assume responsibility for themselves and others.
- *Transparency*
  Transparency in education enables parents and the public to better understand how educational principles are put into practice. Transparent work with children means that intentions and interrelations have to be easily understood.
- *Learning partnership*
  Learning partnerships are relationships of cooperation between ECEC institutions, children's families and external experts, if necessary. The goal of these partnerships is to create an environment that promotes the education and development of children.

2.3 Education and competence

2.3.1 Education

The framework curriculum defines education (in German: *Bildung*) as a lifelong process of human beings' active confrontation with themselves and the world. Self-determination, participation in social and cultural development, and taking on responsibility are an integral part of education (Klafki, 1996). Educational processes are complex interactions between children and their environment. Such processes help children to understand themselves and their role in the world, culminating in their 'acquisition of the world' (Humboldt, 1960). Learning processes, such as curiosity, the joy of experimenting, independent actions, learning by discovery or by following a model, and learning through play are the basis of education. Play is an important factor in the child's 'acquisition of the world'. The ability to play is innate in every human being. It embodies joyful play, untiring curiosity and activity, the intrinsic motivation to understand the environment with all the senses, and the desire to learn something new. Unstructured play is an important source of motivation to learn more, it fosters social-communicative competence and divergent thinking.
In an enriched play environment numerous synaptic connections are built and continuously used in the child's brain. These neuronal networks will help children in the future to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the world (Dunlop, 2003; Pramling, 2004).

2.3.2 Competence

Competence is understood as a network of knowledge, abilities and skills, strategies and routines, in addition to learning motivation, to be able to act in various situations (Reitinger, 2007; Weinert, 1999).

The framework curriculum differentiates between five categories of competence:

- *Personal competence* (Roth, 1968)
  includes a positive self-concept, autonomy, initiative, and the ability to assume responsibility for one's actions. An integral factor of this competence is a child's individual resilience.
  When we think of gifted and talented children, we can observe a high degree of self-control and individualism.
- *Social-communicative competence* (Erpenbeck & Heyse, 2007)
  refers to the ability to act and to form an opinion in both

social and societal environments. Further elements of social-communicative competence are empathy for other people, the ability to cooperate, and constructively dealing with rules.

- *Competence in various subject matters* (Roth, 1968) comprises the ability to act and to form an opinion in various subject matters (domains). This competence is based on exploring and observing objects and materials as well as on understanding the language and content of certain characteristics and connections.
  Gifted and talented children are often experts in various subject matters and want to expand their knowledge and competence.
- *Competence in learning methods* (Gisbert, 2004)
  In addition to the other competences, competence in learning methods becomes more and more important. This principle refers to the development of awareness of one's own learning processes and of beneficial learning strategies. Adults' support helps children not only to reflect on the way they are learning but also to plan and assess their own processes of thinking and learning. This is a crucial basis for all further learning processes later in their lives.
- *Meta-competence* (Weinert, 2001)
  describes the ability to evaluate what we have already learned and what we still need to learn in terms of competences as well as the ability to make use of these competences in a given situation. The beginning development of meta-competence usually goes hand in hand with self-reflection. Self-reflection, however, is always linked to a specific, real-life situation. The best way to support children in developing meta-competence is by allowing them to plan their activities and to set their goals themselves.

2.3.3 Framework conditions for educational processes

The children's competences suggest how their learning environment should be structured in order to improve and foster their skills. If children, for example, are particularly interested in natural phenomena, their interest should be promoted. This can be done by offering not only special research tools and equipment, such as magnifying glasses, microscopes, binoculars, or telescopes, but also by providing specialised books which can encourage children to observe and experiment.

Educational processes on the other hand also clarify which competences still need to be acquired. If children cannot interpret and understand other children's emotions, educational

materials can help to develop social competence. Such materials may range from picture books or photographs showing different facial expressions to role plays and puppetry.

Important framework conditions for a dynamic environment

- Rooms that can be re-designed by the children
- Workshop rooms to develop creative ideas (see e.g. the Reggio Concept)
- Rooms which motivate children to engage in various activities
- Spaces for quiet time and reflecting

Requirements for quality toys and instructional materials

- A large selection of different toys
- A challenge to stimulate various educational processes
- Toys and other materials that engage the child in experimenting, building and constructing
- Toys and materials for make-belief and role play, games with rules, toys and tools for motor activity
- Structured and unstructured materials for designing, for making music, for literacy, for scientific experiments, research materials, or toys for domestic activities

Free choice of toys, of playmates, and activities

Children should decide for themselves who they play with and how big the group is supposed to be. To achieve this goal, however, they need time for both reasoning and discussion. Only in specific contexts children can learn to decide for themselves, to participate and to assume responsibility.

Stimulation through differentiated educational approaches

- Attention, concentration and motivation
- Social relationships
- Expression of desires and interests
- Overcoming frustration, readiness for new learning processes
- Curiosity, the joy to experiment
- Having fun in the group

Ample time when learning through play will

- foster creative ideas

- stimulate motivating happiness (flow status) (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002)
- contribute to self-discovery by being totally immersed in an activity, and
- allow the child to experience freedom.

2.4 Educational domains

The six educational domains of the framework curriculum require the above mentioned pedagogical principles as well as the competence of ECEC teachers to create meaningful learning opportunities. ECEC teachers are free to choose appropriate educational content and methods.
Educational processes always relate to several educational domains at the same time. As educational domains overlap with each other, they lead to integrated and interconnected educational work. Following the idea of co-construction, this educational work is based on the interests and needs of each single child.

Since the competences and list of topics to be addressed have not been specified in detail for the different educational domains, teachers are free to choose adequate content and methods to work both professionally and creatively.

2.4.1 Emotions and social relationships

From birth on children are social beings with relationships which are shaped by their emotions. With increasing age they find it easier not only to control their impulses and emotions but also to make use of acquired coping strategies. These strategies are significantly influenced by the social and cultural context.

Controlling one's emotions is a crucial prerequisite for developing social-communicative competences, such as cooperation and conflict management, tolerance and taking responsibility for oneself and others. Children with emotional and social competences are not helpless victims of their emotions. They can perceive, verbalise, and channel their feelings and deal with negative emotions constructively. They also develop empathic skills and learn how to build relationships (Pfeffer, 2005a, 2005b).

As gifted and talented children often have a fast impulse conduction, they perceive emotions, such as joy or sorrow, very intensely. For some of them it is therefore difficult to

control their feelings or emotional experiences. Sometimes they throw a temper tantrum, when they have the feeling that nobody understands them.

- *Identity* (e.g. Oerter & Dreher, 2008)
  The concept of identity describes the unique personality structure of human beings. Identity is formed through interaction with the environment. One crucial part of identity is our self-concept which includes affective and cognitive elements, such as self-esteem, self-confidence, self-perception and knowledge about ourselves. If we experience acceptance, different types of relationships and a stimulating environment, it becomes easier to develop a differentiated awareness of our individual strengths and weaknesses. Only then it is possible that we start to have confidence in our own abilities and skills and to actively overcome difficulties. For children interaction not only with their peers but also with adults is vital.

- *Confidence and emotional well-being* (e.g. Spitzer, 2002)
  When children establish safe and stable relationships they feel secure. Such relationships are crucial for the children's emotional well-being as well as for their confidence in themselves and their environment.
  Emotional security is one of many integral learning requirements which help stabilising complex neuronal connections in our brain. Children are encouraged to face the unknown and to explore the world on their own.

- *Cooperation, Conflict Management and Resolution* (e.g. Dörfler, 2004; Saarni, 2002)
  ECEC institutions offer children the opportunity to establish diverse relationships with other children and adults. Furthermore, children can find friends and try out and experience different roles. To achieve these goals children need to develop self-perception, they have to be able to express their feelings both verbally and nonverbally and they need to control their emotions.
  In situations of play and everyday life, children learn how to negotiate rules and how to manage conflicts. They also learn to prevail, to cooperate, and to convince others of their ideas. Similarly, children need to balance tensions between asserting their own interests and adapting to their social environment. Only then they will learn how to manage conflicts.
  Gifted and talented children often have a particularly strong sense of justice. Therefore, they often want to solve conflicts and try to do this without violence.

2.4.2 Ethics and society

Ethics is concerned with questions regarding the value and dignity of human beings and with justified and unjustified actions. In a pluralistic and democratic society, commonly shared values are a crucial prerequisite for responsible actions as well as for constructive participation in social processes.

- *Values* (e.g. Hartmann, Stoll, Chisté, & Hajszan, 2006)
  Values are the basis for both norms and actions. When children interact with their environment, they learn more about values and can adjust their own thoughts and actions accordingly.
  As children in our pluralistic society encounter a multitude of value systems, they usually face different norms and standards of action. When they and with them their family's value system are accepted by others, it is easier for them to critically deal with norms and values of others. This is how basic ethical understanding can be developed.
  Children are interested in the values and ideologies of others. Interaction helps them raise and discuss essential and moral questions. This is possible because children use their intuition to deal with philosophical questions and because they have the ability to transcend, which means that they are able to go beyond the limits of the object. Similarly, different ideological and religious traditions within a group can arouse children's interest and lead to relationships of mutual respect. Especially gifted and talented children usually stick out because of their frequent questions concerning philosophical and moral topics, e.g. death or war.

- *Diversity* (e.g. Fthenakis, Schmitt, Eitel, Gerlach, Wendell, & Daut, 2009)
  Diversity is regarded as something positive because on the one hand we are aware of the complexity of human identity and on the other hand people belong to several peer groups at the same time. Particularly in intercultural encounters children experience this sense of diversity.

- *Inclusion* (e.g. Biewer, 2009)
  Inclusive education takes into account the special needs of each child as well as of the group as a whole. This inclusive approach refers to a way of acting and thinking, which incorporates the needs and interests of others and which at the same time appreciates differences. Inclusive education acknowledges children's diversity and their different talents. Therefore, both common and individual learning are of crucial importance.

- *Participation in Decisions*
  Living in a democratic society requires participation skills. The term 'participation' means that children have a say in decisions which affect their own lives as well as the lives of those in their community and that they are allowed to think critically. When children try out different forms of participation, they are able to constructively assume adequate responsibility for shaping their environment.

2.4.3 Language and communication

Language is the most important medium to interact with the world: language is necessary to put emotions and impressions into words but also to understand ourselves and others. It is the foundation for social relationships and participation in our cultural and political life. Language is crucial for planning actions as well as for gathering, processing and sharing information. Language competence is also the key to a successful educational biography.

- *Language and Speaking* (e.g. Jampert, Leuckefeld, Zehnbauer, & Best, 2006)
  From birth on children are interested in language and participate in interaction. They are supported to learn a language through linguistic stimuli and differentiated dialogues with people they know. In each phase of language learning children understand more than they can produce.

Particularly in the beginning children should learn languages within specific and commented contexts. The more children develop language competence, the sooner they are able to use language not only in certain contexts but also to plan actions and to reflect on them. The first language children learn is of particular relevance. This is also true for regional dialects and sign language. As language and identity are closely linked to each other, the language a child's family uses should be cherished. Similarly, learning a second language is always based on first language competence. The more languages we are dealing with, the better we can coexist in a pluralistic society.
Gifted and talented children distinguish themselves because of their early language acquisition and their special interest in symbols, such as the letters of the alphabet.

- *Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication* (e.g. Günther & Günther, 2007)
  Linguistic education always refers to verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal aspects of communication. Nonverbal and paraverbal components, i.e. body language and speech melody, underline spoken words and therefore

support understanding.
We can arouse children's enthusiasm and motivation to learn and use a language by appreciating the diversity of their forms of expression.

- *Literacy* (e.g. Hartmann, Hajszan, Pfohl-Chalaupek, Stoll, & Hartel, 2009)
  The term 'literacy' encompasses all experiences, abilities and skills children gain from printed, oral and written culture before they learn how to read and write. Signs, symbols and different types of writing show us that we do not have to be present to be able to communicate. The more children are confronted with children's literature and adequate texts they easier they understand and interpret linguistically conveyed content – even if such content is detached from additional information, e.g. images or real actions. Therefore, they acquire and differentiate competences which are needed for the process of learning to read and write.

- *Digital Media* (e.g. Baake, 1999)
  Information and communication technologies (digital media) not only shape adults' and children's everyday life, they have also become an important medium of participation in our society. Media competence enables children to use different media critically and with increasing self-control. The media's creative design as well as creatively engaging with the media make it possible to express ourselves and to create own products.
  Similarly, opportunities offered by computers are an important learning and playing source for gifted and talented children. Sophisticated games and tutorials encourage logical reasoning as well as problem solving and lead to better concentration and reflexes. Furthermore, they demand good optical differentiation and visual thinking.

2.4.4 Motor skills, health, and well-being

Children's perception of themselves and of the world is particularly based on experiences of movement, diverse sensations and how these experiences and sensations interact with each other. Children explore and conquer their environment through movement. They become self-efficient and are encouraged to face further challenges.
Furthermore, movement is the key to a healthy physical and psychosocial development. If a human being is considered to be healthy on a physical, mental and social level, she/he keeps a balance between individual needs, opportunities and living conditions.

- *Consciousness of One's Own Body (e.g. Schaefgen, 2007)*
  Children also experience our world and its complexity through their body. This fact improves the children's orientation, expression and creative skills. Additionally, it provides the basis for structured actions and thoughts. They develop a body image which enables them to experience their body's dimensions, limits and their location in space.

- *Motor Skills*
  Children have a natural urge to move. In ECEC institutions this urge is satisfied by a stimulating environment, diverse and intense occasions to move and the teachers' motivating attitude to exercise.
  Exercise helps children to not only deal with themselves and others but also with space and materials in their environment. Children are encouraged to exercise more when they become self-efficient and start to have confidence in their capabilities.

- *Awareness of One's Health (e.g. Kerber, 2005; Bayerisches Staatsministerium, 2007)*
  Physical exercise is one way for children to feel better because it helps to reduce stress, overcome emotional pressure, cope with crises and reduce aggression.
  If children have a positive attitude towards their own body and know about preventive measures to stay healthy, it will support their decision to assume responsibility for their body and their well-being. Such preventive measures may range, for example, from personality development and both gathering information and talking about illnesses or risks to promoting healthy behaviour and habits for everyday life.

Social and emotional well-being is a crucial aspect of children's health. To achieve such well-being children need to develop a positive and natural relationship to sexuality and their own gender identity. One way to influence children's attitude towards sexuality and to prevent sexual abuse is to provide adequate answers to questions children may ask.

2.4.5 Aesthetics and creativity

(e.g. Schäfer, 2005; Braun, 2007)

Children start to explore the world from birth on. Aesthetic impressions are part of this process and play a major role in our everyday lives. Aesthetic perception is based on sensual impressions which children process subjectively. Here, artistic and creative processes help children to structure the complexity of their perception and to express their creativity.

- *Culture and the Arts (e.g. Geertz, 2002)*
  Culture may be regarded as a dynamic process in which human beings express, maintain and further develop their knowledge and attitudes about life. Visual and performing arts as well as music are integral components of culture. They include actions and works which are based on perception, imagination and intuition and are expressed through creative processes.
  In ECEC institutions children have the opportunity to experience and deal with works of art, artists and cultural objects of their own and other cultures. When children come in contact with art they try to attribute sense and meaning to what they perceive (Trevarthen, 2008). This way they learn how works of art address diverse and individually different emotions.

- *Creative Expression (e.g. Bäck, Hajszan, & Bayer-Chisté, 2008)*
  Creativity is expressed in flexible or divergent thinking processes which allow alternative solutions and lead to creative processes and works. Preconditions for creativity are problem sensibility, openness and flexibility. Children who have acquired creative competence question accustomed thought and action patterns and are therefore able to find extraordinary solutions to challenges.
  In the field of aesthetics we find creativity in various artistic forms of expression, for example in sculptural works, in the plastic arts, in the performing arts, in media design, and finally in music and language.

When children start to work creatively they demonstrate how they perceive reality and how they understand the world. They begin to deal with their own questions, thoughts and emotions and connect the inner to the outer world. At the same time, art helps children to become aware of their own forms of expression. They extend their expertise in a field by learning about materials, how these materials can be treated and how certain tools are used. After a phase of exploration the children enter a phase of productive creativity. The working process of creative works, however, is far more important than the works themselves. Creative processes enable children to experience self-efficacy which plays a key role in the development of identity.

2.4.6 Nature and technology (e.g. European Communities, 2007)

Basic competences in science, technology, and mathematics are among the most important capabilities for lifelong learning.

Children experience numerous scientific, mathematical and technical phenomena in their environment from birth on. They are highly motivated to understand them and to explore their causes and effects. Dealing with nature and technology, children always learn something new because they interrelate their own experiences, abilities and skills with new impressions. Step by step, they recognise structures of order and regularities in the environment. Furthermore, children try out different problem-solving strategies, use their insights for new materials and situations and improve not only their knowledge but particularly their competence in learning methods.
Gifted and talented children are often interested in special fields and can offer a lot of knowledge. To be able to determine how long and how intense their activities should be, however, they require open periods of time.

- *Nature and Environment (e.g. Schneider, 2008)*
  When children experience nature it can always be a starting point of interest in both animate and inanimate environment. Scientific methods of acting and thinking are then tried out in experiments. Here, children find connections, construct hypotheses, formulate forecasts and plan something new. They specifically gather information, build up theories and change these theories according to their experiences. From birth on children are excellent learners and have learning mechanisms which they use to revise and restructure their knowledge.

- *Technology (e.g. Hartmann et al., 2009)*
  Our information and knowledge society is shaped by technology. Keeping that in mind, children need manifold exploring and research opportunities in the field of technology.
  Children are fascinated by technical appliances and machines and are interested in how they work. Through observations and experiences of our everyday life they learn about laws from physics and technology. This is how children learn to work in a specific field, how to use different tools and how to pay attention when planning possible procedures and further steps. These experiences help them to realise their ideas, to invent something new and to produce their own works because they begin to transfer their ideas to new materials and situations.

- *Mathematics (e.g. Krajewski, 2005; Lorenz, 2006)*
  Mathematical thinking is a crucial element of cognitive development and includes among other things recognising and explaining repeating patterns, structures, rules and laws.

Very soon children begin to experience time and space, forms and sizes, and other mathematical regularities and structures in many ways. When children face adequate tasks or situations and have success in what they are doing, they develop a positive approach to mathematics. Working with exciting mathematical phenomena of our everyday life, children begin to perceive connections with all their senses. Their curiosity for quantities, sizes, geometrical forms and numbers supports the development of basic mathematical thinking, abilities and skills (preliminary competences). This also includes understanding quantities and proportions, counting and visual-analytical as well as spatial-constructive skills.

2.5 Transitions

The comprehensive re-structuring of a person's world during and after a transition is connected with stress, the ability to adapt, and learning (Griebel & Niesel, 2004). Transitions from family to ECEC institution, from one ECEC institution setting to another, and transitions from ECEC institution to primary school require a high degree of transitional competence on the part of the child as well as on those around him such as coping with stress, social-communicative competence, and resilience. Connecting the educational processes between the different educational levels requires continuity, reaching from ECEC institution to the more advanced educational stages and learning methods in primary school.
In Austria primary school incorporates the learning phases of early childhood education and care and builds upon acquired competence through (Wolf, 2009):

- Learning through play
- The open classroom
- Learning through project-oriented tasks
- Learning through self-discovery

2.6 Educational quality

The educational quality of ECEC institutions influences a child's development of competence, and her/his educational self-acquired experiences (biography).

There are three levels of quality:

- structural quality (group size, child/teacher ratio, size and furnishing of the rooms, selection of toys and other materials)

- process quality (the educational processes between the ECEC teachers and the children)
- the quality of the teachers' qualifications and values (Tietze, Roßbach, & Grenner, 2005; Charlotte Bühler Institut & PädQUIS, 2007)

3. Conclusion

The *Statewide Framework Curriculum for Preschool Education in Austria* is defined as a play-based curriculum for ECEC institutions. Play is understood as one of the most powerful driving forces in early childhood development. Thus the framework curriculum encourages ECEC teachers to provide opportunities to learn through meaningful situations and experiences in an environment of high quality. Especially free play and unstructured play allow children to experiment, make mistakes, learn from them, and find out diverse approaches and solutions. By following their own ideas and strategies children experience themselves as 'co-engineers' of their development and as active learners. In ECEC institutions their divergent thinking skills, their intrinsic learning motivation, and their problem-solving abilities are fostered. In this respect the child will be ready for school and prepared for lifelong learning.

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Managing Diversity and the Role of Co-construction in Early Childhood Education and Care

ECEC Institutions – Places of Early Learning and Development of Competence

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The recent (re)discovery of ECEC institutions as main places of early learning and development of competence in Austria has led to the creation of a curriculum for early childhood education and care (see pp. 9–27). This curriculum claims that managing diversity and inclusive education are central principles in early childhood education and care in Austria. This means that ECEC teachers in Austria are urged to encourage all children to progress at their own learning rate. In everyday work they are challenged to plan opportunities for the development of social, physical, cognitive and emotional skills within an informal kindergarten atmosphere (Ämter der Landesregierungen der österreichischen Bundesländer/Bundesministerium für Unterricht, Kunst und Kultur/Charlotte Bühler Institut/Magistrat der Stadt Wien 2009, p. 12).

Managing diversity in early childhood education and care is usually understood as the need of facing diversity within a group of girls and boys without any discrimination of gender, race, class, religion or ability. But managing diversity means more. It is an essential aspect of elementary learning and developing itself. This article sets out to explain the relationship between managing diversity and the handling of highly gifted children within institutions of early childhood education and care.

Learning and developing through co-construction

When we reflect daily processes in early childhood education and care we need to ask ourselves: How does learning in early childhood work? For ECEC teachers it is important to reflect thoroughly about their ideas of early learning or of learning processes in general. Regarding the question of how learning works, it is undeniable that we cannot make men or women, girls or boys learn something. Learning is something that individuals have to do on their own. It is simply impossible to anticipate learning outcomes (Schäfer 2005). Admitting this allows us to take a closer look at how to really enhance children's development instead of wishing for things that are not within our control.

Girls and boys learn and develop through co-construction. Concepts of co-construction are based upon an understanding of social constructivism. This means that the child is regarded as a social being, its development is expected to be imbedded in social relationships and it is assumed that learning happens through interactive and co-constructive activity (Dahlberg 2010). Learning and development happen in social contexts and apart from the children themselves, there are also other participants actively involved in learning processes, for example parents, siblings, teachers, experts etc.

From the children's point of view

Enhancing early learning and development is more than shaping children into a pattern of behaviour that adults have chosen to be appropriate for them, but which disregards young children's needs and also lacks impact, because we cannot make human beings learn. They have to accomplish that on their own. The other dimension, children's creation of meaning and significance should not be neglected either. It is very important for a co-constructive understanding of education that the child not only builds up its competence in interactive situations but is also actively involved in the construction of culture, world and social reality. Therefore recent childhood studies focus on girls and boys as participating members of society. They take children's perspectives of the world into consideration and take children's constructions seriously. They ask for the way children think and try to find out how girls and boys create meaning and significance within their living environment (Honig/Lange/Leu 1999; Herzberg 2003).

Co-constructive learning in groups

Taking the concept of learning through co-construction seriously has a certain impact on early childhood studies as well as on early childhood education and care itself. We have to take a look at children's activities in ECEC institutions: children preferably play together with their peers in smaller groups. Unfortunately adults sometimes tend to underestimate the complex structure and meaning of this activity. This underestimation leads to the idea that playful tasks are instruments for competence trainings. The notion that children can be made to learn what they are supposed to learn by confronting them with playful tasks seems sometimes too obvious. It stems from the insufficient approach only to reflect on the adult's point of view and therefore tends to pull children towards one direction

while missing all the fruitful impulses that would come from trying to understand the children's point of view (Krenz 2010).

Playing can be seen as a child's profession. It is not something that children do or should do to gain something else. It has its worth in itself. The symbolic character – the so called 'as if' – of children's play is essential (Schäfer 2005, Krenz 2010). A lot of the activities of children in ECEC institutions are accompanied by some kind of fantastical and symbolical role play. Very often the individual role play of one child is linked to role plays of other children. The fascinating thing about this is that children's shared role plays appear as a complete fantasy world, created by the actions of several group members. The same actions that are responsible for the creation of this symbolic world have a different symbolical meaning for each child. Each participant of the group is free to write his or her own script (Brandes 2008, p. 6).

Learning within the group

The group, in which children's plays often take place, is more than the sum of its participants: All participants of the group have their own experiences in accordance with their gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, and ability. They bring along their own constructions of meaning and significance in life. Within the group new constructions, topics and meanings are built. The shared experience within the group context interacts with the individual dimensions. Individuals get the chance to re-define their life experiences, to get new points of view and to receive the fundamental experience of being approved and acknowledged by the group. All this enhances their development. According to group analysis theory, individual development is not the opposite of learning within the group process but is based upon shared experiences in social contexts. The better a child is integrated within the group context, the better the terms are for its individual learning and development (Foulkes/ Anthony 1973 in Brandes 2008, p. 4). The more space for individuality a group can offer, the more benefits there are for the learning and development of its participants. Moreover the more diversity a group can handle (people with different backgrounds and abilities as part of the group), the better the conditions are for individual learning and development. If there is a wide range of diversity concerning the scripts (life experiences) that children work on, there will be more chances to get irritated through different concepts and creations. Irritations of this kind can be the initial point for learning processes. Along with these irritations group members get the chance to re-write their scripts and to reframe their experiences (Brandes 2008).

Given that children's play in diverse groups is an important source for early learning processes, the role of the ECEC teacher obviously has to be re-defined. Moreover it should be taken into consideration which impact such a new role has on the handling of giftedness in early childhood facilities.

The role of the ECEC teacher

Observational studies in ECEC institutions show that ECEC teachers spend a lot of time and energy on structuring group processes. They are usually anxious to create the perfect surroundings and find appropriate tasks for the enhancement of the children's development. Being busy with that, some of them give children only little latitude (time and space) to structure group processes on their own. Taking the children's perspective and the impact of co-construction in groups seriously, it might be fruitful if ECEC teachers tried to be more low-key about the leadership in groups. This does not mean that they should not structure group processes at all. But it is necessary to teach girls and boys to handle structure group processes on their own. This might be a very demanding job that needs a great deal of empathy, sensitiveness and knowledge of each child's interests, current development topics and development status. Above all, children who start attending ECEC institutions usually do not have a lot of experience on living and playing in groups of peers. They are more focused on dual communication and – usually until they leave ECEC institutions – it means a great deal to them to handle conflicts and similar situations. Supporting children on their way into the group of peers, so that they can really benefit from the learning potential which the peer group has to offer, should be one of the ECEC teachers' main concerns (Brandes 2008). What does this mean for handling giftedness within institutions of early childhood education and care?

Facing giftedness within institutions of early childhood education and care

If early learning happens within processes of co-construction through shared play within the group of peers, and if diverse backgrounds and life experiences of group members are fundamental for the learning and development benefits of the group members, it is important for ECEC teachers to be low-key about their role of leadership in groups. Girls and boys need latitude to structure group processes on their own. Professionals need to observe the individuals and the group processes as well, to

keep records of learning and development processes of each child and of the development of peer groups in order to try to understand the children's point of view, to change their attitude if necessary, to support individuals on their way into the group and to assist the group in managing diverse backgrounds and life experiences of its group members, to encourage girls and boys to handle conflicts and to create shared processes of learning and development in which every girl and every boy can re-create her or his own meanings and re-frame her or his experiences.

Below are a few suggestions concerning the handling of giftedness:

Observation, documentation and recognition

The recognition of giftedness is crucial. This includes well-structured observation, specific background knowledge and the cooperation with parents and experts. But observation is more than diagnosing a child's development status and deciding whether a competence that is appropriate for her or his age is given or not. Professional observation is the key to know each child's interests and its current development topics. Observing means to find out which topics, questions and issues are meaningful for the child at the moment. Trying to take on the child's point of view needs time, patience, a serious effort to really get to know a child, the promotion of an authentic dialogue, and observing and reflecting on individual learning and group processes. A high level of perceptiveness is suggested to be an important part of the professional equipment which an ECEC teacher has to offer. Professional observation leads to the recognition and documentation of learning and development processes and outcomes. The documentation of those processes can be the basis for reflecting and planning educational support, for the collegial exchange within the team and for the communication with parents, experts, and the children themselves (Martin/Wawrinowski 1993; Schäfer 2006). Being involved in topics and challenges a child's attempt to become a respected part of the social system of peers leads to a new understanding of education, a new quality of educational actions within early childhood facilities, and a new quality of facing the needs of girls and boys with exceptional talents.

Giftedness as one form of diversity

Unlike race, gender, religion, and disability, giftedness – as one form of diversity – is sometimes hard to recognize. But if it is recognized, it has to be seen as one aspect of diversity

within groups. Although being talented might be seen as a gift, it has its downsides (like every other aspect of diversity) and moreover it interacts with other forms of diversity as well. To differ from the mainstream in one or more than one aspect of your personality, not having made the same or similar experiences than everyone else, can be a hard experience and invites feelings of isolation and separation (Prengel 2006; Racherbäumer 2009). Considering that, it might be important for an ECEC teacher to be able to see that a gifted child might sometimes need more than a highly individualized promotional program for the development of its cognitive skills. An ECEC teacher has to try to get things into perspective, to see that sometimes even though a child is highly gifted it needs special support to connect to other children and to become a part of the group. All the children in the group need to deal with the fact that there is one girl or boy among them, whose life experience and whose perspective might be different. As mentioned above, the more diverse a group is, the larger the benefits are for all the group members. Gifted children can assume special roles among other children, but not roles that are picked and defined by adults but roles that are developed within sometimes highly intensive and conflict-filled processes. In order to deal with these conflicts and to gain competence from these social experiences, all girls and boys in the group need support and encouragement. And maybe at some point the care which the ECEC institution or later the school offers, as important and irreplaceable as it is, might not be enough. An ECEC teacher's job might be to encourage the family of the gifted child to offer their child – additionally to the daily culture of the ECEC institution – access to fields of activities where their child could meet other children who have made similar experiences.

To sum up, it is suggested that the competence of facing giftedness and other dimensions of diversity might be a crucial part of acting professionally within all settings of early learning and development. Developing this competence might need special training, support systems, the chance to cooperate with information centres, and might need resources such as time for observation, space for the creation of a highly motivating learning environment as well as colleagues who can take over if necessary.

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Early Childhood Education and Care in Austria

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In the following article the Austrian system of early childhood education and care is described and its relevance for the promotion of gifted and talented children is discussed.

1. Organization of early childhood education and care systems

The responsibility for the organization as well as for the legal requirements of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) institutions lies with the nine provinces of Austria. This leads to nine kindergarten laws within the country. The state is only responsible for the training of future kindergarten teachers. For the state to implement nationwide activities for ECEC institutions it is possible to contract with the provinces as happened in 2008 and 2009. The contract of 2008 e.g. rules the development of a *Nationwide Framework Curriculum for Preschool Education in Austria* (see pp. 9–27). In 2009 the mandatory free of charge half-day attendance of ECEC institutions for 5-year-olds as well as the specification of the *Nationwide Framework Curriculum* for 5-year-olds were determined.

1.1 Qualification and training

The pedagogical staff of ECEC institutions is trained at Colleges for the Training of Kindergarten Teachers. This vocational school on secondary school level lasts 5 years and finishes with the higher education entrance qualification ('Matura'). The students are 15 to 19 years old and predominantly girls. Further training for kindergarten teachers is only compulsory in two provinces (Burgenland and Styria). In Carinthia certain courses are compulsory. The pedagogical staff in kindergarten is supported by so-called ECEC helpers. Those helpers attend courses, which differ significantly in duration, organization and content depending on the respective province and provider. Courses may vary from 90 hours up to a three-year attendance of Secondary Schools for Social Occupations.
Child minders or in-home day care providers are also required to qualify in courses, which last from 60 hours to 308 hours, also depending on province and provider.

1.2 Employer of kindergarten teachers

There are several employers of kindergarten teachers. Public authorities, comprising state, provinces and communities, own more than 60% of all ECEC institutions, of which 98,7%

are owned by communities (Statistik Austria, 2010a). Among private providers are associations (e.g. KiWi – Kinder in Wien, Kinderfreunde), churches, companies and private persons.

2. Structure and quality of ECEC institutions in Austria

2.1 Early childhood education and care centres

In Austria there is a certain variety of early childhood education and care centres: Nurseries are serving children from birth to three years. Nursery teachers are equally qualified as kindergarten teachers and have attended an additional training on the needs and development of toddlers. Kindergartens host children from three to six years old. In mixed-age kindergartens children from birth to six and sometimes up to ten years are welcome.

There are also parent-governed day care centres, which are mainly for children from birth to six, but sometimes serve schoolchildren too. Parents decide on the organization of these centres and also on the required qualification of the staff.
Child minders or in-home day care providers look after small groups of children from birth until school entry and sometimes also afterwards.
All above mentioned ECEC institutions are not regarded as part of the school system (starting at six years of age), even if they host schoolchildren in the afternoon.

2.2 Percentage of children attending ECECs:

0–2 years	15,8% in ECECs
3–5 years	88,5% in ECECs
5 years	93,9% in ECECs

Source: Statistik Austria (2010b)

2.3 Structural framework in Austria

	From …	Up to…
Group size	20 children	28 children
Teacher-child ratio	1 teacher / group	1 teacher + 1 helper / group
Space	1,5 m^2 / child	3,2 m^2 / child
Preparation time	5 h / week	10–15 h / week
Further training	No regulation	Up to 8 days mandatory

Source: Hartmann & Stoll (2004)

One of the biggest problems concerning quality criteria in ECEC institutions is the nine different kindergarten laws resulting in a very heterogenous landscape of ECEC institutions in Austria with varying levels of quality.

2.4 Parents' participation

Certain aspects of parents' participation are regulated by law. For example the number of parent-teacher-conferences is legally regulated in 7 provinces (one to three conferences per year). In Lower Austria there is a legal obligation for individual conversations between parents and kindergarten teachers, in Styria for cooperation and in Salzburg for parents' councils. Furthermore parents' participation is one of the basic principles of the *Nationwide Framework Curriculum*.

Other possibilities of participation activities were collected in a nationwide survey by the Charlotte Bühler Institute (CBI, 1994): Results show that 98% of ECEC institutions let parents collect materials for the institution. In 97% of ECECs there are informal conversations with parents on a regular basis. In 85% of ECEC institutions parents participate in feasts and celebrations whereas only in 47% of ECEC institutions parents also participate in daily activities. In spite of the fact that those results are 16 years old, experts still report a rather low inclusion of parents in daily activities.

2.5 Children's competences

In the *Nationwide Framework Curriculum* competence is defined as a network of knowledge, abilities and skills, strategies and routines, in addition to learning motivation, in order to be able to act in various situations (CBI, 2009). The framework curriculum differentiates between five categories of competence:

- Personal competence
- Social-communicative competence
- Competence in various subject matters
- Competence in learning methods
- Meta-competence

Children should gain competence in various educational domains, which are linked to each other:

- Emotions and Social Relationships
- Ethics and Society
- Language and Communication
- Motor Skills, Health, and Well-Being
- Aesthetics and Creativity
- Nature and Technology
- Transitions

3. Provision for gifted children in ECEC institutions

Young gifted children deserve very cautious support, a holistic approach, profoundly trained ECEC teachers as well as favorable programmes and setting characteristics (e.g. group size, staff-child ratio; Hartel, 2008; 2009). Although the importance of those early years for talent development is scientific state of the art (e.g. Perleth & Schatz, 2003; Stadelmann, 2004), far too little attention is paid to talent support in Austrian ECEC institutions. For example there is no legal obligation to support gifted and talented children in general in Austrian ECEC institutions. However, early school entrance, as first acceleration, is established by law. From 5,5 years onwards children may start school, given the school headmaster's approval as well as a positive medical opinion.

Enrichment measures highly depend on the respective ECEC teachers, although framework and structure of ECEC institutions would allow for many supporting activities from experimenting, to project work to mentoring and ability grouping. Since 2009 individualization and differentiation are stated as basic pedagogical principles in the *Nationwide Framework Curriculum.*

3.1 Transition to school

Compulsory education starts at the age of six. The transition from kindergarten (or other ECEC institutions) to school is a hotly disputed topic. For various reasons there is a gap between those two educational systems. Due to e.g. different authorities, different training of school and ECEC teachers, different educational traditions and due to the fact that ECEC institutions were not seen as educational settings for a long time, the teachers of both systems find it hard to cooperate. Individual transition projects depend on the dedication of both sides and there are still many structural and organizational problems to overcome.

4. Research on early childhood education and care (institutions) in Austria

In recent years a steady rise of interest in research on ECEC institutions could be noticed. It culminated in establishing the first chair for early childhood education and care at the University of Graz (Styria). Since March 2010 Professor Cornelia Wustmann and her team have been working on this topic.
Furthermore there are certain research activities at some other universities: At the University of Vienna a focus on early transitions (from family to nursery) was built up by Professor Wilfried Datler (Educational Science) and Professor Lieselotte Ahnert (Psychology). And dealing with men in ECEC institutions is a three-year-project at the University of Innsbruck (Professor Josef C. Aigner).

Outside the universities the Charlotte Bühler Institute (Vienna) is the only national research institute focusing on early childhood education and care. A strong emphasis of its research activities lies on quality in ECEC institutions. In the last two years they have, among other things, published the *Nationwide Framework Curriculum* for ECEC institutions in Austria as well as an elaboration for 5-year-olds and for in-home day care providers.

A recent mapping of Austria's research projects on giftedness revealed that there are no Austrian surveys dealing with the early years of gifted and talented children (Preckel et al., 2009). Neither is there any science-based literature for ECEC teachers considering the conditions in Austrian ECEC institutions.

5. Conclusions and objectives

So far, only isolated efforts in supporting gifted and talented preschoolers have been made in Austria. Unfortunately there are no mandatory or even nationwide demands or guidelines for supporting gifted and talented children in ECEC institutions.

In the coming years it is important to raise public awareness of the importance of ECEC institutions as basis for the development of lifelong learning skills and the discovery of early gifts and talents. These activities comprise e.g. addressing ECEC teachers as target audience at national events and conferences and fostering publications about early gifts and talents.

To improve the quality of ECEC institutions a profound quality management based on scientific results has to be set up. The thus required quality programme has to define quality criteria for structural aspects (e.g. group size, staff-child ratio), competences of ECEC teachers as well as methods of identification of gifts and talents as well as gifted education. The transition to school requires particular consideration to assure a continuous support for the gifted and talented, especially when an early school entry is planned.

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Early Childhood Education and Care in Croatia

Prof. Dr. Vesna Vlahović Štetić, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zagreb
Dr. Vini Rakić, Ministry of Science, Education and Sports

1. Education and training of ECEC teachers

1.1 Undergraduate and graduate courses of study

The education of ECEC teachers in the Republic of Croatia is carried out at six universities, at the faculties of teacher education in Zagreb, Osijek, Rijeka, Zadar, Split and Pula. Upon the completion of three academic years of undergraduate studies and the acquisition of 180 ECTS points, the professional title obtained is 'professional preschool teacher' (baccalaureus/baccalaurea).

The Teacher Education College of the University of Rijeka is the first faculty in Croatia which has, starting from the academic year 2009/10, enrolled the first generation of students of the university graduate study programme entitled *Early Preschool Education*. Upon the completion of the five-year course (3+2 years), having acquired 300 ECTS points, a student obtains a Master's Degree in Early and Preschool Education.

Experience has shown that a two-year programme of ECEC is too short to sufficiently equip ECEC teachers for all the numerous and responsible tasks that this kind of education involves. ECEC teacher studies last three years in most European countries. The issue of prolonging/extending the duration of the course of study as well as the issue of ECEC teachers exercising their right to professional development are in the focus of attention. The three-year undergraduate vocational programme for ECEC teachers takes into account democratic values, social and family-related changes, and is based on humanist educational values and scientific achievements of educational sciences.

In the process of adapting to the European education systems, in view of the future accession of Croatia to the European Union, it is necessary to modernise the ECEC teacher education programme and ensure its quality by introducing new contents, new courses and new forms of work, in order to harmonise it with contemporary needs, social reality and scientific achievements.

The new concept of ECEC teacher study programmes enables student mobility and the possibility of following course parts of related university courses at home and abroad. Within

a university students can choose subjects of related courses in Pedagogical Science, Psychology, Croatian or other languages. Such mobility is also possible from and to the matching study programmes within Croatia.

1.2 The employment of ECEC teachers

Kindergartens are public institutions which hire ECEC teachers, and are financed by their founders (cities, local self-government units, legal or physical persons). In addition, ECEC teachers can carry out ECEC programmes in primary schools (early childhood education and care programme in the pre-primary school year), in libraries, in health, social, cultural and sports institutions, and organisations. Apart from ECEC teachers, there are other professionals who work in ECEC institutions: expert associates, pedagogues/counsellors, psychologists, special rehabilitation pedagogues and highly qualified nurses.

1.3 Professional training of ECEC teachers

ECEC teacher training and development is carried out by the Education and Training Agency and the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Zagreb, as well as by the organisations with programmes approved by the responsible ministry. Professional training is compulsory. It is being carried out at state and local level and within a given education institution. Upon the completion of training, the ECEC teacher receives a certificate of participation.

Training is also carried out in the so-called 'practice rooms' for professional education of ECEC teachers and expert associates. There are a total of 50 kindergartens in Croatia, which function as practice rooms. In addition, the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports has named 14 kindergartens as professional development centres, i.e. excellence centres for professional training in early foreign language learning, Montessori pedagogy, ecological and sports programmes, the kindergarten as a learning community programme, stimulating environment and altered parents' role programmes.

2. Early childhood education and care system in Croatia

2.1 The responsible ministry

In Croatia the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports is responsible for education programmes of ECEC institutions as well as for the health protection programmes.

The following legal regulations constitute the legal framework for the implementation of early childhood education and care:

- Early Childhood Education Act (Official Gazette, no. 10/97 and no. 107/07)

- Programme Orientation of Education of Preschool Children (Gazette of the Ministry of Culture and Education of the Republic of Croatia, 7–8/91)
- Rulebook on the type of professional qualification of expert workers in kindergartens (Official Gazette, no. 133/97)
- State pedagogical standard for early childhood education (Official Gazette, no. 63/08 and no. 90/10)
- National curriculum (2010)

2.2 Children attending ECEC institutions

Children attend ECEC institutions from the age of six months until they start attending primary school (at the age of six or seven years). Kindergarten attendance is part of the Croatian education system (ISCED 0), but it is not compulsory. As an answer to the needs of employed parents, ECEC institutions have proven themselves by their quality in almost all areas of Croatia.

Nursery school programmes are carried out for children aged six months to three years, serving 35% of children. Kindergarten programmes include 60% of children, and in the pre-primary school year 99.6% of children are included.

2.3 Number of ECEC institutions and of children included in ECEC programmes

The total number of ECEC institutions in Croatia in the schoolyear 2009/10 is 682 and includes kindergartens owned by cities, towns, municipalities, and counties and privately owned kindergartens (founded by physical persons, legal persons, religious communities, and private organisations).

The total number of children included in kindergartens is 149.477 (total number of children aged from six months to six years in Croatia is 263.550 according to the *Population projection of the Republic of Croatia, 2004 to 2051*).
The number of 4-year-olds included in kindergarten programmes is around 19.500.

2.4 Child-staff ratio

The number of education groups in a given ECEC facility and the number of children in an educational group is specified by the *State pedagogical standard for early childhood education (Official Gazette, 63/08 and 90/10)*. The optimum kindergarten has a size of 17

to 20 educational groups in regular programme or 340 to 400 children in total. An ECEC institution with district branches has an optimum size of 30 educational groups or 600 children.

An ECEC institution can have at least one educational group with a maximum of 25 children. The maximum number of children in the educational group for children aged from 6 to 12 months is 5. The maximum number of children in the educational group for children aged from 12 to 24 months is 12.

2.5 Who is responsible for financing the early childhood education and care system?

Early childhood education and care has been decentralised since 1994, when the founding rights in ECEC were transferred from state to local government level, which resulted in uneven development of quality, standards and accommodation capacities in specific areas. In addition, the salaries of ECEC teachers and expert associates in kindergartens vary depending on the coefficient set by the ECEC institution founders.

2.6 ECEC teachers' working hours

ECEC teachers are required to spend 27.5 working hours per week in direct educational work with a child or group of children. 2.5 hours are set aside for breaks and 10 hours for other working tasks within the ECEC institution, totalling in 40 working hours per week. Other working tasks of an ECEC teacher relate to planning, programming and work evaluation, space/location and motivation preparation, cooperation and counselling work with parents and others, and professional training.

2.7 What competences does a child acquire in an ECEC institution?

According to the *National Curriculum* of 2010, the structure of the early childhood education and care curriculum is divided into three subareas in which the child acquires competences which are structured as:

- me (image of myself)
- me and others (family, other children, close social community, kindergarten and local community)
- the world around me (natural and wider social environment, cultural heritage, sustainable development)

In addition to the competences listed above, attention is given to acquiring practical and motor skills, emotion recognition and expression skills, social skills, along with the adoption of general human values.

Based on these basic guiding principles general, differentiated and individualised curricula are developed.

3. Early childhood education and care of gifted children

3.1 General

Following articles 6 and 17 of the *Early Childhood Education Act (Official Gazette, no. 10/97 and no. 107/07)* on structuring special programmes of early childhood education and care, special attention should be given to gifted children.

ECEC teachers and parents, as well as expert associates in ECEC institutions take part in the process of discovering gifts and talents in children. The procedure of determining talent in a child is performed by a psychologist (identifying capabilities) and a pedagogue (determining educational achievements). The aim of this procedure is to determine special educational needs of gifted children in order to successfully satisfy them through individualised programmes. Individualisation and differentiation are the basic principles for the programmes.

3.2 Talent areas

Children who consistently achieve significantly better (above the average) results than their peers in activities are considered to be gifted kindergarten children. These are the children who start doing many things before their peers, who do it more successfully (faster, better, more often), and who often demonstrate certain specific interests (and master a bigger quantity of specific knowledge and skills) and exceptional creativity, which is the basis of intellectual action.

Kindergarten children's talent is demonstrated in several areas:

- speech/linguistic
- music/rhythmic
- numeric/logic
- physical/kinaesthetic
- visual arts/visual
- social/interpersonal

3.3 Approach to working with gifted children

Apart from additional efforts by the ECEC teacher during the implementation of the individualised programme, teamwork is quite often required by the members of expert-developmental service (psychologist, speech therapist, special needs education teacher), as well as by the external associates.

The basic starting points of the approach are:

- monitoring talent from the aspect of the child's potential,
- every child is potentially a gifted one,
- ensuring a stimulating environment.

Determining potential talent and evaluating achievements:

- ECEC teachers gather information and assess inclusion, interests, the level of a child's psycho-physical development in the educational group by applying various instruments (polls, surveys, checklists, questionnaires, interviews, systematic observation)
- parents and expert associates assess a child's behaviour characteristics during their stay and directly work with the child by applying various instruments (polls, surveys, checklists, questionnaires, interviews, systematic observation),
- a psychologist carries out psychological tests of the child's specific abilities

3.4 Programme goals

Programmes are planned based on short-term and long-term goals.

Short-term goals relate to:

1. assessing potentially gifted children
2. listing promotion measures related to satisfying needs of potentially gifted children and providing stimulating development: procedures in direct work with children, instructions to parents and ECEC teachers related to the implementation of individualised programmes

Long-term goals relate to:

1. developing the abilities of gifted children to improve their own development

2. developing a 'network' of measures for systematic stimulation of development of the potentially gifted child (eventually specialised shorter programmes for potentially gifted children)

3.5 Programme content

Stimulating contents are accompanied by stimulating environment and space/room structured in a quality manner.
Various types of playschools – research-oriented, IT-oriented, creative (verbally, visually, theatrically, musically) – ensure satisfaction of children's various interests and talents.

Activities with children which are most adequate for use in the implementation of the programme for gifted children are the ones which stimulate active learning, creative thinking and creation, verbal abilities, higher levels of cognitive processes, motor abilities, social skills, i.e. the individual's comprehensive development, with emphasis on the specific areas of her/his talent.

3.6 Programme implementation

Most activities are carried out continuously throughout the pedagogical year. However, it is important that the diagnostics of the potentially gifted children is carried out at the beginning of the child's inclusion in an institution. Initial information given by parents during preliminary interviews is particularly important. The work programme with gifted children, which is carried out within the regular programme of an ECEC institution, is realised during the morning and afternoon educational work in regular educational groups.
Work programmes with gifted and potentially gifted children, which are carried out in a specialised playroom, are realised after the regular programme of the ECEC institution.

During her/his stay in an ECEC institution, a gifted child is offered contents in line with her/his developmental age, in order to intensify the development of her/his talent. Apart from the educational work in the institution, children also get to know the life of the community which surrounds them by organised visits and tours to various services and institutions (museums, exhibitions, cultural societies, theatres, healthcare institutions, churches, police stations, fire departments etc.)

3.7 Parent participation

Cooperation with parents represents an important element in the work of an ECEC institution. In addition to the initial activities when a child is being enrolled in the institution,

i.e. when the talent is being determined, parents participate in the creation and selection of the work programme and in the following and evaluating results. Cooperation with parents happens through:

- ensuring the transparency of work
- educating parents on characteristics of potentially gifted children
- supporting parents in acquiring skills for the education and upbringing of a gifted child
- parent participation in deciding on development of the ECEC institution

3.8 Programme evaluation

Programme evaluation is carried out based on the procedures of evaluation and self-evaluation. Surveys are carried out related to ECEC teachers and kindergarten expert service members as well as to representatives of external institutions when required. Problems which occurred during the realisation are being considered, and solutions are being planned. Institution founders follow the work closely, as do the representatives of Croatian Education and Teacher Training Agency, line ministry and various inspection services.

3.9 Determining talent

Various standardised instruments and procedures are being used to determine if a child is gifted: psychological tests, intellectual functioning tests for preschool children, tests of capabilities in music and visual arts, creativity and social maturity tests.

3.10 Enrolment into primary school

A procedure of determining a child's psycho-physical abilities is carried out when a child is being enrolled into primary school. Based on insight into a child's abilities and insight into her/his kindergarten file, a commission can ask for the opinion of a psychologist who followed the child's kindergarten development, in order to continue planning and following the development of a child's talent during her/his primary school attendance.

3.11 Protection of personal information

In accordance with the *Act on the Protection of Personal Information (Official Gazette, no. 118/06)*, all information on gifted children is secret and can be requested by the institutions

which have the right to do so. Kindergartens have been warned to protect the children from media exposure.

3.12 Acceleration

There is no acceleration of gifted children in kindergartens (skipping educational age groups). However, gifted children can be prematurely enrolled into primary school if approved by State Administration Office in a county (Municipal office for education culture and sports) based on parent request in view of a child's psycho-physical capabilities.

4. Conclusion

In the system of early childhood education and care in the Republic of Croatia, there is a tendency to enable participation of all children in as many activities and programmes as possible, in order to satisfy children's various interests and needs and to ensure talent recognition and development.
For children who demonstrate talent at a very early age programmes are ensured, which will satisfy their specific educational needs, within regular kindergarten programmes and through additional differentiated and individualised programmes. In order to implement the programmes aimed at stimulating the development of children's talent, staff is provided by initial study programmes and continuous professional training. In addition, equipment and other necessary conditions are ensured. Faculties and scientific research institutes carry out research on talent and on work with talented children and pupils.

Early Childhood Education and Care in Hungary

Mária Szabóné Pákozdi, Ministry of National Resources

1. General introduction

Early childhood education and care in Hungary is traditionally a split system consisting of two phases: the nursery where children of 20 weeks to 3 years are taken care of and which is supervised by the former ministry (now State Secretariat for Social Affairs) and the kindergarten for children of 3 to 6–7 years of age, which belongs to the field of education, now under the State Secretariat for Education.

In 2007, 556 nurseries existed looking after 32,000 infants, which is 11% of the age group.
In the academic year of 2009/10 there were 4,400 kindergartens with 328,000 children meaning that 92% of all preschool children were enrolled in this type of institution. 94.5% of kindergartens were maintained by the local governments, 3% by churches and the rest by the private sector, e.g. foundations. The Hungarian government spent 0.7% of the GDP on early childhood education and care.

1.1 A brief history of nursery in Hungary

The first nursery in Hungary was established in 1852. Until 1945 the aim of nurseries was to provide care for children while their mothers were at work. Nevertheless, nurseries recognized the main role of the family in children's upbringing.

From 1945 until 1970 with the mass employment of women the need for the development of a system of protection for mothers and children arose. A network of visiting nurses was established along with the expansion of nurseries and has been used ever since. Though the general approach was child-centred, the framework was the socialist ideology: the role of the community was superior.

In 1970 the National Methodological Institute of Creche was established and care work experienced a dynamic development. The role of the family in upbringing the children was re-established, professional development became a priority and complementary services as well as family support were provided. After 1985 the demographic changes and the lack of revenues of local governments led to a decrease in the number of places.

1.2 A brief history of kindergarten in Hungary

The first kindergarten was founded in 1828 by Countess Teréz Brunszvik after her trip to Italy. Until 1891 the kindergartens not only provided care and protection for poor children but they were also seen as opportunities to preserve the national language and thus create a national unity.
In 1837 the first kindergarten teacher training institution for men was founded. The teachers were trained to prepare children for school not by teaching but by facilitating the development of skills and emotions.

The first act on kindergartens in 1891 declared this provision for the 3–6 age group to be compulsory. It also mandated the requirement of professional training for kindergarten teachers and set out the distinctive features of kindergartens.

In the course of the 20th century the Hungarian pedagogy in kindergartens was influenced by the work of Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner and the Soviet pedagogy. The 1950s saw an expansion of kindergartens with the establishment of factory and company-based kindergartens.

The *Programme of Kindergarten Education* published in 1971 was a pioneering work and had a great impact on the pedagogy of kindergartens for decades. Quite contrary to the Soviet collectivist approach it emphasised individual, differentiated treatment for each child and the significance of free play.

The basis of today's pedagogy, the *National Core Programme of Kindergarten* was published in 1996 but it only provides a general framework for kindergartens and each institution is required to prepare their local educational programme taking into account the local circumstances.

2. Age and groups

The kindergarten is considered to be a part of the education system. Compulsory attendance starts at the age of 5 when a minimum of 4 hours 5 days a week must be spent in the kindergarten in order to participate in the preparation for school. For disadvantaged children, places must already be provided from the age of 3 although attendance is not compulsory. Children go to school when they are prepared, either at 6 or 7 years of age (or rarely 8: 13 children in 2009/10). In 2009/10, 92% of children between years 3 to 6 participated in institutional early childhood education and care.

The *Public Education Act* lays down the number of places and groups: A maximum 20–25 children can be allocated to a kindergarten group. The average group size in 2009/10 was

22.8 children in a group and the child-staff ratio was 10.9. In the nursery there were 6.4 infants per one qualified nurse in 2007.

2.1 Number of children in 2009/10

Based on the data in the *Yearly Statistical Book on Education* the following number of children took part in kindergarten education in the schoolyear of 2009/10:

Age	Number of children
3	72,160
4	90,934
5	91,693
6	68,972
7	3,944
8	13

3. Parents

Parents are involved in the education of children through common programmes or kindergarten councils. They are not involved in the management or finances. Kindergarten is free of charge in Hungary (except for meals and excursions) but several local councils have great difficulties in finding the resources. It is quite common to ask parents to provide certain materials (e.g. writing paper, crayons, toilet paper or serviettes).

4. Programmes

The pedagogy in the methodological guide of the nursery is based on playing, helping children to discover, explore and perceive the world, and facilitating physical, mental, emotional, and social development.

4.1 The National Core Programme

The *National Core Programme of Kindergarten*, which is reviewed every 5 years, declares that the most important activity for the child is free play. Playing must be present in the daily timetable and schedule of the kindergarten. The teachers provide opportunities and circumstances for free play all day.

Pedagogical development is based upon the following activities:

- poems, tales and songs, music, sing-and-play, drawing, sculpting, arts and crafts
- physical activities, the active exploration of the outside world, work-type activities (help setting the tables for breakfast), learning through activities

Possible forms of learning in the kindergarten:

- copying behaviour models (for forming behaviour and habits)
- obtaining experiences through spontaneous free play
- activity-based learning, learning based on the child's questions and answers
- observation, experiencing and discovery guided by the kindergarten teacher
- practical task and problem solving

The basic principles are set out in the *Core Programme*: the development of the child's personality is in focus; a child's right to care and protection, upbringing and education is the obligation of the family, the kindergartens play a supporting role.

The *Core Programme* elaborates on the following topics:

- The image of the child / The image of the kindergarten and its functions: protection and care, its social and educational role
- The approach to children: children must be accepted, trusted, respected, loved and appreciated
- Common experiences in the group through activities
- Requirements in personal and physical conditions
- The organisation of life in the kindergarten
- Partnerships with parents and the local community
- Flexible transition to school: physical, social and emotional readiness

The local programme of each particular kindergarten is created by the teachers and the materials and methods are also chosen by them. Teachers must record and evaluate progress of each child. The general task of the kindergarten is to meet the needs of children, their social, emotional and cognitive development.

4.2 Comparison with the *Austrian Framework*

The *Hungarian Core Programme* is a more explicit framework curriculum, expecting a more detailed local curriculum and leaving some issues open. Some ideas of the last decade are missing, for instance it does not refer to lifelong learning al-

though it is fairly evident by now that the necessary attitudes to learning, regular attendance and social competences can best be formed in the earliest years. It does not use the term 'competence' either. It is not based on a contructivist approach, therefore the ideas of empowerment and self-discovery are also missing, or perhaps it can be assumed that the focus on 'free play' may imply them. In 2009 there was a modification of the *Programme* including some of the latest issues, such as the idea of multiculturalism and awareness of the environment.

5. Quality assurance

The *Act on Public Education* regulates quality assurance in kindergartens. Each institution is required to create their institutional quality assurance programme responding to local demand. The programme, the annual reports and self-evaluation must be accepted by the provider and uploaded by the institutions on their websites. There is no system of inspectorate but counselling.

In urban areas where there are more children, the kindergartens are in competition with each other. If a choice is possible, parents have the right to choose the institution for their children. However, this right is not only limited because of the limited number of institutions but also due to the fact that institutions must give preference to children in their catchment area to enhance social inclusion of disadvantaged children. Still, competion has a considerable effect on staff and on the variety of activities kindergartens are allowed to offer upon parents' requests after educational time.

6. Qualifications and training

In the nursery a qualification from secondary vocational school with some extra training is required of nurses. They can also complete their A-levels in a different school and then attend a 2-year high level vocational course. Since September 2010 three higher education institutions in Hungary have offered specialized bachelor level training for them.

Since 1959 the qualification requirement in the kindergartens has been a kindergarten teacher college degree, which now, in the three-cycle higher education system is equivalent to a bachelor degree.

The non-pedagogical staff is required to posess a diploma from secondary vocational school.
The professional support teachers (e.g. speech therapists) must have the same level qualifications as regular kindergarten teachers with a specialization or a college degree – BA in special needs education.

Participation in continuous professional development for every teacher is compulsory – 120 hours every 7 years. The workload for kindergarten teachers is 32 contact hours a week (for teachers in special needs education it is 24 hours). A kindergarten group usually has 2 teachers and one nurse.
In 2009/10 the number of teachers in kindergartens was 30,007, the number of other staff was 22,800. It is alarming to see that hardly any men are engaged in kindergarten education: the number of male kindergarten teachers in 2009/10 was 54!

7. Recent developments in early childhood education and care

A competence-based programme package for kindergartens has been developed within the framework of the *Social Renewal Operational Programme* in order to renew the methods and tools of kindergarten teachers and to help update content materials.

Declining demographic trends, growing poverty and new awareness make the expansion of inclusive education necessary. There is still a tendency in Hungary to deal with problematic issues separately, e.g. as regards children with disabilities. Fortunately, the awareness of the benefits of inclusive education is growing and the former government started a *Kindergarten Integration Programme*. It meant that beyond a certain ratio of disadvantaged children, kindergartens (and schools) get extra professional and financial support in order to facilitate the process of inclusion and to compensate for the greater workload.

The *Sure Start Programme* was originally developed in the United Kingdom and has been imported into Hungary and so far 35 'Children's Houses' have been established in the most marginalized regions of Hungary. These Children's Houses aim at the most disadvantaged families but are open to the public and free of charge. They intend to link the institutions of early childhood education and care to the local community and attract disadvantaged families. In the opening hours kindergarten children or even infants can play together with their parents and with a kindergarten teacher/nurse. Children's Houses aim to involve an assistant from the local community.

7.1 Main challenges and the way ahead

During the time of economic recession the main challenge was to maintain the achievements: the quality and the institutions themselves. According to the latest statistical

yearbook on education, there were 96,000 disadvantaged and 37,000 multiply disadvantaged children in the kindergarten in 2009/10, which shows the need for ensuring access of these children to institutions of early childhood education and care and promoting their inclusion.

Parental leave policy in Hungary has been quite generous since the 1980s because one of the parents is allowed to go on a maximum of 3 years of child care leave. However, the allowance is so low that several parents prefer to take up work and thus more nurseries are needed.

Hungary has a *National Strategy on Children*, which considers the child in a holistic manner. However, the cooperation of the different sectors, which deal with the child, is still very weak and a lot of efforts need to be made to realize the aims of the Strategy.

General elections took place in April 2010 and there have been structural reforms in public administration. The governance of the nursery and the kindergarten have come closer since both social affairs and education are under the same ministry now. The new government is planning fundamental changes in education but the exact policy is yet to be seen.

8. Gifted children in early childhood education and care

In early childhood education and care it is legally obligated to improve competences for all children at an early age. Gifted children mainly attend special events (i.e. competitions) or attend short-term programmes in private academies and special or private preschools.

All the children and their parents are supported during the transition to primary school by having the chance to visit primary school lessons and programmes before choosing a school. However, cooperation between primary schools and ECEC institutions do not happen on a regular basis. There are also no specific measures for acceleration.

Gifted pupils are placed within the regular school system. Therefore, different types of educational provision are considered in the classroom. Supporting gifted pupils is part of the general education system which addresses the needs of all pupils, including gifted learners. Apart from general education, there are special services which specifically address the needs of gifted learners and which are funded by NGOs.

Early Childhood Education and Care in Slovenia

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1. Qualification and training

1.1 Qualification and training

The early childhood education and care study programme is a bachelor's degree (undergraduate) which lasts 3 years and comprises of 180 ECTS points. The study can be continued on the master level (different programmes, each with 120 ECTS points) and the faculties of education also offer doctoral studies.
In the framework of various exchange programmes (e.g. Erasmus programme) students can take part of their studies abroad.

The basic goal of the bachelor study is to equip students for quality educational work with young children – preschool children and children in the first grade of primary school (The Primary School Act, 1996) and for cooperation with parents, co-workers, and other professionals.
In their studies, students of early childhood education and care become familiar with various concepts of childhood and education, and gain fundamental theoretical and practical knowledge from individual areas of kindergarten operation (The Kindergarten Curriculum, 1999). Graduates of the programme must know how to communicate with children and adults, and must be capable of planning, executing and critically analysing educational work. The elective subjects of the programme encourage students to gain a more in-depth training in those areas of work in ECEC institutions for which they have a special interest and ability. An important goal is the acquisition of the fundamental and broadly transferable knowledge that will allow graduates, in the process of lifelong learning, to do research independently and acquire the specific knowledge and skills they will need in work.

In order to obtain a degree students have to gain all of the 180 ECTS points. ECTS points can also be gained in other higher education institutions both in Slovenia and abroad, as well as on the basis of recognised knowledge and skills, providing these points have been gained in accordance with the law, the University Law Statute and the rules of the faculties of education, and have been confirmed by the faculty organs. Study is concluded with the presentation and defense of the graduate project. The graduates gain the professional title 'Qualified Preschool Teacher'.

Anyone can apply for the job as ECEC assistant who has (1) passed the A-levels (2) passed the concluding exam or professional A-levels in the secondary school programme 'The Preschool Teacher' or in the secondary school programme 'The Health Technician'. All candidates for ECEC assistants also have to complete the pedagogical qualification programme at the faculties of education, which lasts one year and comprises 60 ECTS points. For both ECEC teachers and helpers a range of in-service seminars are provided from faculties of education and other pedagogical institutions.

1.2 Further training for ECEC teachers

The further training for ECEC teachers is not compulsory, but every year they have the right to complete five days of permanent teacher training fully or partly financed by the Ministry of Education and Sport. They can choose any programme announced by *The National Catalogue* for teacher training or by private institutions. Taking part in courses verified by the national commission is part of the professional promotion conditions.

2. Early childhood education and care system[1]

The employers of ECEC teachers are kindergartens, primary schools – first grade, hospitals, and special child-care institutions. The main funders and direct providers of services are the municipalities. However, the salary system is unified for the whole country based on the Law and on the Collective agreement.

Slovenia has only one structure of early childhood education and care providing comprehensive education and care for children aged one to six (from the end of maternity leave to the child's entering compulsory school). We call them 'VRTEC'.

Early childhood education and care is part of the education system in Slovenia but it is not compulsory. We do not understand it as 'schooling'.

The Ministry of Education and Sport of Slovenia is the line ministry and is in charge of staff, curriculum and special aid for particular groups of children.

[1] Data from the Ministry of Education and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia, Nada Matjašič Požar

3. The structural framework

The number of children per teaching group is defined by national regulation. Teaching groups of the 'first age group' (from 1 to 3 years) should not include more than 12 children. Teaching groups of children from 3 to 6 years should not include more than 22 children. Subject to the condition and situation of early childhood education and care in the local community, the community can raise the prescribed number of children in a teaching group by no more than 2 children (flexible group size).

The full workload of ECEC teachers is 40 hours per week, including a 30-minute daily meal break. It comprises: planning teaching lessons, teaching lessons, cooperation with colleagues and parents, and participation in other activities regarding a kindergarten working schedule. Within the 40-hour workload ECEC teachers are required to spend 30 periods in class, while ECEC assistants have to work 35 periods per week in class.

Table: Children in Kindergarten by age and gender, Slovenia, school year 2009/10

Age	Total	1 year	2 years	3 years	4 years	5 years	6 and older
Number of children in kindergarten	71.124	8.698	13.192	15.687	16.143	16.497	907
Girls	34.158	4.213	6.328	7.584	7.701	8.002	330
Boys	36.966	4.485	6.864	8.103	8.442	8.495	577
%							
Percentage	74	41	66	84	87	92	5
Girls	73	41	65	83	85	91	4
Boys	75	41	67	84	89	93	6

Source: SURS (Statistical Office Slovenia); Oct. 2010

3.1 Quality standards of ECEC institutions

The system is regulated by two key acts: *Organization and Financing of Education and Training Act* and *Preschool Institutions Act*. They determine conditions necessary for the establishment of ECEC institutions and for their organization and administration. Public and private ECEC institutions are obliged to follow the principles and directions of the *National Curriculum for Preschool Institutions* (1999).

In principle, quality assessment is under the responsibility of the individual ECEC institution. It is usually performed as self-evaluation study. The development of a specific plan ('vision') for each ECEC institution has been encouraged, with setting the goals and criteria for monitoring quality. Team evaluation of pedagogical work is preferred, carried out in pairs (an ECEC teacher and an ECEC assistant), in small groups (e.g. all educators of class units of the same age-group or of one ECEC unit; a group of educators interested in a specific problem) or in the 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 national advisers from the National Education Institute.

In drawing up the new curriculum, special emphasis was put on the main principles that have contributed to the re-conceptualization of early childhood education and care in Slovenia (1999):

- *The principle of democracy, pluralism and multiculturalism* (different program; different theoretical approaches and models; different methods and ways of working with preschool children in early childhood education and care settings; flexibility in the organization of living and working in ECEC institutions considering the space and time organization; diverse selection of content and activities).
- *The principle of openness of the curriculum, autonomy and professional responsibility of ECEC staff*
- *The principle of equal opportunities and consideration of diversity among children* (respecting the characteristics of different developmental periods; respecting individual differences in development and learning; respecting the differences between groups, e.g. regarding gender, or social and ethnic background). 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 special needs in ECEC institutions.
- *The principle of providing choice* (different programs be-

tween which parents can choose; the choice between different activities in ECEC institutions).

- *The principle of respecting the child's privacy and intimacy*
- *The principle of balance* (the balance between the child's development and the 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* (as regards the specific characteristics of development and learning of preschool children; as regards scientific knowledge, which defines the areas of the curriculum; and as regards knowledge of educational sciences and cultural studies).
- *The principles of horizontal and vertical linkage* (linking the various areas of activity in ECEC institutions; cooperation between the family and ECEC institution as well as between ECEC institution and primary school).
- *The principle of cooperation with parents* (written and oral reports of the various programmes of ECEC institutions should be publicly available to parents; parents have the right to gradually introduce their children into ECEC institution programmes; parents have a right to a continuous and real-time exchange of information; while cooperating with parents, the families' privacy, their culture, language, life philosophy, values, views and traditions should be respected).
- *The principle of critical evaluation*
- *The principle of developmental-process approach:* In the various areas of activities within the ECEC curriculum, the role of parents is particularly emphasized: their responsiveness, ability to communicate and sensitivity, continuous observation, monitoring and encouraging individual children to cooperate, involvement (at least indirectly) in various children's activities, creating a supportive, symbolically rich and interesting environment for children, a constant concern for the safety and welfare of children.

4. Parent participation

An important quality element of an ECEC institution is the cooperation with parents. Parents have the right to take part in planning the life and work of an ECEC institution. Parents should consider the professional autonomy of the ECEC staff who – on the other hand – should consider the culture, identity, language, world view, values and convictions, customs, and habits of the parents.

There are two councils in ECEC institutions: the ECEC councils and the council of parents. The council of parents is formed to implement parents' interests in an official manner.

5. Competences

Slovene early childhood education and care contains no obligatory or systematic evaluation of the children's performance since the quality concept is not based exclusively on performance indicators but rather on a balance between process indicators, intermediate indicators, and structural indicators.

6. Future plans

At the moment theoretical and value foundations of early childhood education and care are publicly discussed. A white paper on education is being re-evaluated and reformed.

The system of financing early childhood education and care has been reformed into a more transparent and unified system of financing.

Special attention is paid to high quality of early childhood education and care by preserving/improving the existing standards for structural quality and by providing high quality teachers' training programs.

7. The provision for gifted children in early childhood education and care

7.1 Provision

The provision for gifted children is an obligation for every ECEC institution although there are no specific articles about gifted children or about gifted education in the *ECEC Act* (1996, amendments 2000, 2003, 2005). The identification of gifted children is not expected.

The curriculum of early childhood education and care is administered by the Council of the Republic of Slovenia for General Education. The national curriculum for ECEC institutions (1999) is based on considering the individual differences in development and learning as well as the need of the child's development.

The curriculum is open and enables the implementation of various programmes (day, half-day, short). The objectives, contents and activities are designed differently for the first and for the second age-group of children.

The curriculum contains the objectives and principles of early childhood education and care, which affect every-day activities, communication and classroom activities. In planning routine activities (eating, resting, tidying up), the differences between children must be taken into account (gender, social and ethnic background, philosophy of life, abilities etc.) and such conditions must be created that those differences can be expressed. Children's particularities, their right to choose and their distinctiveness must also be regarded. The classroom should be flexible, diverse, safe and stimulating.

The principle of equal opportunity for children and parents, as regards the children's diversity, their right to choose and the principle of maintaining a balance between various aspects of the child's physical and intellectual development are set out in the *ECEC Act* (1996, amendments 2000, 2003, 2005).

The ECEC staff also includes education counsellors with university degree in psychology, pedagogy, social work, social pedagogy or special and rehabilitation pedagogy and they support the educational and developmental processes of the ECEC institution and offer a consultation for teaching staff, parents and children.

The ECEC teachers have to monitor the children's progress and needs on a regular basis. They started to use portfolios to do so a few years ago.

The following curriculum objectives of early childhood education have a great influence on practice:

- developing the ability to understand and accept others and oneself, as regards the distinctiveness and cooperation within groups
- developing the skills to recognize emotions
- stimulating emotional perception and expression, stimulating curiosity, exploratory spirit, imagination and intuition
- developing independent thinking
- stimulating communication skills for an effective and creative use of language; at later stages stimulating reading and writing
- stimulating the perception of artistic works and artistic expression

- transmission of knowledge from various fields of science and everyday life
- stimulating physical and motor development as well as development of self-dependence regarding hygienic habits and health care

7.2 Transition between ECEC institutions and primary schools

ECEC institutions and primary schools are obliged to cooperate in order to ensure a perfect transition regarding teaching programme and other activities. However, giving information about a child to the primary school is only allowed with the parents' official agreement. When the kindergarten is an organizational part of the primary school, which has happened frequently in recent time, the transition period is less difficult.

7.3 Specific measures for acceleration

There are no specific measures for acceleration in ECEC institutions. Early entrance in primary schools is only an exception. The parents' request has to be approved by the appointed primary school commission which consists of the primary school teacher, a school counsellor, a health professional and the ECEC teacher.

7.4 Specific provision for gifted children

Individualisation is one of the main principles of early childhood education and care. The enrichment programmes usually consist of early foreign language learning, dancing, and music and sports activities.

7.5 Forms of cooperation with other institutions apart from school

All ECEC institutions cooperate with local civil organizations and communities, with public and private music, dance and language schools and with sport clubs.

8. Research on early childhood education and care

Universities in Slovenia are conducting research on early childhood education and care. For example: the effect of the quality of the ECEC institution and home literacy environment on the child's language development; the effect of free play and other daily activities on a child's language development.

There are quite a few studies about identifying and educating gifted and talented children in preschool years:

- Parents' awareness of the potential giftedness of their preschool child by Majda Pšunder, 2003
- The criteria for gifted programme evaluation for ECEC teachers by Ivan Ferbežer, 2003
- How do ECEC teachers identify gifted children and encourage their development by Tamara Malešević, 2003
- Music giftedness in kindergartens by Tanja Klemenčič, 2009
- Recognition of giftedness in kindergartens by Tonja Ferjanič, 2008