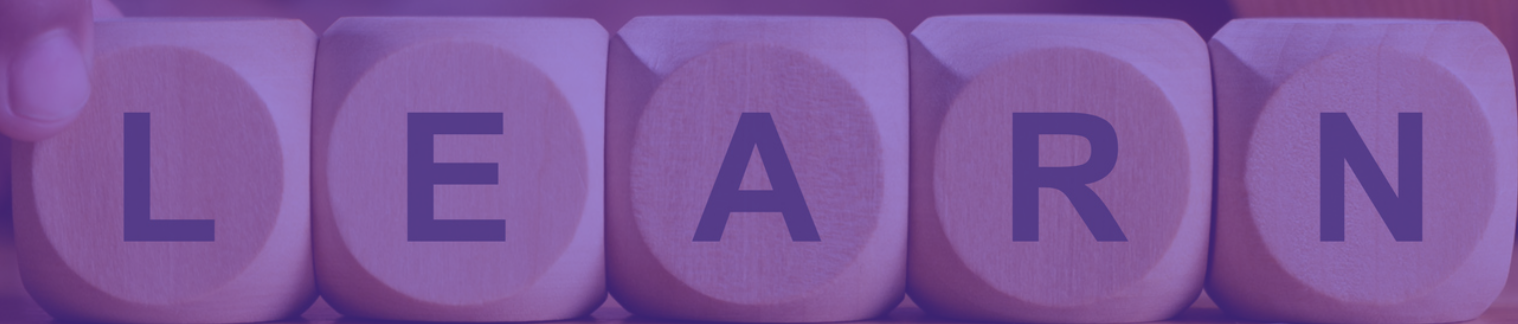


Early Childhood Education Policy to mitigate inequalities in educational outcomes:

The Path to Educational Equity



Policy brief August 2026

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POLICY BRIEF | AUGUST 2026

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.21624136

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Early Childhood Education Policy to mitigate inequalities in educational outcomes: The Path to Educational Equity - Policy Brief

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**Co-funded by
the European Union**



**UK Research
and Innovation**

Co-funded by the European Union under grant agreement number 101132339 and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) under grant agreement number 10108849.

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authorities can be held responsible for them.

Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) policy to mitigate inequalities in education

Educational inequality remains a fundamental challenge for modern democracies, dictating long-term outcomes in employment, health and wealth. Research indicates that these **disparities** are not just a product of schooling but are **visible as early as 9 months of age**, with children from migrant, minority and low-income backgrounds facing the steepest barriers (Halle et al., 2009; Farquharson et al., 2024). To mitigate these early gaps, **Early Childhood Education (ECE)** has emerged as a critical lever for fostering equity. Yet, previous research lacks practical evidence on measuring the long-term impacts of ECE policies in reducing inequalities in educational outcomes. The STRIDE project directly addresses these challenges by conducting a study on the evaluation of long-term effects of ECE policies across five European contexts.

Drawing from the rigorous findings in our research, this policy brief aims to offer recommendations, based on the policy cycle, for ECE policies and reforms through shared evidence of what works and what could be improved at different levels to further mitigate inequalities in educational outcomes in the short, medium and long term.

About the Research

As a deliverable for the *Strategies for Achieving Equity and Inclusion in Education Training and Learning in Democratic Europe* (STRIDE) Project, the report “*Mitigating inequality in educational outcomes: Evidence from Early Childhood Policy Reforms in Five European countries*”¹ evaluated the long-term impacts of Early Childhood Education (ECE) reforms in five European countries: England, Poland, Hungary, Norway and Denmark. Reforms included England’s *Sure Start*, Poland’s universal preschool expansion, Hungary’s Mandatory Kindergarten from Age Three, Norway’s *Free Core Time in Kindergarten Initiative* and Denmark’s Introduction of Mandatory Language Assessments. The ECE reforms were analysed using a **mixed-methods** approach throughout all country cases. Through an integration of quantitative analyses, qualitative interviews with critical stakeholders and policymakers, and a media analysis gauging political and popular sentiment toward policies, this study produced a robust, multi-dimensional evaluation of ECE policy development, implementation and outcomes.

Based on the comparative research, we briefly present our findings and recommend policy and practice actions. These are organised across the five stages of the policy cycle and span international, national and local levels (see Figure 1).

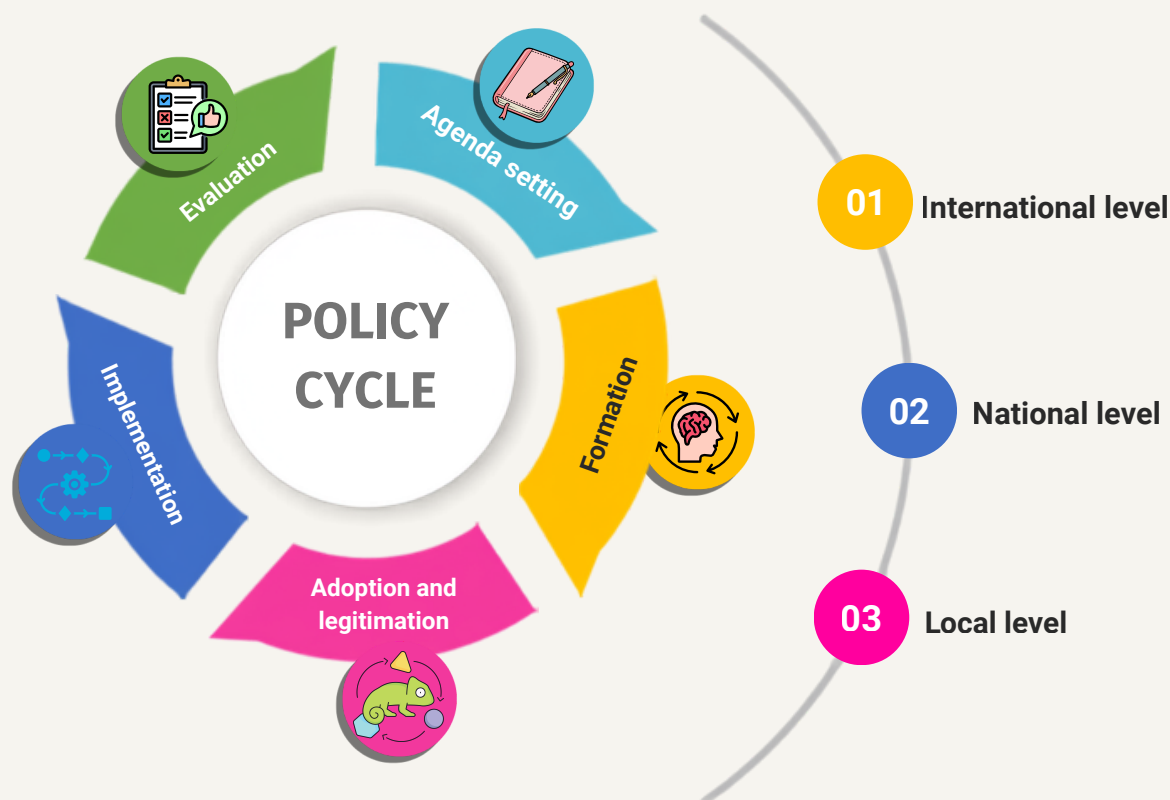


Figure 1. Policy cycle (5 phases)

Key Research Findings

Results from all country cases revealed the significance of ECE reforms, especially to the general public, as cases emphasised the importance of stakeholder and beneficiary involvement in the development and dissemination of ECE policies and revealed shared popular sentiments of ECE amongst the public in the media. Additional key findings from our comprehensive research are as follows:



Agenda Setting

1. Political Legitimacy through benchmarking and welfare rights: findings in Poland² and Hungary³ reveal that efforts to expand access to ECE aligned with international standards (e.g., EU benchmarks) which can act as catalyst for national governments to expand preschool access. Across all countries, ECE expansion was broadly accepted and endorsed politically when framed as a foundational right.



2. Targeted outreach through local data: national policies often fail to reach the most marginalised, rural communities without specific local identification; therefore, localised data mapping and assertive outreach should be used to identify and support the most marginalized families who fall through the cracks of standard policy.

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1. Hoskins, B., Dinh, K., Ferrer, S., Ślusarczyk, M., Szpakowicz, D., Slany, K., Medgyesi, M., Lőrincz, B., Tomka, Z., Strømme, T. B., Mohammad-Roe, S., Bell, J., Iversen, S. N., Andersen, I.G., Hanghøj, A., and Hansen, R.S. (2026). Mitigating inequality in educational outcomes: Evidence from Early Childhood Policy Reforms in Five European countries. Lifelong Learning Platform. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17290743>
 2. Ślusarczyk, M., Szpakowicz, D. and Slany, K. (2026). Mitigating inequality in educational outcomes: Evidence from Early Childhood Policy Reforms: **Poland case study report**. Lifelong Learning Platform. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20305324>
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Policy Formation

3. Integrated Services and Educational Continuity: Successful models (e.g., England's *Sure Start* model) use cross-sectorial hubs, acting as a "one-stop shop" by linking health, family support, and ECE to target development. However, these gains are lost without intermediary services that bridge the gap between early childhood and primary school (England and Hungary).⁴

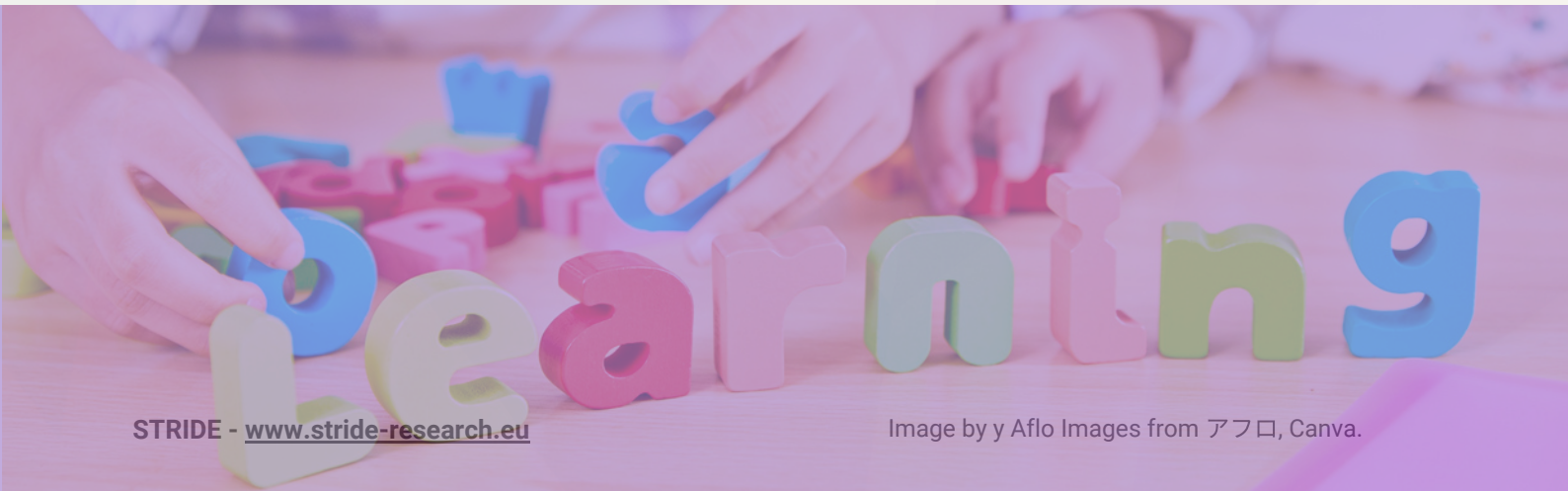


4. International Knowledge-Sharing for Equity: Comparative evaluations (for example, England's integrated "one-stop shop") provide blueprints for addressing multi-dimensional poverty, while collaborative knowledge-sharing helps nations identify and pre-empt shared threats, such as the "elitisation" of private preschools observed in both Poland and Hungary.

5. Beneficiary Empowerment as Policy Design: Findings from all countries reveal the significance of beneficiary involvement in the development and formulation of ECE policies. Engaging parents as "informed partners" rather than passive recipients is crucial. This community involvement fosters the trust and reciprocity needed for effective and sustainable policy implementation.

5

4. Hoskins, B., Dinh, K. and Ferrer, S. (2026). Mitigating inequality in educational outcomes: Evidence from Early Childhood Policy Reforms: **England case study report**. Lifelong Learning Platform. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20305125>





Policy Adoption and Legitimation

6. Sustainable Funding vs. Bureaucracy: While EU funds drive expansion of ECE in disadvantaged regions (e.g., Hungary), high bureaucracy and short-term cycles create financial risks for local authorities and NGO's (Poland's case). Streamlining these processes is essential for long-term program stability.

7. Targeted support and Statutory enshrinement of programmes: Evidence suggests that targeted support yields more significant benefits for the disadvantaged than universal reforms alone (Norway⁵ and Denmark⁶). However, programmes must be enshrined in law to protect them from funding cuts during political or economic shifts.



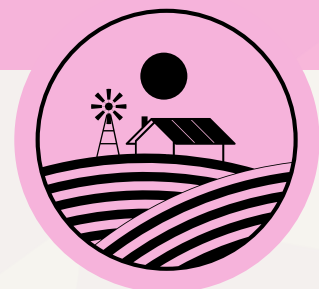
8. Local Integration and Responsibility: Long-term success of ECE policy depends on local authorities taking ownership and cooperating with local communities and NGOS (Poland). Integrating ECE into broader municipal welfare investments (rather than treating it as a standalone programme) ensures it is viewed as a permanent pillar of social support (Norway).

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Policy Implementation

9. Reliance on Multi-Level Funding and NGOs: Expansion in rural and disadvantaged areas (e.g., Poland) depends heavily on cooperation of international instruments and NGOs, which often compensate for essential "welfare state replacements" by providing infrastructure where government services are absent and macro level changes are time-consuming.



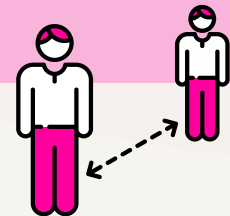
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10. Workforce Crisis and Lack of Implementation Fidelity as Barriers to Quality:

Across all countries (notably Hungary and Norway), severe teacher shortages and high staff turnover fundamentally limit the system's capacity to reduce educational inequalities, regardless of programme design. Lack of implementation fidelity and standardised guidelines due to the nature of local and decentralised programmes create significant issues for quality assurance and follow-up (Denmark and England).

11. Physical Proximity and Holistic Care: Physical distance remains a primary barrier for marginalised families (Norway and England). Thus, successful implementation requires localised services and "assertive outreach", direct, personal engagement to facilitate enrolment among hard-to-reach groups. Multidimensional ECE models, providing shared access to information across healthcare, familial wellbeing programmes, education and play are particularly significant for the most disadvantaged groups.



Policy Evaluation

12. Value of Pilot Data and cross-country knowledge sharing: The absence of pilot data and background studies, primarily in Hungary, was a primary weakness in policy rollout, as they had little to no foundation for effective ECE reform.

13. Collection and Accessibility of Longitudinal Data: Effective evaluation measures were made possible through availability and access to longitudinal databases, such as the National Pupil Database in the case of England. The difficulty of conducting randomised controlled trials due to the localised nature of programmes made this longitudinal data even more significant.

14. Accessibility of cross-sectorial data: this was significant in England as the Sure Start Model was based on a multidimensional approach, which required the usage of accessible data across healthcare, familial wellbeing programmes and education for successful impact evaluations.



Recommendations for policy and practice

Based on this comparative research, we recommend the following policy and practice actions, organised across the five stages of the policy cycle.

Agenda Setting

- **International Level | Leverage Benchmarking:** Ensure the continuation of effective ECE targets and indicators with international standards (e.g., OECD, EU education and training strategic framework for 2021–2030, or European Education Area guidelines) to catalyse political will and provide a roadmap for national reforms.
- **National Level | Frame as a Universal Right:** Position ECE as a foundational entitlement under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Broaden the narrative by framing it as a core pillar for social mobility and labour market expansion.
- **Local Level | Map "Invisible" Populations:** Utilise localised data mapping to identify specific neighbourhoods, groups and communities that remain unreached by standard ECE services.

Policy Formation

- **International Level | Leverage Collaborative Frameworks:** provide access to and utilise international research and frameworks for the development of ECE policies and focus on universal threats to educational equity to enhance the global effectiveness of ECE.
- **National Level | Integrated, Cross-Sectorial ECE model and Seamless Educational Trajectories:** Design ECE as a "one-stop shop", integrating health, education, and family support services. To prevent "gain fadeout," establish clear intermediary guidelines that ensure this integrated support continues through the transition into primary school.
- **Local Level | Formalise Parental Deliberation:** Establish methods to ensure the implementation of stakeholder voices in the creation of ECE programmes. This ensures programme design is responsive to specific community needs and builds local trust.

Policy Adoption and Legitimation

- **International Level | Streamline Funding and Protect Social Mandates:** Reduce the administrative burden for accessing international grants (e.g., EU Social Fund). Ensure that these funds maintain a dedicated focus on ECE as a critical social dimension, protecting it from shifting geopolitical priorities.
- **National Level | Prioritise Statutory Protection:** To ensure long-term survival, move programmes beyond temporary budget allocations by enshrining them in national legislation to reduce progress fade-out and mitigate the elimination of effective ECE programmes after pilot implementation.
- **Local Level | Formalise Municipal Commitments:** Transition from "pilot project" status to permanent service delivery by integrating successful ECE initiatives into core municipal budgets and governance structures. This shifts ECE from a contingent programme to a stable pillar of local welfare.

Policy Implementation

- **International Level | Establish "Fast-Track" Funding for the Third Sector:** Streamline the delivery of international structural funds (e.g., via the European Commission) to empower NGOs and local activists to act as service providers in regions where national welfare systems are insufficient or absent. 
- **National Level | Mitigate the Workforce Crisis and Address Lack of Implementation Fidelity:** Address systemic teacher shortages through sustained investment in competitive salaries and high-quality training. Without a stable and qualified workforce, programme quality and the ability to reduce educational inequalities are fundamentally compromised. Create universal standards for ECE programmes, despite localised components to ensure implementation quality and effective evaluation. 
- **Local Level | Optimise Assertive Outreach and Holistic Care:** Ensure ECE facilities are physically located within disadvantaged residential areas to eliminate transportation barriers. Use high-engagement recruitment methods, such as home visits and door-to-door outreach, to reach families alienated by other methods like standard digital application systems. Facilitate the secure exchange of information between health, social services and education sectors to provide accessible, holistic care. 

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Policy Evaluation

- **International Level | Facilitate Cross-Country Knowledge Sharing:** Utilise international platforms (including from the European Commission) to exchange findings from both successes and failures. Sharing small-scale pilot evaluations before full-scale implementation prevents the replication of costly errors across borders.
- **National Level | Ensure Quality Evaluation, Data Accessibility and Monitoring:** Mandate that assessments and screenings include legally binding follow-up support to prevent "progress fade-out." Additionally, centralise and open country-wide datasets to researchers, policy makers and stakeholders to ensure transparent, evidence-based policy adjustments. Emphasise the importance of longitudinal data production and sharing for the evaluation of ECE policies.
- **Local Level | Formalise Cross-Sectorial Data Sharing:** Empower local governments to bridge "data silos." Facilitating the secure exchange of information between health, social services and education sectors is essential for conducting accurate, multi-dimensional local impact evaluations.



Conclusions



Work Package 5 of the STRIDE Project has contributed significant findings through its evaluation of five country case studies. Insights from all countries offer strong foundations for policy development, implementation and evaluation.

This research not only helps stakeholders and policymakers examine what works but also provides critical tools to promote the mitigation of educational inequalities for children facing intersectional disadvantages in the short, medium and long term.



Glossary



General list of acronyms and terms

Term	Definition
ECE Early childhood education (ECE)	Early childhood education (ECE) covers all forms of organised and (Early Childhood sustained centre-based activities – such as preschools, kindergartens and day-care centres – designed to foster Education) learning and emotional and social development in children. These programmes are generally offered to children from the age of three to around 6–7 years. Source: OECD 2013 Education Indicators in Focus – 2013/02 (February)
OECD	The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) is an international organisation that serves as a forum and knowledge hub for data, analysis, and best practices in public policy, collaborating with over 100 countries worldwide. Source: https://www.oecd.org/en/about.htm
National Pupil Database (NPD)	A vast longitudinal database managed by the UK Department for Education (DfE) that contains detailed information on pupils in state-funded schools in England. It links pupil characteristics (such as age, gender, ethnicity, and eligibility for free school meals) with their educational attainment data as they progress through the school system. It is a primary resource for educational research, policy evaluation, and the production of school performance tables. Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-pupil-203-database-npd-privacy-notice



Term	Definition
Sure Start	A flagship UK government initiative launched in 1999 designed to support families with children under the age of five living in disadvantaged areas. The programme provides "integrated" services—combining early education, childcare, health services, and family support—under one roof. Its core objective is to improve children's "school readiness" and long-term life chances by breaking the link between poverty and low educational attainment. Source: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/researchbriefings/cbp-7257/
Free core time	The Norwegian government secures 20 hours of free core time per week for 2-, 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds, and children with delayed school start, who live in households with low income. From August 1, 2024, families with an annual income under 642,700 NOK are entitled to free core time. From August 1, 2025, the income limit will increase to 669,050 NOK. Source: regjeringen.no
Work Package	A component of the project work breakdown. It represents a group of project activities targeting common specific objectives. List of STRIDE Work Packages: - WP 1: Project management and research governance - WP 2 : Policy analysis and meta-analysis in Europe - WP 3 : The trends of inequalities in education achievement - WP 4: A map of significant factors of inequalities in education - WP 5: Identify effective policy initiatives and interventions - WP 6: A toolbox for effective policymaking and assessment of inequalities in education - WP 7: Impact pathways, public engagement & synergy building
Deliverable	A tangible output such as a report, prototype, working paper, or dataset that demonstrates the completion of a specific task or milestone set out in the project.

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Project Name: Strategies for Achieving Equity and Inclusion in Education, Training and Learning in Democratic Europe (STRIDE)

Coordinator: OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway - lhuan@oslomet.no

Consortium:

- Oslo Metropolitan University, NOVA, Oslo, Norway
- Jagiellonian University (JU), Poland
- National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA), Greece
- VIA University College, Denmark
- TÁRKI Social Research Institute (TÁRKI), Hungary
- Roehampton University (RU), United Kingdom
- Lifelong Learning Platform (LLLP), Belgium

Funding scheme:

Programme: Horizon Europe (HORIZON)

Call: Inclusiveness in times of change (HORIZON-CL2-2023-TRANSFORMATIONS-01)

Duration: 1 February 2024 - 31 January 2027 (36 months)

EU contribution: 2 637 503.00 €

Website: <https://stride-research.eu/>

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INCLUSION IN EDUCATION, TRAINING AND
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