

Overcoming inequality in early childhood education and care: A comparative analysis of five European countries

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1. Introduction

Universal access to education has long been recognised as both a fundamental human right and a global development priority. It is central to fulfilling children's right to education, as articulated in Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and to reducing inequalities, poverty, and child exploitation. Over the past three decades, successive global education agendas have progressively expanded their ambitions.

According to UNESCO (2026), international commitments evolved from universal access to primary education (1990), to universal completion of primary education (2000), and ultimately to universal completion of secondary education as part of the Sustainable Development Goals adopted in 2015. However, the pace of these expanding commitments has outstripped the capacity of many education systems to deliver them, and even the earliest objective of universal primary education is unlikely to be fully achieved by 2030.

Despite these challenges, global participation in education has increased substantially. Since 2000, total enrolment worldwide has grown by approximately 327 million learners, representing a 30% increase. Many countries have expanded participation through sustained policy efforts to remove barriers to access, improve retention, support disadvantaged learners, and facilitate progression across educational levels. These reforms have been accompanied by legal and policy measures aimed at making education systems more equitable, inclusive, affordable, and responsive to learners' diverse needs (UNESCO, 2026).

Within this broader agenda, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has emerged as a key policy priority. Increasing evidence demonstrates that high-quality ECEC contributes to children's cognitive, social, and emotional development while supporting family well-being and reducing inequalities from the earliest stages of life (Field, 2010; Bellour, Bartolo, & Kyriazopoulou, 2017; OECD, 2025).

Consequently, expanding access to inclusive, affordable, and high-quality ECEC has become an important objective for governments seeking to strengthen education systems and improve long-term social and economic outcomes.

Nevertheless, progress towards universal ECEC remains uneven. UNESCO (2022) reports that, in 2021, only 22% of United Nations Member States had made pre-primary education compulsory, while 45% provided at least one year of free pre-primary education. Furthermore, only 46 countries had established both free and compulsory pre-primary education in legislation. Although participation has increased globally, important disparities persist. The gross enrolment ratio in pre-primary education rose from 46% in 2010 to 61% in 2020, while participation in organised learning one year before the official primary school entry age reached 75% in 2020. However, in low- and lower-middle-income countries, fewer than two-thirds of children participate in organised learning before entering primary school. Inequalities also extend beyond formal provision: globally, only 64% of children experience a positive and stimulating home learning environment, with considerable regional variation ranging from approximately 40% in sub-Saharan Africa to around 90% in Europe and Northern America.

Europe presents a comparatively strong picture, although important differences remain across countries. In the European Union, participation in ECEC among children aged three years to the start of compulsory primary education reached 94.6% in 2023, approaching the EU's 2030 target of 96%. Eight Member States have already achieved this target, while most others report participation rates above 90%, reflecting sustained policy efforts to expand access, particularly for three-year-old children (European Commission, 2025). By contrast, participation among children under the age of three averaged 39.3% in 2024, with substantial variation between countries, highlighting persistent inequalities in the availability and accessibility of services for younger children (European Commission, 2026).

Despite growing international attention, considerable variation remains in how countries organise, finance, and regulate ECEC systems. Understanding these differences is essential for identifying policy approaches associated with equitable access and quality provision. This paper therefore compares five case studies of different contexts, i.e. England, Poland, Hungary, Denmark, and Norway.

Overview of Research on ECEC

Research on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has consistently highlighted its importance for children's development, educational achievement, and later life outcomes. Much of this evidence is grounded in human capital theory, which views investment in education as a means of developing individuals' knowledge, skills, and productivity (Becker, 1962). Building on this perspective, Heckman (2000, 2006; Heckman & Masterov, 2007) argues that investments made during early childhood generate the highest social and economic returns because learning is cumulative and early capabilities provide the foundation for subsequent development. Consequently, ECEC has increasingly been conceptualised as a form of social investment that can promote both economic productivity and social equity, particularly when it reaches children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Esping-Andersen, 2008).

While widely influential, the human capital perspective has also been subject to important critique. Bourdieu (1986) argues that educational outcomes are shaped not only by formal education but also by the unequal distribution of cultural and social capital. Children's opportunities and educational success are strongly influenced by the cultural resources, values, and social networks available within their families, contributing to the intergenerational reproduction of social inequalities. From this perspective, the benefits of education depend not only on access to educational services but also on the broader social and institutional contexts in which those services are provided.

Empirical research nevertheless provides strong evidence that participation in high-quality ECEC is associated with improved cognitive, social, and educational outcomes, with particularly large benefits for children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage (Burger, 2010; Melhuish et al., 2015). Similar findings have been reported in evaluations of universal ECEC systems, which suggest that expanding access can improve school readiness, educational attainment, and longer-term life outcomes (Drange & Havnes, 2018; van Huizen & Plantenga, 2018; Dietrichson et al., 2020). These findings have contributed to ECEC becoming a central component of education and social policy across many countries.

At the same time, the literature cautions against viewing ECEC as a universal solution to educational inequality. The benefits of ECEC depend not only on participation but also on the accessibility, affordability, inclusiveness, and quality of provision (European Union, 2022). Moreover, expanding enrolment alone does not necessarily reduce inequalities. Comparative research suggests that socio-economic disparities in participation and outcomes may persist even in countries with extensive public childcare provision, particularly where broader labour market structures, welfare arrangements, and family policies continue to reproduce unequal opportunities (Van Lancker, 2018; Laaninen, Kulić, & Erola, 2024). These findings underline the importance of examining ECEC within its wider policy and institutional context rather than considering participation rates in isolation.

This comparative working paper builds on five national reports produced within the STRIDE project (Hoskins et al., 2026), which examine the role of ECEC in addressing educational and social inequalities in England (Hoskins, Dinh & Ferrer 2026), Norway (Strømme, Mohammad-Roe & Bell 2026), Denmark (Iversen, Andersen, Hanghøj & Hansen 2026), Poland (Slany, Ślusarczyk & Szpakowicz 2026), and Hungary (Medgyesi, Lőrincz & Tomka 2026).

Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative research conducted in each country, the paper compares national approaches to ECEC policy and implementation, identifies common themes and key differences, and explores how institutional arrangements influence the capacity of ECEC systems to promote equitable outcomes. More specifically, it compares how the reforms were designed and put into practice, and how they were discussed politically and in the media, asking under what conditions ECEC expansion narrows – rather than reproduces – educational inequality.

The present study

This comparative working paper builds on five national reports (Hoskins et al., 2026) produced by the STRIDE project, which examine the role of ECEC in addressing inequalities in five countries: England, Norway, Denmark, Poland, and Hungary. The primary aim is to compare these cases and identify common themes. More specifically, it compares how the reforms were designed and put into practice, and how they were discussed politically and in the media, asking under what conditions ECEC expansion narrows – rather than reproduces – educational inequality. All five studies employ mixed-method approaches to assess the impact and effectiveness of ECEC reforms.

The quantitative component seeks to analyse available data and identify measurable impacts of ECEC in each country.

However, due to limitations in data availability and methodological inconsistencies, direct cross-country comparison is not feasible. Instead, the findings from each case are presented separately. The qualitative component comprises two parts. First, interviews were conducted with policymakers and practitioners (see Table 1) to explore issues such as policy design, data access, implementation, effectiveness, and critical reflections. Second, a media analysis was undertaken to examine how public debates evolved during the design, implementation, and post-implementation phases. After a first round of selection and screening a final number of articles were selected (see Table 2). The comparative analysis is primarily based on this qualitative evidence.

	Interviews (female-male)	High level (government, parliament)	Medium level (local authorities, researchers, NGO)	Low level (teachers, other practitioners)
England	4 (3-1)	4		
Poland	4 (4-0)		3	1
Hungary	8 (5-3)	3	2	3
Norway	2 (1-1)	1		1
Denmark	4 (4-0)	1	2	1
Total	22 (17-5)	9	7	6

Table 1: Semi-structured interviews

	Articles	Time period
England	109	1997-2015
Poland	40	2007-2021
Hungary	155	2010-2024
Norway	174	2005-2011
Denmark	13	2007-2024
Total	491	

Table 2: Media analysis

The paper is structured as follows. The first section presents an overview of each case, including the selected policy reform, its type, objectives, and distributional effects, with particular attention to inequality. It also outlines the content and timeline of each policy. This is followed by a descriptive summary of the quantitative findings. The subsequent section presents the qualitative analysis, focusing on two main dimensions: (1) policy implementation, including challenges, limitations, effectiveness, stakeholder engagement, data use, and evaluation; and (2) public debates and policy recommendations, including political motivations, underlying values, media representation, and national discourse surrounding the reforms.

2. Reform type and goals

Across all five countries, early childhood education is widely regarded as a key policy instrument for addressing educational disparities. As expected, the design, scope, and underlying political motivations of reforms differ considerably (see Table 3).

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	England	Poland	Hungary	Norway	Denmark
Type of Reform	Targeted early-intervention programme in disadvantaged areas	Gradual universal expansion of preschool access	Universal attendance mandate from age 3	Targeted free hours for low-income & immigrant families	Universal mandatory language screening for children starting compulsory school (age 6)
Primary Policy Goals	Improve early development; support families; reduce deprivation	Increase access, especially in rural & poorer regions	Promote early enrolment, reduce inequalities, support social integration	Increase ECEC participation among disadvantaged /immigrant families; support language development	Identify early language delays; support school readiness; reduce early gaps

Table 3: Reform types and policy goals

In England, Sure Start, a major early childhood intervention programme launched in 1998, was designed to reduce inequalities by providing a comprehensive range of support services to children and families in deprived communities. The programme sought to improve children's health, development, and school readiness, with the overarching objective of narrowing the achievement gap. Prior to the implementation of ECEC programmes such as Sure Start, substantial disparities in child development and educational attainment were particularly evident among children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

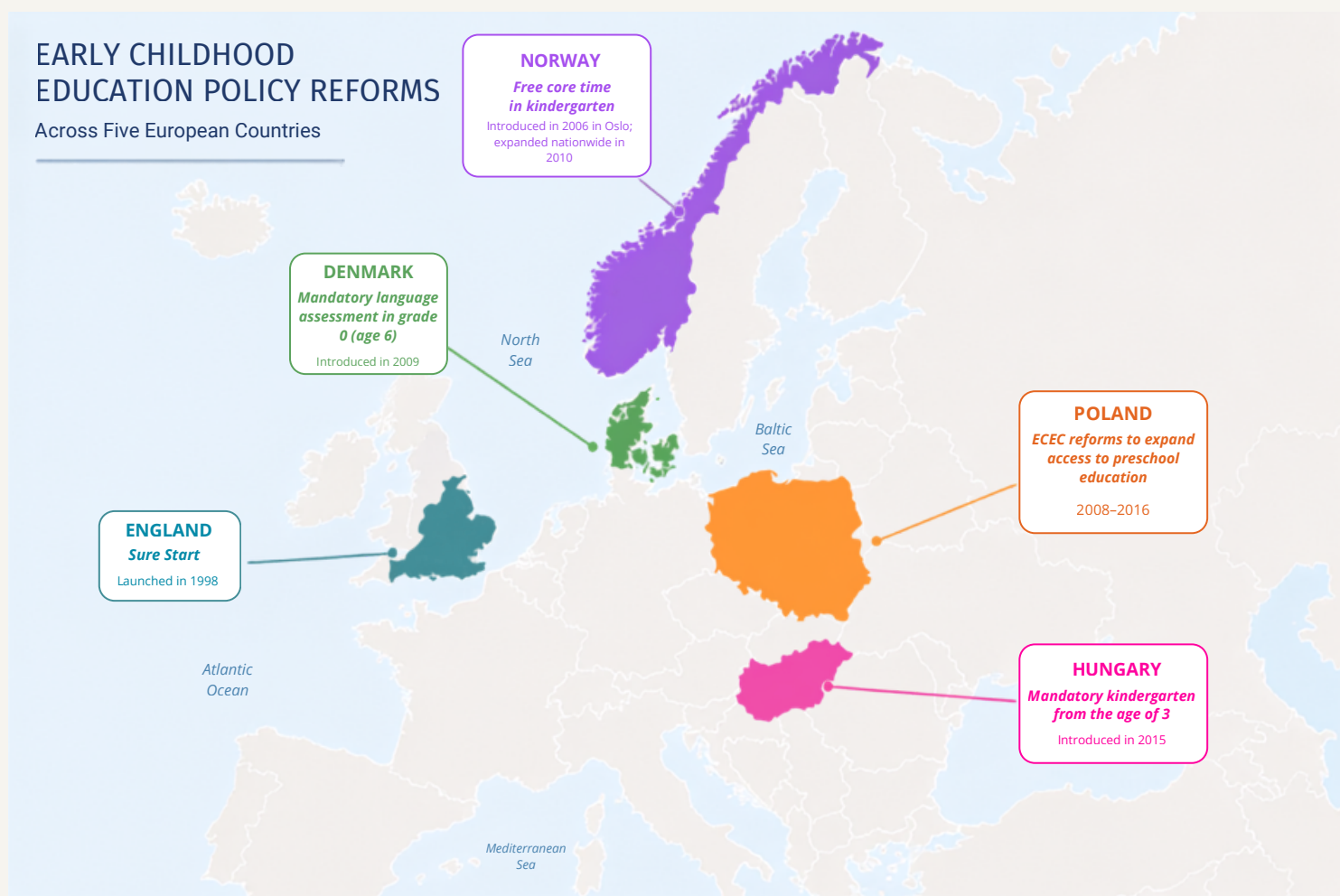
In Poland, the ECEC reforms under examination consist of a series of policy initiatives introduced between 2008 and 2016 aimed at expanding access to preschool education. These measures focused on increasing the number of institutions and available places, as well as improving affordability through the partial elimination of fees. Both international and national evidence indicate that early childhood education has positive effects on long-term cognitive and social outcomes; consequently, expanded access may contribute to reducing educational inequalities over time.

The reform selected for analysis in Hungary was the introduction of mandatory kindergarten attendance from the age of three at the ISCED-0 level, implemented in 2015. Under this policy, families are required to enrol their children in kindergarten in the academic year following their third birthday. This measure was introduced in alignment with the objectives of the Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy (HNSIS, first issued in 2011), which aimed to increase preschool participation among disadvantaged, especially Roma, children.

The policy reform "Free core time in kindergarten" is examined in Norway in relation to social inequality in education, particularly among immigrant populations, which were its initial target group. The reform allowed children from low-income families to receive up to 20 hours of free kindergarten per week upon application. The analysis incorporates both quantitative assessments of educational outcomes 12 to 13 years after implementation, and qualitative retrospective evaluations from policymakers, as well as analyses of media coverage at the time of implementation. Initially introduced in Oslo in 2006 and targeted at low socioeconomic status (SES) immigrant populations, the reform was expanded nationwide from 2010, with a broader focus on low-SES groups.

Finally, Denmark introduced mandatory language assessments for children in Grade 0 (age 6) in 2009. This nationwide reform required all children enrolled in the first year of compulsory schooling to undergo a standardised language assessment. It represented a significant institutional shift in Danish early education, driven by the political objective of reducing social inequality through earlier identification of learning needs and more timely pedagogical intervention. Rather than introducing an entirely new practice, the reform formalised and standardised existing assessment procedures, which had previously been implemented unevenly across municipalities and schools.

Figure 1: Map of Early Childhood Education Policy Reforms



3. The quantitative analysis

As mentioned in the Introduction, a direct comparison of the quantitative analyses is not feasible due to the differing types of data and methodologies employed across countries. Nevertheless, this section briefly outlines the approaches adopted in each case and summarises key findings regarding the impact of the respective reforms.

In **England**, the quantitative analysis employed a quasi-experimental design to evaluate the long-term effects of the Sure Start programme on educational outcomes, specifically the attainment of at least one post-16 Level 3 qualification by age 18 (e.g., A-levels or equivalent technical/vocational qualifications). To operationalise exposure, a variable was constructed as the distance from a child's residence at age five to the nearest Sure Start centre, with non-exposure serving as the comparison condition. This approach was necessitated by the absence of individual-level registration data. The primary objective was to assess whether Sure Start contributed to reducing educational inequalities, particularly by increasing the likelihood that disadvantaged students would obtain a Level 3 qualification. The results indicate some positive effects; however, these become statistically non-significant in the final model specification. Overall, the findings are partially consistent with prior research demonstrating short- and medium-term benefits of the programme, especially in supporting disadvantaged children and reducing educational inequality.

The absence of longitudinal datasets limits the scope for causal inference in the **Polish case**. Existing data primarily capture school performance at various stages and are often either non-representative or highly individualised. Consequently, there is limited evidence on the direct impact of ECEC on later educational outcomes. To address this gap, data from Statistics Poland were used to examine the expansion of ECEC provision, its role in reducing regional disparities, and its association with socio-economic development. These data were linked to results from national examinations to explore whether improvements in ECEC access correspond with better academic outcomes. The analysis combined examination of data with regional administrative indicators, including preschool availability, enrolment rates, and socio-economic controls such as unemployment and poverty levels. However, variations in examination formats, changing contextual conditions, and the multifactorial nature of educational achievement preclude strong causal conclusions regarding the impact of ECEC expansion.

A clear, statistically significant link between how much preschool was available and how well children did on exams ($p < 0.001$) was mentioned, and this link was stronger in cities than in rural areas.

In **Hungary**, the analysis draws on the Hungarian Life Course Survey, a longitudinal dataset following a cohort of students from Grade 8 in 2006 through subsequent years. The analysis studied the effect of length of kindergarten attendance on educational outcomes of a pre-reform cohort, as data for the cohort affected by the reform was not yet available. The analytical sample includes individuals who participated in both the national competency assessment and a household survey. Educational outcomes include standardised reading and mathematics test scores at age 14–15, and the attainment of a secondary school diploma by age 20–21. The principal explanatory variable is the duration of kindergarten attendance. The findings indicate no overall effect of an additional year of kindergarten attendance on the examined outcomes. However, significant positive effects on reading and mathematics scores are observed among children from materially disadvantaged households. No corresponding effect is found for secondary school completion, suggesting that early benefits may not persist throughout the educational trajectory. These results align with existing literature, which often reports heterogeneous effects and stronger benefits for socio-economically disadvantaged groups.

The **Norwegian study** utilises a difference-in-differences design based on a phased implementation of a kindergarten reform across selected districts of Oslo. This design enables comparison between cohorts exposed to the reform and those unexposed, while controlling for pre-existing differences across districts. The analysis uses population-level administrative data, including educational outcomes measured by upper secondary school grades and progression indicators, as well as parental background characteristics. Given that the reform primarily targeted immigrant and low socio-economic status populations, particular attention is paid to these groups. Consistent with prior research, the analysis finds no statistically significant overall effects on dropout rates. However, there are indications—albeit not statistically significant—of positive effects among the targeted disadvantaged groups. These findings suggest that targeted early childhood interventions may yield benefits for populations at greater risk of poor educational outcomes, although such effects may be difficult to detect over longer time horizons.

Finally, in **Denmark**, the study applies an Interrupted Time Series (ITS) design to evaluate the impact of a nationwide reform introduced in 2009, mandating language assessments for all children in Grade 0. The primary outcome is Grade 9 academic achievement, measured by standardised GPA. The ITS approach allows for the estimation of changes in both level and trend before and after the reform, under the assumption that pre-reform trends would have continued in the absence of intervention. The analysis incorporates school-cohort fixed effects and relies on population-wide administrative data. The findings indicate a small but statistically significant positive effect of the reform on academic achievement. However, effects vary across social groups and appear closely linked to differences in local implementation and institutional practices. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those with immigrant backgrounds experienced relatively larger gains, suggesting a modest reduction in educational inequality. These heterogeneous effects support the argument that universal early interventions can disproportionately benefit groups previously lacking access to early identification and support mechanisms.

4. Results of multi-level analysis with quasi-experimental design

The main comparison between the five cases takes part in this section based on the material from semi-structured interviews conducted with policy makers, researchers, and teachers as well as the media analyses. The first part focuses on the design and implementation phase, including any issues raised about the limitations of the reforms, the use of data, deliberation with different stakeholders and beneficiaries, evaluation, and the effectiveness of the reforms. The second part compares and discusses political motivations, values and public narratives in relation to the policy reforms. This section discusses also the role of the media, the way its reform was discussed and presented in each country and finally includes recommendations made by the interviewees.

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4.1 Design and implementation: Challenges and effectiveness

Since quantitative data did not consistently yield conclusive insights regarding the impact of the current working paper, the interviews provided a deeper perspective and facilitated a more nuanced understanding of the policy's structure, evolution, and effectiveness in each case.

The use of data during the design and preparation phase was generally characterised by limited accessibility and usability, although there was unanimous agreement that, where available, data proved valuable. In the English case, interviewees emphasised the particular difficulty of obtaining data from the health sector, highlighting the overall complexity of its organisational structure. Given that the health sector often constituted the initial point of contact between families and programme leaders, its rigidity in terms of data sharing was considered detrimental. In contexts where national data were unavailable, European sources—such as Eurostat, Eurydice, and OECD—were utilised as points of departure for reform (e.g., in Poland and Hungary). These sources either indicated comparatively low national rankings in ECEC or compensated for the absence of data on disadvantaged regions and communities.

Another set of challenges concerned the interaction between local and central governance levels, including structural barriers such as bureaucracy. In the English case, it was noted that the locally based system was essential for beneficiary engagement but ultimately unsustainable, necessitating a shift towards centralisation to enhance effectiveness. However, managing large-scale programmes presented additional challenges. In Poland, strong grassroots mobilisation at the local level was observed, with active involvement from local authorities, families, activists, and communities, reflecting high levels of motivation. Conversely, at the central level, barriers included bureaucratic complexity, financial uncertainty (e.g., short-term and frequently changing EU funding), insufficient systemic support, complex state-level legislation, demanding reporting requirements, and extensive institutional inspections. By contrast, in Norway, bureaucratic and financial barriers were not prominently reported. Greater flexibility was observed in the allocation of funds for recruitment, without stringent analytical reporting requirements, thereby reducing administrative burden. In Hungary, similarly to Poland, the reception of policy reform was more favourable in rural areas. This was likely due to a shortage of available childcare places in urban centres, alongside underutilised capacity in depopulating regions as well as a sense of restriction of parental rights among more educated, liberal audiences in urban settings. Furthermore, the predominance of a top-down policymaking approach was identified as a significant barrier, compounded by limited political will and commitment to educational equality. This was further exacerbated by the fragmented implementation of policies, often introduced without a comprehensive overarching plan.

The involvement of stakeholders and beneficiaries was widely regarded as critical. Within the English case, parental participation was embedded from the outset on a voluntary basis, with many local initiatives incorporating parents' perspectives on community needs. This approach fostered higher levels of trust between families and programme leaders, contributing to the development of social capital. However, encouraging parents to enrol their children in kindergarten was not always straightforward, particularly in urban areas in Hungary, where resistance necessitated the development of new communication strategies. Across all cases, parental involvement was considered fundamental.

In Norway, the importance of prior dissemination of information was emphasised, with initiatives such as door-to-door outreach, implemented to engage families more effectively. Additionally, language courses were introduced for mothers whose children were enrolled in kindergarten as part of an activity requirement. This measure was positively received and proved more successful than anticipated, although it remained a time-limited pilot and was not sustained.

The role of the third sector was also highlighted as crucial, particularly in Poland, where it was described as playing a role comparable to that of the welfare state. Through bottom-up, long-term learning processes, third-sector organisations contributed to the establishment of collaborative practices between national policymakers and local actors and communities.

Evaluation practices, however, were not standardised. In the English case, evaluation mechanisms were implemented, and the use of data was considered essential; nevertheless, challenges arose due to the scale of the programme, which encompassed approximately 250 local initiatives with limited central coordination. In Poland, state-led evaluation was largely absent, with only small-scale assessments conducted by third-sector organisations, which nonetheless indicated positive outcomes. Similar gaps in systematic evaluation were identified in Hungary, Norway, and Denmark, where evidence was primarily derived from the perspectives of policymakers and practitioners.

External and unpredictable factors also influenced policy outcomes. For instance, the 2008-2009 Global Financial Crisis was cited in the English case as leading to the rebranding of existing programmes as Sure Start Centres, thereby complicating evaluation processes. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic constituted a significant external factor affecting the measurement of policy effectiveness, as noted in the Polish and Danish cases.

Overall, despite the challenges identified, interviewees expressed broad agreement regarding the positive impacts of the policies. In England, the Sure Start programme was received favourably by parents and families, particularly due to the inclusion of their perspectives—an approach relatively uncommon in policymaking. In Poland, increased access to ECEC was associated with measurable improvements in children’s development, well-being, and future opportunities. Similarly, in Hungary, while some concerns were raised regarding infrastructure (e.g., limited availability of places, teacher shortages), accessibility, insufficient impact measurement, and inadequate parental preparation, the policy was generally well received. Positive perceived outcomes included enhanced opportunities, reduced dropout rates, improved socialisation, and strengthened child protection. In Norway, the reform was associated with improvements in language acquisition, particularly among immigrant children, as well as broader societal benefits, including increased labour market participation among women. Nonetheless, challenges persisted, including teacher shortages and suboptimal working conditions (e.g., high workloads, staff shortages, and sick leave). Additional barriers included the location of kindergartens—despite their role as meeting points for parents—and digital application processes, which could be perceived as exclusionary. Comparable challenges were noted in Denmark, particularly in relation to ministerial support for language assessment systems and associated IT infrastructure.

4.2 Public debates and recommendations

As with most policy reforms, the five cases under examination generated substantial public debate. These debates were prominently reflected in media coverage and were also referenced by several interviewees, some of whom offered recommendations at the conclusion of their interviews. Media discussions largely clustered around three central themes: the implementation of the reforms, their effectiveness, and the surrounding political discourse. These discussions incorporated perspectives from journalists, practitioners, policymakers, beneficiaries, and the broader public.

With regard to effectiveness, media coverage across the five cases presented a mixture of positive, negative, and neutral evaluations. In the case of Sure Start, positive portrayals were not limited to a single media outlet. These accounts frequently highlighted success stories, including improvements in community relations, testimonials from parents, and the promotion of diversity and inclusion as examples of best practice. However, despite extensive discussion of these benefits, there was a notable absence of evidence concerning improved academic outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children. In contrast, critical accounts of Sure Start primarily emphasised the lack of measurable educational gains for children from disadvantaged backgrounds in relation to their peers.

In Poland, with the exception of one media outlet representing an extreme conservative and Catholic perspective, there appeared to be broad political and media consensus regarding the importance of expanding ECEC. This consensus implicitly assumed positive outcomes for children, and policies aimed at improving access enjoyed strong public support, even where there was disagreement over specific reform details.

Similarly, in Hungary, media coverage – as well as interviews – did not provide evidence of a comprehensive national impact assessment. Some articles referenced European Union education reports from 2016 to 2018, which commended Hungary for achieving kindergarten attendance rates above the EU average. One report, citing a European Commission source, suggested that higher attendance rates may yield long-term benefits, such as improvements in national PISA scores. Additionally, statements from politicians of the governing party Fidesz in the years following implementation framed the policy as a successful instrument for enhancing equality of opportunity, particularly for disadvantaged children. Nonetheless, these claims were not supported by concrete statistical evidence.

Media discussions in the Norwegian context highlighted an important indirect effect of the reform, namely increased parental participation in kindergartens. For many parents, particularly mothers, kindergartens served as important social spaces, facilitating language acquisition and integration into Norwegian society. Increased enrolment among children with immigrant background was thus associated with greater parental engagement and familiarity with Norwegian culture.

Finally, in Denmark, early media portrayals of the 2009 language assessment reform characterised it as a necessary but insufficient measure for addressing linguistic inequalities. Commentators argued that it should be complemented by earlier assessments, targeted interventions, and adequate resource allocation. A minority of articles offered more fundamental critiques of the assessment design. A decade later, media representations of the 2018–2019 reform reflected a more polarised debate, balancing arguments that the policy was essential for equalising educational opportunities against concerns regarding its potential negative effects on children’s social and emotional well-being.

Regarding implementation, financial considerations emerged as a central theme in several cases. For example, in the case of Sure Start, media debates focused on the scale and nature of funding cuts, their impact on vulnerable populations, associated political controversies, and broader societal consequences. In Poland, persistent challenges related to access were highlighted, particularly regional and socio-economic disparities, as well as controversies surrounding admission criteria.

The availability of kindergarten places dominated media discourse, appearing in nearly half of the analysed articles in Hungary. This issue constituted the primary critique raised by experts, educational organisations, and non-governmental organisations, who argued that the necessary infrastructure was insufficient and unevenly distributed. Consequently, the system was deemed ill-equipped to accommodate increased enrolment. Another frequently discussed issue was the unintended consequence of introducing mandatory schooling from age six to create space for younger children in kindergartens, which in turn led to capacity constraints in primary schools and concerns by education experts and teachers about the readiness of children enrolling in schools. Media coverage also addressed the enforcement of mandatory kindergarten attendance, often criticising its punitive aspects, such as the suspension of family allowances, which disproportionately affected low-income households.

In Norway, during the implementation phase (2006–2007), some media coverage expressed scepticism regarding the policy's effectiveness, particularly in relation to the integration of migrant children. Comparisons with Denmark suggested that increased kindergarten participation did not necessarily translate into improved integration or language outcomes, with reports indicating limited interaction between minority and majority children.

Political dynamics constituted a significant dimension of media discourses across all cases. Sure Start, for instance, was widely regarded as a popular and politically salient programme, attracting attention from numerous politicians. Debates surrounding the use of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) highlighted tensions between methodological rigour and the programme's localised implementation. These debates were further politicised, as Members of the Parliament advocated for programme inclusion within their constituencies.

In Poland, political discussions focused on chronic underfunding and disputes between national and local authorities over financing responsibilities. The politicisation of education was also evident in media portrayals, particularly in right-wing outlets, which often stigmatised low-income families as a burden on society. At the same time, coverage of the reversal of school-age policies and the prominence of urban parental voices underscored enduring territorial and socio-economic divisions.

Parliamentary and public debates during the proposal phase received extensive media attention in the Hungarian case. Internal disagreements within the ruling Fidesz party were widely reported, including opposition from an education working group and differing views among party members regarding the appropriate age for mandatory attendance. Conflicts between government ministries and coalition partners were also highlighted. These tensions contributed to delays in policy adoption, with initial proposals reportedly rejected by the Prime Minister. Continued internal resistance was met with strong political pressure, framing dissent as a challenge to party unity.

Finally, the broader political context, including electoral cycles, influenced public debate. In Norway, for example, the 2005 parliamentary elections provided a platform for political parties to promote the "free core time" kindergarten policy as part of their electoral programmes, particularly among centre-left parties. From the outset, the reform was framed as a response to challenges related to integration of migrants, with pilot initiatives prioritised in areas with high proportions of migrant populations.

With regard to recommendations, the primary issues raised by the interviewees and reflected in the media centred on three interrelated dimensions: policy design, implementation, and evaluation. A recurring theme was the importance of fostering data-informed decision-making processes, while simultaneously maintaining a clear focus on the lived experiences and tangible outcomes for individual children. In this respect, several contributors emphasised the need to incorporate children's perspectives more systematically into the development and refinement of reforms, rather than relying solely on aggregate indicators or administrative data.

Closely linked to this was the recognition that meaningful evaluation requires adequate time horizons. Respondents highlighted that many reforms are assessed prematurely, limiting the ability to capture their full effects, particularly in the context of early childhood education, where outcomes may only become visible over the longer term. As such, allowing sufficient time for implementation, consolidation, and longitudinal evaluation was considered essential for accurately determining policy effectiveness.

In addition, several recommendations pointed to the need for extending the duration of existing programmes, integrating further expert input into policy design, and broadening the scope of target populations to enhance inclusivity and impact. These suggestions reflect a broader concern with ensuring that reforms are both comprehensive and adaptable to diverse needs.

Finally, political will and sustained commitment were consistently identified as critical enabling factors. Interviewees underscored that achieving greater equality in early childhood education requires not only well-designed policies but also long-term political investment, cross-sectoral coordination, and a clear prioritisation of equity objectives. In this sense, effective reform was seen as contingent upon both technical design and the broader political and institutional context in which policies are developed and implemented.¹

¹ For more details on recommendations, see the Early Childhood Education Policy to mitigate inequalities in educational outcomes: The Path to Educational Equity (Policy Brief): [10.5281/zenodo.21624136](https://zenodo.org/record/21624136)

5. Conclusion

Taken together, the comparative analysis yields several overarching conclusions. First, while ECEC reforms have the potential to reduce educational inequalities, their effectiveness is highly contingent upon contextual and implementation factors. Targeted interventions and well-resourced programmes tend to produce more discernible benefits for disadvantaged groups, even when overall effects remain modest. Second, universal provision, although important for expanding access, is insufficient in isolation. Without adequate attention to quality, capacity, and targeted support mechanisms, universal approaches may fail to reduce, and may in some cases exacerbate, existing inequalities (Van Lancker and Ghysels, 2016).

Third, local context plays a critical role in shaping both participation and outcomes. Factors such as urban–rural disparities, migration patterns, socio-economic conditions, and administrative structures significantly influence the effectiveness of ECEC provisions. Fourth, political stability in the sense of an agreed plan on ECEC by all political sides and sustained financial investment are essential for ensuring the long-term success of reforms. Frequent shifts in policy direction, funding reductions, and inconsistent national priorities can undermine programme continuity and impact. Finally, the analysis underscores the importance of adopting a multidimensional approach to evaluation. The integration of administrative data, qualitative research, and media analysis provides a more comprehensive and robust understanding of policy effects than any single methodological approach in isolation.

In sum, while ECEC reforms represent a promising avenue for addressing educational inequalities, their success depends on a complex interplay of design, implementation, and contextual factors. A nuanced and multidimensional analytical framework is therefore essential for understanding both their potential and their limitations.

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STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING EQUITY AND
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