Diagnostic Study of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Georgia

Final Report, 20 June 2022

Abbreviations

ABBREVATION	FULL TERMINOLOGY
COVID-19	SARS-CoV-2 (2019-nCoV) coronavirus
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EMIS	Education Management Information System
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ESIDA	Educational and Scientific Infrastructure Development Agency
ISSA	The International Step by Step Association
KSA	Kindergarten Support Agency
LEPL	Legal Entity under Public Law
MDF	Municipal Development Fund
MoES	Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia
MoH	Ministry of Internally Displaced People from the occupied territories, Labor, Health, and Social Affairs
MRDI	Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia
NAEC	National Assessment and Examinations Centre
NFA	National Food Agency
NPA	National association of Preschool Education
NCEQE	National Center for Education Quality Enhancement
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SRP	School Readiness Programme

TPDC	National Center for Teacher Professional Development
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

CONTENTS

Abbreviations **2**

1. Introduction **9**

2. Methodology **10**

2.1. Conceptual approach to the study 10
2.2. Research tools used 10
2.2.1. Desk research 10
2.2.2. National-level interviews 11
2.2.3. Case studies 11
2.2.4. National Survey 12
2.2.5. Validation workshop 13
2.3. Limitations 13

3. Findings for each dimension of ECE in Georgia **14**

3.1. Access to ECE 14
3.1.1. Availability of preschool services and trends in enrolment 14
3.1.2. The main challenges regarding access to ECE 19
3.1.3. Progress towards ensuring wider accessibility to ECE and existing opportunities 27
3.2. Content and quality of preschool education and the SRP 29
3.2.1. Quality standards in Georgian ECE and the SRP 29
3.2.2. Results of the classroom observations 32
3.2.3. The main challenges regarding the quality of ECE and the SRP 47
3.2.4. SRP and Schoolification 54
3.2.5. Progress towards improved ECE quality, particularly of the SRP 56
3.3. ECE quality monitoring system 58
3.3.1. Existing quality monitoring system in ECE 58
3.3.2. The main challenges regarding quality monitoring in ECE 63
3.3.3. Progress towards better ECE quality monitoring system and existing opportunities 68
3.4. Utilisation and coordination mechanisms for ECE 69
3.4.1. Existing coordination mechanisms and responsibility sharing in ECE 70
3.4.2. The main challenges regarding responsibility sharing in ECE 72

3.4.3. Progress towards better responsibility sharing in ECE and existing opportunities 75

3.5. Professional development in ECE 77
3.5.1. Current Status of ECE professional development 77

3.5.2. The main challenges considering professional development of ECE professionals 89

3.5.3. Progress towards better professional development system in ECE and existing opportunities 92

3.6. Remuneration for professionals in ECE and attracting ECE professionals 96
3.6.1. Current remuneration conditions for ECE professionals 96

3.6.2. The main challenges with remunerating and attracting ECE professionals 98

3.6.3. Progress toward better remuneration and opportunities for professionals 102

4. Conclusions and recommendations 106

4.1. Access to ECE 106
4.1.1. Conclusions on access 106

4.1.2. Recommendations on access 107

4.2. Quality of ECE 109
4.2.1. Conclusions on ECE quality 109

4.2.2. Recommendations towards improved ECE quality 110

4.3. Monitoring and coordination 112
4.3.1. Conclusions on monitoring and coordination 112

4.3.2. Recommendations for monitoring and coordination 113

4.4. Professional development for ECE staff 119
4.4.1. Conclusions on professional development opportunities 119

4.4.2. Recommendations regarding professional development 121

4.5. The School Readiness Programme 125
4.5.1. Conclusions 125

4.5.2. Recommendations regarding the School Readiness Programme 126

Annex 1. Research Framework 130

Annex 2. Interview participants 133

Annex 3. Case study samples 134

Annex 4. Observation methods 135

Leuven Scales for Well-being and Involvement 135

ISSA Quality Scale 136

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. The five dimensions of quality ECEC 10
Figure 2. Survey respondents' job positions 12
Figure 3. Respondents' highest achieved level of education 13
Figure 4. Share of children attending ECE according to survey respondents 15
Figure 5. Perceived access to ECE of disadvantaged children 17
Figure 6. Perceived factors hindering access to ECE 20
Figure 7. Perceived lack of measures to support access to ECE for disadvantaged children 24
Figure 8. Perceived improvement of access to ECE over the past 4 years 27
Figure 9. Perceived content of the SRP curriculum 31
Figure 10. Extent to which current SRP practices meet national standards 31
Figure 11. Profiles of observed teachers ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Figure 12. Overall results and results per focus area of quality 34
Figure 13. Demographic data of the study sample ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Figure 14. % of well-being and involvement results in low, moderate and high levels 41
Figure 15. Main perceived barriers to implementing the SRP 48
Figure 16. Perceived barriers to the provision of inclusive education 54
Figure 17. Extent to which stakeholders perceive a risk of schoolification in the SRP 55
Figure 18. Frequency of use of various ECE quality monitoring tools 60
Figure 19. topics covered by ECE monitoring tools 61
Figure 20. FRequency of use of various SRP quality monitoring tools ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Figure 21. topics covered by SRP monitoring tools 62
Figure 22. Perceived barriers to monitoring ECE quality 63
Figure 23. Perceptions on ECE staff readiness for monitoring 65
Figure 24. Perceived barriers to monitoring SRP quality 68
Figure 25. Qualifications of ECE professionals ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Figure 26. Qualification of different ECE professionals 81
Figure 27. Availability of training and support needed for SRP ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Figure 28. Stakeholders' perception of the availability of teacher trainings on SRP 86
Figure 29. Coverage of SRP in Initial teacher training 87
Figure 30. Stakeholders' perception on the coverage of SRP in initial teacher training ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Figure 31. Essential elements of initial ECE teacher training ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Figure 33. Perceptions on remuneration policies and opportunities of ECE professionals 98
Figure 33. Opinions on remuneration levels, by gender 101
Figure 34. To what extent do you think that the following means would help to attract more qualified staff to work in ECE? ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Figure 35. means to attract talent, female versus male respondents ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Comparison of data sources on access to ECE in GEorgia 16
Table 2. Summary of observation results 35
Table 3. Overview of observation results by municipality 36
Table 4. explanation of the scores 40
Table 5. mean and sd for well-being (N=1073) and involvement (N=1074) 41
Table 6. Min, max, mean and sd for wellbeing and involvement per case study 42
Table 7. Min, max, mean and sd for well-being and involvement per age group 42
Table 8. Number of qualitative remarks indicating a strenght, per case study 43
Table 9. Number of qualitative remarks noting an element for improvement, per case study 45
Table 10. Responsibilities of the main preschool actors 70
Table 11. examples of other actors' responsibilities 71
Table 12. ECE professionals meeting the set requirements 77

Table . Average monthly salaries of ECE professionals versus average population .....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Table 16. Research questions 130
Table 17. Overview of the Leuven scale sample 134
Table 18. Overview of the scale levels for the Leuven well-being Scale and Leuven Involvement Scale 136

1. Introduction

The current study is part of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) component of the Innovation, Inclusion and Quality Project, implemented by the Government of Georgia and funded through a World Bank Loan. The first component of the Innovation, Inclusion and Quality Project has the objective to "*Improve Quality of and Access to Early Childhood Education: support to facilitate expanded access to quality preschool education in selected preschools*".

To support ongoing and future reforms of ECE by the government, the current study provides a *Diagnostic Study of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Georgia*, focusing particularly on a *review of Access, Quality and Equity Issues and Related Challenges and Gaps for Strengthening this Level of Education*. The findings of the study form the evidence-informed basis for the interventions planned under the first component of the project.

The study was designed in line with the elements of the *European Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*, focusing on i) access to ECE, ii) ECE structural and process quality, iii) ECE quality monitoring, iv) coordination mechanisms, v) professional development and vi) remuneration. Besides preschool education in general, the study pays particular attention to the improvement of the School Readiness Programme (SRP) and the preschool to school transition. The study also reviews the inclusiveness of current ECE provision.

The study relies on data collection through a mixed-methods approach. *Desk research* and *interviews with national-level stakeholders* addressed the wider legal and policy context of ECE in Georgia and ongoing developments in the sector. The research team used *seven municipality case studies* to complement the policy-level data with on-the-ground institutional data. Case studies comprised of preschool observations, interviews with preschool staff and municipal officials, and focus groups with teachers and parents. Local-level data was also collected through a *national survey* targeting preschool and municipal staff.

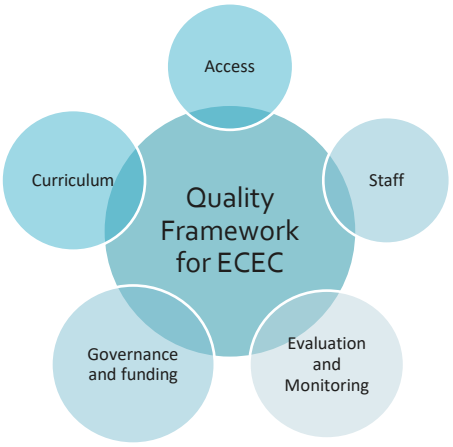
The study conclusions and recommendations are aligned with the six elements of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) but demonstrate that they are intrinsically linked. Therefore, the conclusions and recommendations also touch upon improvements across the elements.

2. Methodology

2.1. Conceptual approach to the study

Based on the objectives of the assignment and the needs of the Client, the research team used the European Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care as research framework to structure the current study.

FIGURE 1. THE FIVE DIMENSIONS OF QUALITY ECEC



Source: European Commission (2014) Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care

Following this framework, the research comprised two main dimensions:

1. A comprehensive evaluation and identification of main issues and gaps of the *ECE sector in general* (supply and demand, professional development and working conditions for ECE staff, quality monitoring, utilization and uptake) building and updating the results of the study commissioned by UNICEF.
2. A comprehensive review of the *School Readiness Programme* provided in preschools and in primary schools.

Additionally, the research team prepared a detailed list of research questions for each ECE dimension to support data collection. The full list can be found in Annex 1.

2.2. Research tools used

As mentioned in the introduction, the research relied on a mixed-methods approach using quantitative and qualitative data, collected at both national and local levels.

2.2.1. Desk research

The review of existing sources was conducted in two stages of the project:

1. During the *Inception Stage*, the team reviewed prior studies as well as government documents pertaining to ECE quality standards, regulations, procedures, monitoring systems, documents on

the SRP, etc. The review informed the development of the research tools, namely by highlighting the main areas of interest and the gaps in available information.
2. During the *Data Collection Stage*, the team conducted an in-depth review of prior studies, statistics, and government documents to triangulate, contextualize, and complement information gathered through the interviews, case studies, and survey.

The desk research mainly focused on national-level developments, laws and policies, and ongoing and planned reforms.

2.2.2. National-level interviews

The national-level interviews targeted various stakeholders across Georgia in the following categories:

- Government Ministries, departments, and agencies
- Universities involved in the development of the new ECE teacher training curriculum
- Local and international NGOs, donor organisations, and international organisations

The national-level interviews enquired mainly about stakeholders' perceptions of ongoing reforms and developments, new and persisting challenges to ECE, and areas and recommendations for improvement.

In total, 30 persons were interviewed between December 2021 and early February 2022. The complete list of interviewed organisations can be found in Annex 2.

2.2.3. Case studies

Seven municipalities were selected for in-depth case study research. The municipalities were sampled to ensure that the sample included both rural and urban settings, covered different regions of Georgia, and included municipalities with a high share of ethnic minorities. As a result, the following selection was made:

- Rural municipality: *Khelvachauri (Autonomous Republic of Adjara)*
- Rural mountainous municipality: *Tianeti, (Mtskheta-Mtinaeti region)*
- Rural and ethnic minority municipality: *Akhaltsikhe (Samtskhe-Javakheti region)*
- Urban municipality: *Zugdidi (Samegrelo -Zemo Svaneti region)*
- Urban municipality: *Ozurgeti (Guria region)*
- Urban and ethnic minority municipality: *Marneuli (Kvemo Kartli region)*
- Capital of Georgia: *Tbilisi*

In each municipality, a number of preschools were selected for the research. The following activities were carried out in each municipality:

1. Observations of preschool classrooms, using the ISSA Instrument for Assessing Quality Practices and the KU Leuven wellbeing and involvement scales.
2. Interviews with teachers, preschool leaders, and municipal officials.
3. Focus groups with teachers, parents of children attending preschool, and parents whose children do not attend preschool.

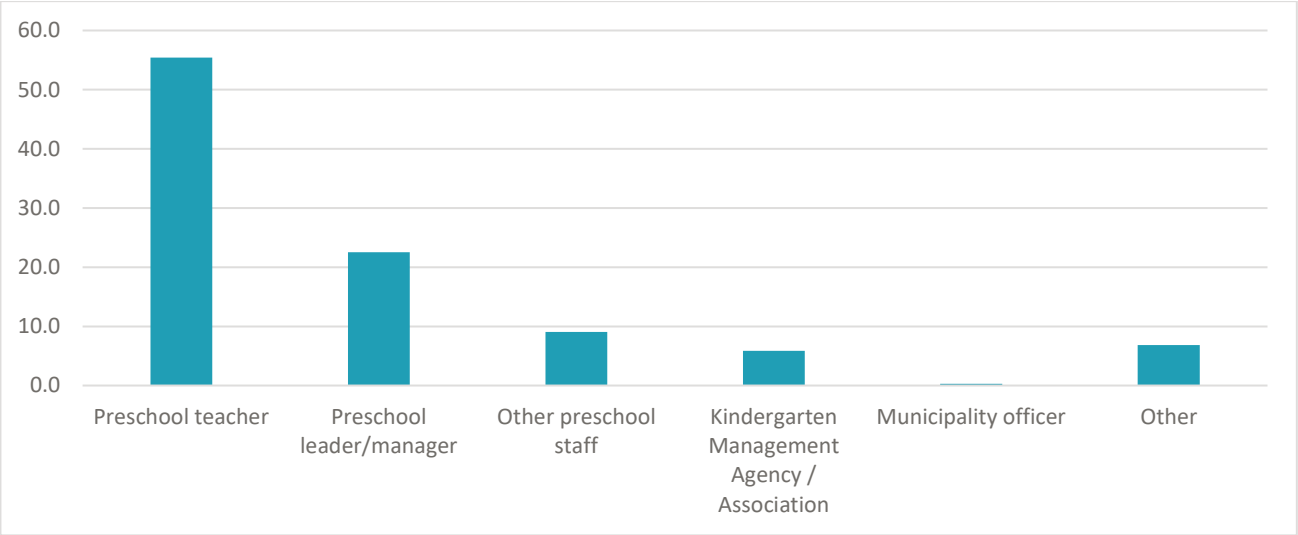
Annex 3 presents details on how many preschools were targeted, how many persons were interviewed and how many observations have taken place in each municipality.

2.2.4. National Survey

The research team developed a national survey targeting preschool teachers and staff, municipal officials, and other preschool stakeholders at the municipal level. The survey was developed in English and translated into Georgian. It comprised 29 questions in line with the five dimensions of the European Quality Framework.

The survey obtained 1732 responses across Georgia, of which 99% were from female respondents. The majority of respondents (87%) comprised preschool staff, namely, teachers, preschool leaders, or other preschool staff members.

FIGURE 2. SURVEY RESPONDENTS' JOB POSITIONS

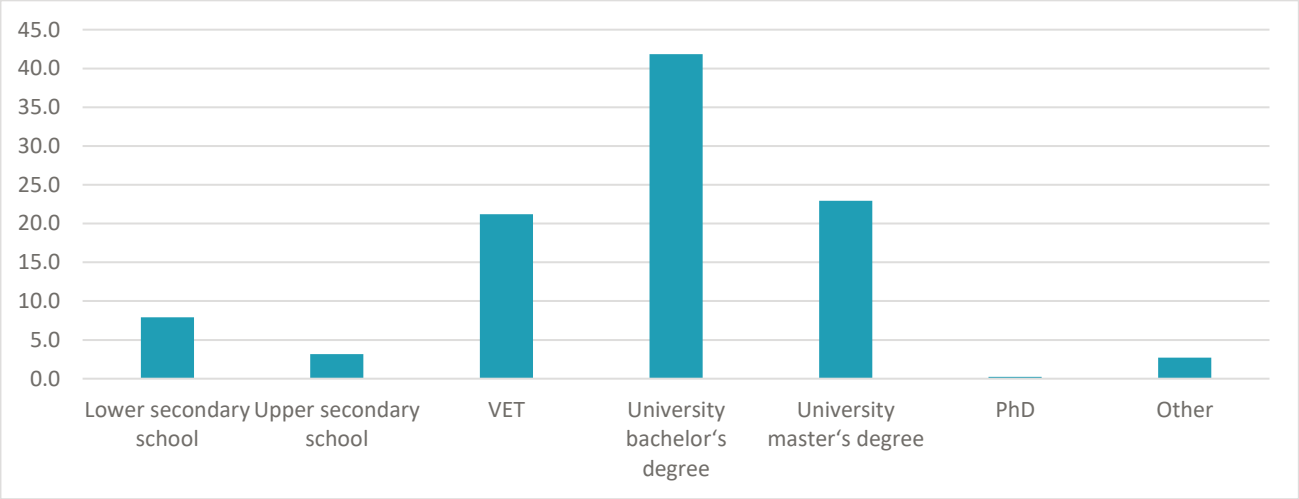


Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "What is your position?"

Note: Category "Other" means that the respondent is not working in ECE institution, municipality or Kindergarten Management Agency and is related to ECE field in other way, for example, is an employee of an NGO working with ECE institutions.

The respondents have diverse lengths of experience working in the field of ECE, ranging from 0-5 years (27%) to more than 15 years (28%). Most respondents attended university-level education at bachelor (42%) or master (23%) levels. About 11% of respondents achieved lower or upper secondary school education as highest level.

FIGURE 3. RESPONDENTS' HIGHEST ACHIEVED LEVEL OF EDUCATION



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "What is the highest level of education that you achieved?"

The vast majority of respondents (87%) indicated that their initial training was focused on early childhood education.

2.2.5. Validation workshop

On the 18th of May, a workshop was held with representatives of the Ministry of Education and various education agencies. During the workshop, the main findings and recommendations were presented for each of the ECE dimensions and stakeholders posed questions and comments. Subsequently, 45 minutes were dedicated for group work, allowing participants to discuss in-depth the recommendations and findings for the dimension allocated to their group. The group insights were shared in the final plenary. The insights from the workshop were used to finalise the report.

2.3. Limitations

The study was implemented using a mixed-methods approach to ensure that conclusions and recommendations are built on a reliable evidence-base, through triangulation and comparison of quantitative and qualitative data, and comparison of national and local data. However, the current study must be considered in line with certain limitations.

Firstly, the *COVID-19 pandemic* has affected preschool education, as such that ECE is executed under somewhat different circumstances and personnel in preschools may have been affected personally by the pandemic. A low(er) number of children attending the preschool institutions daily is a concrete indicator of the impact of COVID-19. While the research team did not directly notice concrete impact of COVID-19 in the observed preschool settings, it should still be considered that some preschool practices may have diverted (slightly) from usual, pre-COVID practice.

Secondly, while the case study municipalities reflect different geographic and demographic realities in Georgia, *the results of the case studies cannot be considered representative*. Therefore, findings from the case studies cannot be generalized to the whole country. Rather, they are illustrative of practices taking place on the ground and reflect opinions and circumstances in each individual municipality.

3. Findings for each dimension of ECE in Georgia

3.1. Access to ECE

3.1.1. Availability of preschool services and trends in enrolment

The 2016 Law on Early and Preschool Education and Care outlines that preschool education, while being non-mandatory, should be universal and available for all children of the eligible age (typically from 2 years of age until they are eligible to start primary education)[1]. Most of the preschools admit children from 2 to 6 years old, while some admit children from 3 to 6 years old and some preschools admit children younger than two[2]. However, the situation is different in the reality, and not all children are able to access early childhood education (ECE) services.

This chapter presents the available data on access to preschool services. However, the analysis of the data revealed some discrepancies between the available data from different sources. As the preschool enrolment data from different sources is slightly different, no clear observations or absolute statements about the current access to ECE in Georgia cannot be made. The arguments presented in these sections are based on the data available but due to the unreliability of the data they should be treated with caution. No comparisons throughout the years can be made as well because the data collected in different years focus on different age groups or use different method to collect the data (reporting using absolute values or enrolment rates, for example).

3.1.1.1 General enrolment

The number of preschools grew from 1540 in 2017 to 1647 in 2020. At the same time, the number of children registered/enrolled in public preschool institutions decreased from 162 879 children in 2017-2018 to 158 062 children in 2020-2021.[3] This decrease might relate to access barriers during the pandemic.[4] However, as the enrolment/registration is available only in absolute numbers, it is hard to understand whether there was any effect on the enrolment rate or whether this decrease in children registered in preschools is just a results of a generally decreasing number of children in a country.

According to the data of National Statistics Office of Georgia, 154 501 children were enrolled in public preschool education and care in school year 2021/2022[5]. According to the official statistics, in 2021 there were 279 101

[1] Legislative Herald of Georgia (2016). *Law of Georgia on Early and Preschool Education*. Available at: https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/download/3310237/0/en/pdf#:~:text=1.,every%20child%20of%20relevant%20age

[2] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study*.

[3] National Statistics Office of Georgia (n.d.). *Early and Preschool Education.* Available at: https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/58/early-and-preschool-education

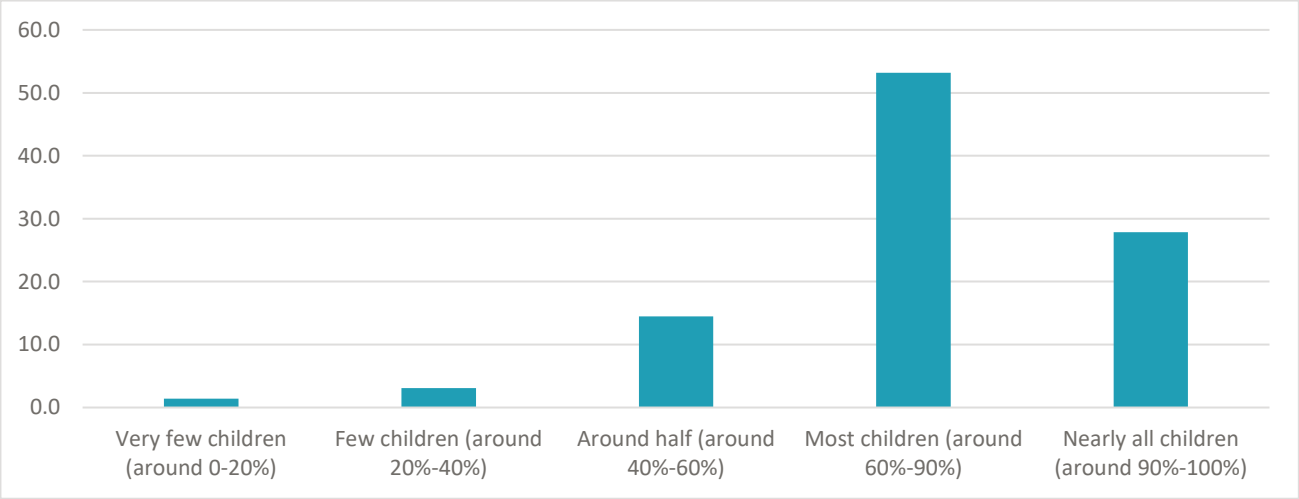
[4] AGIC (2022). *Early Preschool Education research in Georgia.* Available at: https://agic.ge/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/skolamdeli-ganathlebis-kvleva.pdf

[5] National Statistics Office of Georgia (n.d.). *Early and Preschool Education.* Available at: https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/58/early-and-preschool-education

children from age of 2 to 6 in Georgia[6]. This means that around 82% of children are enrolled in the preschools. The household survey from 2018, which also considers the enrolment in private preschools, shows that the average enrolment for children aged 3-5 years was 82%[7]. This is in line with the National Statistics Office data. However, the study on ECE in Georgia based on the data from 2017 shows that the enrolment rate for children aged 2-5 years was 69.5%[8]. This is significantly lower that the estimate that can be derived from the National Statistics Office data for 2021. While this difference may indicate that some improvements in ECE accessibility have appeared in the last few years, the questionable reliability of all the available data hinders the validity of such observations.

The results of survey conducted for this study indicates that the respondents still perceive access to preschools as rather limited. Out of 1732 respondents, 19% believed that less than 60% of children in their municipality attend ECE and only 27.8% believed that the attendance rate is more than 90%. The survey data is presented in the figure below.

FIGURE 4. SHARE OF CHILDREN ATTENDING ECE ACCORDING TO SURVEY RESPONDENTS



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "To what extent do you think that ECE-aged children in your municipality attend preschool?"

The overview of different available data shows that there are some significant discrepancies in the existing data. They can appear due to different reasons. Firstly, statistics in absolute numbers may not show a full picture. As the age of children enrolled in public preschool institutions is not specified, the enrolment rate cannot be accurately calculated using the absolute numbers available. It may be the case that some deviations from the set age for preschool appear and the statistics do not show that. The absolute numbers also do not reflect the accurate situation in separate municipalities because it might be a case that some children are registered in one municipality but attend a preschool in another municipality. Children may also be registered to the preschool but not attend it. It is also important to note that the number of children in private preschool institutions is not considered in national statistics[9]. While private preschools are attended only by a minor share of children

[6] National Statistics Office of Georgia (n.d.). *Population as of 1 January by age and sex (single years of age).* Available at: https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/41/population

[7] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[8] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

[9] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

enrolled in ECE (2% in 2015[10]), it is still important to take into account such institutions to have a better picture of the situation. Moreover, it is important to consider that different data sources use different ways to report their findings and also may focus on different age groups. For example, the National Statistics Office of Georgia has preschool attendance data for children aged 2-6, while the cited data from 2017 focuses on children aged 2-5. Some of the used data sources may also be hardly generalizable. For example, while the data from the household survey, in theory, should present more thorough overview of the attendance of ECE institutions in the country if lacks reliability because it is not official state level data and there is no guarantee that all children were included in this survey. Finally, most of the available data is from the years before the COVID-19 pandemic and does not consider the potential effect of the pandemic mitigation measures on preschool attendance. It is important to keep in mind as the available surveys indicate that the attendance in the preschools have become very low because of COVID-19 pandemic and parents often do not allow their children to attend preschool even if they are registered[11]. The table below presents a short summary of different data that is available and has been used for this study.

TABLE 1. COMPARISON OF DATA SOURCES ON ACCESS TO ECE IN GEORGIA

Data source	Year	Age group considered	Data format	Value reported
AGIC report	2017-2018	Not specified	Absolute number of children in preschools	162 879 children
AGIC report	2020-2021	Not specified	Absolute number of children in preschools	158 062 children
National Statistics Office of Georgia	2021-2022	Not specified	Absolute number of children in preschools	154 501 children
UNICEF study published in 2018	2017	2-5 years	Enrolment rate	69.5%
UNICEF household survey	2018	3-5 years	Enrolment rate	82%
Survey of preschool staff and municipal staff responsible for ECE education conducted for this study	2022	Not specified	Perception of the enrolment rate	27.8% of respondents stating 90%-100% of children attend preschool; 53.2% of respondents stating 60%-90% of children attend preschool

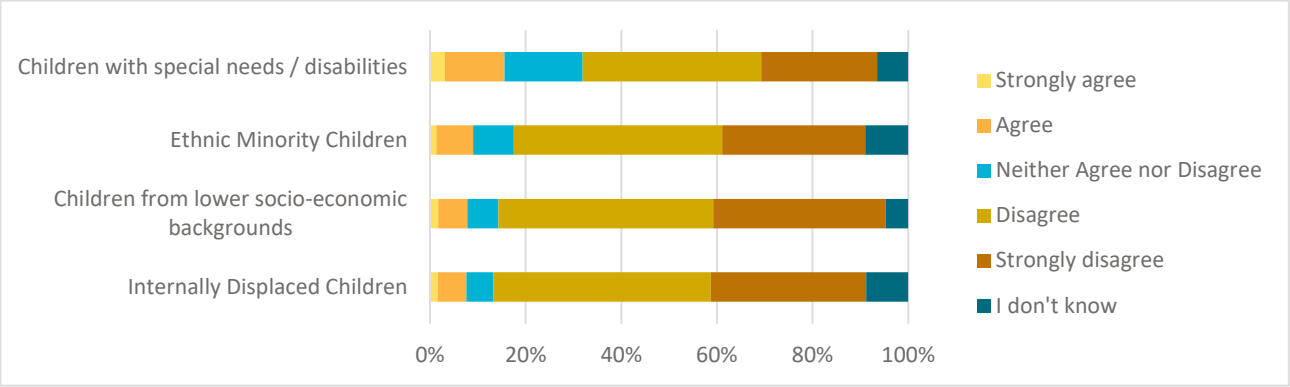
[10] UNICEF (2016). *Welfare Monitoring Survey 2015*. Available at: http://unicef.ge/uploads/Welfare_Monitoring_Survey_Georgia-GEO_WEB.pdf

[11] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

3.1.1.2 Enrolment of specific groups of children

Even though the ECE enrolment rate has improved over the last few years, accessibility to ECE varies significantly depending on a group of children in question, with more disadvantaged groups being left behind. The case study observations in seven municipalities indicate that most of the preschools have rather homogenous groups of children with most children being from relatively functioning families/advantaged backgrounds. Only some of the observed preschools, for example, a few preschools in Tbilisi, were predominantly attended by disadvantaged children. Participants in the interviews conducted for this study noted that specific groups, including children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, children living in rural areas, ethnic minority children, and children with disabilities and special educational needs are amongst those who do not benefit from ECE services. Overall, the seven case studies indicate the same finding. The results of the survey conducted for this study, which was completed by 1 731 respondents, indicated that some groups of disadvantaged children often face more barriers that prevent them from attending ECE. As shown in **Error! Reference source not found.**, from 7.6% to 15.6% of respondents believed that specific groups of children have more often lacked access to quality preschool services.

FIGURE 5. PERCEIVED ACCESS TO ECE OF DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "To what extent do you agree or disagree that the following groups of disadvantaged children more often lack access to quality preschool services?"

The survey results indicate that equal access to early childhood education is not ensured as up to 15.6% of respondents believed that specific groups of children may lack access to quality preschool services. However, the available data shows that the existing inequalities may be even more severe.

Children with disabilities also often lack access to preschool institutions. However, their enrolment rates are hard to determine. Official data indicate that only less than 1% of all children from age of 2 to 5 have any form of disability, which is significantly lower than the average estimate of 5% for this age group. Consequently, it is likely that a lot of children with disability are not registered as such and are not properly included in the statistics, making the available data less reliable[12]. This means that, in the reality, the enrolment rates of children with disabilities and their access to ECE may be different from official data and that perceived by survey respondents.

While only 9% of respondents thought that the **ethnic minority children** have limited access to early childhood education and care, the household survey conducted in 2018 shows that children from ethnic minorities attend

[12] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

preschools significantly less compared to their native counterparts. In 2018, only 29% of Azerbaijani and 69% of Armenian children attended preschools compared to 86% of Georgian children[13].

Considering children from **socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds**, 7.8% of respondents believed that they are less likely to access ECE. However, the actual share of children from socio-economically disadvantaged families that lack access to ECE may be much higher. Available enrolment data shows that in 2018, only 63% of children from poorer families were attending preschool compared with 88% of children from the richer families[14]. The results from the case study observations conducted for this project also indicate that socio-economically disadvantaged groups may be at risk of lower ECE assess. For example, interviewees for the case study from Khelvachauri municipality mentioned that while the most children are not able to access ECE because of the lack of available sports, a larger part of children outside of ECE are from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

There are some additional groups of children that may be less likely to attend ECE. According to the household survey conducted in 2018, these groups include children from **rural areas** and younger children. In 2018, the enrolment rate in rural areas was 70% compared to 88% in urban areas. Tbilisi city had the highest enrolment rate (90%), while Kvemo Kartli region, densely populated by ethnic minority Azerbaijani, had the lowest enrolment rate (44%)[15]. Moreover, the enrolment rate among 3-year-olds was 73%, among 4-year-olds – 83%, and 90% for 5-year-olds[16].

The available data show that there are significant differences in ECE attendance between certain groups of children, with more disadvantaged children being left behind. However, as mentioned, the **available data should be treated with caution**, and it should be kept in mind that some of the inequalities and specificities are not well-captured because of the lack of reliable data. This also hinders the ability of policy makers to take informed evidence-based decisions as there are little credible sources of information they can consult. The study on quality of the preschool education by National Assessment and Examination Centre found that from 64 analysed municipalities only 52 (75%) had general database with the information about municipal preschools. In most of these municipalities the information was collected in manual attendance records. In the remaining 12 municipalities there is no evidence that the data on ECE attendance was collected in any way[17].

It is also important to keep in mind that accessibility to preschools may not necessarily mean that specific groups of children are able to receive the same services as their parents and are not excluded or discriminated in some ways. It was noted by the interviewees that teachers and decision-makers often plan activities only considering the needs and abilities of children with typical development, which means that activities are not planned to be engaging for children that may come from disadvantaged groups[18]. For example, one of the interviewees contacted for this study highlighted that while children with special educational needs should not have less access to preschools because preschools cannot refuse to accept children to preschools, their involvement in different activities and interaction with their peers in preschool may be very limited[19]. Families from ethnic minorities and migrant families also often face different treatment and discrimination in preschools, especially public preschools. For this reason, according to one interviewee from a university that provides training for future ECE teachers, a lot of migrant families or ethnic minority families often choose private

[13] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[14] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[15] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[16] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[17] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[18] Interview with Ilia State University

[19] Interview with Mac Georgia

preschools, if they can afford it, or keep their children at home[20]. However, there is a lack of official data to generalise this claim.

3.1.2. The main challenges regarding access to ECE

The available data shows that on average almost 20% of children aged 2-5 do not attend preschools (as enrolment data in 2018 was equal to 82%[21]), with children from ethnic minorities, rural areas and poorer families often being left behind. This shows that even though, by law, preschool education should be universal and available for all children of the eligible age[22], this is not necessarily the case and several challenges regarding the access to ECE exist. These challenges are related to both the gaps in supply of ECE and gaps in demand for ECE. The challenges related to the gaps in supply include poor infrastructure, overcrowding, lack of places, and lack of funding, to name a few. The challenges related to the gap in demand for ECE include the lack of awareness about the benefits of attending preschool and concerns parents have about the conditions in the preschools.

It seems that challenges related to supply of ECE tend to be more important than those related to the demand side. The respondents of the survey that was conducted for this study were presented with different barriers that may hinder access to preschool education. As it can be seen from **Error! Reference source not found.**, they prioritised the challenges related to supply of ECE and limited availability of ECE services. Challenges related to demand of ECE were rated as less common. For example, when asked what factors influence the enrolment of young children in preschool education in their municipality, 13.5% believed that overcrowded ECE institutions hindered ECE access and only 4.7% believed that ECE access is limited because families cannot cover the costs related to preschool education. While the preschools, according to the law, are free of charge[23], there are some costs that can be connected to the attendance of the kindergarten, such as transportation costs or costs of the learning materials that are needed and not provided.

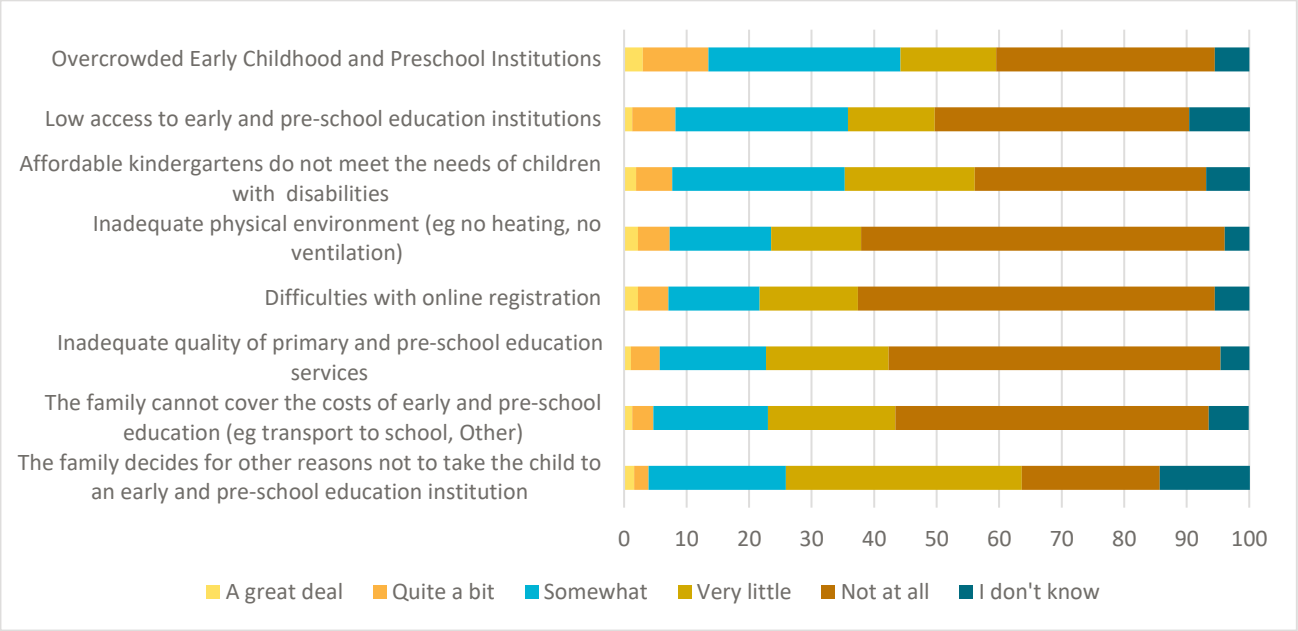
[20] Interview with Ilia State University

[21] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[22] Legislative Herald of Georgia (2016*). Law of Georgia on Early and Preschool Education*. Available at: https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/download/3310237/0/en/pdf#:~:text=1.,every%20child%20of%20relevant%20age

[23] Legislative Herald of Georgia (2016*). Law of Georgia on Early and Preschool Education*. Available at: https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/download/3310237/0/en/pdf#:~:text=1.,every%20child%20of%20relevant%20age

FIGURE 6. PERCEIVED FACTORS HINDERING ACCESS TO ECE



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "What factors do you think influence the enrolment of young children in preschool and preschool education in your municipality?"

From the first sight, survey results seem rather confusing. Even though around 19% of respondents believed that less than 60% of children in their municipality attend ECE, only from 13.5% to 4.7% of respondents believed that specific challenges hinder access to ECE in Georgia. This then raises a question why the perceived access to ECE is rather low if none of the presented challenges are seen as very pressing. However, closer examination of the survey results shows that the perceived importance of different challenges also depends on the perceived ECE attendance. For example, 48.3% of respondents who believed that nearly all children attended ECE did not think that overcrowded ECE institutions influence the access to ECE, while only 25% of respondents who answered that very few children attend ECE had the same opinion. This may mean that those who perceive access to ECE as problematic also have more knowledge about the potential challenges that hinder ECE accessibility, while those who do not deal with the cases where some children may be excluded from ECE also do not see different barriers that may hinder access to ECE.

3.1.2.1 Challenges related to the provision of preschool services

The results of the survey conducted for this study shows that lack of provision of quality preschool services and related challenges are seen as the barriers hindering ECE access in Georgia. Other available studies and information collected through the interviews conducted for this study also support the finding that challenges related to the provision of preschool services are one of the most important barriers hindering accessibility of preschool services. Other studies and interviews also highlight some additional challenges related to provision of preschool services that were not mentioned in the survey or by the survey respondents.

First of all, there are some challenges in the supply side of ECE that are related generally to the ECE system and organisation in the country. Even though it is widely understood that ECE is very important for the future development of a child, the field does not get the attention it needs. For example, one interviewed stakeholder noted that there is no consistent methodological support from the Ministry of Education to the municipalities, which means that municipalities often have to decide for themselves how to deal with different issues arising in the field. The observations also indicate that there may be a lack of support because the municipalities themselves rarely ask for support from the ministry and often lack clear understanding themselves what

support they need. [24] Moreover, while regulations for ECE field exist, they seem to be rarely enforced and hard to achieve. This results in preschools often having to make a trade off between what to prioritise – quality of the services or accesibility – and still not reaching the set out standards[25]. It also seems that systematic approach to ECE is missing and it is unclear which institutions are responsible for what[26]. This results in a lack of coordination between the institutions involved in ECE[27], inefficiency of the efforts to improve ECE as different actors often focus on the same issues[28], and a lack of clear instructions for ECE institutions and professionals how they should provide ECE[29].

Overcrowded preschools, which were noted as affecting ECE access by 13.5% of survey respondents, also seem to be one of the main challenges related to supply of ECE that hinder accessibility of preschool services. The study including the survey of representatives from 64 municipalities showed that around a quarter (26.6%) of municipality representatives pointed out that a lack of preschools is one of the most important challenges considering the access to preschool services[30]. Indeed, the UNICEF report, basing its observations and claims on the data from 2017, found that 14 000 children did not attend preschools specifically because of absence of preschool institutions[31]. The interview participants also noted that there are less preschools than needed[32], and the preschool groups are very overcrowded[33]. Overcrowded preschools and lack of available spaces especially hinder the access to ECE in highly populated urban areas, such as Tbilisi[34]. This is also visible from the observations of the preschools selected as case studies under the framework of this project. For example, in the ECE managers and teachers, municipal staff, and parents from Khelvachauri mentioned that one of the main reasons why some children do not attend preschool is a lack of spaces in the preschools. The findings from the focus group with parents whose children do not attend a preschool show that, indeed, most of the children are on the waiting list for the preschool, some of them for years, and cannot attend the preschool even though the parents understand the importance of early childhood education. The parents from Tianeti municipality also noted the lack of space in preschools as one of the main reasons their children do not attend ECE.

Another important challenge that has been highlighted by interviewees and in publicly available studies is the problematic physical infrastructure in ECE institutions. More than one third (39.1%) of participants in the survey of representatives from 64 municipalities believed that deteriorated infrastructure and buildings were the main reason for low enrolment in ECE institutions[35]. One interviewee, who is also a parent, noted that the sanitary conditions in the preschools are very poor, which is often related to poor infrastructure as well[36]. These challenges are often related to the lack of financial resources, which hinders the ability of the ECE institutions to improve their infrastructure[37]. As the preschools often lack financial resources, it is also unlikely that these challenges related to the poor infrastructure will be improved in a near future.[38] The same challenges related to

[24] Interview with World Vision

[25] Interview with Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency

[26] Interview with Ilia State University

[27] Interview with the MoES

[28] Interview with Ilia State University

[29] Interview with the MoES

[30] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[31] UNICEF (2018). *The Welfare Monitoring Survey 2017 – Summary.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1051/file/WMS.pdf

[32] Interview with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

[33] Interview with Kids Office

[34] Interview with Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency

[35] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[36] Interview with the MoES

[37] Interview with the Georgian Portage Association

[38] Interview with "Mac Georgia"

the ECE service provision, i.e., lack of or poor infrastructure, overcrowded groups, have been identified also in the seven case studies included in this study.

Quality of preschool education also seems to be an important challenge that hinders access to ECE. Inadequate quality of preschool education was mentioned as an important barrier to ECE by 5.7% of respondents who participated in the survey conducted for this study. The quality of the preschool services seems to be questionable and poorly monitored[39]. The poor quality of ECE services points to several more specific challenges. For example, one interviewee mentioned that ECE professionals have very long working days exceeding 8 hours, which often results in ECE staff being exhausted and, consequently, negatively affects the quality of ECE education[40]. Another interviewee mentioned that ECE professionals often lack needed competences[41], which limits their ability to provide quality education for children. Moreover, due to the lack of resources the ECE institutions often lack needed educational materials[42], which means that children often do not have access to different educational resources which could support their development. The same factors affecting structural and process quality in preschools have been indentified also in the case studies developed under this study.

These challenges that hinder quality of ECE may affect access to ECE in two different ways. Firstly, if ECE is of low quality, it does not bring a lot of benefits for children, even if they are able to attend it. Secondly, if the quality of ECE services is low, parents may not consider ECE as very beneficial and may be less motivated to ensure that their children attend the preschool.

Finally, it is important to note that all of the above challenges are closely connected together and they collectively hinder access to ECE. For example, having overcrowded groups in preschools hinders the ability of teachers to implement a child-centered pedagogy and to ensure that the daily program and activities are meeting the individual needs of each child[43]. Moreover, the study on ECE in Georgia reads that having large preschool groups (40-50 children) makes it harder for teachers to properly address the needs of specific groups of children, such as children with special educational needs or children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds[44]. The very high child-adult ratio negatively affects the quality of ECE services. It means that even though a child may be able to attend ECE, they may still be deprived of quality ECE services if they are enrolled in overcrowded ECE institution.

Structural quality factors, i.e., infrastructure, child-adult ratio, working conditions negatively affect the process quality (pedagogical approaches, interactions, learning strategies, learning environment, partnership with families, etc.).

3.1.2.2 Challenges related to the demand for preschool services

While there are a lot of challenges related to the availability of ECE, gaps in demand for ECE and various concerns and beliefs also hinder the accessibility of ECE. While some parents just prefer that their children do not attend preschools[45], in some cases the decision is not a result of their personal preference but indicates some serious challenges in the ECE system. Some of these challenges, which were also mentioned in the survey

[39] Interview with the World Bank Financed Program: Education Quality, Inclusion and Innovation

[40] Interview with the Teacher Professional Development Center

[41] Interview with the Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency

[42] Interview with the Georgian Portage Association.

[43] Interview with the MoES

[44] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

[45] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

conducted for this study, include difficulties with online registration and the cost of transport to the preschool[46], to name a few. It is also important to note that several challenges that affect the supply side of ECE also affects the decision of the parents whether to allow their children to attend preschools.

Firstly, it is important to highlight that, as mentioned, parents may decide not to enrol their children in ECE just because of their personal preference or beliefs. However, in some cases this decision is made because parents do not have enough information about the benefits of early childhood education and care for their children[47]. The observations from Tianeti municipality show that as a matter of fact, children often do not attend a preschool because their parents do not perceive early childhood education as important. One interviewee also noted that the parents are also influenced by their family, including grandparents, and the society they live in when they are making this decision. Moreover, even the individuals working in the sector are often not ranking this decision as a problem[48]. This indicates that there is a general lack of understanding of the importance of ECE in the society, which then creates challenges for ECE providers in creating demand.

Parents may also be demotivated to allow their children to attend ECE because of the poor quality of ECE services. If the physical conditions in the preschool are poor and the children do not get enough individual attention from overworked teachers, the quality of ECE services is questionable. This may demotivate the parents from trying to get their children to ECE institutions[49]. For example, a teacher from Akhaltsikhe municipality, who was interviewed when conducting the case study in the municipality, mentioned that the conditions in the preschool they work in are very poor as there is no heating system or hermetic windows, and parents often disqualify such conditions as completely inappropriate. Moreover, as some interviewees noted, due to the poor quality of preschool education parents in some cases choose preschools, especially public preschools, only if they do not have other options and cannot take care of the children themselves due to their work[50]. If parents have an opportunity, they tend to prefer private preschools[51] or leaving their children with grandparents[52].

As already mentioned, the preschools groups are often overcrowded, which creates conditions facilitating the spread of different contagious diseases in ECE institutions[53], and, consequently, parents may be scared that if their children attend preschools, they are more exposed to different viruses and contagious diseases[54]. This concern is especially common among the parents in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic[55]. Teachers interviewed in Akhaltsikhe, Ozurgeti, and Zugdidi municipalities confirmed that some parents do not bring their children to preschool because of the pandemic. The parents from Tbilisi and Ozurgeti who participated in focus group discussions organised under the framework of this study confirmed that while their children are enrolled in the preschool, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, their attendance became rare and irregular.

Finally, it is important to note that poor infrastructure often hinders the ability of parents to enroll their children in ECE institutions and to ensure attendance. More specifically, parents often complain that while the registration in ECE is electronic, and it is not very reliable, they rarely manage to register on time[56]. The findings from the interviews conducted for the case study in Tianeti municipality also show that in some specific cases

[46] While the kindergarten itself is free of charge, there are still costs involved in access to preschools, such as transport.

[47] Interviews with the MoES, and Ilia State University

[48] Interview Ilia State University

[49] Interviews with the Center for Teacher Professional Development, and "Mac Georgia"

[50] Interview with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

[51] Interview with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

[52] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[53] Interview with the MoES

[54] Interviews with the MoES and the Teacher Professional Development Center

[55] Interviews with the Kids Office and the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[56] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

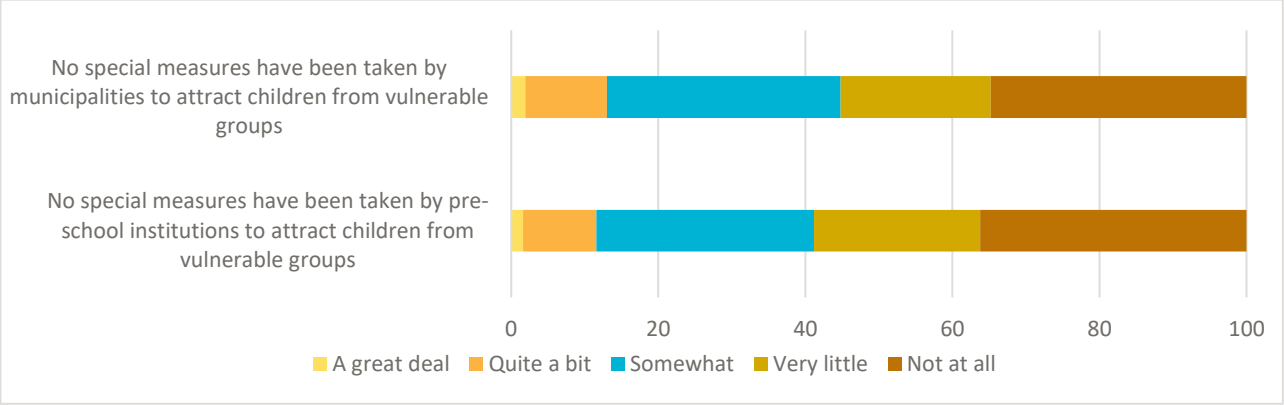
registration is very complicated. For example, if the family changes their residence, it may become more difficult for them to register for ECE in a new place. Moreover, due to the poor general infrastructure some parents struggle to ensure that their children can physically reach ECE institution due to the lack of transportation available[57].

3.1.2.3 Challenges hindering access to ECE for specific groups of children

The overview of the access to ECE services in Georgia shows that some groups of children, such as children with special needs, children from ethnic minorities, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds and internally displaced children, potentially have less access to preschools than other children. Naturally, the challenges that are discussed above affect potentially disadvantaged children as well as other children. However, access to ECE for specific groups of children that are potentially more vulnerable is hindered by additional general challenges as well as specific challenges depending on the group in question.

Firstly, there is no comprehensive systematic approach at national or municipal level to ensure more accessible ECE services for children from potentially more disadvantaged groups[58]. This results in a very fragmented approach to increasing ECE accessibility for disadvantaged children and the lack of focus on the specific challenges that children from each group faces. The lack of systematic approach to ensure additional support for potentially disadvantaged groups of children is visible at municipal and institutional level. As it can be seen from the figure below, the results of the survey conducted for this study shows that 13% of respondents did not observe any special measures taken by municipalities to attract children from disadvantaged groups to ECE and believed it to be an important barrier to tier ECE access. 11.6% of the respondents did not observe such measures being taken by preschools and perceived the lack of these measures as an important barrier.

FIGURE 7. PERCEIVED LACK OF MEASURES TO SUPPORT ACCESS TO ECE FOR DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "To what extent do you think the following barriers affect inclusive preschool in your municipality?"

Considering **children from ethnic minorities** the results of the survey of municipality representatives show that only 13% of surveyed municipalities had any specific policies that aimed to increase access of the children from ethnic minorities to ECE institutions. However, the institutions in those municipalities did not receive any additional funding to implement the needed changes[59]. From the interviews conducted under the framework of this study it seems that the main challenges, which are hindering ECE access specifically for children from

[57] Interview with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

[58] As demonstrated by the survey as well

[59] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study*.

ethnic minorities, are related to a lack of bilingual ECE education and poor quality of the existing bilingual education. Bilingual ECE teaching, which, in theory, should be tailored to the needs of ethnic minority children, is of rather poor quality[60]. Moreover, as teaching of Georgian language is also of a rather low quality, children do not get the needed basic knowledge to ensure their fluent integration to the society. The language barrier is challenging for parents who need to use Georgian language to enrol their children to ECE[61]. Moreover, one interviewee noted that families from ethnic minorities as well as other groups that are somehow different, for example families with children with disabilities, are often left out of the system in terms of accessibility to ECE services or involvement in the specific activities, which then discourages them from letting their children attend preschools[62].

The results of the survey of representatives from 64 municipalities also shows that only 42% of the municipalities had policies focusing on increasing inclusion of children from socially disadvantaged families to ECE and none of the municipalities had additional funding for such efforts[63]. This shows that the specific challenges faced by **children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds** are rarely considered. Indeed, interviewees noted that children who do not have one of the parents, are orphans or homeless often cannot access ECE institutions because no one takes care of their registration and other administrative issues[64]. The registration may also be difficult for parents/caretakers of such children because they are required to register children online and may not have access to internet or digital technology[65]. Moreover, ECE professionals and other parents often have negative perceptions towards parents and families from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, which discourages parents from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds from letting their children attend the ECE institutions and even creates a pressure on the parents not to let their children attend ECE[66].

Access to ECE services specifically for **children with disabilities special educational needs** (SEN) is often hindered by the lack of necessary infrastructure. The results of the survey with municipality representatives indicate that the majority of buildings used by ECE institutions are not adapted to the needs of children with physical impairments. Around a quarter (26.6%) of the municipality representatives who participated in the survey indicated the lack of infrastructure for inclusive education as one of the main challenges hindering the accessibility to ECE[67]. Generally poor infrastructure and lack of transportation also hinders access to ECE for children with SEN, even when they manage to get enrolled in ECE institution. It is especially the case for children with disabilities in densely populated or mountainous areas, where it is more difficult to ensure the needed transportation[68].

It is also important to note that a lot of preschools lack qualified personnel who could support children, especially when they have **special educational needs**, and teachers working with such children. Moreover, the preschools often lack the resources and tools needed to work with children with special educational needs[69]. Even in the municipalities where the needed support is provided, it is often criticised as being of inadequate quality. For example, in Kutaisi there is only one preschool that meets the current standards and can be

[60] Interview with World Vision

[61] Interview with the Teacher Professional Development Center

[62] Interview with Ilia State University

[63] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[64] Interview with the Municipal Development Fund (MDF)

[65] Interview with Kids Office

[66] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

[67] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[68] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[69] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

considered to be suitable for children with special educational needs[70]. Interviewees confirmed that indeed in many cases preschools do not have neither capacities nor finances to accommodate the specific needs of children in ECE[71] and lack needed specialists[72]. In addition, similarly as with parents from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, ECE professionals and other parents often do not trust parents of children with special educational needs[73], and there is a lot of stigmas around children with SEN[74], which discourages parents from enrolling their children to ECE institutions. A representative of university offering initial teacher training, who was interviewed under the framework of this study, observed that in their region parents of children with SEN often prefer letting their children stay at home and get support from early development centres or privately hired specialists instead. According to the interviewee, parents in their region make this decision due to the poor conditions in preschools specifically for children with SEN and negative perception towards such children[75].

Finally, as mentioned, the highest ECE enrolment is seen in Tbilisi, capital city, and is lower in rural regions. According to the household survey conducted in 2018, the enrolment rate in rural areas was 70% compared to 88% in urban areas. Tbilisi city had the highest enrolment rate (90%), while Kvemo Kartli region had the lowest enrolment rate (44%)[76]. This indicates that **children from rural areas** may face additional challenges when accessing ECE. This may be the result of an even lower availability of preschools in rural areas and the lack of transportation available. The available study including a survey of representatives from 64 municipalities shows that in some cases children in rural areas have to walk to preschools in another village because there are no preschools in their own village and no transportation available to take them to the other village[77]. Participants in the interviews conducted for this study indeed confirm that access to ECE is especially challenging in rural areas because in a lot of villages there are no preschools and preschools, existing institutions are small and cannot accept all the children[78].

The findings from the case studies confirm that the lack of preschools and transportation significantly hinders the ECE access of children in rural areas. For example, one teacher from Zugdidi noted that even though some transportation for children from villages is available, it comes too early for little children to use it. There are also no alternative educational services for children in rural areas or innovative solutions how to make up for the lack of such services[79]. The interviewees also noted that the cases of discrimination of children from different backgrounds may also be more common in rural areas. This, according to the interviewed stakeholders' personal observations, may discourage some parents from enrolling their children in ECE[80]. However, while there is a lack of ECE institutions in rural areas, it is also important to remember that access in urban areas is not always better due to overcrowded institutions and number of children being significantly higher than the number of available places[81]. Overcrowded preschools and lack of available places can be a problem for kindergartens in both rural and urban areas.

[70] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*; Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

[71] Interview with "Mac Georgia"

[72] Interview with Kids Office

[73] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

[74] Interview with the Georgian Portage Association.

[75] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

[76] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[77] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[78] Interviews with MDF, Ilia State University, the MoES, the Georgian Portage Association, and the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

[79] Interview with the Teacher Professional Development Center

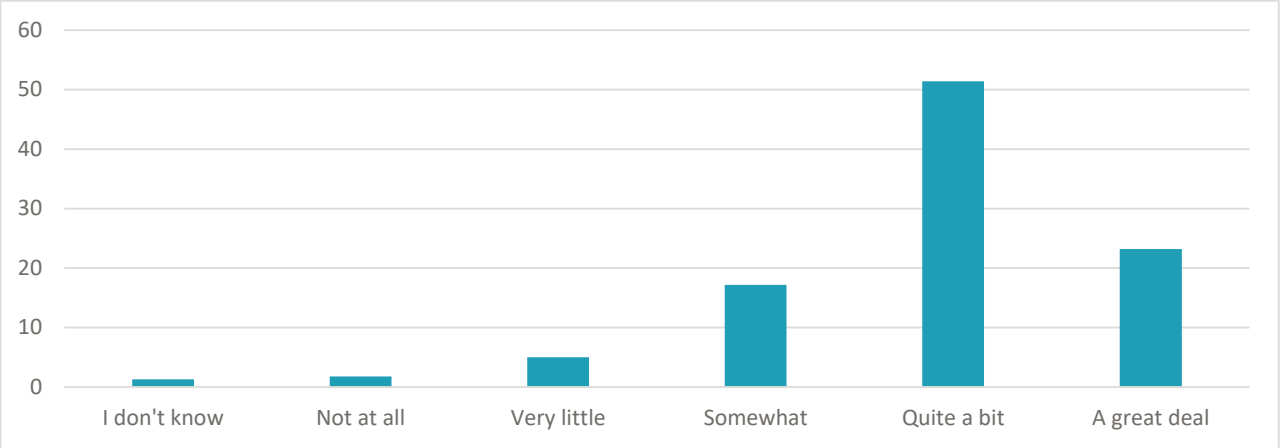
[80] Interview with MDF

[81] Interview with the MoES

3.1.3. Progress towards ensuring wider accessibility to ECE and existing opportunities

While there are a lot of challenges hindering access to ECE, the enrolment rate may be increasing, and more and more children have access to ECE. The respondents of the survey conducted for this study believe that access to ECE has increased in the past four years (**Error! Reference source not found.**). However, it must be noted that this is a *perceived* increase and does not rely on official data.

FIGURE 8. PERCEIVED IMPROVEMENT OF ACCESS TO ECE OVER THE PAST 4 YEARS



Source: Survey among 1 732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "Do you feel that access to preschool education in your municipality has increased in the past 4 years?"

Looking into the presented data, it is clear that there is some progress in ensuring better access to ECE for all children. This progress appeared due to the various improvements that took place in the last few years. However, certain challenges still remain creating a lot of opportunities for improvement and the use of innovative solutions exist.

There are several recent or ongoing programmes and measures that have contributed to ensuring better access to ECE services for all children, but especially for the disadvantaged children. These measures focus on creating more spaces in ECE, prioritising disadvantaged children, improving quality of ECE, and closely cooperating with non-governmental and international organisations.

Firstly, the lack of access is being tackled by building new preschools, especially in areas where the access is especially problematic, for example, in moutnainous areas. In these areas building preschools not only ensure better access to ECE for children, but also create more work spaces[82]. In Samtskhe-Javakheti region, three new preschools were opened in the last four years which facilitates enrolment of children from across the region[83]. In Tbilisi, for example, 23 new preschools, enrolling at least 350 children each, were opened in the last 3 years. However, it seems that opening new preschools not always results in less crowded preschools and, consequently, better quality services. The preschools that are perceived as "better" are still having overcrowded classrooms and long waiting lists, while those perceived as "worse" do not manage to collect full groups.[84]

[82] Interview with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

[83] Interview with World Vision

[84] Interview with Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency

The lack of access to ECE is also being tackled by prioritising the access of the most disadvantaged groups. For example, the preschool education quality study b National Assessment and Examination Center showed that some municipalities give priority access to ECE for children of single parents or siblings of the chidlren who are already enrolled in the preschools[85]. However, one respondent in an interview conducted under the framework of this study noted that in some cases priority access to ECE services may be given to some children at the expense of other children. The interviewee mentioned specifically school-age children getting priority access at the expense of younger children[86].

It is also important to consider how the measures that in general contribute to the improving the quality of ECE services in Georgia may have also contributed to increasing the access to these services. For example, one respondent of the interview conducted under the framework of this project noted that the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with ECE experts, has recently developed a curriculum for ECE institutions. This development is evaluated positively[87], which may result in more demand for ECE and ensure that the services provided are actually beneficial for children. Moreover, when preschools employ additional specialists, such as special educators, psychologists and methodologists, these specialists can assist ECE teachers in designing individual plans for children with special needs and choosing the suitable support measures for different children[88]. Such preschools then become more suitable for children with specific needs and parents may feel more comfortable letting their children attend preschools when they know they will get the needed support. However, the needed specialists are employed only in a small number of preschools and even then, the benefits they bring are hindered by the fact that the preschools are overcrowded, and that teachers are not able to spend sufficient time on each individual child[89].

While one of the important challenges hindering quality of ECE services and, consequently, access to quality ECE services is the lack of resources, a lot of progress was made in close cooperation with international organisations. For example, with support from UNICEF, several projects focusing on better quality of ECE services and wider access to these services were implemented. These projects focused on providing more resources to preschools, supporting capacity building among municipal staff focusing on ECE, promoting closer cooperation in ECE field, developing general quality standards and ECE curriculum, exploring alternative models of ECE, and raising awareness about the importance and benefits of ECE among parents, and providing other support[90]. Specific projects UNICEF supported include, for example, the Positive Partnership support. The interviewees assessed the efforts of international and non-governmental organisations, such as UNICEF, positively and believed that their support could have a direct or indirect positive effect on access to ECE. For example, one interviewee noted that access to ECE is likely to increase due to the efforts of the NGO sector to support the improvements of ECE sector and raise awareness about the importance of ECE. [91].

Even though the presented recent changes helped increase the access to ECE for all different groups of children, there is still a lot of room for improvement. The current efforts are rather fragmented[92], and the fact that some participants of the interviews conducted for this study could not name any improvements that have appeared in the last 3 years[93] shows that they are either at a small scale or not successful enough to be widely known. Moreover, it is important to consider that COVID-19 pandemic has been negatively affecting the ECE sector

[85] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[86] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[87] Interview with "Mac Georgia"

[88] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[89] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[90] Interviews with the MoES and Kids Office

[91] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[92] Interview with Kids Office

[93] Interview with the Georgian Portage Association.

and hindering effectiveness of any efforts aiming to improve ECE quality. As the pandemic disrupted the activity of ECE institutions, the previously visible effect of different improvements may have diminished and the opportunities for new developments and projects may have decreased.

Several potential measures that could ensure more access to ECE should still be explored. While school readiness programmes (SRP) were started in some schools in different municipalities in the last three years, some of these groups were later transformed into mixed age groups. Specifically, while initially 46 SRP groups were organised in school buildings, now there are only 26 of them as others were transformed to mixed age groups[94]. This shows that while focus on readiness for school may be important, due to different reasons children more often attend mixed age groups and there is a greater need for mixed age groups with a better-quality education. Consequently, the SRP curriculum could be adapted to also benefit younger children and ensure better quality ECE services for children of all ages. It is also important to focus more on educating the parents about the importance of the early childhood education and care. Teachers from Zugdidi participating in a focus group discussion noted that it would be very useful to also organise some educational activities or other outreach activities for parents, especially parents with disadvantaged backgrounds, where they could learn about the importance of preschool education.

3.2. Content and quality of preschool education and the SRP

The European Quality Framework for ECE describes various elements that needs to be in place to ensure the quality provision of ECE. Particularly, the EQF requires countries to adopt a "**curriculum based on pedagogic goals, values and approaches which enable children to reach their full potential addressing their social, emotional, cognitive and physical development and their well-being**"[95]. This requires child-centred pedagogies embedded in the curriculum, to ensure that educators can adjust their approach to the individual needs of the child[96].

Besides the curriculum content and the approach to children's learning and development, the EQF considers that quality ECE relies on **effective collaboration within the ECE institution**, namely, collaboration of staff with children, with colleagues and with parents. [97] This approach aligns with the growing interest in the "**whole-school approach to wellbeing**" at the school level, which similarly considers that effective education and wellbeing in school is the responsibility of multiple actors within and outside the school.[98]

3.2.1. Quality standards in Georgian ECE and the SRP

3.2.1.1 General preschool education

In Georgia, preschool education is governed by the Law on **Early and Preschool Education and Care adopted in 2016**[99]. This law is the first ever preschool law in Georgia and predominantly assigns responsibilities to

[94] Interview with the MoES

[95] Council of the European Union (2019). *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems.* Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(01)&rid=4

[96] Council of the European Union (2019). *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems.* Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(01)&rid=4

[97] Council of the European Union (2019). *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems.* Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(01)&rid=4

[98] Cefai, S., Celeste, S. & Caravita, S.C.S. (2021). *A systemic, whole-school approach to mental health and well-being in schools in the EU.* Available at: https://nesetweb.eu/en/resources/library/a-systemic-whole-school-approach-to-mental-health-and-well-being-in-schools-in-the-eu/

[99] Legislative Herald of Georgia (2016*). Law of Georgia on Early and Preschool Education*. Available at: https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/download/3310237/0/en/pdf#:~:text=1.,every%20child%20of%20relevant%20age

preschool actors, presents universal access and equity in ECE, and lays a legal basis for various reforms in the sector.

A key element of the Law is the requirement for the government to develop **national standards for preschool education** in the country. As a result, four sets of national standards were adopted in 2017, namely[100]:

- Professional standards for preschool caregiver-pedagogues.
- Early and preschool education program quality standards.
- Sanitary and hygienic standards for preschools.
- Catering and diet nutritional value standards for preschools.

Every preschool (whether state-provided or private) will have to meet these new mandatory standards if it is to be authorized. *As municipalities respond, the strongest feature of a new standard is well organized and regulated standardized hygienic conditions in preschools. 20% of the municipalities speak about this strength. 19% of municipalities discuss the roles of improved learning environment and educational programs compatible with new standards. 17% of respondents indicate that currently caregivers have increased motivation to learn something new*.[101]

3.2.1.2 The School Readiness Programme

The School Readiness Programme (SRP) is a specific curriculum to be implemented in the last year of preschool (age 5-6). The programme is designed to introduce certain elements of primary school (though using play-based pedagogies) to facilitate the subsequent transition to primary school. This programme is mandatory for all preschools to implement. In some municipalities, the SRP takes place already in the primary school building and the Ministry of Education is planning to launch a pilot that provides SRP in 150 primary schools across the country.

Besides the general preschool standards, the Law acknowledges the need for a standard on school readiness. The School Readiness Programme was first developed in 2014, to be implemented in the last year of preschool education (ages 5-6). Upon its introduction, the Ministry of Education stated that "*the School Readiness Program, based on play-based learning methodology, will prepare 5–6-year-old children for school. The aim of the program is to develop child skills in different directions, to acquire motor, social, emotional and cognitive skills, to develop communicational and conversational skill*s."[102]

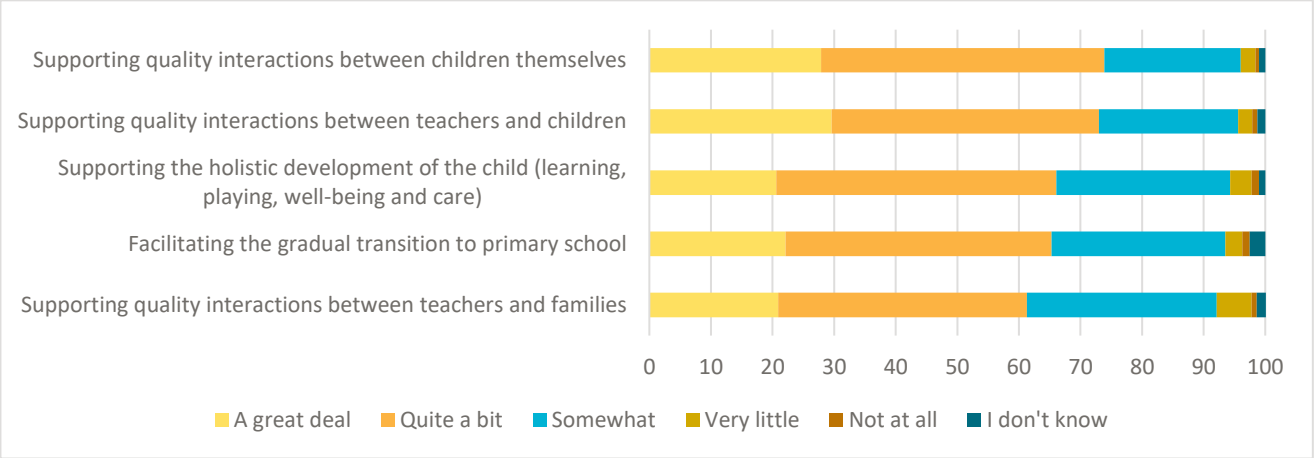
The majority of preschool and municipal survey respondents perceive that the current SRP curriculum addresses quality interactions and holistic development of the children "a great deal" or "quite a bit" as demonstrated in **Error! Reference source not found.**.

[100] Livny, E. & Bakradze, T. (2018). *Policy Brief – Improving Quality and Equity in Preschool Education in Georgia: Key Challenges and Policy Recommendations.* Available at: https://tbilinomics.com/images/Consulting/Policy-Brief---Preschool-education.pdf

[101] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[102] Ministry of Education and Science Georgia (2015). *'School readiness program' registration starts.* Available at: https://mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=5995&lang=eng

FIGURE 9. PERCEIVED CONTENT OF THE SRP CURRICULUM

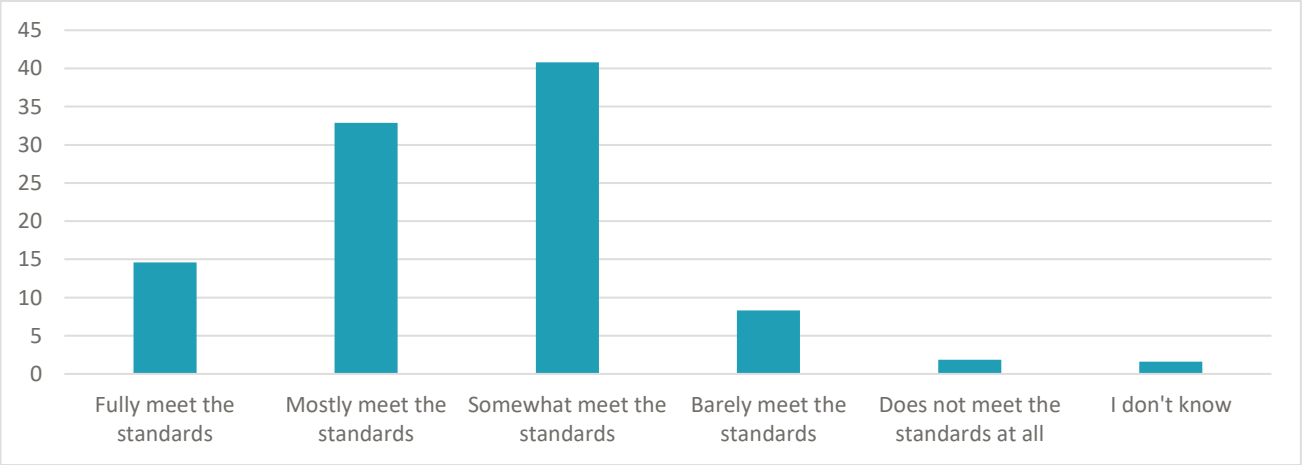


Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "To what extent do you think the current SRP curriculum sufficiently addresses the following elements?"

No extensive assessment has been conducted across Georgia to monitor whether the SRP is being implemented in accordance with the official curriculum and pedagogical approach, and whether the implementation complies with national preschool standards. the National Center for Education Quality Enhancement informed that there are planned processes for 2023-2024 when preschools will be assessed for compliance with the standards.[103]

The survey among municipality-level stakeholders and ECE staff found nearly half (47%) of respondents think that SRP practice in their municipality fully or mostly meet preschools standards.

FIGURE 10. EXTENT TO WHICH CURRENT SRP PRACTICES MEET NATIONAL STANDARDS



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "Based on your experience do you find that SRP in your municipality meet current national preschool quality standards?".

The following sections present the results of the classroom observations carried out under this study (3.2.2.) and the main challenges to content and progress quality of preschool education as indicated by interview and survey respondents, and desk research.

[103] Interview with the NCEQE

3.2.2. Results of the classroom observations

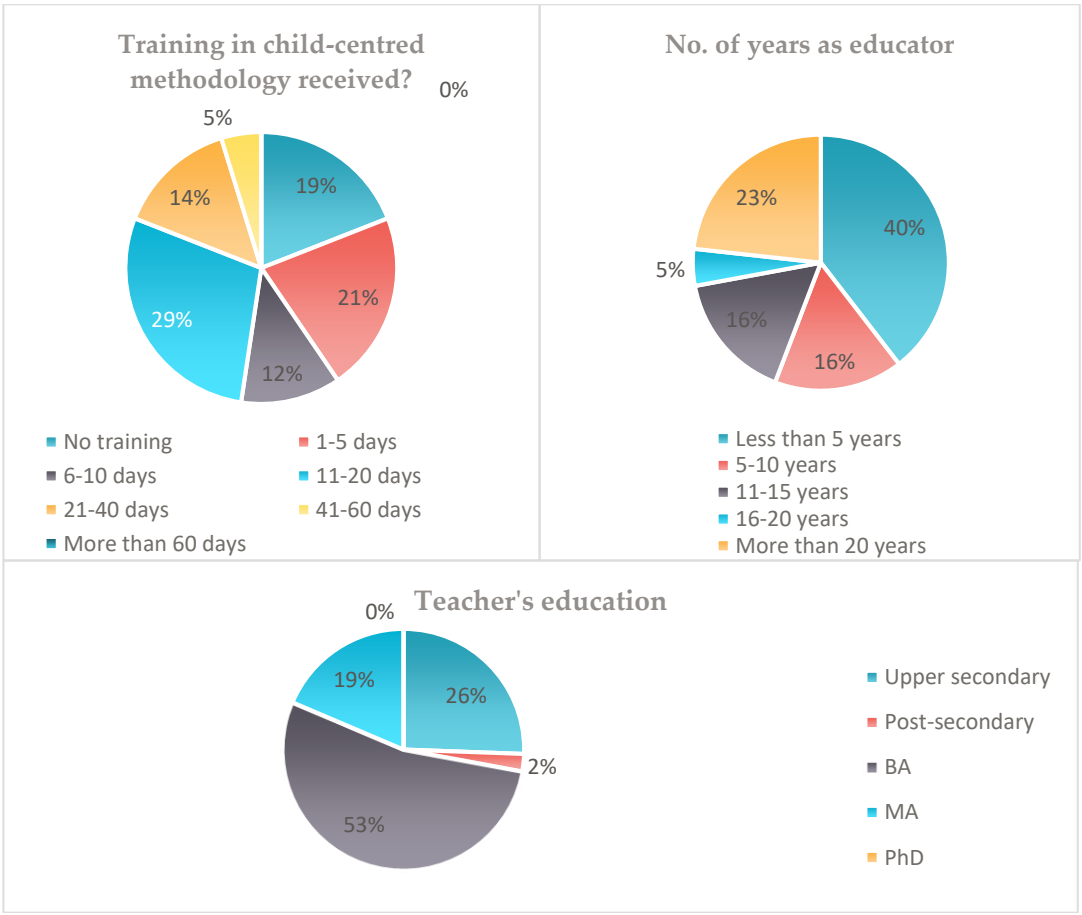
Over the course of February and March 2022, the research team visited 29 preschools from 7 municipalities, 17 of them implementing the SRP. During these visits, classroom environments, practices and teacher behaviour were observed with the use of the ISSA Instrument for Assessing Quality Practices, the Leuven Well-being Scale and Leuven Involvement Scale.

3.2.2.1 The ISSA Instrument for Assessing Quality Practices

For assessing the process quality in preschools (including SRP groups), observations focused on collecting data about the quality of practices employed by the teachers in the classroom. 43 teachers have been observed. The teachers' group profile comprises:

- a good balance between trained and less trained teachers in child-centred methodology
- a higher percentage of teachers with less than 5 years of teaching experience, counter-balanced by close to 30 percentage of teachers with more than 16 years of teaching experience.
- High level of education, with 72% of teachers being prepared at BA level (53%) and MA level (19%).

FIGURE 11. PROFILES OF OBSERVED TEACHERS



Source: Observations carried out in 29 preschools in seven municipalities, covering 43 teachers

For assessing the quality of practices in the selected Municipalities, settings and groups, The *ISSA Instrument for Assessing Quality Practices* was used. The instrument was developed by ISSA in 2012 based on internationally recognized child-centred early childhood theories and standards, and on close to 20 years of implementing the child-centred values, philosophy, and practice in close to 30 countries in Europe and Central Asia. The child-centred programs promoted by ISSA starting with the early 90s aimed at creating a paradigm shift from a teacher-centred pedagogy to a child-centred pedagogy through ongoing in-service training, continuous professional development (including, mentoring, coaching, peer support) and mechanisms for quality assurance (including monitoring, supervision) to sustain the profound changes intended.

ECE systems across different countries in Europe and Central Asia position themselves on a continuum from a teacher-centred philosophy and pedagogy in ECE to a child-centred philosophy and pedagogy. Many of them have made significant progress in changing the ECE policies (curriculum, standards, pre-service and in-service training, monitoring and evaluation, etc.) and changing the everyday practices in ECE settings to reflect child-centred values, approaches and practices. By using the ISSA Instrument, the data resulting from observation provides an **indication of the level of child-centeredness of the practices used by teachers in preschools for children from 3 to 6 years of ag**e. The results coming from using the Instrument are intended to be used for improving their practice through individual and group professional development programs.

The *Instrument* represents a condensed version of *The Professional Development Tool for Improving Quality of Practices in Preschool*, a tool aimed at supporting teachers in improving their child-centred practice, which was developed based on the *ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy*. The principles define high quality child centred pedagogy in preschool settings, and they contain 85 indicators.

The Instrument comprises a subset of 36 key Indicators that are mostly observable in a classroom setting and are identified as predictive of high-quality practice captured by and linked to the larger set of 85 Indicators in the ISSA *Principles of Quality Pedagogy* and the *Professional Development Tools*. **The 36 Indicators distinguish excellent teaching practice**. Each Indicator out of 36 is described through examples or descriptions of practice on a continuum from inadequate to good start and to quality child-centred practice in preschool.

The *Instrument* is an excellent way to quickly gather a snapshot of teacher practice to gauge implementation of the larger set of Indicators of quality practice.

Areas of quality assessed by trained observers included:

3. Interactions
4. Family and Community
5. Inclusion, Diversity and Values of Democracy
6. Assessment and Planning
7. Teaching Strategies
8. Learning environment

All areas include principles and indicators that reflect a high-quality child-centred environment that nurtures child's development and learning, respecting the individual potential, needs, interests and the agency of each child.

Practices under each were rated on a 3-point scale as it follows:

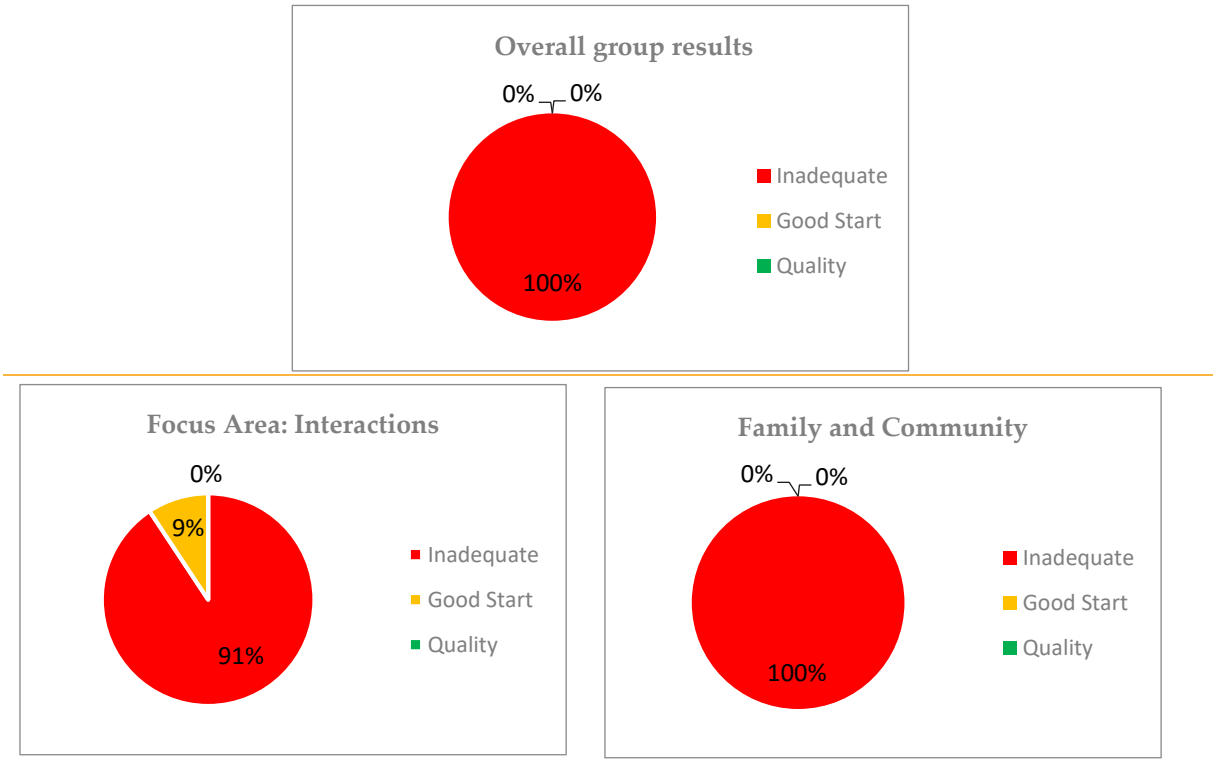
- **LEVEL 0 – INADEQUATE (Score between 0.00-0.67)** describes practices which are not child-centred (i.e, teacher-centred)
- **LEVEL 1 – GOOD START (Score between 0.68-1.84)** describes practices that indicate a more child centred focus, but still lacking consistency, intentionality, or depth, especially in terms of working with the agency of the child (i.e., the shift from teacher–centred to child-centred).
- **LEVEL 2 – QUALITY PRACTICE (Score between 1.85-2.00)** describes clear evidence of engaging in quality practice. Child centred practice at this level is internalized by the educator in terms of

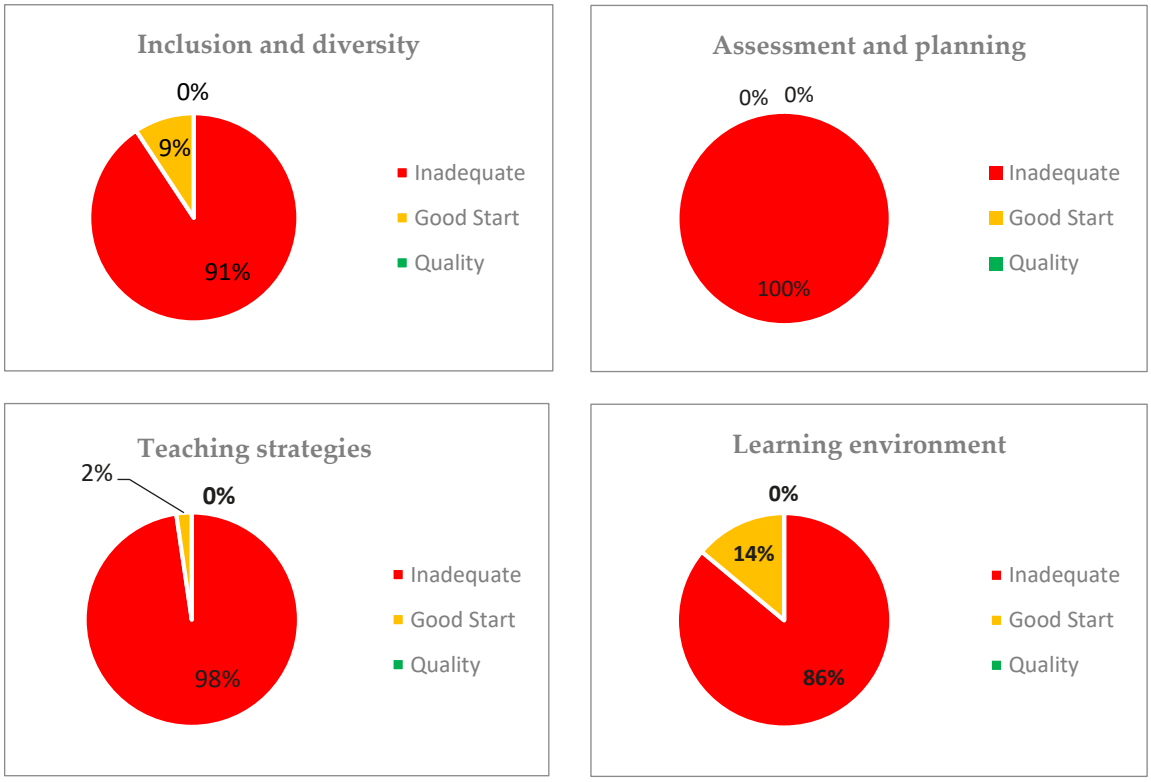
consistently demonstrating his/her belief that young children have the right to realize and expand their own potential and to express their voice in the development of their own identities and abilities, relationships, and interactions with others, with ideas, with objects, and real and imaginary events.

While the progress from dominantly Level 0 score to dominantly Level 1 score may indicate that an important shift from a dominantly teacher-centred practice to a more child-centred practice took place, the progress from dominantly Level 1 to dominantly Level 2 indicates that a child-centred pedagogy is being implemented, and there is a significant improvement of the quality of the child-centred practice.

43 teachers have been observed across seven municipalities. The overall results (calculated mean of all scores) indicated a dominant ***Level 0* score across all Focus areas**, with very little variation towards Level 1 in a few Focus areas: *Interactions, Inclusion and Diversity, and Learning Environment*, as indicated in Table 1. graphics below. *Level 0* score indicates that the dominant type of pedagogy that is used in the observed classrooms is teacher-centred, i.e. very little to no opportunities for children to express themselves, their opinion and interests, to have multiple opportunities to make choices, to explore the environment and engage independently or with peers in experiments, to build their identity and autonomy, to be assertive, etc. *Level 0* does not indicate that there is a low-quality teacher-centred practice, but that the practices are not child-centred:

FIGURE 12. OVERALL RESULTS AND RESULTS PER FOCUS AREA OF QUALITY





Source: Observations carried out in 29 preschools in seven municipalities, covering 43 teachers

The mean scores calculated for all 43 observations across the six Focus Areas indicate a very low frequency of scores situated between 0.68 and 1.84 which qualify for a *good start*. No ***Level 2*** score was recorded across all 43 observations, as indicated in Table 2.

TABLE 2. SUMMARY OF OBSERVATION RESULTS

		Overall group profile	Interactions	Family and community	Inclusion, diversity, and values of democracy	Assessment and planning	Teaching strategies	Learning environment
Between 0.00 and 0.67	Inadequate	100%	91%	100%	91%	100%	98%	86%
Between 0.68 and 1.84	Good Start	0%	9%	0%	9%	0%	2%	14%
Between 1.85 and 2.00	Quality	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Source: Observations carried out in 29 preschools in seven municipalities

Except for the teachers observed in Tbilisi municipality, where slightly more Level 1 scores were recorded under Focus Areas: Interactions, Inclusion, Diversity and Values of Democracy, and the Learning Environment, all teachers observed in the other six municipalities scored almost unanimously at Level 0, i.e. dominantly teacher-centred practice (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

TABLE 3. OVERVIEW OF OBSERVATION RESULTS BY MUNICIPALITY

Teacher's code	Interactions	Family and community	Inclusion, diversity, and values of democracy	Assessment and planning	Teaching strategies	Learning environment	Overall score
CASE STUDY 1: Khelvachauri							
C1S10-AITS01	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,14	0,10	0,00	**0,04**
C1S10-AINJ03	0,00	0,00	0,33	0,00	0,10	0,00	**0,07**
C1S10-AIKD02	0,20	0,00	0,50	0,00	0,10	0,25	**0,18**
C1S20-AIKD01	0,60	0,00	0,50	0,29	0,50	1,00	**0,48**
CASE STUDY 2: Tianeti							
C2S20-AILQ02	0,20	0,00	0,50	0,14	0,20	0,50	**0,26**
C2S10-AING01	0,00	0,00	0,33	0,14	0,20	0,25	**0,15**
C2S10-AIKD02	0,80	0,00	0,33	0,29	0,30	0,25	**0,33**
C2S20-AIKD01	0,00	0,00	0,33	0,00	0,20	0,00	**0,09**
CASE STUDY 3: Akhaltsikhe							
C3S10-AITsB02	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	**0,00**
C3S20-AINJ02	0,00	0,00	0,50	0,14	0,00	0,00	**0,11**
C3S20-AIKD01	0,60	0,00	0,83	0,14	0,40	0,75	**0,45**
C3S10-AITB01	0,20	0,00	0,33	0,14	0,00	0,25	**0,15**
CASE STUDY 4: Tbilisi							
C4S30-AINK02	0,00	0,25	0,00	0,14	0,20	0,25	**0,14**
C4S30-AINK03	0,00	0,25	0,17	0,00	0,20	0,25	**0,14**
C4S40-AINK01	0,00	0,00	0,33	0,14	0,30	0,00	**0,13**
C4S20-AILQ01	0,60	0,00	0,67	0,29	0,30	0,75	**0,43**
C4S30-AITS01	0,20	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,10	0,25	**0,09**
C4S50-AITK01	0,60	0,00	0,50	0,43	0,50	0,25	**0,38**

Teacher's code	Interactions	Family and community	Inclusion, diversity, and values of democracy	Assessment and planning	Teaching strategies	Learning environment	Overall score
C4S10-AINT01	0,80	0,00	0,83	0,29	0,30	1,25	**0,58**
C4S10-AINT02	0,80	0,00	1,00	0,00	0,70	0,75	**0,54**
CASE STUDY 5: Ozurgheti							
C5S40-AILQ02	1,00	0,00	0,67	0,57	0,40	1,00	**0,61**
C5S10-AITsB02	0,00	0,25	0,17	0,00	0,00	0,00	**0,07**
C5S30-AITsB01	0,60	0,50	0,50	0,14	0,20	0,00	**0,32**
C5S40-AINJ01	0,00	0,00	0,50	0,29	0,20	0,50	**0,25**
C5A10-AING01	0,20	0,00	0,67	0,57	0,30	0,50	**0,37**
C5S20-AINT01	0,20	0,00	0,50	0,14	0,20	0,25	**0,22**
C5S20-AITS02	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,14	0,00	0,25	**0,07**
CASE STUDY 6: Zugdidi							
C6S40-AILQ01	0,00	0,25	0,33	0,00	0,00	0,50	**0,18**
C6S70-AITsB01	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,29	0,00	0,00	**0,05**
C6S30-AINJ01	0,20	0,00	0,83	0,43	0,00	0,50	**0,33**
C6S60-AINJ01	0,00	0,00	0,50	0,00	0,00	0,25	**0,13**
C6S80-AING01	0,20	0,00	0,33	0,14	0,10	0,00	**0,13**
C6S10-AINT01	0,20	0,00	0,67	0,29	0,40	0,25	**0,30**
C6S20-AINT01	0,40	0,00	0,50	0,43	0,30	0,50	**0,35**
C6S50-AITB01	0,20	0,00	0,50	0,29	0,10	0,25	**0,22**
CASE STUDY 7: Marneuli							
C7S30-AINK01	0,40	0,25	0,50	0,14	0,30	0,25	0,31
C7S50-AITsB01	0,40	0,00	0,17	0,14	0,00	0,00	0,12

Teacher's code	Interactions	Family and community	Inclusion, diversity, and values of democracy	Assessment and planning	Teaching strategies	Learning environment	Overall score
C7S10-AINJ02	● 0,00	● 0,00	● 0,50	● 0,14	● 0,10	● 0,50	● 0,21
C7S40-AING01	● 0,00	● 0,00	● 0,33	● 0,00	● 0,20	● 0,00	● 0,09
C7S10-AIKD01	● 0,20	● 0,00	● 0,50	● 0,14	● 0,30	● 0,50	● 0,27
C7S20-AIKD01	● 0,20	● 0,00	● 0,50	● 0,14	● 0,40	● 0,50	● 0,29
C7S60-AIKD01	● 0,40	● 0,00	● 0,50	● 0,00	● 0,30	● 0,50	● 0,28
C7S20-AITB02	● 0,00	● 0,00	● 0,00	● 0,00	● 0,00	● 0,00	● 0,00

Source: Observations carried out in 29 preschools in seven municipalities.

Before providing conclusions, it is important to underscore that, given its focus on high quality child-centred practice, the ISSA Assessment Instrument is a helpful tool to assess if and to what extent the observed and documented practices are child-centered, and if yes, to what extent they are of quality. For this reason, teachers who are guided by a teacher-centred pedagogy, will most likely receive low scores across all areas.

Conclusion regarding the quality (child-centredness) of practice

Given the group profile of the teachers' observed, as well as the demongraphic data of the preschool sample where observations took place (see Table 3), the overall results indicate that:

- There is not an observable difference in the quality (the child-centredness) of practices between rural and urban areas or between classroom situated in preschools or schools.
- The low level of quality (child-centredness) in not determined by the presence in the classroom of children with disabilities or of children belonging to a minority group, by the age of children, by being in a mixed age group or by being a SRP group.
- The pre- and in-service training of teachers did not influence positively the achievement of the standards of quality child-centred practice as defined in the ISSA quality indicators.

FIGURE 13. DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF THE STUDY SAMPLE

Source: Observations carried out in 29 preschools in seven municipalities

On the other hand, the results from observations may well confirm **a high correlation between structural and process quality**. The child-centred pedagogy requires adequate preparation of, and ongoing support to, ECE staff, a child-centred learning environment (indoor and outdoor) that allows exploration, experimentation, free and structured play, peer and group learning, stimulating learning materials, and ongoing dialogue, cooperation with, and involvement of, families in learning activities and in decisions regarding children's learning and development, etc.. The interviews and focus groups with the teachers in all 7 municipalities indicated important shortages regarding structural quality: low quality of infrastructure (especially the outdoor spaces), difficult working conditions (low salaries, high workload, no benefits, etc.), high child-adult ratio (though not recorded during the observations), insufficient in-service training programs for ECE staff and methodologists, scarce quality or insufficient or lack of learning materials, tremendously impacts the quality of practice.

While the results from the 43 observations cannot be generalized to the entire ECE system in Georgia, given the almost homogenous low scores across the preschools in all 7 municipalities, it might suggest that significant attention should be paid to specific aspects that the result is likely to point at:

- the dominant type of pedagogy that guides teachers' practice is teacher-centred
- there is a big gap between the planned curriculum (recently revised) and implemented curriculum, with the first one promoting a child-centred pedagogy and the latter demonstrating the use of well-established teacher-centred practices.
- the recent professional and ECE standards did not yet contribute to creating a change in the way teachers engage in the teaching-learning process, moving from a teacher-centred pedagogy to a more child-centred one.

systemic factors, such as the current pre- and in-service trainings, the quality of infrastructure and of the learning environment, are not necessarily conducive to implementing a more child-centred pedagogy in classrooms.

3.2.2.2 Leuven Scales for Well-being and Involvement

The Leuven Well-being Scale and Leuven Involvement Scale, developed at the Centre for Experiential Education, KU Leuven focus on the experiences in children while being in the preschool setting and participating in all activities. By using the Leuven scales, observers i) get an insight of child-orientedness of the preschool practice, measuring the effectiveness of learning (indicated by the levels of involvement) and ii) the degree to which children feel at ease in the setting (indicated by the levels of well-being). Two approaches were used in this study, namely assessment of well-being and involvement through quantitative scoring and qualitative reflections on the classroom context. **The full methodology is described in Annex 4**.

Well-being and involvement are assessed using a **five-point scale**, where also the values in between can be used.

- Ratings *lower than 2.5* are considered as low scores,
- Ratings *between 2.5 and 3.5* are considered as moderate
- Ratings *higher than 3.5* are considered as high.

TABLE 4. EXPLANATION OF THE SCORES

	THE LEUVEN WELL-BEING SCALE	THE LEUVEN INVOLVEMENT SCALE
Score 1	>1 Outspoken signs of distress	>1 No activity
Score 2	>2 Signs of distress predominate	>2 Interrupted activity
Score 3	>3 A mixed picture, no outspoken signs	>3 Activity without intensity
Score 4	>4 Signs of enjoyment predominate	>4 Activity with intense moments
Score 5	>5 Outspoken signs of enjoyment	>5 Continuous intense activity

Source: KU Leuven observation tool, elaborated in Annex 4.

The observation sample consists of 43 groups, settings spread over 7 case study municipalities. In total 95 adults (teachers and teacher assistants) and 542 children were included in the sample. The data collection for the Leuven Scale contains 1073 observations of well-being and 1074 observations for involvement (on average, each child was observed twice), collected by 8 different observers.

The results of the observations demonstrate visible challenges in the well-being and involvement of preschool children in the case study municipalities. **Error! Reference source not found.** presents the average score across the seven municipalities.

TABLE 5. MEAN AND SD FOR WELL-BEING (N=1073) AND INVOLVEMENT (N=1074)

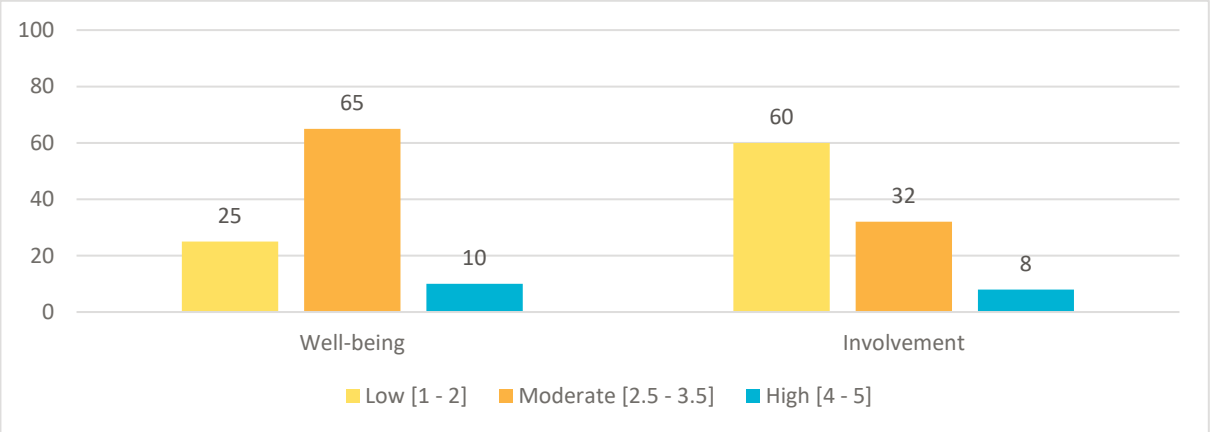
	M	SD	MIN.	MAX.
Well-being	2.78	.80	1.00	5.00
Involvement	2.13	1.03	1.00	5.00

Source: Observations carried out in preschools in seven municipalities, covering 1073 children for the well-being scale and 1074 children for the involvement scale.

For **well-being**, the average is 2.78 (*moderate to low*). The observations resulted in 25% low scores (score 1, score 1.5 and score 2), 65% moderate scores (score 2.5, score 3 and score 3.5) and 10% high scores (score 4, score 4.5 and score 5). About 40% of the groups (17 groups) have a group mean for well-being between 3.00 and 3.50. Those are the groups where the majority of the children feel neutral to good. About 60% have a group mean of 2.99 or lower. Four of these groups (9%) have a group mean that is lower than 2.00. It is extremely low.

There is a slightly different picture for **involvement**, where the average is 2.13 (*low to moderate*). The observations resulted in 60% low scores (score 1, score 1.5 and score 2), 32% moderate scores (score 2.5, score 3 and score 3.5), and 8% high scores (score 4, score 4.5 and score 5). The majority (39 groups, 91%) of the groups have an average that is below 3.00. Half of the groups (22 groups, 51%) has a group mean lower than 2.00. In those groups, the majority of children is not learning. In 4 groups (8%), the group mean is 3.00 or higher, meaning that in these groups, most children are often captivated and intensely busy with activities. **Error! Reference source not found.**4 shows the distribution of low, moderate, and high well-being and involvement as percentage of the total observed population.

FIGURE 14. % OF WELL-BEING AND INVOLVEMENT RESULTS IN LOW, MODERATE AND HIGH LEVELS



Source: Observations carried out in preschools in seven municipalities, covering 1073 children for the well-being scale and 1074 children for the involvement scale.

Comparing well-being and involvement, we see significant differences between case studies. Well-being of Case Study 1 is with M = 2.18 significant lower compared to all other case studies. Between the other case studies, there are no significant differences. For involvement, there is a tendency[104] that involvement in Case Study 1 with M = 1.75 is significant lower compared to all other case studies (with exception of the case studies 3 and 4). There is a tendency that the involvement of case Study 2 with M = 2.53 is significantly higher compared to the case studies 1, 3, 4, 5, and 7 (but not with case study 6)

[104] We see significant differences between case study 1 and case study 2, 5, 6 and 7. There are no significant differences between case study 1 and case study 3 and 4.

TABLE 6. MIN, MAX, MEAN AND SD FOR WELLBEING AND INVOLVEMENT PER CASE STUDY

			WELL-BEING					INVOLVEMENT				
Case Study [105]	**N settings**	**N groups**	**#N observed**	**Min.**	**Max.**	**Mean**	**SD**	**#N observed**	**Min.**	**Max.**	**Mean**	**SD**
1	2	4	99	1.0	4.0	**2.18**	.94	99	1.0	3.5	**1.75**	.81
2	2	4	100	1.0	4.5	2.89	.78	100	1.0	4.5	**2.53**	1.06
3	2	4	100	1.0	4.0	2.67	.72	100	1.0	4.0	1.81	.81
4	5	8	200	1.0	5.0	2.94	.60	199	1.0	4.5	2.06	1.02
5	4	7	175	1.0	4.5	2.91	.81	175	1.0	4.0	2.15	1.01
6	8	8	199	1.0	5.0	2.82	.86	201	1.0	5.0	2.34	1.03
7	6	8	200	1.0	5.0	2.78	.77	200	1.0	5.0	2.12	1.09
	29	43	1073					1074				

Source: Observations carried out in preschools in seven municipalities, covering 1073 children for the well-being scale and 1074 children for the involvement scale.

For well-being, there are significant differences between the 3-4 age groups and the 5-6 age groups, the mixed age groups, and the SRP program: namely, well-being is significantly higher in the 3-4 groups than in the other 3 groups. There are no significant differences between the 3-4 age groups and 4-5 or 4-5-6 age groups. For involvement, no significant differences are observed.

TABLE 7. MIN, MAX, MEAN AND SD FOR WELL-BEING AND INVOLVEMENT PER AGE GROUP

		WELL-BEING					INVOLVEMENT				
	N. of groups	**N. observed**	**Min.**	**Max.**	**Mean**	**SD**	**N observed**	**Min.**	**Max.**	**Mean**	**SD**
3-4 age	4	100	1.0	4.5	**3.06**	.65	100	1.0	4.5	2.29	1.05
4-5 age	9	224	1.0	4.5	2.80	.74	224	1.0	4.5	1.98	1.00
4-5-6 age	1	25	2.0	3.5	2.92	.34	25	1.0	3.5	2.02	.80
5-6 age	13	324	1.0	5.0	2.76	.82	325	1.0	4.5	2.20	.97
Mixed	7	175	1.0	5.0	2.72	.89	174	1.0	5.0	2.15	1.16
SRP	9	225	1.0	5.0	2.71	.84	226	1.0	5.0	2.10	1.01

Source: Observations carried out in preschools in seven municipalities, covering 1073 children for the well-being scale and 1074 children for the involvement scale.

In a second step, observers indicated **qualitative explanations** for the observed levels of well-being and involvement. For this an open analysis framework with the following five categories was used:

- *the offer*: how 'rich' or well-equipped is the learning environment (both in offered materials and activities during the observation)

[105] Case study 1 = Khelvachauri. Case study 2 = Tianeti. Case study 3 = Akhaltsikhe. Case study 4 = Tbilisi. Case study 5 = Ozurgeti.. Case study 6 = Zugdidi. Case study 7 = Marneuli.

- *the group climate*: to what degree do children feel at home in the group (visible in relations between children and between adult(s) and children)
- *the degree of freedom*: how much freedom and autonomy do children have?
- *the organisation*: how effectively is the day organised and are children's needs considered?
- *the guidance of the teacher*: how much empathy is there while interacting with children?

In total, 132 elements of strength and 189 elements for improvement were mentioned.

a) Elements of Strengths

The strength that is most mentioned is the warm, friendly, and caring style of the teacher. In almost half of the observations (19 quotes), the observer notes that the teacher is sensitive towards children:

> "*The educator is sensitive to the children, encourages them, listens to them, calms them down when needed. "Do not worry, you might have caught a cold, I will call your mother and she will come soon (CES20_LSTSO2)"*

In most observations, obligatory whole group activity is the dominant way of organizing things. In 10 cases, free play is mentioned: often during a (small) part of the day or in combination with whole group activities. In two observations, free play was observed during the whole observation period.

Compared to other case studies, the classrooms of case study 4 (Tbilisi) seem slightly better equipped and organized. In this case study, the 'well-equipped rooms and organization of it in activity centres is mentioned several times. This aligns with the ISSA scale findings where the learning environment is judged slightly higher in case study 4 groups.

Overall, observers indicated a lot of elements for improvement but also observed high-quality practices. The observation with the highest group means for well-being (M = 3.52) and involvement (M = 4.00) is a good illustration of a child-friendly and play-based approach, with an appreciative approach towards the diversity in the group.

> "*The observation was carried out both outside and inside during activities. The high scores for well-being and involvement are explained by outside and inside activities being mostly children-led and facilitated, contributed, and supported by the teachers. Outside they played hide and seek, drew whatever they wanted with colorful chalks, moved a lot, giggled, and had fun. Adults were not intervening in the process, just overtightening mostly, and they also played together with the children. Children did not have to wait without doing anything. After lunch, one three-year-old girl went to sleep. The other children moved to the room which was organized in thematic corners and there were sufficient resources provided '(…). Worth to mention that this group is not only a mixed age group but also an ethnically mixed group too. Several children used the Armenian language and the teachers also communicated in Armenian. One also used the Russian language, and she was also addressed in the Russian language as the teacher knew Russian. The same children also used Georgian for short interactions (C7S30_LSTsB01)."*

TABLE 8. NUMBER OF QUALITATIVE REMARKS INDICATING A STRENGHT, PER CASE STUDY

	CS1	**CS2**	**CS3**	**CS4**	**CS5**	**CS6**	**CS7**	TOTAL
Offer								
Attractive, clean and well-organized room					2	1	1	**5**
Several activity centers in the room				4		1	1	**6**
Well-equipped resources				5			1	**6**

Accessible resources					1			**1**
New and uncommon materials and activities (e.g. large aquarium and fish, self-made materials, natural resources)	1				3	1		**5**
Exciting, attractive activities (e.g. dancing, music)	1	1					1	**3**
Group climate								
Positive relation between Teacher and children - Calm and caring style, humor, respect, kind and friendly, appraisal	1	3	2	6	5	4	5	**26**
Attention for each individual child			2		1	1	1	**5**
Positive relations between children				1	1	2	3	**7**
Degree of freedom								
Teachers takes into account the needs of children		1	1	2		1	1	**6**
Free play and own initiatives allowed during teacher-led activities	1		1	2	1	1	2	**8**
Children play in small groups (children can choose between 2 to 4 activities)	2						1	**3**
Free play observed			1	3	2	2	2	**10**
Children are involved in organizational tasks				1				**1**
Organisation								
Teachers sets clear expectations (eg talks about what comes next)	1		1	1	1		1	**5**
Interconnecting activities		1						**1**
Good balance between guided and free activities					2	1	1	**4**
Guidance								
Teacher is sensitive and responsive	1	2	1	3	4	4	4	**19**
Teacher offers positive encouragement, support and suggestions for activities	1	1				3	5	**10**
Teacher supports autonomy							1	**1**
Total Number of quotes								
	9	9	9	28	23	22	31	**132**

Source: Observations carried out in preschools in seven municipalities, covering 1073 children for the well-being scale and 1074 children for the involvement scale.

b) Elements for Improvement

In some locations, the condition of the infrastructure needs improvement: the room is too small, the room is empty or only contains chairs and tables, is unsafe, there is no heating, no toilets close to the classroom. In more than half of the observations, the lack of materials is mentioned.

As mentioned above, in almost half of the observed objects researchers noted that teachers are friendly and sensitive. During some other observations, little or no communication is observed. The teacher only instructs or controls.

> *The atmosphere is tense. In the beginning, the teacher was very nervous. She corrected the children's sitting pose with a gentle touch, making negative remarks, whispering something to the children, and making hints with her*

eyes. At one moment, one boy ran up to one corner of the room to show something to his friends and quickly ran back to his place, as if he was doing something forbidden (C2S10_LSNK01)

Apart from the lack of resources in many classrooms (noted in 27 statements), the biggest element for improvement is the low level of autonomy for children. The findings from the class observations show that in 75% of the observed ECE groups most activities are teacher-led, which means that there is little space for children to exercise their autonomy through, for example, expressing their interests and needs or taking initiative in what activities to engage in. Both the activities and the way to do the activities are often compulsory for the whole group. As the activities are compulsory for the whole group and not differentiated, the children who finish the activities earlier than others often have to wait without doing anything. Therefore, transition between different activities is also very slow and time consuming. As the activities are implemented for the whole group and are compulsory, it takes time for teachers to prepare and in that time children have little to do, so they usually just sit and wait until teachers are ready to implement other activities. In the guidance of children, group management and instructing children are mentioned more than stimulating children with developmentally appropriate suggestions and supporting their need for autonomy or facilitating their learning process at their own pace.

TABLE 9. NUMBER OF QUALITATIVE REMARKS NOTING AN ELEMENT FOR IMPROVEMENT, PER CASE STUDY

	CS1	CS2	CS3	CS4	CS5	CS6	CS7	**TOTAL**
Offer								
The room is small	1		2	1		3	2	9
Room is unattractive, needs renovation, is poor, inappropriate (eg. no heating, dangerous), is a large open space	1	1			2	3	4	11
There are minimal or few materials	3	1	3	2	6	6	6	27
The materials are not well organized or accessible		1	1	2	2		2	8
The accessible materials are not attractive (eg. old, broken, not age appropriate, not diverse…)				3	2	3	1	9
There is a poor choice of activities (eg. only closed activities like coloring, only cognitive activities, activities are not age appropriate…)				1		2	1	4
Group climate								
No or limited communication and interaction, (eg. ignorant teacher, teacher only giving instructions…)	2		1	1	2	2	2	10
Negative or tensed (eg. controlling) atmosphere, loud voice of teacher, a lot of noise, shouting, name calling, firm, demanding, rude or disrespectful guidance	2	2			2	4	1	11
Negative remarks and comments towards children			1	2				3
Children are testing the rules or are tensed and scared					1		1	2
Degree of freedom								

	CS1	CS2	CS3	CS4	CS5	CS6	CS7	TOTAL
Only or most of the time teacher-led activities, no choice in activities, most or all activities are compulsory and in whole group	4	3	3	7	4	6	5	32
No choice in how doing things (eg left-handed children to draw and eat with right hand)	1	1	1		1		1	5
Toys are accessible, but require permission of the teacher to use them (rules limiting initiative)		1		2	1	2		6
Organisation								
The compulsory activities take too long	2	1		1		1	1	6
There are long or inefficient transition or waiting times (eg waiting before lunch at table)	1	2	3	2	3	2	1	14
The activities change to quickly					1			1
Guidance								
There is no sensitivity for individual children's needs	2	1		3		1	3	10
The teacher focuses on group management, subduing children, giving instructions	3	1	2	3	2	3	1	15
There is no stimulation or developmentally challenging children (eg. during free play the teacher supervises instead of active participating with children)			2	1	1	2		6
Total number of quotes								
	22	15	19	31	30	40	32	189

Source: Observations carried out in preschools in seven municipalities, covering 1073 children for the well-being scale and 1074 children for the involvement scale.

Conclusions regarding the Leuven Scales for well-being and involvement

Well-being and involvement are two essential, distinguishable aspects of quality. They express to what extent children feel good (well-being) and are fascinated and concentrated (involvement) in early years settings. This varies a lot. Between groups there is variation in well-being (M= 2.78, SD = .48) and involvement (M = 2.13, SD = .62). The overall picture is that well-being is moderate, while involvement is rather low: most children feel rather neutral in the early years setting and do not get enough chances to actively learn and do things.

The main reasons for the observed scores for well-being and involvement are that mostly teacher-led activities in the whole group (sitting on chairs at tables) are observed, with a teacher giving instructions (instead of communication and dialogue with children). It often goes along with long waiting moments (waiting for instructions, waiting or materials, waiting for the activity as such, waiting for the next activity to come).

In almost half of the observations, the observers mention the fact that teachers are joyful, empathetic, friendly, calm, and caring as an element that contributes positively to the observed scores for well-being and involvement. It can be concluded that in most cases, teachers succeed in offering the necessary emotional support to some extent. This is why well-being is moderate, and, in some cases, good.

Regarding the educational support, there is still a lot of room for improvement. Observers indicate that teachers very often fail to offer appropriate developmental challenges and autonomy to children, such as discovering what children's interests are by observing them and holding conversations, enriching ongoing activities by

open impulses (such as inviting children to communicate, adding materials, making suggestions, asking thought-provoking questions. It explains why involvement is low in most cases. However, in some observations and for some groups, some indications of a more child-oriented approach were found.

3.2.3. The main challenges regarding the quality of ECE and the SRP

Despite the introduction of preschool education standards, curricula, and responsibilities for monitoring of ECE quality, the observation results demonstrate that clear challenges exist to the implementation of quality education in the preschool classroom. Stakeholders identified numerous barriers that hinder the quality of current preschool education provision and the provision of the School Readiness Programme in particular.

While stakeholders are generally positive about the preschool standards themselves, the **implementation of the standards** is questionable, and it is not even across the municipalities. UNICEF's research in 2018 found that i) some municipalities do not have any information on the Standards or available resources; ii) ECE staff in high mountainous regions and regions with ethnic minorities are not familiar with the Standards and do not have access to supportive resources, and iii) not all ECE staff (e.g., specialised staff) are aware of the new Standards.[106]

The quality standards for preschool themselves and SRP in particular cause issues. Since the SRP was created before the education standards, the old SRP standards are not aligned with the new standards.[107] Another challenge regarding the quality standards was mentioned by one of the universities, namely that the child development and learning standard includes a separate standard for 0–5-year-olds and a separate standard for school readiness group (5-6 years old). The formats are also different between these two standards as well as the division of the developmental domains. This is creating misunderstandings for professionals. [108] The university representative considers that:

> "*When the school readiness standard was set up, it was set up very quickly and there was no way to work in depth and detail. Therefore, when we talk about adapting the program to the standards, first the development standards of school readiness years should be corrected, merged, logically arranged, specified, narrowed, and put in one framework with the standards of early ages*". [109]

Another key challenge regarding the quality of SRP is that in many preschools, the programme is not fully implemented, and the extent of implementation differs between municipalities and preschools. Therefore, stakeholders currently doubt the actual effectiveness of the SRP and doubt that the current provision meets the national quality standards. [110] Additionally, the SRP was never officially piloted, with close monitoring of its implementation, and improved based on the pilot outcomes.[111] Therefore, after introduction of the curriculum, it has not been revised.[112]

The current study identified various challenges to the quality implementation of the SRP, as demonstrated in **Error! Reference source not found.**. Not one barrier stands out as most significant. According to the survey results, there are a variety of factors which all -to some extent- hinder the effective and quality implementation of the SRP.

---

[106] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

[107] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[108] Interview with Ilia State University

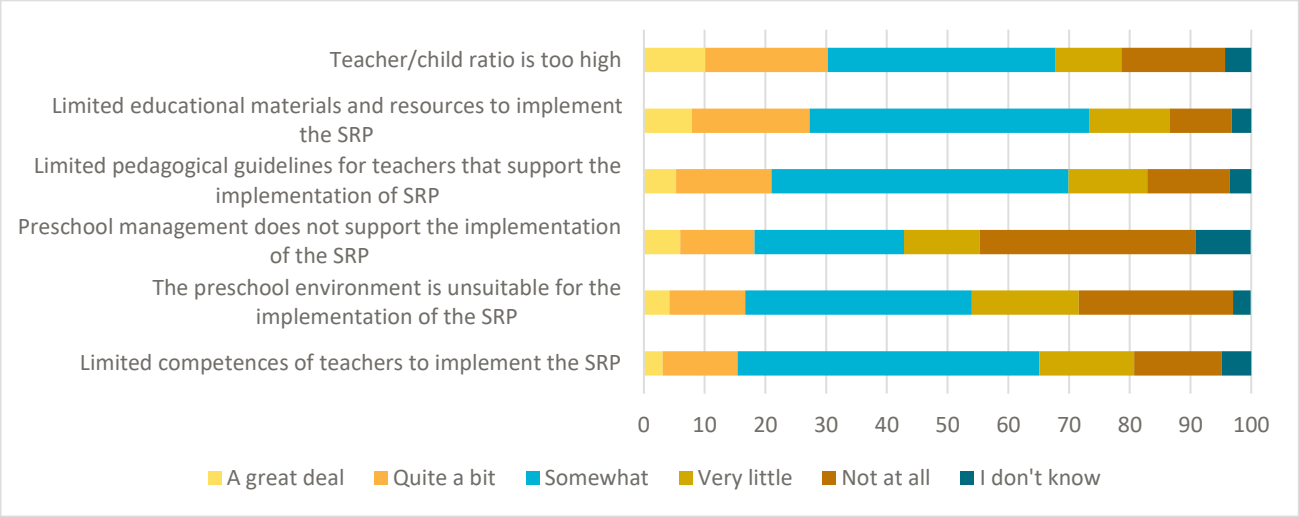
[109] Interview with Ilia State University

[110] Interview with the MoES

[111] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[112] Interview with Ilia State University

FIGURE 15. MAIN PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING THE SRP



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "To what extent do you think the following barriers prevent preschools from implementing the SRP curriculum?"

Many challenges to the quality of the SRP relate to the overall situation of preschool education, but specific SRP-related challenges were identified as well. A comparison of the interviews with national level stakeholders, the interviews and focus groups carried out under the case studies, and the survey results from local level stakeholders demonstrate that national level ECE experts perceive greater challenges to the SRP programme and its barriers compared to local staff. This could be related to the lack of specialised training for preschool staff and insufficient awareness of what the SRP should ideally entail (see also chapter 3.5.).

The main challenges to quality preschool education and SRP implementation are presented in more detail below.

- **Over-crowdedness of preschool settings**

While the 2016 Preschool law clearly sets maximum sizes per age groups, prior research[113], stakeholder interviews[114], as well as the survey demonstrate that over-crowdedness in preschools remains a common problem across the country. In fact, the teacher/child ratio was most commonly listed as impacting the quality implementation of the SRP by survey respondents (30% considered it impacted the SRP "a great deal" or "quite a bit"). Particularly in bigger cities, preschools host and excessive number of children, without having resources or territory to expand. [115]

- **Education resources**

Gaps in the availability of educational and pedagogical resources for teachers and preschool staff are a common challenge listed in relation to preschool education in general, and the SRP in particular. Prior studies, confirmed by interviewed stakeholders, found that open-ended, engaging, and natural resources are scarce, and education materials are not renewed. In some cases, budget restrictions require parents and teachers to bring such

[113] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

[114] Interview with the MoES

[115] Interview with Educational and Scientific Infrastructure Development Agency (ESIDA) and the MoES

resources, relying on their own money.[116] Stakeholders note that gaps in resources are particularly dire in mountainous areas and that private preschools often possess more resources than public preschools, though not necessarily contributing to higher process quality.[117]

The SRP suffers from similar gaps in resources, as 27% of survey respondents indicate that limited education materials and resources prevent preschools "a great deal" or "quite a bit" from implementing the SRP. Stakeholders note that current available educational resources are not sufficient to support the SRP, which requires a lot of equipment in their view. A survey by the State Audit Agency also showed that in almost all regions there are insufficient resources to deliver a school readiness program.[118] Preschools lack the financial resources (and autonomy) to purchase necessary resources.[119] Therefore, the presence of resources varies from municipality to municipality[120].

- **Education content and pedagogy**

The content of preschool education is set at the national level, supported by the national quality standards, and ECE staff has limited autonomy to adapt the programmes and curriculum.[121] Therefore, ECE staff cannot adjust content to their local environment or to the reality of the preschool (e.g., in terms of available resources and group size).[122] While the SRP also relies on a curriculum with a child-centred pedagogical approach, some more flexibility is awarded to the teachers (e.g., there are less pre-defined activities that must be followed). [123]

As shown in **Error! Reference source not found.**, the majority of surveyed local ECE actors (66%), as well as interviewed stakeholders perceive that **on paper, the SRP curriculum focuses sufficiently on emotional wellbeing and holistic development**. The challenge is the **actual implementation in the classroom**. It relates to a lack of competences of teachers to use child-centred pedagogies to support holistic development (as demonstrated in section 3.2.2.1 by the ISSA scale findings), as well as to unsuitable environments in the classroom (as demonstrated in section 3.2.2.2 by the Leuven scale findings). The NGO that conducted the skills assessment pilot found that, for example, motor skills are not developed properly due to lack of interior space and children not being taken into the yard. As for the development of psycho-emotional skills, the implementation depends on the competencies of educators, but in this regard, the educators are not trained. [124]

Similarly, monitoring of SRP practice in 2017 demonstrated that the implementation of SRP in preschools is different from the established SRP curricula and guidelines. In only 8 out of 26 preschools, a play-based educational practice was used; in most of the preschools, educational themes were not based on children's interests; and most of the caregivers do not use observation or portfolios to assess children.[125] The monitoring activity also showed that preschools only implemented the activities in the SRP books, but do not focus on the

[116] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf; Jijavadze, N. & Kukhaleishvili, T. (2017). *UNICEF Report: School Readiness Program Monitoring.*;, Interview with Mac Georgia

[117] Interview with Kids Office

[118] Interview with the National Association for Preschool Education

[119] Interview with Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

[120] Interview with the MoES

[121] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf; National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[122] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study*; Jijavadze, N. & Kukhaleishvili, T. (2017). *UNICEF Report: School Readiness Program Monitoring*

[123] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[124] Interview with Mac Georgia and with, Akaki Tsereteli State University

[125] Jijavadze, N. & Kukhaleishvili, T. (2017). *UNICEF Report: School Readiness Program Monitoring*

child-centred approach.[126]. This means that, in reality, the "implementation" of the SRP relies on pre-defined activities, which, according to UNICEF, are "*far away from the ethos of the curriculum as it was imagined*".[127] These activity guidebooks for teachers contain scripted activities, which contradict the child-centred approach and limit children's involvement in shaping the activities.[128]

Two years ago, a pilot project by the Center for Teacher Professional Development was implemented to introduce the SRP in various preschools. The pilot demonstrated that preschool teachers are not familiar with the basics and pedagogy of this program. They use the set of activities provided, but the (pedagogical) principles behind the activities are not familiar to them. Since limited support was provided to preschool teachers in terms of curriculum implementation, the results of this pilot are likely applicable across Georgia.[129]

- **Parental engagement**

The 2018 ECE survey by the NAEC found that the majority of municipalities support the policy of parental engagement, while 29% of municipalities replied that such policies are not implemented. Similarly, preschools in 44% of municipalities frequently engage parents. [130]

Error! Reference source not found.Error! Reference source not found. shows that among the examples of the SRP curriculum, quality interaction between teachers and parents is least often perceived as addressed. Additionally, the university representative believes that the involvement of the parents is much lower in practice compared to what the standards require.[131] Two stakeholders pointed out that parental engagement in preschool education is a key challenge for teachers. Preschool teachers do not know effective and diverse strategies how to involve family in early education processes.[132]

- **Competences of preschool staff**

As already demonstrated in the previous sections, a core challenge to the implementation of quality preschool education across Georgia is the lack of highly qualified ECE staff and the ISSA Quality scale revealed that higher education achievements did not always lead to higher quality. There are significant gaps in the current preschool education system for preschool teachers, namely, a lack of a specialized training in ECE on a bachelor's level, and little or no in-service training on specific curricula.[133] A university representative noted in this regard that in-service trainings or updates are insufficient to replace in-depth, ECE-related, pre-service training.[134] This is elaborated in chapter 3.5.

According to stakeholders, gaps in the competences of teachers relate particularly to skills and knowledge to implement modern child-centred pedagogies focusing on the holistic development of the child. Preschool staff are also not made aware, or trained on, the national preschool standards.[135] In this regard, the Center for Teacher

[126] Jijavadze, N. & Kukhaleishvili, T. (2017). *UNICEF Report: School Readiness Program Monitoring*

[127] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[128] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[129] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[130] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[131] Interview with Ilia State University

[132] Interviews with Kids Office and the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

[133] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf; National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*; Jijavadze, N. & Kukhaleishvili, T. (2017). *UNICEF Report: School Readiness Program Monitoring*; Interview with the MoES

[134] Interview with Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

[135] Interview with the MoES

Professional Development found that while teachers understand the meaning of "play", they do not possess the competencies and resources for organising and stimulating the play.[136] One stakeholder mentioned in particular that, besides the physical environment, teachers lack competences to create a psychologically safe environment for children.[137] A municipal preschool agency noted that "*it is more difficult for us to address social and emotional well-being compared to physical well-being*".[138]

Besides general gaps in specialised ECE training for preschool teachers, stakeholders agree that teachers are not sufficiently trained and prepared to implement the SRP. The distribution of guidelines and textbooks on implementing the SRP is deemed insufficient for teachers to meaningfully implement the SRP curriculum.[139] Particularly, the university and teacher development center representatives perceive a lack of understanding of the SRP curriculum among ECE actors. For example:

> "*When this curriculum was introduced, I had a feeling that, at first, educators did not know what child-centeredness meant. Some educators did not understand the curriculum, and others could not access it at all. The problem is the language and terms in the curriculum leading to misunderstandings. Therefore, the curriculum was systematically incorrectly introduced.*" [140]

It strongly influences the ability of preschool teachers to not only implement the SRP and general preschool activities but also to use the accompanying pedagogies to introduce meaningful interactions and support the holistic development of the child.

- **Unsafe preschool settings.**

One of the main challenges to evaluating the suitability of preschool environments is the lack of modern, updated technical standards on infrastructure and materials. The existing technical regulations that are in force are perceived as quite outdated (the last technical regulation dates to 2001), while preschool education and standards have significantly developed since then.[141]

In 2017, a small-scale preschool monitoring process found that only 7 out of 26 preschools were considered a safe environment, with most problems stemming from damaged materials or furniture.[142] Currently, stakeholders still express significant dissatisfaction with the current safety of preschool institutions.

The main challenge relates to insufficient maintenance of preschool institutions. Various stakeholders reported that walls are damaged, and rooms are damp.[143] One stakeholder provided the example: "*I can remember one preschool that was destroyed two years ago, and today children still study in an old club building, because a new building was not constructed*".[144] Another stakeholder informed that "*I have met preschool teachers and educators who have not taken their children outside for two years because the yards are not well-maintained. Most preschools in the region do*

[136] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[137] Interview with the MoES

[138] Interview with Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency

[139] Interviews with the MoES, the NCEQE, and Sokhumi State University

[140] Interview with Ilia State University

[141] Interview with ESIDA

[142] Jijavadze, N. & Kukhaleishvili, T. (2017). *UNICEF Report: School Readiness Program Monitoring*

[143] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

[144] Interview with Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University

not have outdoor spaces."[145] Unsuitable outdoor spaces were more often mentioned by stakeholders. There are preschools where children cannot play or even walk safely.[146]

Stakeholders report that the poor physical environment is more commonly witnessed in rural areas. Similarly, education resources are reported to be scarcer in rural areas. [147]

- **Unsuitable learning environments**

Besides meeting safety standards, stakeholders also perceive gaps in the ability of the **physical environment to support learning and development**. Stakeholders report that "the basic is done", namely painting of the walls and provision of minimum sanitary facilities, but the preschool infrastructure is often not designed, taking into consideration the needs of the child and their development. [148] A stakeholder noted that some preschools lack the facilities to stimulate socio-emotional development, such as yards for playing or generally a social environment that stimulates quality interactions. [149]

The physical environments of preschools are also not actively updated in relation to new pedagogical approaches or curricula, such as the SRP. The implementation of the SRP requires some adjustments to the room, compared to the rooms for the other preschool children. It requires teachers to rearrange their teaching space differently compared to what they are used to.[150]

Additionally, preschool teachers face difficulties creating an **atmosphere that stimulates children's (emotional) well-being**, partially because this issue is insufficiently addressed in teacher training. Various interactions in preschools (between children and adults, between teachers, between teachers and parents) all affect children's wellbeing, but teachers are not aware of this and have no guidance on how to manage such interactions positively.[151] A university representative pointed out that they heard many complaints about tense relationships between co-workers and administration, as well as between preschools and parents. It requires a great effort from educators to create an emotionally safe atmosphere for children.[152]

- **School-based SRP**

The previous sections dealt with the implementation of ECE in general, and the SRP in the preschool setting. However, in some instances, SRP is delivered in primary schools. Besides the opportunities offered by this arrangement (described in section 3.2.4), there are a variety of challenges affecting SRP quality when implemented in the school building. The topic of "schoolification" is discussed separately in section 3.2.3.

Firstly, stakeholders are concerned about the **physical environment of primary schools** as a setting for preschool education. Namely, Georgian schools are not segregated by age, so children from first to 12th grade are in the same building. [153] A stakeholder considered that "*children of preschool age are not ready to go into these huge schools, without a yard, to watch seniors running around in the corridors like crazy*". [154] School-based SRPs require

[145] Interview with the MoES

[146] Interview with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

[147] Interview with Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University

[148] Interviews with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara and with Kids Office

[149] Interview with Ilia State University

[150] Interview with Ilia State University

[151] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[152] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

[153] Interviews with the MoES and with Ilia State University

[154] Interview with Ilia State University

staff to consider how the group should be organized and "isolated" from the older children of the school.[155] Similarly, considering the age difference, preschool children have different infrastructural needs, such as separate toilets.[156]

Stakeholders are concerned that **the school environment does not meet the preschool standards**. [157] For example, school classrooms do not possess the same characteristics and facilities as preschool classrooms. [158] The preschool environment is more age-appropriate, informal, and loaded with play, since the physical environment and inventory are more adapted to children. A stakeholder noted that if schools would create a similar environment, school-based SRP could work, but currently, Georgian schools don't have this possibility.[159]

In this regard, stakeholders also noticed that school-based SRP could cause the separation of the SRP from the general preschool area, which reduces the "holistic" approach to ECE.[160] The school is responsible for the development of reading and writing skills, risking that the SRP will be influenced by curricula that are not age-appropriate.[161]

For parents, the school environment comes with certain disadvantages. Namely, there is no food provided, and it is not a full-day service like preschools.[162] Namely, the preschool-based SRP program offers the parent a 9-hour service, with food (4 times a day) while SRP in schools covers only 3 hours. Some stakeholders who were involved in piloting SRPs in schools noticed that only a few parents were interested and signed up.[163]

- **Inclusive education**

Chapter 3.1 presented various challenges that disadvantaged groups of children face regarding access to preschool education. However, access to preschool does not guarantee that children from disadvantaged backgrounds enjoy the same quality of education.

According to the survey results, most ECE actors at the municipal level do not see extensive challenges in providing inclusive education for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The most prevalent barrier, noted by 24% of the respondents, is the lack of appropriate facilities for children with special needs. It is followed by 17% of respondents who believe staff is not well-prepared to work with children with special needs.

The survey shows that (although differences are small) respondents see more challenges for children with special needs, compared to children from ethnic minorities. It aligns with the findings on access, which demonstrate that children with special needs / disabilities more often lack access compared to other groups of disadvantaged children.

[155] Interview with the Kindergarten Support Association (KSA)

[156] Interview with the National Association for Preschool Education

[157] Interviews with the Teacher Professional Development Center and with NCEQE

[158] Interview with the MoES

[159] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

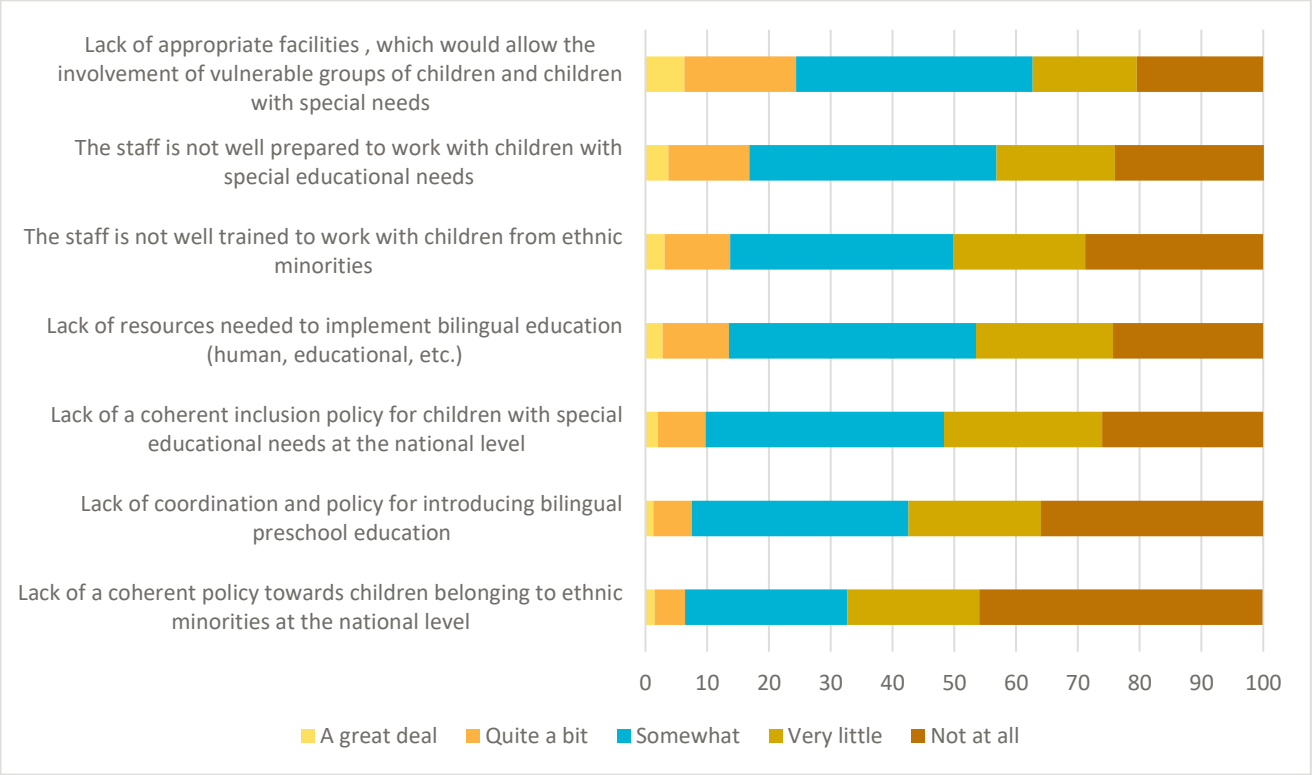
[160] Interview with Ilia State University

[161] Interviews with NCEQE and with Akaki Tsereteli State University

[162] Interview with the World Bank Financed Program: Education Quality, Inclusion and Innovation

[163] Interviews with Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency and the KSA

FIGURE 16. PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO THE PROVISION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "To what extent do you think the following barriers affect inclusive preschool education in your municipality?"

The 2018 UNICEF study did not find evidence of any form of collaboration between ECE centres and daycare centres for children with disabilities, the Social Service Agency, or any other type of early childhood intervention service for children with special needs. It also hinders preschools from providing sufficient support to children with special needs or disabilities.[164]

Although the number of survey respondents replying that certain factors affect inclusive education "a great deal" or "to some extent" is rather small, there is a group of about one-third of respondents who consider that each of the challenges "somewhat" affects inclusive education. It means that overall, there do exist multiple barriers related to staff competencies, preschool facilities, and government policies, which -combined- can pose significant barriers to inclusive education.

3.2.4. SRP and Schoolification

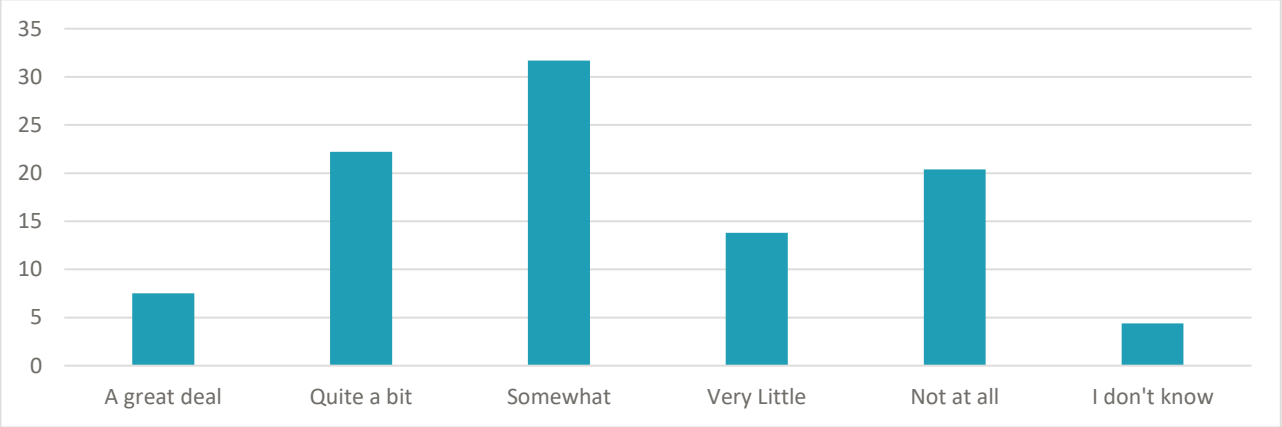
Some ECE programmes, such as the Georgian SRP, expose preschool children to the culture of primary school. Besides the opportunities and benefits, there is a key challenge known as "schoolification". It refers to ECE settings that adopt practices that are usually more related to primary schools, such as higher staff-pupil ratios, longer hours away from home, more teacher-directed pedagogies, greater attention to academic content and less playtime.[165]

[164] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

[165] OECD (2017). *Starting Strong V: Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education*. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/publications/starting-strong-v-9789264276253-en.htm

The results of the survey and the interviews did not find a uniform perspective among stakeholders to what extent the Georgian preschool has a risk of schoolification either in preschool or school-based (SRP) settings.

FIGURE 17. EXTENT TO WHICH STAKEHOLDERS PERCEIVE A RISK OF SCHOOLIFICATION IN THE SRP



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "Do you see a risk of schoolification of ECE in your municipality? (i.e. That ECE focuses too much on primary school practices)?"

Nearly 30% of the respondents see a clear risk of schoolification ("a great deal" or "quite a bit"), while 34% perceive this risk as very little or do not perceive it at all.

Risks of schoolification perceived by interview respondents relate mainly to the **introduction of more academic skills in the SRP**, compared to socio-emotional development and play as expected in preschool education.[166] A stakeholder pointed out that "preschool teachers and caregivers still think that school readiness is only teaching kids writing and reading, numbers and shapes".[167] One stakeholder is concerned that preschool teachers face a lack of creativity during the SRP implementation and are therefore mainly focused on the development of academic skills.[168]

In this regard, the risk of schoolification based on curriculum content is relative to the competencies of the teachers. Most stakeholders replied that the SRP curriculum and preschool standards on paper do not focus disproportionately on academic skills and emphasizes the development of socio-emotional skills. However, stakeholders are concerned that teachers cannot implement the curriculum activities focusing on socio-emotional development. [169]

> *I think the balance is acceptable: the curriculum is based on child-centred approaches and also emphasizes the holistic nature of child development and education, so the program methodology is acceptable at the level of basic principles. however, educators have not undergone training in terms of school readiness. It is natural that their practice may not be relevant to the program, often with a greater emphasis on giving factual knowledge and information.*[170]

[166] Interview with Kids Office

[167] Interview with Samtkhe-Javakheti State University

[168] Interview with Kids Office

[169] Interviews with Sokhumi State University, Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University; the Georgian Portage Association, and World Vision

[170] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

The second risk of schoolification occurs when the **SRP takes place in the primary school**, instead of the preschool environment. Generally, stakeholders perceive preschools as better suited to balance between preschool education and school readiness activities. [171] Namely, SRP in school is more likely to resemble the school's general classroom formation and infrastructure, which are not always suitable for ECE pedagogies.[172]

Another danger perceived by stakeholders is that SRP in the school environment will be implemented through more academic pedagogics and less child-centred pedagogies, because the SRP becomes more focused on academic skills than it actually should be.[173] As mainly schoolteachers are leading these groups, they are more inclined to structure education as "lessons" rather than engaging children in different activities.[174]

School environments are more focused towards academic skills, risking that preschool children may be more engaged in academic work, learning and studying, instead of playing.[175] In some schools, the SRP is called a zero group (first year of primary school education) and the play approach is less prominent in the pedagogies.[176] Similarly, there is a greater risk that teachers have higher expectations of demands towards children, which are not appropriate with their age and development.[177]

3.2.5. Progress towards improved ECE quality, particularly of the SRP

The previous section has described the various gaps in the quality provision of preschool education and the SRP in general. However, interviews and desk research also indicated various good practices, opportunities, and ongoing improvements that are taking place to enhance ECE quality.

3.2.5.1 Good practices and ongoing improvements

- **Quality of ECE**

An important strength of the SRP programme is that, on paper, the design of the curriculum and pedagogies are in line with national preschool standards.[178] Important elements such as quality interactions among children and adults involved in ECE are outlined, and the curriculum focuses on the holistic development of the child. Therefore, the basis for high-quality SRP exists.

Various efforts have been made to improve the physical environment of preschool education, and stakeholders also reported improvements in this regard over the past years. Stakeholders mentioned that

> *"More than 150 schools have been built in recent years, and 91 have been fully rehabilitated under the Millennium project alone and equipped with new equipment. In Tbilisi, 50 public preschool institutions are being rehabilitated. 18 more schools will be built by the World Bank project, 60 more will be rehabilitated. World Vision Georgia has built and rehabilitated several preschool institutions as well".*[179]

- **Benefits of school-based SRP**

[171] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

[172] Interview with Sokhumi State University

[173] Interviews with Ilia State University and with Kids Office

[174] Interview with the MoES

[175] Interview with Kids Office

[176] Interviews with Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University and with Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University

[177] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[178] Interviews with Akaki Tsereteli State University and with Sokhumi State University

[179] Interview with ESIDA

When challenges related to schoolification and the overall school environment are sufficiently addressed, stakeholders perceive various benefits and opportunities related to the organisation of SRPs in school.

Most importantly, many stakeholders consider that school-based SRP can **facilitate the smooth transition** from preschool to primary school. In this case, the child is gradually exposed to the school setting while still benefitting from preschool education.[180] In some cases, the teachers for the SRP and primary school classes are the same, which also facilitates the transition. Stakeholders also think that school-based SRPs can enhance the emotional readiness for school and therefore reduce the stress of transition to school.[181]

Additionally, school based SRPs can solve **demographic challenges** in regions where the small population hinders the set-up of preschools. Schools in smaller villages sometimes have unused spaces (e.g. due to a decrease in the population), which can be used in a cost-effective way for the implementation of the SRP programme. In this case, the alternative would be that there is no preschool education available at all.[182] [183] [184]

While the school-based SRP offers benefits to children and parents, there is also a clear **interest from the side of the school**, from a commercial point of view. Namely, the SRP provides the school with opportunities to connect with prospective children.[185] Some stakeholders noted that schools make an effort to provide high-quality SRP (especially private schools) to ensure that the children are enrolled in their elementary classes.[186]

3.2.5.2 Opportunities and recommendations

Overall, it is clear that many quality challenges relate to a lack of resources. A first step to improving preschool quality would be to allocate additional financial resources to the sector, at least for the procurement of educational materials, the restoration of preschool buildings and environments, and the pre-and in-service training of preschool staff.[187]

Additionally, the findings of the current study support stakeholder perceptions that the preschool reality (size, needs, available resources) differs between preschools across the country. Therefore, a strict unified approach to preschool financing may not be suitable. Instead, a stakeholder suggested that more flexibility and financial autonomy for preschools can enable them to better address their needs and gaps in relation to their circumstances.[188]

Given the perceived risks of schoolification of the SRP, and the lack of child-centred pedagogies, stakeholders recommend revising the SRP programme by providing more pedagogical instructions and pre-and in-service teacher training.[189] Various stakeholders noted that the SRP curriculum should have more strategic guidelines and instructions for parental and family engagement, to ensure that families can support the socio-emotional development of their children, and the transition to school.[190] The transition to school should also receive more prominent attention in the curriculum throughout the year (and not only towards the end of the preschool

[180] Interview with the MoES
[181] Interview with the MoES
[182] Interview with ESIDA
[183] Interview with the Teacher Professional Development Center
[184] Interview with Ilia State University
[185] Interview with the NCEQE
[186] Interview with Kids Office
[187] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development
[188] Interview with Civitas Georgia
[189] Interview with the MoES
[190] Interviews with the MoES and Akaki Tsereteli State University

year).[191] Close cooperation with schools can support this transition and the implementation of school preparatory activities throughout the year.[192]

3.3. ECE quality monitoring system

3.3.1. Existing quality monitoring system in ECE

The EPE law (2016) formulates that the quality of ECE including SRP should be monitored on different levels:

- **Municipalities** must develop a system of monitoring, assessment and reporting and ensure its functioning for the purposes of establishing the compliance of preschool education services with the authorization standards (external monitoring);
- **The Ministry of Education** must establish rules for authorizing preschools; develop a monitoring system for public institutions and carry out such monitoring and evaluate and prepare relevant recommendations for the purposes of implementing, developing and improving the State Standards for Preschool Care and Education.

The exact allocation of responsibilities between different actors and levels is described in section 3.4 on coordination.

As indicated in the Law, the actual monitoring activities are implemented by **municipalities**. The *Order of the MoES about the monitoring system in the public institution for the introduction, development and improvement of the state standards of preschool care and education* was approved in 2019. This document provides guidelines and expresses the need for qualified and trained monitoring specialists.[193] Stakeholders confirm that the responsibility for the actual development of quality monitoring tools was delegated to the municipalities, with the requirement for them to introduce by-laws, procedures and monitoring systems to implement the monitoring obligation.[194] There are currently no national, overarching frameworks, methods or guidelines for quality monitoring.[195]

There is no active role for the Ministry in this regard. In fact, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport of Adjara emphasized in this regard that "*We do not interfere in this process. We have no leverage in this regard. We do not appoint, dismiss, or pay wages. The Ministry does not have the right to do monitoring by law nor does it have the competence: it is at the municipal level*". [196]

The law provides several processes for monitoring to ensure the quality of ECE. The preschool standards are the basis for these processes.

- The **authorization process** of all public preschool by the Municipalities (managed by the National Center for Education Quality Development)
- **Consulting Council of Parents** in every public preschool
- Monitoring of **Nutrition Standards** by LEPL National Food Agency

[191] Interviews with the MoES and Akaki Tsereteli State University

[192] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

[193] Order of the MoES about the monitoring system in the public institution for the introduction, development and improvement of the state standards of preschool care and education

[194] Interview with the NCEQE

[195] Interview with MDF

[196] Interview with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

- Registry of **statistical information** defined by the Government of Georgia and administered by the Municipalities

The first step towards quality assurance is the "**authorization process**" where preschools are only allowed to provide preschool education once they have passed the authorization procedure (including a review of the preschool compared to national standards). However, by early 2022, the authorization process has not yet been launched. A stakeholder indicated that, after some amendments in the 2016 Law, the preparatory process for authorization will start in 2022 and the systematic authorization process commences in 2025 and will last until 2030.[197] This authorization process should cover all public and private preschools.

However, for other monitoring activities such as preschool education quality, municipalities are responsible to develop their own monitoring materials. In each municipality there are typically units established by the municipality that are in charge of general management and oversight over preschools in the municipality and also for monitoring.[198]

The Tbilisi municipality indicated, for example, the following instruments and procedures used by them to monitor preschools and their quality[199]:

1. Self-assessment by the preschool itself.
2. Monitoring by the Tbilisi kindergarten Agency.
3. Central Audit Monitoring.
4. Monitoring by the City Council.
5. Monitoring by the City Hall.

Such monitoring tools mainly relate to personnel and financial issues. The Tbilisi kindergarten agency also uses the quality standard questionnaire to monitor the quality of educational methods and pedagogies. [200]

As it can be seen from the interviews in case study municipalities, **different approaches to the monitoring process are being implemented**. For example, in Khelvachauri, Ozurgeti, Zugdidi, Marneuli and Tbilisi municipalities, methodologists evaluate whether all planned activities are actually being carried out and assess the quality of the care and education that is being provided. A teacher from Zugdidi evaluated the work of the methodologist positively as they manage to have a close relation with the preschool teachers and provide advice and support needed. In some preschools in Zugdidi the school managers and acting managers perform monitoring activities with a help of a specialised methodologists working in preschools. In Tianeti, Ozurgeti, Tbilisi, Zugdidi, Marneuli, and Akhaltsikhe experts from the Preschool Agency regularly visit preschools to explain how different activities should be implemented, observe the work of the teachers and provide feedback and recommendations. A teacher from Tbilisi, who had little training in ECE, noted that monitoring and feedback they receive help them improve their practices and partly make up for their lack of training.

In addition, **nutrition and food safety** is monitored by the Food Agency. The National Food Agency confirmed that they visit preschools at least four times a year to monitor food quality; hygiene; sanitary norms; food production and processing, food storage temperature regime, food validity and quality, the expiration date and

[197] Interview with the MoES

[198] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[199] Interview with Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency

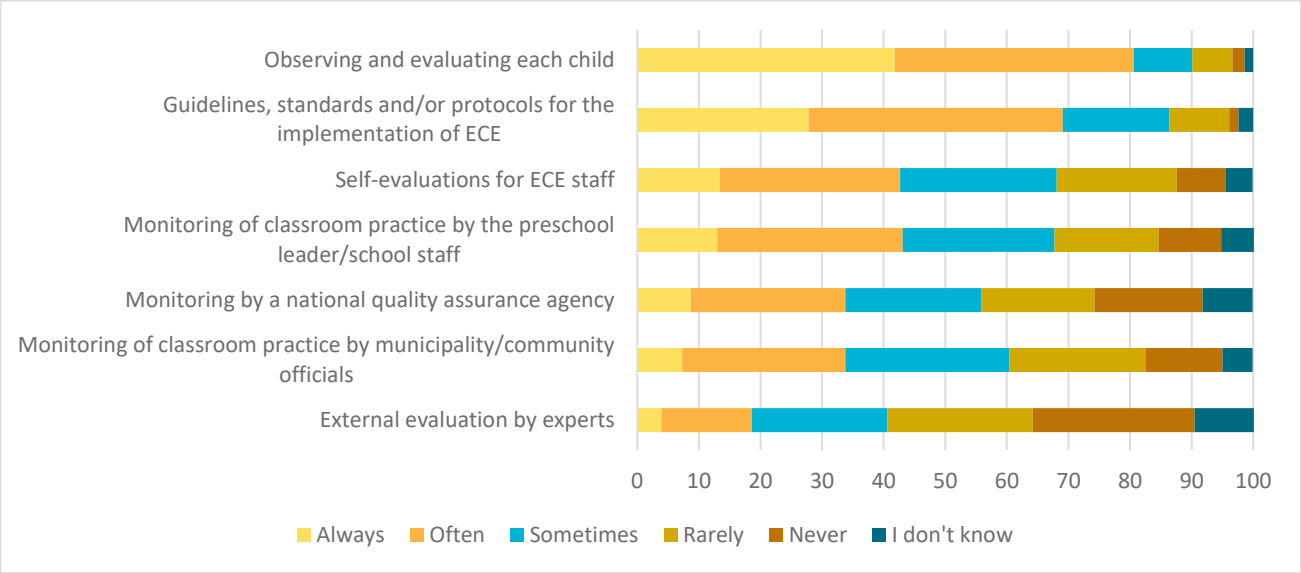
[200] Interview with Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency

shelf life of food. Based on their measurements, annual reports are prepared with scorecards and prioritisation of upcoming monitoring locations and topics.[201]

The majority of municipalities reported in 2018 that such external monitoring of food and nutrition safety was taking place in their municipality.[202] In the current study, the school management staff from the preschools in Ozurgeti shared that they focus a lot on nutrition and food safety during their monitoring activities. Interviews in Tianeti municipality case study shows that nutrition and hygiene are an importance aspect of the monitoring system. Infection control is implemented every Friday to properly monitor the risk of contagious infections. During the COVID-19 pandemic additional procedures to monitor the safety of children and prevent the spread of the virus were introduced.

The survey implemented under the current study enquired whether local preschool staff and municipality officials had come across specific monitoring tools. As demonstrated by Figure 18, the most common monitoring tools include evaluation of individual children (81% encounter this always or often) and guidelines, standards, and protocols for ECE implementation (69%). External evaluations by experts are least common (19%).

FIGURE 18. FREQUENCY OF USE OF VARIOUS ECE QUALITY MONITORING TOOLS



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "In your work have you encountered any of the following mechanisms to ensure the quality of preschool education?"

Interestingly, while municipalities hold the main responsibility for quality monitoring, only 34% encounters classroom practice monitoring by municipalities "always" or "often". Also, less than half of the respondents (43%) "always" or "often" encounter self-evaluation tools. Classroom monitoring by municipalities is also less encountered by less experienced teachers. 18% of ECE teachers working for less than 5 years never encountered such monitoring compared with 10% of ECE teachers working for more than 15 years.

In general, it seems that ECE teachers who started working recently have less experience with different monitoring tools. For example, when asked if they ever encountered guidelines, standards and/or protocols for

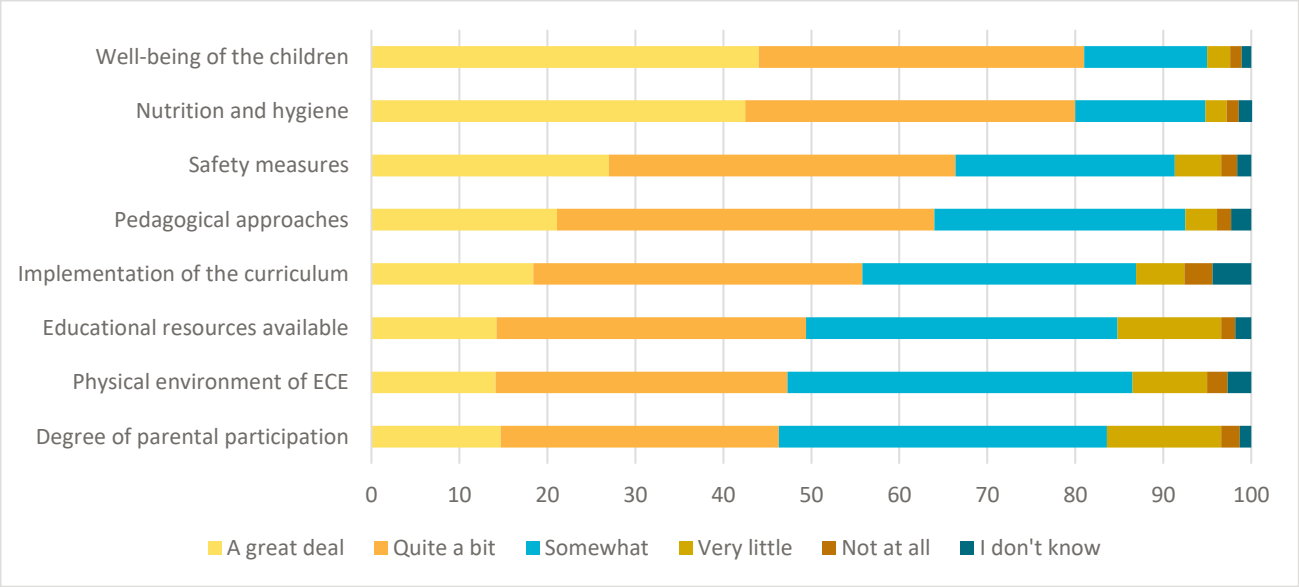
[201] Interview with the NFA

[202] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*; Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

the implementation of early childhood education and care, 32% of teachers working for 11-15 years and only 24% of those working for less than 5 years answered "always". Moreover, when asked if they encountered observing and evaluating each child, 48% of teachers working for 11-15 years answered "always" and 35% of those working for less than 5 years did the same.

In case monitoring tools are encountered and used, respondents consider that they mostly cover the wellbeing of children (81% answered "a great deal" or "quite a bit") and nutrition and hygiene (80%).

FIGURE 19. TOPICS COVERED BY ECE MONITORING TOOLS



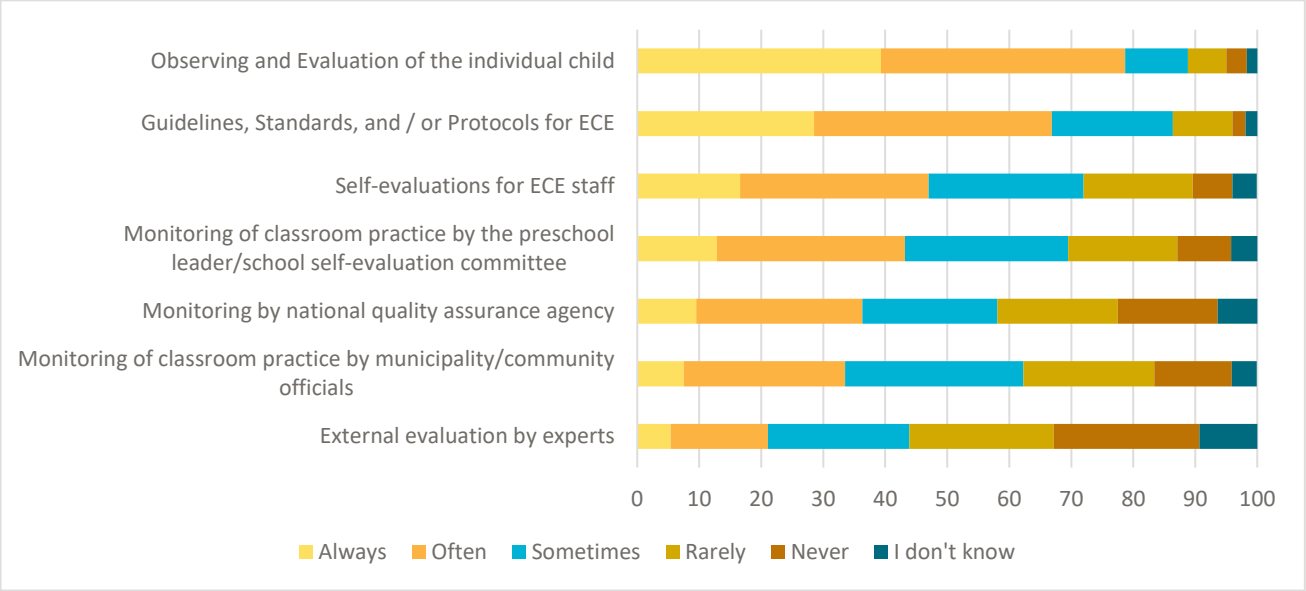
Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "If you encountered any quality control measures for ECE in general, which of the following elements did they cover?"

In terms of the **School Readiness Programme**, the executive order of the MoES about School Readiness Standards (2015) defined monitoring of the implementation of the Standards as a recommended activity carried out by the MoES. Stakeholders indicate that monitoring of the SRP entails the same procedures as general preschool education, namely that there are no national frameworks or tools and that municipalities are responsible to design monitoring tools. Stakeholders could not answer to what extent this takes place.[203]

Similar to the monitoring of ECE in general, respondents most commonly encounter evaluations of the individual child (79% answered "always" or "often") and guidelines, standards, and protocols (67%). While these numbers are slightly lower compared to general ECE monitoring, respondents more often reported the use of self-evaluation for SRP monitoring (47%) compared to ECE in general (43%).

[203] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

FIGURE 20. FREQUENCY OF USE OF VARIOUS SRP QUALITY MONITORING TOOLS

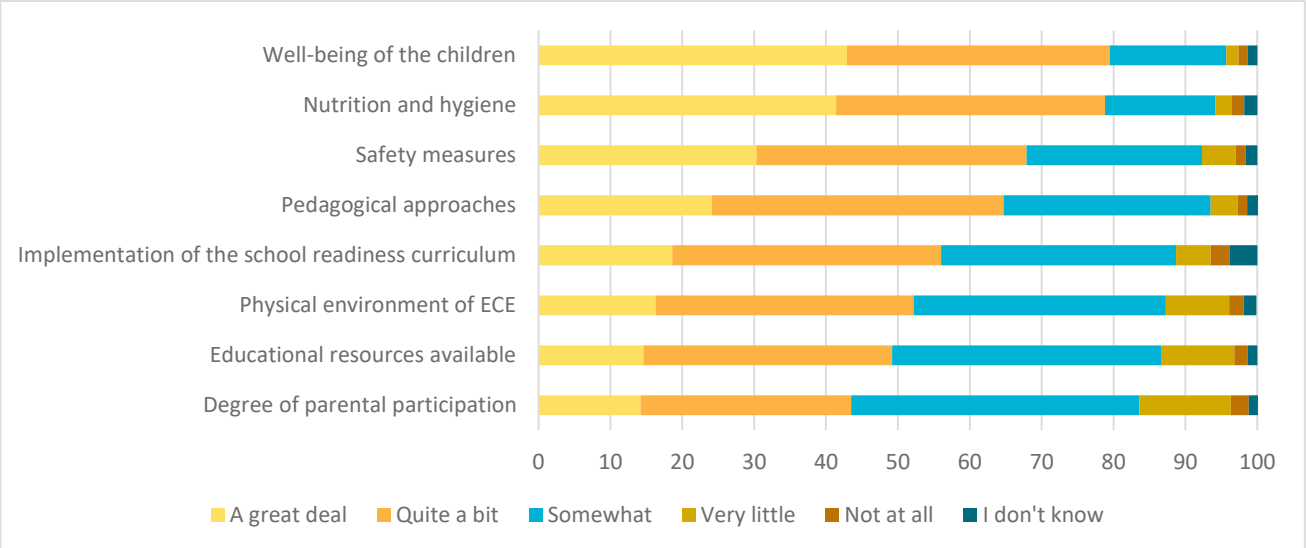


Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "In your work have you encountered any of the following mechanisms to ensure the quality of SPR in particular?"

Similarly, as with quality monitoring of general ECE, less experienced teachers were also less aware of the different tools for monitoring SRP quality. For example, when asked if they have encountered self-evaluations for ECE staff as a tool to ensure the quality of SRP, among those working for less than 5 years 10% answered "never" and 11% answered "always", while among those working for 11-15 years 4% answered "never" and 20% answered "always".

The content of SRP quality monitoring tools as perceived by respondents are similar to the content of general ECE monitoring. Namely, there is a strong focus on children's wellbeing and on nutrition and hygiene.

FIGURE 21. TOPICS COVERED BY SRP MONITORING TOOLS



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "If you encountered any quality control measures for SRP in particular, which of the following elements did they cover?"

It is important to note that, while the SRP is meant to provide a different type of programme, the information on the monitoring of its quality barely differs from general ECE monitoring. Either there are no or few separate monitoring tools and approaches available for the SRP, or local ECE actors have limited awareness about them.

The following section will present current challenges to quality monitoring, affecting ECE in general, and the SRP.

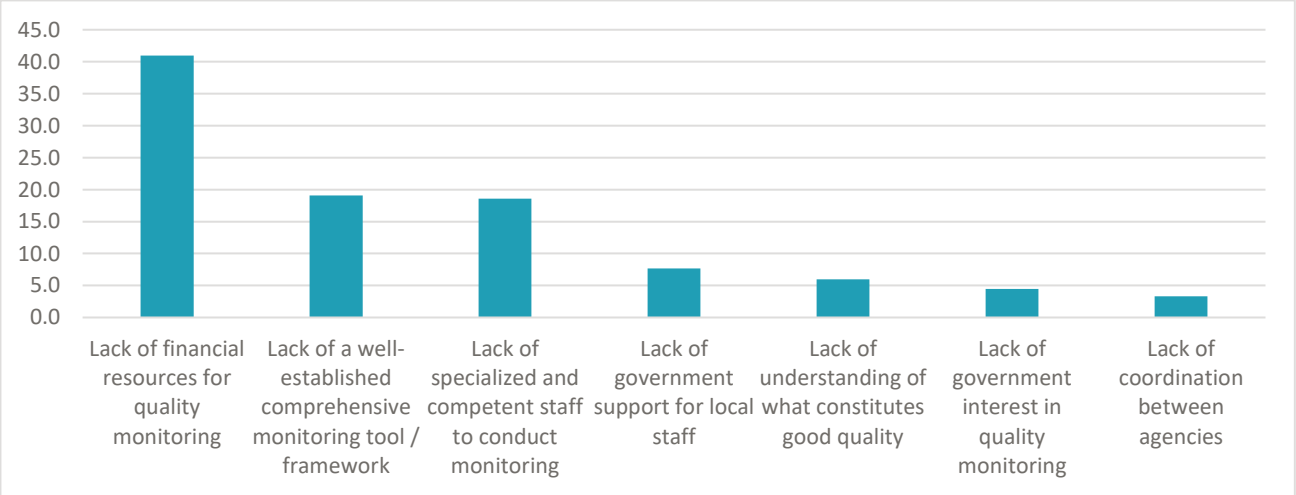
3.3.2. The main challenges regarding quality monitoring in ECE

While the responsibilities and standards for quality monitoring are clearly outlined in the Preschool law, the implementation of monitoring activities remains a challenge. The 2018 NAEC survey identified that in 43.5% of municipalities (30 in total), preschools use self-evaluation tools, but most of them were unsure which self-evaluation tools were used. Only six municipalities indicated that preschool staff periodically gather and discuss strengths and weaknesses of their professional life, and only three municipalities reported that preschools use journals of accomplishment of monthly plans and monthly reports.[204]

During the current study, multiple stakeholders confirm that monitoring is not done consistently and regularly.[205] Additionally, one stakeholder pointed out that preschool monitoring involves various standards (safety, nutrition, etc.) set by different ministries who employ their own monitoring approaches. Different approaches can cause mixed interpretation, which poses a risk to the reliability of the process.[206]

A core challenge to the implementation of quality monitoring is the lack of knowledge and competence in this field, demonstrated by the fact that a large number of interview respondents were unsure what elements of preschool education is monitored and how. According to the survey respondents, the main barriers to quality monitoring of ECE in general include the lack of financial resources for monitoring (41%), followed by a lack of a well-established comprehensive monitoring tool / framework (19%) and lack of specialized and competent staff to conduct monitoring (18%).

FIGURE 22. PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO MONITORING ECE QUALITY



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "In your opinion, what are the main barriers to better monitoring of the quality of early and preschool education?"

[204] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[205] Interview with Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

[206] Interview with NCEQE

These challenges were also mentioned by interview respondents and complemented with additional obstacles to effective monitoring of ECE practice.

- **Lack of financial and human resources for monitoring**

A lack of financial resources for monitoring stood out among the survey respondents, demonstrating this as a crucial barrier at the municipal level. This was also found in the NAEC and UNICEF studies where municipal actors indicated financial, human, and material constraints to monitor ECE quality.[207] The NAEC survey found that 14.4% of municipalities do not have the capacity to conduct monitoring. An issue mentioned in this study regards the costs and problems with transportation needed to visit the preschools.[208]

Interviewees for the current study indicated that financial resources for monitoring by municipalities are generally very limited and not a priority for investments. Therefore, monitoring relies on preschool staff's personal motivation, who are not compensated or trained for the additional work.[209]

Human resource gaps are also noted by interview respondents. For example, the Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency noted that they have six staff members in the agency to oversee the work of 180 preschools.[210] This issue is directly related to the insufficient financial resources, which hinder municipalities from recruiting (qualified) ECE monitoring staff. [211]

The findings from the case studies also indicate that lack of resources hinders the quality of existing ECE monitoring system. For example, ECE teachers from Khelvachauri municipality participating in the focus group mentioned that although the methodologists from the municipality focus on monitoring activities, the quality and usefulness of monitoring is questionable because the number of preschools they have to monitor is very high and the time for it is very limited.

- **Lack of a monitoring framework and tools**

As indicated in 3.3.1., the preschool standards prescribe the minimum quality standards for ECE, but no uniform quality monitoring methodology or framework exists that guides municipalities in executing their monitoring responsibilities. In 2018, the NAEC study identified the lack of such a uniform document to guide monitoring as a crucial barrier to the monitoring process[212].

It seems that monitoring activities are often implemented by local actors, so they vary significantly between the municipalities and the overall approach to monitoring is missing. An interviewed ECE leader from Akhaltsikhe municipality noted that the national government should increase its efforts to ensure sufficient monitoring of the education system.

The result, according to interviewees, is a fragmented and heterogeneous approach to monitoring, which relies on the capabilities of individual municipalities and preschools. Interviewees note from their experience that preschool unions and agencies do not always have a structured, consistent approach to monitoring, with

[207] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*; Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

[208] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[209] Interviews with the Center for Teacher Professional Development, with Kids Office, and with SamtkheSamtskhe-Javakheti State University

[210] Interview with Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency

[211] Interview with Sokhumi State University

[212] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

relevant monitoring tools. In fact, many ECE actors believe almost no quality monitoring is taking place at all, due to a lack of tools and structures. [213]

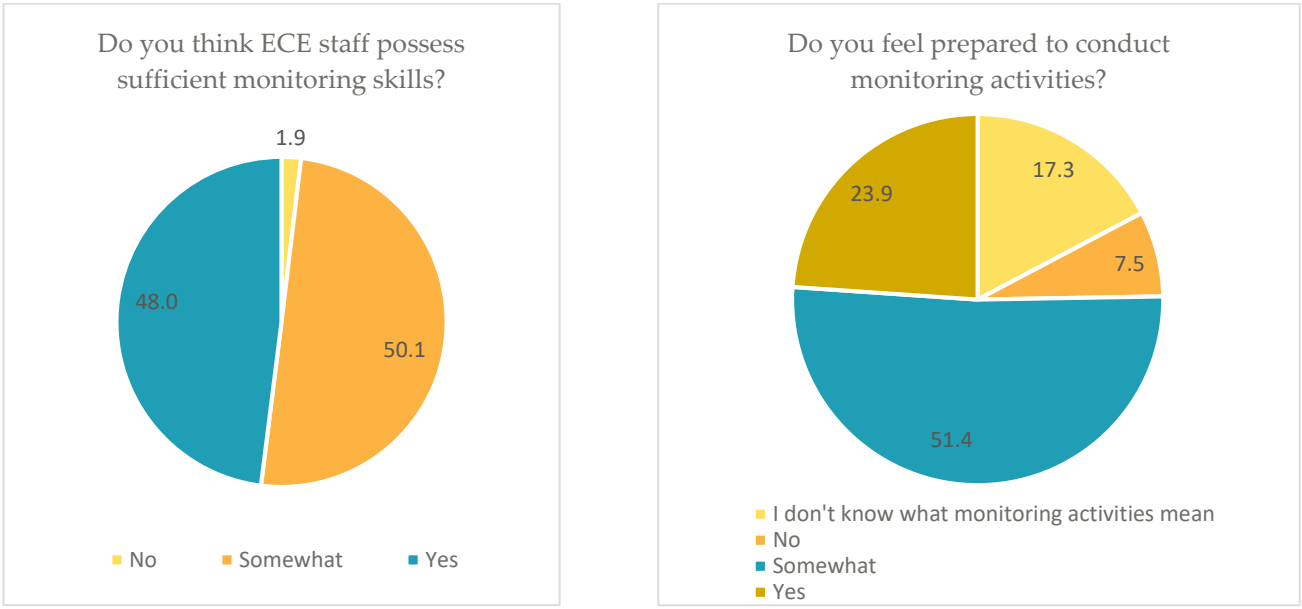
Additionally, one stakeholder pointed out that the lack of structure in the monitoring dimension can lead to confusion among the teachers. They noted that "*if teachers are monitored, it is better for them that only one actor would monitor their teaching practices or approaches. Sometimes it happens that the MoES monitor quality, but the municipality also monitors quality. They don't have a similar conclusion, feedback, and recommendation. Consequently, preschool teachers are very confused*".[214]

It also seems that due to no clear framework for the monitoring, the monitoring activities are perceived more as a formality. For example, interviewees for the case study Khelvachauri municipality feel that the existing monitoring lack clear framework of how the results of the monitoring can be used and, in that way, reduced the monitoring activities to a mere formality. Interviewed ECE institutions' leaders were not even sure what aspects of ECE institutions are being monitored. There are no discussions about what is observed, and the lack of resources prevents the municipality officials from taking any concrete actions for improvement.

- **Lack of competent monitoring staff**

The third key barrier to monitoring, as identified in the 2018 NAEC survey, regards the absence of qualified personnel to provide relevant monitoring.[215] National level ECE actors in the current study confirm that this is still the case. However, local level respondents to the survey are more optimistic. As shown by Figure 23, 48% of respondents believe that ECE staff possess the necessary skills to monitor ECE staff. However, when asked about themselves, only 24% consider themselves prepared to conduct ECE quality monitoring and 51% considers themselves somewhat prepared.

FIGURE 23. PERCEPTIONS ON ECE STAFF READINESS FOR MONITORING



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. *Left*: "Do you think that ECE staff in preschools possess sufficient skills to monitor the quality of ECE?"; *right*: "Do you feel prepared to conduct monitoring activities to improve quality of ECE?"

[213] Interview with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara; and the NCEQE

[214] Interview with Sokhumi State University

[215] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

The results of the survey also show that less experienced teachers feel more prepared to conduct ECE monitoring. When asked if they think that ECE staff possesses sufficient monitoring skills, 52% of teachers working for less than 5 years and 43% of those working for more than 15 years answered "yes". As mentioned above, less experienced teachers tend to have less experience with different monitoring tools, which means that they may be overestimating their monitoring skills.

National level interviewees believe that there is a lack of professionals who are qualified and trained to monitoring the situation in preschools.[216] A university representative pointed out that it is difficult to find qualified monitoring staff when there are already challenges in recruiting qualified ECE staff. [217] The observations from a case study in Khelvachauri municipality also indicate that the officials responsible for ECE monitoring are often not competent enough, especially because there is no focus on their continuous professional development due to the lack of funding.

Various interviewees stated that municipal staff is unsure how to conduct monitoring, with which tools and how to use the results.[218] It relates to the fact that most municipal staff is trained for governance, but not in the field of ECE pedagogy. Those who do have a background in ECE have not received continuing professional development training, meaning that their knowledge of ECE is no longer aligned with recent reforms and modern pedagogies.[219] Similarly, where preschool union employees are responsible for visits to preschools, they themselves do not have the necessary ECE skills or monitoring experiences and therefore cannot adequately assess the quality and resources of preschools. The monitoring then relates to more infrastructural elements such as whether the heating is on and whether food has been provided, rather than the quality of the preschool education.[220]

Finally, not all professionals who are responsible for monitoring are competent enough to provide the recommendations from the monitoring activities, which results in them being less useful. While the case study interviews from seven municipalities confirm that a lot of professionals responsible for monitoring also provide specific recommendations that are useful for teachers, some of the teachers noted that they get no recommendations and no feedback.

- **Lack of attention to education content and pedagogies**

As briefly introduced in the previous section, the lack of knowledge and skills of monitoring staff, as well as the lack of sufficient monitoring guidance and frameworks hinders municipal actors from assessing the quality of preschool education. Therefore, stakeholders indicate that this dimension of monitoring is often left out. [221] In fact, a university representative estimated based on her experience that in the vast majority of municipalities, the preschool union or agency do not monitor education content and programme quality. This relates directly to the lack of competences. [222]

Stakeholders also noted challenges regarding the authorization rule in this regard which, when implemented, should provide another tool for monitoring preschool quality. Namely, the current authorization tool comprises

[216] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[217] Interview with Sokhumi State University

[218] Interviews with the MoES and with Kids Office

[219] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[220] Interview with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

[221] Interview with the NCEQE

[222] Interview with Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

mainly closed answer options (yes/no) which do not provide a comprehensive overview of the situation in the preschool, its environment, and its pedagogies.[223]

Given the lack of monitoring tools and capacity, it is clear that limited to no monitoring of inclusive education for disadvantaged children takes place. Evidence of such practices were not found in the current study. One stakeholder simply confirmed that there are no tools to monitor preschool education for children with special needs.[224]

- **Attitudes towards monitoring**

While most stakeholders recognise the important of monitoring ECE quality, some interviewees noted that teachers themselves are rather hesitant to being monitored. An NGO stated that "*monitoring is a fearful process for preschools as staff are afraid of being fired. Some procedures and changes are put in place only because of this fear, not based on the belief that such changes will improve ECE quality*".[225] Staff are afraid of being fired, but also do not understand who is involved in the monitoring, using which tools, and what is observed. [226]

The monitoring activities are also sometimes perceived as being unrelated to the activity of the ECE institutions themselves. For example, one interviewee working in an ECE institution that is a case study in Khelvachauri municipality for this project perceived the monitoring activities conducted by the Preschool Agencies as irrelevant for the work of the ECE institutions themselves. They were not aware of what aspects of their work are being monitored and did not perceive the monitoring activities to be beneficial.

In this regard, the UNICEF study from 2018 also found that the diverse approaches to monitoring by diverse agencies are interpreted by practitioners as stressful and not helpful[227]. A stakeholder confirmed during the current study that, as a lack of coordination and clear frameworks for monitoring, "*we get a frightened caregiver who is told one by one to do so, by another to do the exact opposite, and generally does not understand what to do*".[228]

Monitoring might also be affected by conflict of interest. Namely, in most cases, preschools are not registered as independent organisations. They are registered under the preschool union. In this regard, monitoring by the union means that union management is monitoring itself, which may cause subjectivity in the interpretation of monitoring results.[229]

- **Specific challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic**

The observations from the case studies highlighted that some additional challenges have arose in the context of COVID-19 pandemic and its mitigation measures. For example, the interviewed municipal staff from Khelvachauri municipality noted that when the preschools moved to distance learning, the monitoring activities were discontinued as the implementation of such activities became more challenging and harder to enforce. The teachers from Marneuli also confirmed that Preschool Agency professionals visit them less because of the pandemic and the monitoring activities are now less frequent.

[223] Interview with Kids Office

[224] Interview with Mac Georgia

[225] Interview with Kids Office

[226] Interview with Ilia State University

[227] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

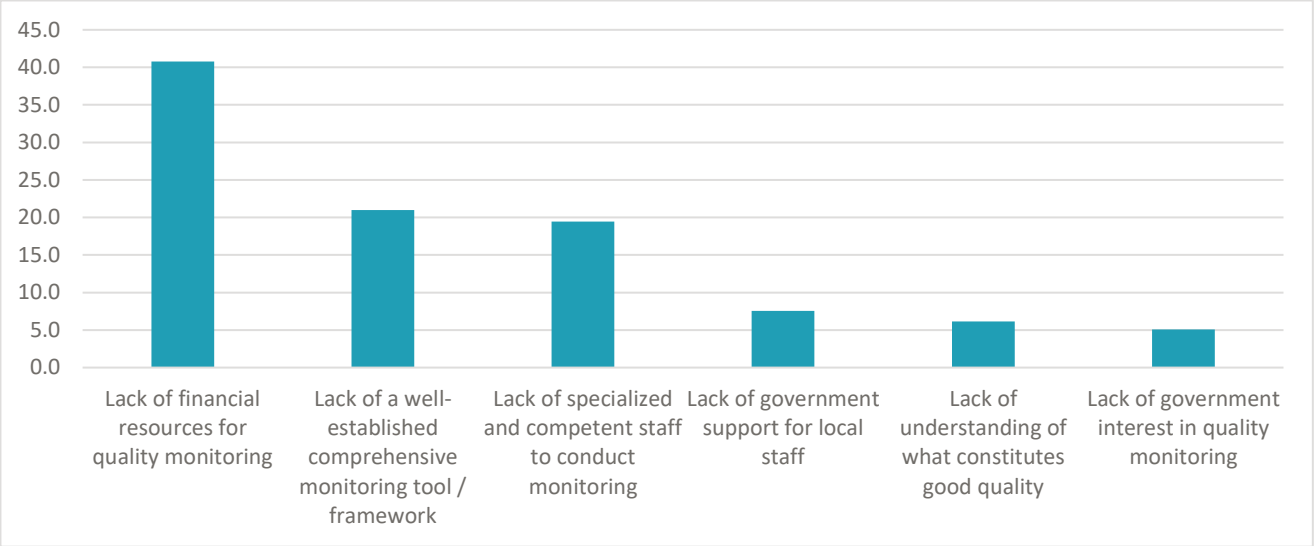
[228] Interview with Ilia State University

[229] Interview with NCEQE

- **Specific considerations for SRP monitoring**

When asked about specific issues regarding the monitoring of SRP quality, interviewees mainly stated the same challenges that affect general preschool monitoring[230]. Figure 24 demonstrates rather similar results as Figure 22, namely financial barriers, lack of a monitoring framework and lack of competent staff.

FIGURE 24. PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO MONITORING SRP QUALITY



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "In your opinion, what are the main barriers to better monitoring the quality of the school readiness program?"

3.3.3. Progress towards better ECE quality monitoring system and existing opportunities

Besides the ongoing challenges to monitoring, stakeholders also reported good practices, opportunities, and recommendations.

The Ministry of Education indicated that it is currently working on a **tool for quality monitoring**, which is being piloted in selected municipalities. To implement the tool, monitoring staff need to receive detailed information on the requirements in the field of ECE, and the Ministry obtains information from ECE staff (who are subsequently selected as monitors). The tool will include curriculum implementation, pedagogies and educational resources.[231]

Considering the core gaps of missing frameworks, limited capacity and lack of educational quality monitoring mentioned above, the tool may be able to account for the main gaps in the monitoring system. The monitoring tools for process quality (including the implemented curriculum), and the authorization process should also be aligned with the Preschool Standards on child-centered pedagogy across different areas (interactions, learning strategies, learning environment, assessment, involvement of families, inclusion). Both the monitoring staff and

[230] Interview with Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

[231] Interview with the MoES

the preschool staff should be aware of the standards and how they should be translated in practice, to ensure that the monitoring process achieves its purpose - to improve quality.

One stakeholder recommended that the **improvement of staff monitoring capacity** should focus not only on the monitoring staff, but also on preschool staff. They need to be prepared for monitoring activities and understand the process and importance. This may reduce their anxiety towards monitoring and make better use of the results.[232] In addition, for fulfilling its main quality improvement purpose, the monitoring process and results should feedback into the pre- and in-service training programs to indicate areas which need particular attention in preparing and ongoingly support the ECE staff,

While the case study observations generally indicate that the results of the monitoring are rarely used, there are some good practices that could be singled out, which shows that some improvement is taking place. More specifically, in some cases the evaluators **provide feedback for the teachers and give them recommendations** on how to improve specific situations or how to work with specific children. For example, interviewed teachers from Tianeti municipality mentioned that experts from Preschool Agency after observing their practices also give them some advice on how to improve. One of the teachers shared that the provided recommendations helped them significantly improve their work with some more difficult children.

Two stakeholders also indicated that **food and nutrition monitoring** has improved over the past years by expanding the National Food Agency's human resources and providing regular trainings.[233] Detailed questionnaires were developed in line with the preschool standards, which evaluate the food, menu, calories, and technical characteristics of the product.[234]

Various stakeholders are optimistic about the upcoming introduction of the **authorisation process**. It is assumed that this process will include allocation of more financial resources for monitoring and enhance knowledge about the quality of preschool education across the country.[235] The preschool manager from Tianeti municipality interviewed when conducting a case study in the framework of this project believed that authorisation could not only improve the monitoring, but the overall quality of ECE services.

Generally, stakeholders recommend **increasing data collection and exchange through monitoring activities** as it will enhance the visibility of the needs of municipalities and subsequently enhance the validity of policy decisions. There is a concern that the current high level of decentralisation in monitoring may not work effectively (as section 3.3.2. has demonstrated) as different actors are also not communicating sufficiently (see also section 3.4.2.). In this regard, the Ministry of Education may need to take a stronger role in developing a monitoring framework with concrete indicators for measurement (aligned with the Quality Standards) which are relevant for the improvement of ECE. By collecting uniform data across the country, combined with national – local exchange about local needs, the Ministry of Education can address individual municipalities with targeted interventions and solutions.[236]

3.4. Utilisation and coordination mechanisms for ECE

The European Quality Framework for ECE emphasizes that governance and coordination are crucial elements of quality, for example by connecting the ECE institution to other services and by developing a coherent policy

[232] Interview with Ilia State University

[233] Interview with the NFA

[234] Interview with KSA

[235] Interview with the MoES

[236] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

framework for ECE. In particular, the EQF prescribes that "**stakeholders have a clear and shared understanding of their role and responsibilities and know that they are expected to collaborate with partner organisations**".[237] Additionally, a coherent policy framework is needed that can proactively foster collaboration and long-term investment in local communities. [238]

3.4.1. Existing coordination mechanisms and responsibility sharing in ECE

The management and coordination of preschool education in Georgia is arranged by the 2016 Law on Early and Preschool Education and Care. The law divides responsibilities between national and local-level actors as follows[239]:

TABLE 10. RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE MAIN PRESCHOOL ACTORS

NATIONAL LEVEL	MUNICIPALITIES	PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS
The *government overall* is responsible to ensure universal availability of early and preschool education programmes, establish rules for the authorization of institutions and approve the state standards for early and preschool education. The *Ministry of Education* is responsible to prepare the Government of Georgia for approval of state standards for preschool education and caregiver-pedagogues, prepare curricula and resources, and develop a monitoring system in order to improve state standards for preschool education. Authorization of institutions in the transitional period is carried out by a legal entity of public law under the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia - National Center for Education Quality Development	Municipalities are responsible for the delivery of the preschool curricula and inclusive access to ECE. They should ensure involvement of parents, develop a local monitoring system for the implementation of the state standards, and establish a "strong and sustainable preschool system" with accompanying resources, retraining of pedagogues and caregivers, and overall ensuring implementation of ECE in accordance with national law and standards. According the changes in the law local administration are responsible in order to obtain the status of early and preschool education institutions should undergo initial electronic registration, submit the self-assessment and go through the authorization procedures. The local administration monitors compliance of institutions with the requirements for ECE institutions,	Preschool institutions established in accordance with the law are responsible for providing universal ECE in line with national standards, comply with standards for ECE institutions, develop strategies for inclusivity, hygiene and sanitation, and against violence. Institutions are also responsible to carry out regular internal monitoring and assessment.

[237] Council of the European Union (2019). *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems.* Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(01)&rid=4

[238] Council of the European Union (2019). *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems.* Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(01)&rid=4

[239] Legislative Herald of Georgia (2016*). Law of Georgia on Early and Preschool Education*. Available at: https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/download/3310237/0/en/pdf#:~:text=1.,every%20child%20of%20relevant%20age

the Government of Georgia, approves the temporary rule of passing the authorization by the institution, as well as the suspension and termination of the institution authorization	assesses the financial and accounting reports and monitors compliance with other requirements of the 2016 Law.	

The national government and Ministry of Education are the main entities responsible for setting the standards, while the **municipalities** carry the main responsibility for ensuring implementation of, and compliance with national standards. Municipalities have allocated budgets for the management and improvement of preschools. If needed, municipalities can apply for national funding, for example the Fund for Projects in the Regions, which is managed by a government commission. The municipality assesses the need for additional funds and designs a project proposal.[240]

Within the municipality, there are three ways in which public preschools can be managed: i) by a municipal preschool agency (in Tbilisi), ii) by preschool unions established by municipal authorities, or iii) by a department within municipal governments (such as departments for culture, education, sports and youth affairs).[241] **Preschool Agencies or unions** (under the municipality) manage the preschool and makes decisions regarding the management of the preschool budget, the recruitment and hiring of preschool staff and the educational programs.[242] Besides the Ministry of Education, various other ministries and national agencies have been given responsibilities under the 2016 Preschool law. For example:

TABLE 11. EXAMPLES OF OTHER ACTORS' RESPONSIBILITIES

AGENCY	RESPONSIBILITIES
The Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia	Prepare and submit to the Government of Georgia for approval technical regulations for the establishment of rules for observing sanitary and hygienic standards at institutions, and technical regulations for establishing catering and diet nutritional value standards at ECE institutions.
The National Food Agency	Examine food safety at institutions under the procedures provided for by the legislation of Georgia
The National Statistics Office of Georgia	Publish information received from municipalities: the number of institutions, the number of children involved in the educational programs of institutions, the number of caregiver-pedagogues and caregivers, other information related to early and preschool education

[240] Interview with the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia (MRDI)

[241] Livny, E. & Bakradze, T. (2018). *Policy Brief – Improving Quality and Equity in Preschool Education in Georgia: Key Challenges and Policy Recommendations.* Available at: https://tbilinomics.com/images/Consulting/Policy-Brief---Preschool-education.pdf

[242] Interview with NCEQE; National Assessment and Examination Centre (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

National Center for Education Quality Development	Shall provide gradual authorization of early and preschool education institutions
Teacher's Professional Development Center	Improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools through implementation of teachers' professional knowledge (*elaborated in chapter 3.5*).

However, the 2016 Law does not provide information about, or requirements for coordination between the different agencies and levels.

Currently, the 2016 Preschool Law does not provide for separate responsibilities or coordination mechanisms regarding the SRP. The Law provides for the main standards and requirements, and therefore it can be assumed that SRP coordination falls under the same coordination approaches as preschool education in general.

3.4.2. The main challenges regarding responsibility sharing in ECE

Following the conclusion that there are no national structures for coordination between preschool actors, several interviewed ECE actors and stakeholders note coordination as a particular weakness of the Georgian preschool system. Several distinct issues were brought forth by interview respondents and focus group participants with the main issues being the large number of actors involved in preschool education, unclear roles, overlaps, and gaps between these ECE actors, preschool autonomy and authorisation. The following sections present the main barriers to effective coordination.

- **Coordinating the large number of actors involved in preschool education coordination**

As presented above, the 2016 Law appoints responsibilities to a number of agencies and ministries outside the education system. While there are numerous actors at the national level, there is no mechanism to coordinate their input either at the national level or at the level of the municipalities.[243] This was confirmed by most interviewees and explained as example in the following way: "*involvement of too many actors does not reflect well on the sector of early education when there is a lack of coordination*"[244]

Different actors assign different priorities to preschool education and have different roles to play. This also means that perceptions on preschool education differs among these actors. Currently, there is no mechanism that unites all actors (e.g., in a coordination council) to develop a common information flow to the municipalities. Additionally, there is no mechanism or strategy to engage other actors such as the private sector.[245] Universities in this regard point out that there are insufficient mechanisms for them to play a role in ECE coordination or to discuss with preschools directly.[246]

Gaps in coordination and communication affect the implementation of responsibilities, but also information sharing among all actors. Interviewees note that information is usually left in the agencies or at the levels where they are collected. There is no platform or mechanism that facilitates the access to, and sharing of, information among all actors.[247] An interviewee described that *"it seems to me that coordination mechanisms don't exist. The*

[243] Interview with the MoES

[244] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[245] Interview with the MoES

[246] Interview with Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

[247] Interview with MDF

Ministry of education created new permanent staff in resource centres, but we don't have any crossing with them and don't know who they are. It should be competent people who must take responsibility for monitoring education quality."[248]

- **Unclear roles, overlaps, and gaps between ECE actors**.

In continuation of the first point, many interviewed stakeholders are uncertain themselves or perceive uncertainty in the sector in general about the demarcation of responsibilities between different actors. The responsibilities outlined in the Law are described in such terms that overlaps as well as gaps occur between actors involved in ECE.[249]

Interviewees note that actors are not aware about their responsibilities in relation to each other. [250] For example, a government-level respondent explained that they have limited coordination tools since all resources and management responsibilities lie at the municipal level. While the Ministry of Education formally holds responsibility for the development of the national standards, some interviewees perceive that it has no mechanisms to monitor compliance, but also no concrete communication structures to communicate with municipalities and preschools themselves directly on these matters.[251] Interviewees from the Ministry confirmed that communication between different actors is challenged by the lack of clear allocation of roles.[252] An interviewee explained: "*It is unclear who is in charge, what responsibilities they have and the participants that are currently in this system are not in coordination with each other and in reality, this only allows changes to be made point by point."*[253]

The 2018 UNICEF report found, on the other hand, that the preschool agencies in municipalities officially have access to the Standards but are not always familiar with them or possess necessary resources to monitor their implementation. The same applies to ECE staff in preschools.[254] A national-level actor did not perceive overlaps of responsibilities but noted that municipalities are not fully aware of their own responsibilities related to ECE quality enhancement and assume that the central government will provide trainings in this regard.[255] An interviewee suggested this coordination issue which results in lack of effective action was evident from the creation of the law itself: "*Different people are working for the creating the laws and they have very different visions, more importantly, they are not focused on the consensus. Developing laws requires the coordinator, who will be responsible organizing different actors' participation and based on teamworking making agreement."*[256]

- **Autonomy of preschools**

In most municipalities, preschools are not autonomous and are therefore dependent on their coordination with municipalities for procurement, staff development, reallocation of resources, etc. Municipalities announce tenders in the beginning of the year and then purchase a specific number of educational resources for the year (toys, books, etc). This means that the introduction of new resources (and therefore shifts in education content or topics) during the year are nearly impossible. As a result, preschool can only purchase cheap resources, affecting the quality of education.[257] Similarly, most preschools also do not have the autonomy to select and hire

[248] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

[249] Interview with the MoES

[250] Interview with Kivitas Georgia

[251] Interview with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

[252] Interview with the MoES

[253] Interview with Ilia State University

[254] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

[255] Interview with the MoES

[256] Interview with Sokhumi State University

[257] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

personnel, since this falls under the municipality's responsibility. Some exceptions exist in large cities such as Tbilisi and Batumi.[258]

Thus, an interesting conflict apparent in the interviewees was the complaint of lack of national coordination as well as appraisal of decentralisation. This was likely due to the lack of autonomy at the institutions and disappointment with the achievements and coordination of municipalities. An interviewee explained: *"It seems to me that coordination mechanisms don't exist (…) Of course we like the idea of decentralization, but to hope solely on municipalities is not quite safe."*[259] In these situations where interviewees felt that the municipalities did not manage their responsibilities well, many interviewees complained about the lack of coordination between the ministry and the municipalities. For example, by stating that coordination cannot take place until the minister thinks that it is her/his job to instruct the major.[260] Focus group participants also proclaimed that they would prefer more coordination between agencies, since there have been delays in the testing programs because of weak coordination whishing the Ministry of Education to be more involved – especially in training. Yet, interviewees from Ministry of Education explained that this is due to the decentralisation set-up and communication challenges between municipal and nation level. It was clear that the focus group participants who only had good experiences working with the municipalities had less wishes for the ministry to get involved.

Additionally, the situation is severed due to a lack of guidance and transparency on how different actors should cooperate. Preschool institutions are not always aware of decisions made at the municipal level, and interviewees note that they are not always aware of their reporting responsibilities.[261] Municipalities are sometimes perceived as taking decisions on preschool infrastructure or construction, without consulting preschools themselves. As a result, the physical environment does not correspond to the child-oriented methodology or implemented curriculum.[262] Overall, in focus groups and interviews ECE professionals do not show that they have the agency to implement changes or make their situations more positive through coordination themselves, although they would prefer more autonomy if they had guarantees from the national or municipal level on training and financial support. When focus group participants were asked about situations where they collaborated with other centres or local administration, it was very rare to hear stories of such coordination taking place at all with ECE professionals being involved.

- **Authorisation of preschool institutions**

Multiple stakeholders considered that the authorisation process of preschool institutions (i.e., legally authorising them to provide preschool education) contains gaps. An interviewee explained that when they have not been able to approve and initiate authorization process, this also shows what kind of communication it is: *"Meetings are held and everyone agrees on everything at that meeting but then it does not work out (someone needs finances, someone needs staff)*".[263]

Most importantly, some coordination and oversight procedures are lacking. Local stakeholders indicated that they have been unable to initiate authorisation procedures and consider that Georgia should establish an agency that will help all agencies coordinate responsibilities, involving more qualified staff.[264] Currently, stakeholders believe that the authorisation procedure as established by law, is not yet implemented and therefore it is unclear

[258] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

[259] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

[260] Interview with Civitas Georgia

[261] Interview with the MoES

[262] Interview with Ilia University

[263] Interview with Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency

[264] Interview with Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency

if preschools comply with the minimum standards. A reason for this, mentioned by a stakeholder, is that there is no planning for when and how such authorisation should be launched.[265] This is evident in a comment by the following interviewees: "*The recommendation of various international experts is that there should be some coordinating body. This field is so multisectoral, it is difficult that there is no single coordinating body*"[266]; *"There is communication between the central and local government, but I cannot say that coordinated processes are going on. There is some communication but no coordination."*[267]

3.4.3. Progress towards better responsibility sharing in ECE and existing opportunities

Besides the coordination and communication challenges listed above, some interviewees also pointed out that coordination has improved in recent years, for example due to increased activity by the Ministry of Education.[268][269] This section presents recommendations and good practices highlighted by interview and focus group respondents that can further improve coordination between ECE actors.

Firstly, interview respondents recommend enhancing the vision for ECE at the national level. This includes **strategic ECE documents for all actors** outlining their roles and responsibilities and outlining how coordination and communication should take place (i.e. a "concrete, written plan").[270] An interviewee explained: "*We need strategy documents for all ECE actors for ensure that coordination and interactions among different agencies going well*."[271] Non-governmental organisations indicated the possible value of a coordinating council, which would take responsibility for the implementation of the obligations established by law and the standard.[272] Some stakeholders consider that the Ministry of Education should take a stronger leading role to enhance coordination, especially when actors at municipalities lacked agency and resources, and have good experiences with ministries' involvement.[273] "*A good example of coordination is the resource centre. The early specialist of the resource centre contacted us with the Ministry of Education and Science, and we were lucky to be active and fully involved in these processes."*

Given that many of the challenges listed above arose from the lack of concrete delineation of responsibilities and allocation of tasks and coordination tools, the introduction of coordination strategies outlining how the legal attribution of responsibilities functions in practice, can significantly improve coordination. One recommendation would be to distribute the leadership more evenly. Focus groups participants stated that *"I would like to see more smooth and clear redistribution of duties and responsibilities, as well as the strengthening of coordinated communication."*

Additionally, plans to **enhance data collection and information sharing** across ECE actors are already foreseen in the near future, through the development of a platform, which will then be introduced in EMIS.[274] This should be welcomed by ECE professionals, since interviewees and focus group participants highlighted the need and wish for more information sharing between institutions and actors: "*The level of coordination is quite low among preschool institutions. There is a challenge in information sharing. Information is usually left in the agencies/unions or at*

[265] Interview with the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia

[266] Interview with the Georgian Portage Association.

[267] Interview with World Vision

[268] Interview with Samtkhe-Javakheti State University

[269] Interview with the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia

[270] Interviews with Samtkhe-Javakheti State University and the Teacher Professional Development Center

[271] Interview with Samtkhe-Javakheti State University

[272] Interview with the Teacher Professional Development Center

[273] Interview with World Vision

[274] Interview with MDF

the levels they are gained. A platform should be developed which will then be introduced in EMIS, which will include absolutely all the information about the child. This coordination mechanism is yet to be set up rather than to be implemented."[275] Further proved by: "I think coordination is not enough, different actors perform different tasks, but eventually their unification does not seem to happen. For example, even today many NGOs work with preschools, but have **little information about each other's activities**."[276] Also in the focus groups, participants had very little understanding and never heard or collaborated with other actors in ECE, although being very eager to learn from best practice and get support.

Thus, at the **municipal level**, some stakeholders see the need to develop units responsible for infrastructural works and liaises with the municipality in their execution to support foster coordination at all levels. This could be staff in existing agencies and unions, who are qualified in civil engineering, qualified, and trained in this area, and who will be able to set priorities, do the respective budget planning, control annual planning work, or a separate coordination unit.[277] Interviewees explained that "*it can be said that coordination needs to be strengthened between all parties - between ministries, between ministries and municipalities, the experience of non-governmental organizations should be used more*"[278]; "*I think we need an agency that will help all agencies coordinate responsibilities*";[279] *and "The Ministry of Education cooperates with the municipalities, however, it would be good to have reports from the municipalities and it would also be good to define a coordination unit".*[280]

However, various examples were provided of successful coordination and cooperation at the local level. Universities described their cooperation with their local municipality in terms of trainings and courses, open workshops, and lectures. One university has a memorandum of understanding with preschools allowing preschool teacher students to visit in preschools for practical training[281]. Similarly, the 2018 UNICEF study found that preschools actively cooperate with local health service centres and in some cases with the food agency, sport complexes, museums, theatres, libraries, cultural centres (artists) and the Club of Young Scientists.[282] Focus group participants applauded positive work by unions when they were able to provide resources and training material. An interviewee explained how this positive work at municipal level with agencies or unions can be done: "*define who should do it, how to do it. However, these rules were adopted in such a way that those who adopted it have no idea what this document is. There is no training at all, I think more is needed than training*.[283]

Additionally, exchange between municipalities could be very influential in improving coordination effectiveness. There are issues between municipalities – there are some things that are problematic in some municipalities that are not so important in others. It is important to ensure that the institutions can spot these issues and address them, there must be a systematic approach for spotting these issues, to better distribute the responsibilities so that NGOs do not feel overburdened with "saving the day". There needs to be more focus on monitoring and data management and there is a need for systematic approach to address this. At the moment, the system is not "talking" to each other. In some cases, things are working, but in others they are not, and the same mistakes are repeated. Consequently, the Ministry should be responsible for collecting and analysing the data to improve the quality of data.

[275] Interview with MDF

[276] Interview with Tbilisi State University

[277] Interview with ESIDA

[278] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[279] Interview with Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency

[280] Interview with the Teacher Professional Development Centre

[281] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

[282] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

[283] Interview with Ilia State University

Interviewees also mentioned specific recommendations regarding the **SRP coordination**. For this programme, an additional level of coordination applies, namely, between preschools and schools. While this coordination does not take place systematically, several cases were noted where municipality workers facilitate this exchange.[284] Vice versa, in case of school based SRPs, there is a need of collaboration between the school and the municipal preschool agency. [285] An interviewee stated: *"We are open to all agencies, organizations or ministry who want to cooperate with us. Of course, the more coordination there is, the better the result will be."*[286]

3.5. Professional development in ECE

3.5.1. Current Status of ECE professional development

3.5.1.1 Requirements for ECE professionals and their qualifications

Georgia approved the mandatory Professional Standards of Caregiver-Pedagogue in 2017. The standards foresee that ECE personnel should have a higher education degree or professional education degree[287] and 4 years of working practice in a preschool[288]. However, these Standards set the requirements only for the qualifications of caregiver-educators and music caregivers-educators and are not concerned with the qualifications of other ECE staff. Information from three municipalities – Kutaisi, Badgati and Tsageri – shows that there are some qualification requirements for other educational staff as well. In Tbilisi, for example, educators ECE educators should have pedagogical background or related qualification[289]. However, these requirements are rarely enforced. For example, some of the teachers from Tianeti municipality who participated in the focus group interview could not comment on the requirements because they were not acquainted with them. The table below shows the number of ECE professionals who meet the requirements.

TABLE 12. ECE PROFESSIONALS MEETING THE SET REQUIREMENTS

Regions	Total number of professionals	Number of professionals who meet the requirements (High education + 4 years working experience)
Georgia	16330	5238
Tbilisi	5139	1413
Mtskheta –Mtianeti	495	171
Shida Kartli	1135	324
Kvemo Kartli	1084	320
Kakheti	1410	530

[284] Interview with Kids Office

[285] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[286] Interview with the NFA

[287] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[288] Interview with Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University

[289] Interview with Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency

Samtskhe-Javakheti	576	225
Racha-lechkhumi/qvemo svaneti	221	63
Samegrelo/zemo svaneti	1332	403
Imereti	2779	942
Guria	555	202
Adjara	1504	645

From information available, it seems that before 2017 no clear requirements existed. Consequently, it is unclear what criteria were used for the selection of ECE professionals. It is possible that a lot of current ECE teachers were accepted to the positions because of their connections or personal preferences of those choosing the staff[290]. Moreover, while most of the positions require higher education degree, only some of them require a higher education degree in a subject relevant to the position and in a lot of cases ECE professionals do not have to have education background in ECE[291]. These requirements, especially considering that they are rarely enforced, are not seen as in line with the international standards[292].

As there is no enforced legislation that clearly sets the requirements for the qualifications of the ECE professionals or the existing legislation is not enforced, the background of ECE professionals varies greatly[293]. One of the interviewees questioned for this study noted that according to their belief around 80-85% of all teachers meet the set-out requirements[294]. However, the available data shows that it may not always be a case. Available survey on the qualifications of the ECE professionals showed that from 57 surveyed municipalities 13 of them have no single caregiver with a bachelor's degree in a relevant field[295]. On the other hand, one interviewee noted that in Rustavi out of 182 ECE educators in 22 preschools only 3 do not have higher education degree, but even those without the higher education degree have training in ECE[296]. In Kutaisi and Imereti regions, for example, most of the teachers are graduates of Akaki Tsereteli State University or Gogebashvili professional college[297]. The wide variation in qualifications of ECE professionals can also be seen from the figure below, which shows the share of ECE professionals with different education levels who participated in the survey conducted for this study.

[290] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

[291] Interview with KSA

[292] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

[293] Interviews with Sokhumi State University, the Teacher Professional Development Center, and Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

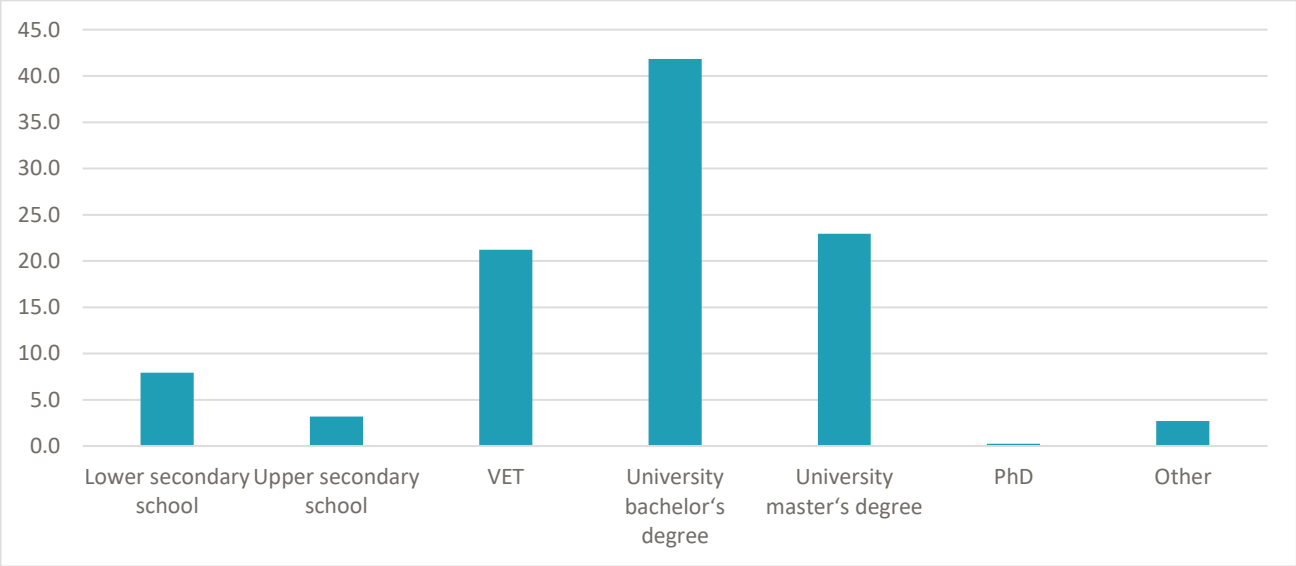
[294] Interview with Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency

[295] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

[296] Interview with the National Association for Preschool Education

[297] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

FIGURE 25. QUALIFICATIONS OF SURVEYED ECE PROFESSIONALS, IN %



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "What is the highest level of education that you achieved?"

The results of the survey show a slightly more positive picture than the statistics on how many ECE professionals meet the set-out requirements (Table 12). This may be the result of different biases that may have appeared during the data collection through the survey and could not be controlled for. For example, the ECE professionals who were motivated to participate in the survey may be more motivated to contribute to the improvement of ECE sector and, consequently, have more qualifications. The official statistics on the qualifications of the ECE professionals is scarce, making it difficult to draw any specific conclusions or to validate these observations.

It is also important to note that even if the ECE professionals have higher education degree, it does not mean they have knowledge in ECE as their degree may be not related to the field. The ECE professionals may have degrees in philosophy, social sciences, banking, law, chemistry, physics or even medicine[298]. Available data from municipalities which cover 1 241 preschools shows that these preschools in total had 2 434 qualified ECE professionals, 46% of whom had professional/vocational education and 54% of whom had a bachelor's degree related to ECE[299]. Moreover, one interviewee shared that 2018 data indicate that around 30% of ECE educators have higher education (at least bachelor's degree) in ECE related field and around 26% have vocational or professional training in ECE. However, this leaves approximately 44% of educators with no relevant qualification[300]. Importantly, those with a higher education degree in ECE likely obtained this during the Soviet period, meaning that their pedagogies are highly outdated.

The data collected through the interviews conducted for this study also point to a great variety in qualifications of ECE professionals. For example, one interviewee noted that some professionals may have a bachelor's degree in primary education[301], others may have taken vocational training courses in ECE, while some caregivers and caregiver assistance have no education or training in ECE[302].

[298] Interviews with KSA, Akaki Tsereteli State University, and the MoES

[299] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[300] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[301] Interview with Samtkhe-Javakheti State University

[302] Interview with MDF

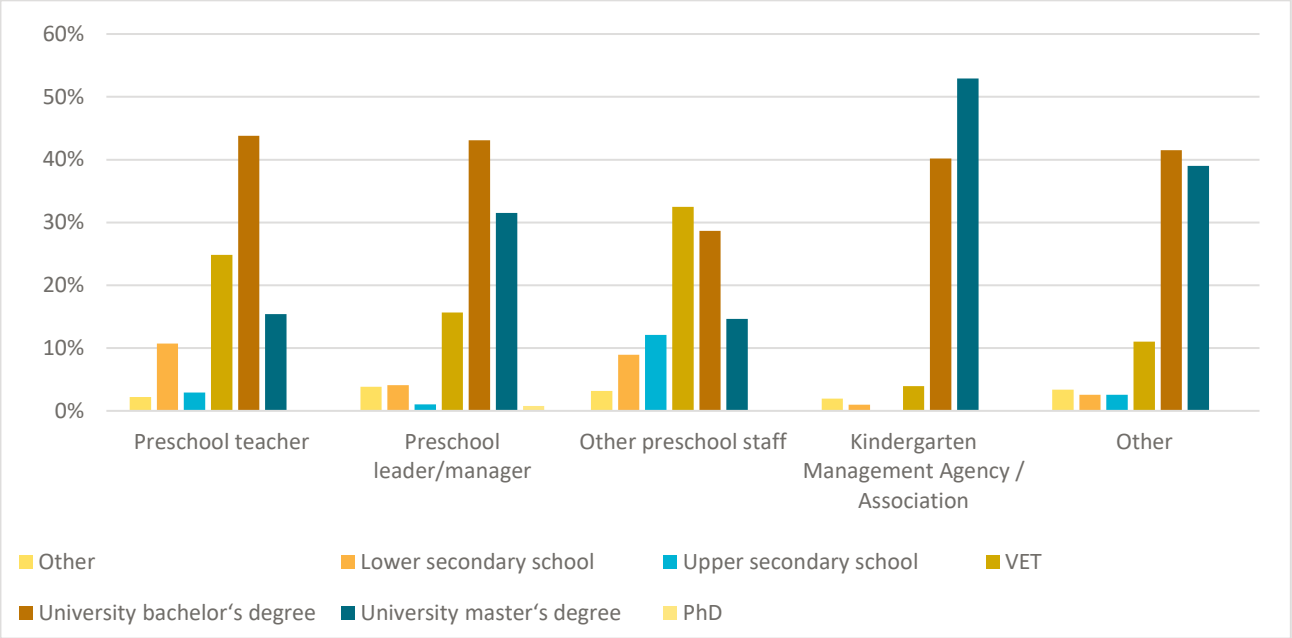
The requirements exist not only for the ECE teachers but also for other ECE professionals. However, the requirements for other professionals are defined by each municipality and may differ greatly between them. In Tbilisi, for example, management personnel in ECE institutions should have a higher education degree, but it is not specified in what field and no specific experience in required[303].Unfortunately, there is a lack of publicly available data on a share of personnel in ECE institutions that meet those requirements[304]. The requirements are usually not very clear and not very transparent[305]. This results in varying qualifications of not only ECE teachers but also other staff. It is confirmed by the results of the survey conducted for this study. As it can be seen in Figure 26, the highest qualification of different professionals in ECE field varies quite a lot. While around 59% of preschool teachers have bachelor's or master's degree, the qualifications of preschool managers tend to be higher, with around 75% of them having bachelor's or master's degree, and the qualifications of other preschool staff tend to be lower with around 43% of them having higher education degree.

[303] Interview with Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency

[304] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[305] Interview with Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University

FIGURE 26. QUALIFICATIONS OF DIFFERENT SURVEYED ECE PROFESSIONALS, IN %



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "What is the highest level of education that you achieved?" The answers divided according to the answers to the questions "What is your position?"

As already discussed, when presenting the qualifications of the ECE teachers, it is important to keep in mind that even if the different professionals working in ECE have higher education degree, it does not necessarily mean that they have a background in early childhood education and care. Instead, even though they are working in the sector, the professionals may have educational background in different fields.

Considering the available qualifications of caregivers' assistants, the situation is rather alarming. This can also be confirmed by the survey data. As seen in Figure 26, other preschool staff, which includes caregivers' assistant mainly have vocational training or bachelor's degree and only some of them (14.6%) have masters' degrees. The **Error! Reference source not found.** also shows that only 80% of other preschool staff, including the assistants, had initial training fully on ECE. According to the existing regulations, caregivers' assistants are not required to have higher education degree and it is believed that most of them do not have it[306]. For example, the preschool education quality study by National Assessment and Examination Center found that in 487 preschools in 30 municipalities there was no single caregiver assistant who had a bachelor's degree or has received special education in the relevant field[307]. However, there are also some regions where the situation is better. For example, in Rustavi 60% of non-teacher personnel in ECE have higher education degree and the rest have some training in the ECE field[308].

While the caregivers and caregivers' assistants rarely have educational background in a relevant field, it is more common that specialised staff in a preschool (psychologists, speech therapists, methodologists, and others) will have a bachelor's degree in the field of ECE. However, this may also vary depending on the region in question. The results from a survey in 64 municipalities show that in around a quarter (16) municipalities, from 80% to 100% of specialised teachers had bachelor's degree in the field connected to their work, in 18 municipalities,

[306] Interview with Mac Georgia

[307] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[308] Interview with the National Association for Preschool Education

mostly those covering mountainous regions and rural settlements, none of the specialised employees had a bachelor's degree in the related field[309].

It is also important to keep in mind that qualifications of ECE professionals may depend on different factors and on what institutions are discussed. For example, qualifications of ECE professionals will often depend on a specific region. More urban regions are likely to have more qualified teachers than rural and mountainous regions[310]. Moreover, qualifications of ECE personnel in public and private institutions often differ. As there are requirements for ECE professionals in public preschools to have 4 years working practice, at least some of them do. In private preschools, on the other hand, these requirements are often disregarded[311]. One interviewee noted that in public preschools there are more mixed age groups, so the qualification of all teachers working with different age groups is more or less the same.

In private preschools, on the other hand, children are more often put into groups by age, and it is more likely that the teachers working with older children have educational background in ECE, while those working with younger children may not have it[312]. In addition, the staff from private preschools often have more qualifications on paper but lack experience working with children while staff in public preschools usually have lower qualifications on paper but have significantly more practice[313]. This is also related to the tendency of private preschools to hire younger ECE professionals[314]. Another interviewee mentioned that in general professionals working in public institutions are more qualified than those working in private institutions, but due to significantly more overcrowded groups in public preschools the advantage of having more qualified professionals is not visible and families still tend to be happier with private preschools[315]. The private preschools are also more oriented towards the needs and requests from parents[316].

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that even if the ECE professionals have educational background in ECE or have received some relevant training, they may still lack needed competences because they have received their training a while ago. This means that even those professionals having educational background in ECE may not have knowledge on the most recent developments in the field[317]. It is also important to note that even if ECE professionals have a degree in ECE, it does not mean that they will have relevant knowledge. For example, an analysis of the Tbilisi preschools revealed that older educators tend to have a diploma in "Preschool Pedagogy", which likely did not cover current approaches in ECE[318]. A lot of professionals also have acquired ECE specific knowledge during the Soviet times, which means that their knowledge may be even contradictory to what is now expected from them. At the same time, such professionals often believe that the outdated knowledge they have is sufficient and that they do not need additional training to improve their knowledge[319]. Moreover, according to the Georgian Statistics Agency (Geostat), the number of preschool educators has grown over the past years from 12 364 in the year 2017-2018 to 16 234 in 2020-2021.[320] However, while this may address

[309] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[310] Interview with Ilia State University

[311] Interviews with Ilia State University, and Mac Georgia

[312] Interview with Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

[313] Interview with Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

[314] Interview with Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

[315] Interview with Sokhumi State University

[316] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

[317] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[318] Interview with KSA

[319] Interview with Ilia State University

[320] AGIC (2022). *Early Preschool Education research in Georgia.* Available at: https://agic.ge/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/skolamdeli-ganathlebis-kvleva.pdf

the general shortage of ECE professionals, it is not necessarily a beneficial development as the qualifications of these professionals are unknown.

3.5.1.2 Initial teacher training

The qualifications of ECE teachers and other staff in ECE institutions vary a lot. While this is related to the lack of clear requirements for ECE professionals, it may also be related to the availability of training in ECE field[321]. Indeed, while there are some positive developments underway and it is hoped that these developments will bring significant positive changes[322], it seems that currently the opportunities of initial training in ECE field are scarce.

Nine universities are at the moment developing the bachelor's programmes in ECE. However, there are no programmes that are currently available focusing specifically on ECE[323]. A representative of one university in Georgia interviewed for this study noted that until 2012, their university had a bachelor's programme for the preschool teachers, but it was later discontinued[324]. Batumi University had a preschool education programme until 2004[325]. While there are no bachelor's programmes focusing on early childhood education and care, there are some vocational education programmes focusing on ECE that individuals wishing to work in ECE can attend[326]. This results in the situation where a lot of ECE teachers either have a higher education in other field, such as primary education, or have vocational training[327]. There are also some alternative ways for ECE professionals to receive the initial training. For example, Teacher Professional Development Centres have a 66-hours training module that can introduce an individual wishing to work in ECE to the basics of ECE[328]. Additional alternative initial training opportunities include informal training, self-development, assistance from peers and colleagues[329].

3.5.1.3 Available continuous professional development for ECE professionals

Continuous professional development for ECE personnel is crucial, especially for those who received their initial training according to outdated programmes or received little initial training in general. It seems that continuous professional development is very beneficial for ECE professionals and is perceived rather positively[330]. However, continuous professional development training is scarce in Georgia and is lacking a systematic approach, as well as a quality assurance feedback mechanism. Available studies show that most of the staff members in ECE institutions in Georgia have not received any continuous professional development training in the last 10 years[331].

The available studies show that only 29% of the municipalities provide trainings for managers and teaching staff in ECE institutions. In these institutions where continuous professional development is available, individuals receive 18 hours of trainings per year. However, it is unclear what the quality of the available training courses is, especially considering that municipal methodologists themselves who are responsible for

[321] Interview with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

[322] Interview with the MoES

[323] Interview with MDF

[324] Interview with Sokhumi State University

[325] Interview with Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

[326] Interview with Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

[327] Interview with Samtkhe-Javakheti State University

[328] Interview with the MoES

[329] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[330] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

[331] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). *Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

these training courses did not have any continuous professional development opportunities after receiving their training decades ago[332]. Still, some trainings are available and there are several training providers.

Several Teacher Professional Development Centres exist across the country. They organise different trainings and activities to provide continuous professional development opportunities for ECE professionals. For example, in 2020, six new modules focusing on improvement of the competences of ECE professionals were developed by Teacher Professional Development Centre in Adjara. The programme lasts one year. By the end of 2021, 180 ECE professionals were trained according to this programme. This programme is funded by the Division of Education of Adjara and the professional do not have to pay for these trainings[333].

Some universities also have continuous professional development opportunities. For example, Batumi University has a continuous education centre, which provides training for in-service teachers. The Centre also offers caregiver-educator module of 66 hours that can be taken by individuals wishing to work in ECE but have no initial training[334]. Moreover, Modus College, created with the support of Rustavi preschool agency, offers several long-term and short-term courses for ECE professionals and those interested in the field. The available short-term courses, which can be seen as opportunities for continuous professional development, include modules on administrative issues, organizational arrangement, professional ethics, ECE methodology, and issues related to violence against children[335].

There are also some other training and development opportunities that may not fall under the framework of formal training. For example, continuous professional development opportunities in the preschools themselves through practices such as mentoring. For example, in some preschools the personnel gather during the hours when there are no children in the preschool and discuss their professional issues. However, in a lot of preschools there are no child-free times, so such discussions cannot be organised[336]. Moreover, quality standards for ECE teachers exist and there are specific guidebooks that teachers can read when they have time if they cannot or do not want to attend formal trainings[337].

It is also important to consider the availability of continuous professional development for other ECE personnel, not only the teachers and their assistants. Some opportunities for other ECE personnel exist, for example, the Teacher Professional Development Centres have additional training module for administrative staff in ECE institutions[338]. Unfortunately, it seems that currently available continuous professional development courses focus primarily on the needs of teachers. The managers of preschool complained that the training available for them focuses only on children's upbringing, even though they would benefit more from the training that includes more information on managerial issues[339].

In general, according to the data collected, there is a lot of interest in professional development opportunities in the ECE field[340]. However, the demand is not always met, and the available training offer does not satisfy the

[332] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

[333] Interview with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

[334] Interview with Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

[335] Interview with the National Association for Preschool Education

[336] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

[337] Interview with Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University

[338] Interview with the MoES

[339] World Vision Georgia (2018). *Strategy final evaluation FY2014-2018 Early Childhood Development (ECD).*

[340] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

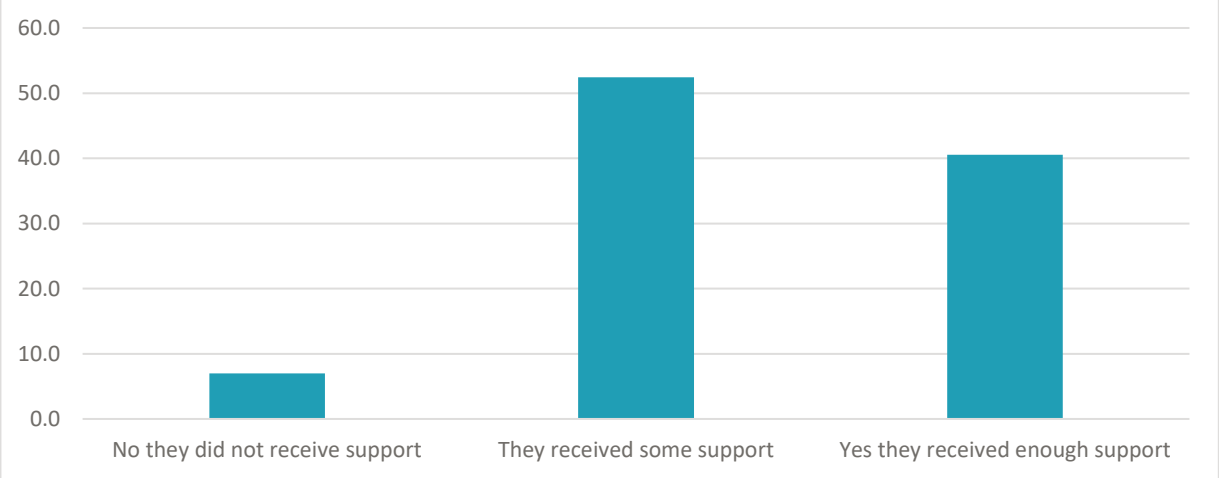
needs of ECE professionals or their interests. The available training offer seem to be of rather questionable quality and do not cover a lot of topics that are very important for different ECE personnel.

3.5.1.4 ECE teacher training on the SRP

The overview of the qualifications of the ECE professionals and available initial and in-service training shows that ECE teachers may often lack qualifications needed for their work and may have little opportunities to improve their qualifications and competences due to scarce in-service training. However, it is also important to consider how the available training prepares ECE professionals for implementing the SRP specifically. According to the data collected, similarly as with initial and in-service training in general, training on SRP lacks systemic approach and is rather fragmented[341]. While in some cases ECE professionals seem to be qualified to introduce the SRP and to ensure that the children are ready for school[342], the available data indicates that available training may rarely highlight the specificities of the SRP and fail in helping ECE teachers prepare for implementing this programme.

The results of the survey conducted for this study shows that only 40.6% of respondents considered the teacher training and available support efficient to ensure that teachers can implement the SRP (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). Some of the teachers interviewed for the current study shared that they do not feel ready to implement the school readiness programme, while a few were confident of their ability to implement it. Most of the teachers believed that even though they have some skills and knowledge necessary for SRP, they would benefit from additional trainings.

FIGURE 27. PERCEIVED AVAILABILITY OF TRAINING AND SUPPORT NEEDED FOR SRP



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "Have preschool teachers in your municipality received training or support materials for the implementation of the SRP?"

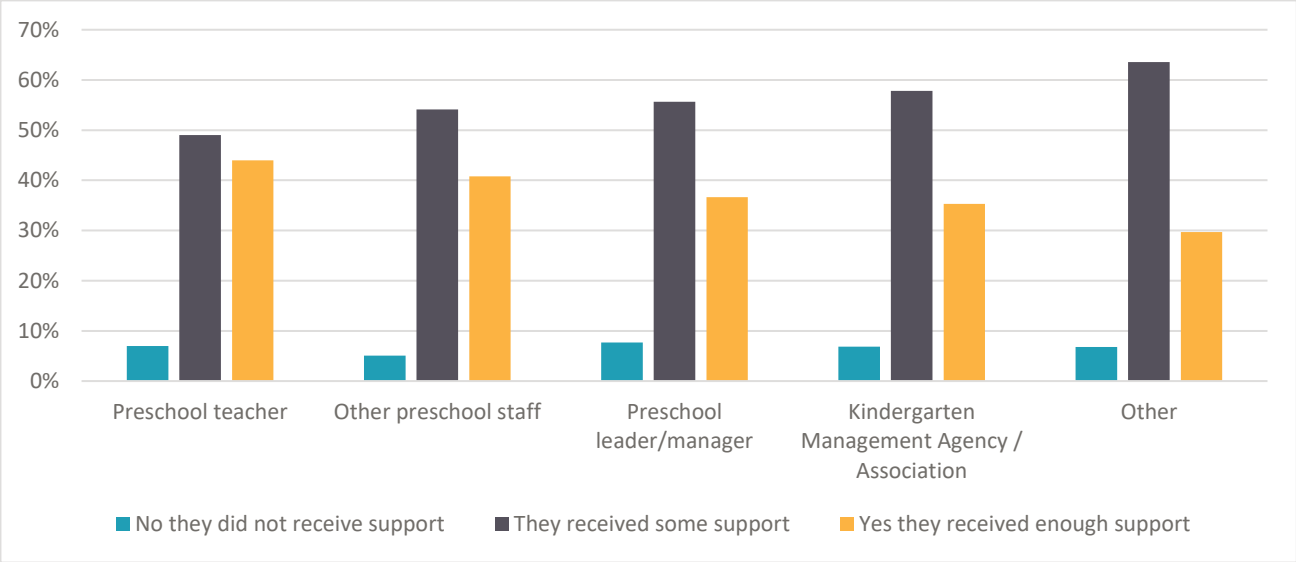
It is also important to consider how the availability of support is perceived by different groups of stakeholders. The result of the conducted survey shows that while preschool teachers and other preschool staff, which usually includes assistants of teachers and other support staff, believe that teachers receive sufficient training and support to implement school readiness programme (44% and 41% respectively), other stakeholders are less likely to think that teachers receive the sufficient amount of support. For example, only 35% of representatives of Preschool Associations and Agencies believed that preschool teachers receive enough support to implement the school readiness programme. This may indicate that while the teachers themselves are more optimistic

[341] Interview with the MoES

[342] Interview with the National Association for Preschool Education

about their readiness to implement the programme, they are either too optimistic or are not able to ensure that the quality of their activities is high because other stakeholders in the education system are less likely to believe that teachers had enough training and support to be able to implement school readiness programme.

FIGURE 28. STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTION OF THE AVAILABILITY OF TEACHER TRAININGS ON SRP



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "Have preschool teachers in your municipality received training or support materials for the implementation of the SRP?" The answers divided according to the answers to the questions "What is your position?"

Firstly, the lack of appropriate training and support for teachers considering SRP may be a result of the lack of understanding that ECE teachers may need different knowledge or skills to implement SRP compared to working with younger children in the preschool. SRP is often understood in one of the simplest ways – introducing school subjects, such as math and literacy, to children in a preschool as it is in schools, not in an integrated way. In this context, little attention is paid specifically to SRP during the training for ECE teachers, especially initial teacher training[343]. The training of teachers for SRP usually does not differ from the training of ECE teachers working with younger children[344]. However, it is important to consider both initial and in-service training separately.

The results of the survey conducted for this study shows that only 39.4% of respondents believed that initial teacher training programmes prepare teachers for the implementation of SRP (see Figure 29). This may be a result of the general lack of appropriate initial training for ECE professionals. Moreover, it is important to consider that most of the teachers received their initial training decades ago when SRP was not yet developed. However, according to the data collected, the situation is slowly improving, and universities are starting to include some specific modules and courses on SRP[345], or include knowledge on SRP in existing modules and courses in a horizontal way[346].

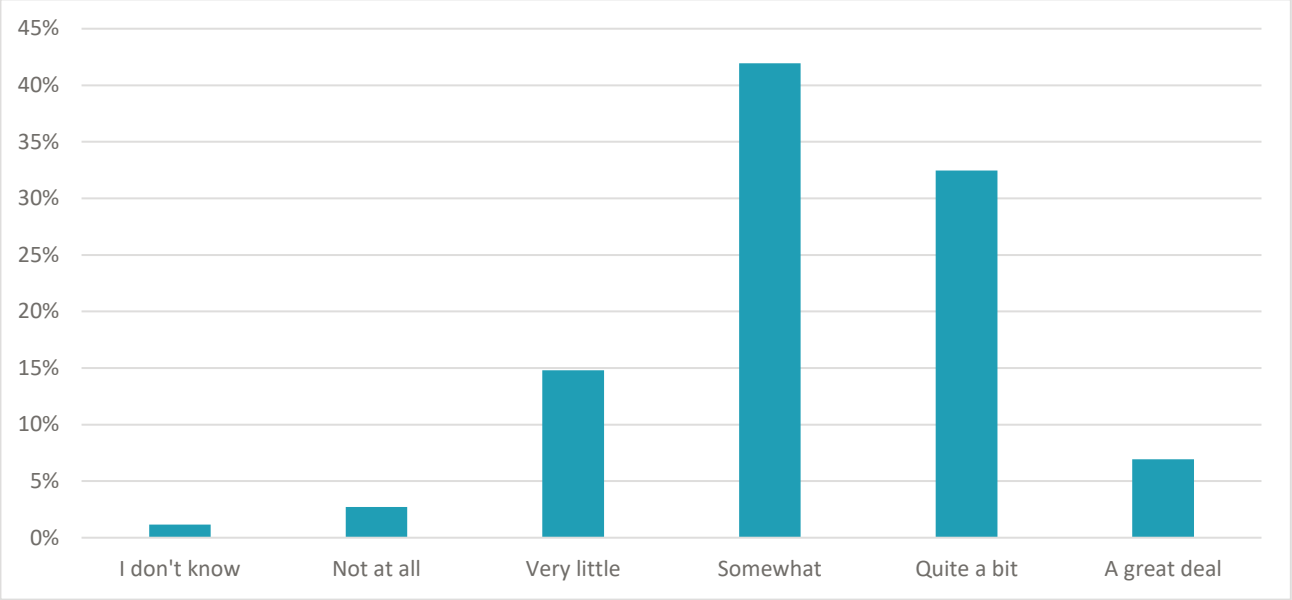
[343] Interviews with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara, Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University, Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency, and Akaki Tsereteli State University

[344] Interview with the MoES

[345] Interviews with Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University, Akaki Tsereteli State University, and the Teacher Professional Development Center

[346] Interviews with Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University, and Samtkhe-Javakheti State University

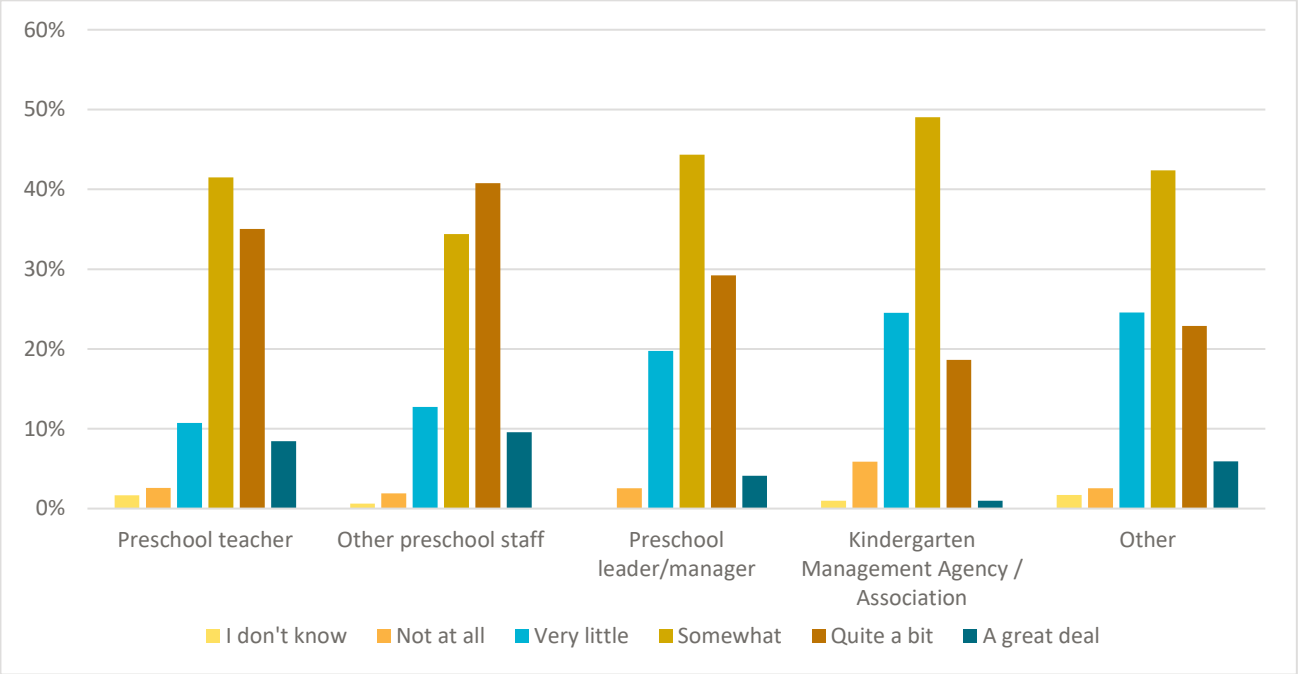
FIGURE 29. COVERAGE OF SRP IN INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "In your opinion, do the current initial teacher training programmes prepare teachers with necessary competences to implement the SRP?"

The survey results show that similarly as with the perception on the available support for teachers to implement school readiness programme, the perception of how well initial teacher training covers SRP is more positive among the ECE teachers than among other stakeholders working with preschool education. More specifically, as seen in **Error! Reference source not found.**, while 43% of preschool teachers and 51% of other preschool staff believed that current initial training programmes ensure that ECE teachers have necessary competences to implement SRP, only 33% of preschool managers and 20% of representatives of Preschool Associations and Agencies had the same opinion. This can again mean that the teachers are too optimistic or that they implement the school readiness programme in low quality for other reasons, not the lack of training, and because of that, other stakeholders believe that the training available is not sufficient.

FIGURE 30. STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTION ON THE COVERAGE OF SRP IN INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "In your opinion, do the current initial teacher training programmes prepare teachers with necessary competences to implement the SRP?" The answers divided according to the answers to the questions "What is your position?"

In addition to initial teacher training, it is important to consider how SRP is presented in the continuous professional development offer. Continuous professional development on SRP is seen as crucial for the already working teachers, even if they have some knowledge in SRP. As the SRP and a general understanding of ECE field may be constantly changing, continuous professional development programs can ensure that teachers are acquainted with the most recent developments in the field[347]. Several trainings have been conducted so far to introduce SRP to ECE teachers and trainers of ECE teachers. For example, in summer 2015, UNICEF prepared a 5-day (40 hours) training for university representatives and other training providers specifically on SRP. The training also concluded with some testing of knowledge, and not all participants received the training certificate as they did not pass the test. This shows that the training was planned in a way to ensure that the participants get the needed knowledge out of it. After the training, the trainers should have worked with teachers and ECE professionals in different municipalities to ensure that the knowledge is disseminated further. However, there is no available evidence that it has happened, meaning that it is likely that further dissemination of this knowledge did not occur or was rather superficial[348]. It is also possible that due to the lack of practical activities during the training, the trainers did not have enough practical skills to transfer it to others[349]. There were also some efforts by municipalities and various organisations to provide support for ECE staff in the implementation of SRP through different trainings and resources. It seems that, at least in some cases, these efforts were effective, and teachers gained knowledge to implement the SRP. [350]

Besides initial and in-service training, it is important to consider other ways in which teachers may gain the knowledge needed to implement the SRP. For example, the curriculum of the programme and various

[347] Interview with the National Association for Preschool Education

[348] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[349] Interview with Samtkhe-Javakheti State University

[350] Interview with Ilia State University

methodological resources are available to teachers to get acquainted with on their own[351]. There is also an activity book that should, at least in theory, support the ECE professionals in implementing the SRP and coming up with ideas for the relevant activities[352].

It is evident that the SRP and the competences educators need to implement it are, to some extent, covered by existing initial and in-service teacher training. However, it is unclear if the available training offer is sufficient to ensure that teachers can effectively implement the SRP in the way that it was conceived. As with initial and in-service teacher training in general, the inclusion of SRP in the teacher training programs seems to be slightly fragmented, available trainings are scarce and their effectiveness and usefulness are not properly monitored. Still, some improvements and positive developments are observed.

3.5.2. The main challenges considering professional development of ECE professionals

As it can already be seen from the description of the set requirements for the ECE staff, their qualifications, and the training available to them, there are a lot of serious challenges considering the professional development of ECE professionals. Most importantly, the available initial and in-service teacher training is scarce[353]. Also, the availability of trainings is not equal across the regions[354]. Moreover, there are more challenges related to the legislative framework regulating the requirements for ECE professionals, the existing training, and the access to available training. These challenges hinder the opportunities of ECE professionals to develop their competences and ensure that they are ready to provide high quality ECE.

The data reveals that there is no systematic approach to professional development in ECE[355]. While some requirements exist, they are rarely enforced and tend to vary between the municipalities[356]. Because as institutions public preschools are also related to local politics, ECE professionals often may be employed not because of their specific competences but because of political reasons[357]. For example, while there is a requirement for ECE teachers and teachers' assistants to have higher education degree, only a small share of them actually meet this requirement[358]. Moreover, there are no clear regulations what type of continuous professional development training should be undertaken by professionals and how much time and how often they should undertake trainings[359]. The teachers who participated in the focus groups in the preparation of the case study analysis in Tbilisi also complained that while trainings are organised for the teachers in the preschools that are participating in the piloting of different projects, other preschools and teachers are often left behind and receive no training. This negatively affects the quality of ECE services because, as mentioned above, a lot of ECE professionals got their education at least a decade ago and, if they did not have conditions or motivation to receive in-service training, they likely are not aware of the most recent developments in ECE field[360].

[351] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

[352] Interview with the Teacher Professional Development Center

[353] Interview with Mac Georgia

[354] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[355] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[356] Interviews with UNICEF Georgia, Samtkhe-Javakheti State University, Sokhumi State University, Mac Georgia, KSA, and the Teacher Professional Development Center

[357] Interview with Ilia State University

[358] Interview with Ilia State University

[359] Interviews with the Teacher Professional Development Center, Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency, and Ilia State University

[360] Interview with the MoES

There is also little focus on monitoring the quality of the training offer and the competences and abilities of educators providing the trainings tend to be questionable[361]. It is also important to note that while there is a lack of systematic approach to professional development of ECE teachers on national or municipal level, the institutions can rarely have their own approaches because of the lack of autonomy[362]. Moreover, as there is lack of available teacher training programmes, it is no surprise that the existing training offer is very fragmented. The fragmentation of available training offer is observed when talking about initial training[363], in-service teacher training[364], and inclusion of knowledge and skills on SRP in the existing training offer and creation of a new one[365]. While some trainings are available, it seems that the continuity between the existing offer and a long-term approach to in-service training is missing[366]. The different providers of trainings also rarely coordinate among themselves[367]. Moreover, schools do not consider how to use their training budget efficiently and instead of distributing available trainings fairly, they tend to urge some teachers to participate in a lot of trainings even if they do not need them or have no time for them and disregard the professional development needs of others[368].

Professional development opportunities tend to be of lower quality because of the lack of knowledge about ECE field among those involved in the ECE decision making process and in preparation of the trainings. For example, one of the interviewees noted that preschool agencies in different municipalities often lack a comprehensive vision for ECE and approach the field rather technically, focusing on spending and hiring of staff and disregarding quality related issues such as monitoring or promotion of development in the field[369]. As trainings are mostly regulated by the municipalities, their availability differs between municipalities and usually is poor and not in line with international standards[370]. Moreover, the municipal methodologists themselves and other professionals who are responsible for some of the training courses, did not benefit of any continuous professional development opportunities after having received their training decades ago[371]. The lack of knowledge among trainers has been highlighted by the interviewees as well[372]. This lack of knowledge about the ECE field and its importance may be a result of the general public opinion about ECE as a non-important and non-prestigious field[373].

An important challenge regarding the professional development of the ECE professionals is the lack of available funding for it[374]. This hinders the development of contemporary scientifically inspired initial and in-service teacher training programmes and accessibility to existing professional development opportunities. For example, while most of the in-service ECE teachers are very interested in training opportunities and would be willing to attend the trainings, municipalities and institutions cannot afford it and low salaries of the ECE teachers make it nearly impossible for them to cover the costs of the trainings themselves[375]. In all municipalities

[361] Interviews with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara and KSA

[362] Interview with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

[363] Peeters, J. (2020). *UNICEF Workshop Report for 9 Georgian Universities: finalization of BA programmes.*

[364] Interview with the MoES

[365] Interview with the MoES

[366] Interview with the MoES

[367] Interview with Kids Office

[368] Interview with Ilia State University

[369] Interview with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

[370] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[371] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

[372] Interview with Ilia State University

[373] Interviews with Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University, and the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[374] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[375] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

analysed as case studies for this project a lack of funding was identified as one of the main challenges considering the access to continuous professional development activities. For example, the interviewed municipal staff members from Khelvachauri municipality also mentioned that due to a very large number of ECE teachers who need to be trained, the amount of funding required is very high and may not always be ensured. The interviewed municipal staff member from Tianeti municipality noted that teachers often have to pay for professional development opportunities themselves, which means that they have to be very motivated to do that and have means to cover the costs, which is often not a case because of small salaries. However, generally the municipalities are trying to ensure that there is at least some funding for teacher training and continuous professional development. Moreover, various donor organisations are also providing a lot of funding for teacher trainings in cases where municipalities cannot afford them[376].

It is also important to note that there is too much focus on theory in the initial and in-service trainings. The providers of trainings do not invest enough in the link between theory and practice. [377]. For example, the new bachelor's programmes that were proposed in 2021 have some ECTs reserved for internship, but disproportionately little, compared to similar initial trainings for ECE in other countries[378]. However, the greatest challenge at the moment is that there are no bachelor programmes focusing specifically on ECE[379]. While some of the existing programmes may be relevant to ECE, such as programme in primary education, they cannot cover all specific issues in the ECE field. It is hoped that these issues will be tackled with new bachelor programmes in ECE that are being developed. The participants of interviews conducted for this study also highlighted the lack of practical activities (link between theory and practice) in available teacher training[380]. For example, it was noted that the available 66-hours module that individuals can take if they do not have educational background in ECE but wish to work in a sector, is often criticised for not having enough practical assignments and being too focused on theoretical knowledge[381]. Teachers who participated in a focus group for the case study in Tbilisi also echoed this sentiment. While they found the trainings useful, they missed practical component of the trainings where they could observe the discussed methods and learn to apply the methods themselves in their classroom.

Moreover, continuous professional development training is criticised for offering little diversity. The available trainings tend to have a universal approach, which means that the same trainings are provided to all educators and the specific needs of each individual teacher are not considered[382]. For example, the available 66-hour module for caregivers-educators (online and offline) is seen as very beneficial but is criticised for being less useful for older teachers who do not know how to use online platforms, work on Zoom or Teams, download and upload essential materials[383]. This shows that the module is not adapted to the needs of all teachers and the individualisation of trainings may not be taken into account. Considering the specific modules on SRP, while they are seen as very beneficial, they are also criticised for not helping the teachers develop their flexibility and autonomy in implementing the programme. More specifically, the modules mainly focus on the work with older children and do not provide suggestions on how younger children, from two to five years of age, can be included in SRP activities, in cases where teachers have mixed age groups[384]. One interviewee also noted that the module has too much content for a short period of training for the teachers to remember everything[385]. These issues in the available training offer often result in ECE professionals taking a very technical approach to

[376] Interview with Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency

[377] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[378] Peeters, J. (2020). *UNICEF Workshop Report for 9 Georgian Universities: finalization of BA programmes.*

[379] Interview with the MoES and Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University

[380] Interview with Sokhumi State University

[381] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[382] Interview with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

[383] Interview with Samtkhe-Javakheti State University

[384] Interview with Samtkhe-Javakheti State University and the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[385] Interview with Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

the implementation of SRP curriculum and other activities in the preschools. Teachers tend to only implement the activities provided as examples in guidebooks and in other support material, and do not allow flexibility in their work that could help them accommodate the needs of different children[386].

The above-mentioned challenges have been observed in public preschools in general, but there may be some differences in private preschools or even in public preschools in specific areas. Firstly, the situation in private preschools may be slightly different, but there is no publicly available data about it[387]. It is likely that the initial training of ECE professionals in private institutions is more or less the same as of those in public institutions, but there is a possibility that ECE teachers in private institutions can receive more support from their institutions to participate in in-service teacher trainings[388].

Moreover, in the regions mainly populated by ethnic minorities additional challenges appear. For example, in Marneuli municipality, widely populated by ethnic minority communities, the language barrier often prevents ECE professionals from participating in available professional development activities or use the available resources for self-learning[389]. The interviewees confirmed that the language barrier often prevent Azerbaijani and Armenian teachers from making use of available trainings and resources[390].

3.5.3. Progress towards better professional development system in ECE and existing opportunities

The overview of the qualifications of the ECE professionals and availability of professional development opportunities indicate that the current situation is rather concerning. The ECE professionals often lack needed qualifications and have little opportunities for professional development aligned with their needs. However, some recent developments point to potential improvements in professional development of ECE personnel.

Firstly, it seems that professionals involved in ECE field are beginning to understand the importance of initial and in-service training for ECE teachers. The respondents of the survey conducted for this study were asked how important, according to them, different elements of initial teacher training are for ECE teachers. As presented in **Error! Reference source not found.**, respondents considered all presented elements as "highly important". Between 60% and 78.6% of respondents considered that issues such as child-centred forms of teaching or building reciprocal relations with parents should be included in the initial teacher training.

[386] Peeters, J. & Hulpia, H. (2018). Study on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Georgia. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/1236/file/Preschool%20Quality%20Study.pdf

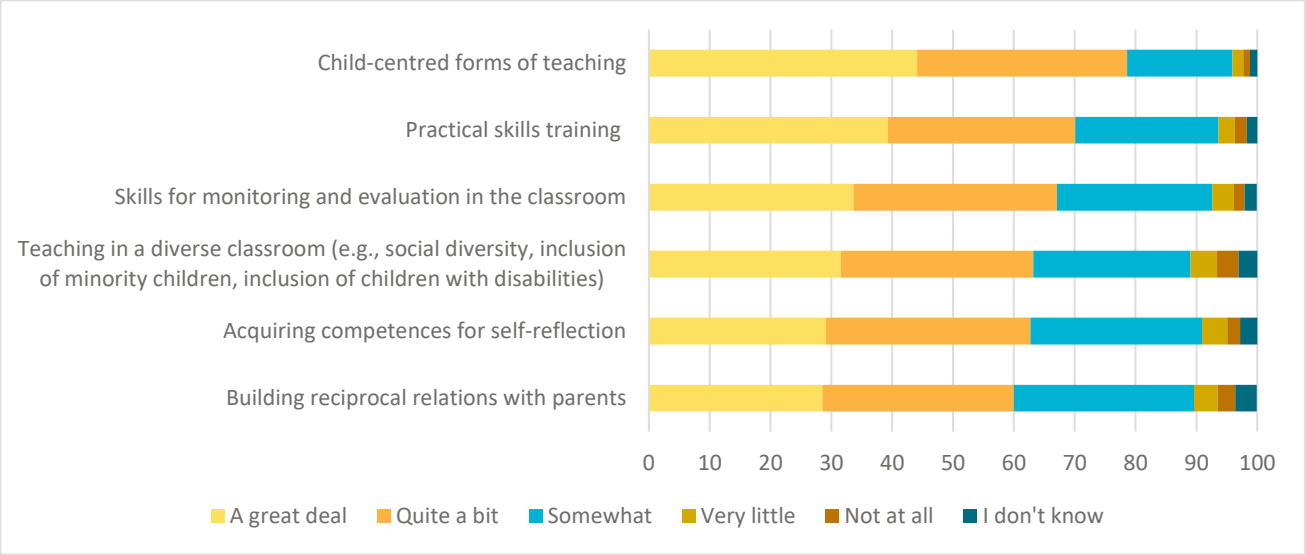
[387] Interview with the MoES

[388] Interview with MDF

[389] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[390] Interview with the MoES

FIGURE 31. ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF INITIAL ECE TEACHER TRAINING



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "To what extent do you believe that the following elements are essential for initial (pre-service) ECE teacher training?"

The results of the survey are presenting an optimistic picture especially when thinking about a new generation of teachers as less experienced teachers perceived the abovementioned different crucial elements of ECE teacher training as important. For example, when asked how important it is to cover teaching in diverse classrooms during teacher training, only 28% of teachers working for more than 15 years considered this as a very crucial component of ECE teacher training and 36% of teachers working less than 5 years thought the same. When asked how important it is to include child-centred forms of teaching in teacher training, 39% of ECE teachers working for more than 15 years considered this as a very important topic for ECE teacher training and 50% of teachers working less than 5 years had the same opinion. The teachers who received their initial training recently and have less work experience also seem to be more optimistic about how well the initial teacher training programmes can prepare the future teachers for implementing the school readiness programme. When asked if believe that the current programmes sufficiently prepare the teachers to implement the programme, 40% of ECE teachers working for less than 5 years believed the training is sufficient to ensure that teachers can implement the school readiness programme and only 41% of ECE teachers thought the same.

Secondly, it is important to note that there is an increasing interest in early child development from the general public. More specifically, one interviewee noted that available training modules are popular not only among ECE professionals, but also among parents and nannies. In Akaki Tsereteli State University, for example, trainings can be attended by anyone who is interested, and they are usually attended by various people[391]. This indicates that importance of ECE field is increasingly seen as more and more important, with prospects that in the future there will be more focus on ensuring that the professionals in the field are qualified, competent and receive the support they need. ECE professionals themselves seem to be very motivated to learn and improve[392]. Different professionals working in ECE field who were interviewed in the preparation of the case studies under the framework of this project highlighted the need for professional development activities and expressed their interest in such activities. Moreover, during the pandemic it became evident that, if the ECE professionals are motivated, they can find some relevant training online and easily engage in self-improvement. However, at the moment such self-development is not actively encouraged or supported by the preschools or other actors in ECE field[393]. Still, it is very likely that with the changing opinion about the importance and role of ECE there

[391] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

[392] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[393] Interview with MDF

will be more opportunities for ECE professionals to improve their competences and more of them will be regularly involved in professional development activities.

Moreover, plans to enforce stricter requirements for ECE teachers, which will likely motivate the ECE institutions to pay more attention to the level of competences of their employees. Minimum requirements according to the national professional standards are already defined. According to the new requirements, individuals wishing to work in ECE will be required to have bachelor's degree in ECE or in a relevant field, such as psychology[394]. According to the new requirements, the individuals with the fifth-degree vocational education focusing on preschool education can also work as ECE teachers[395]. However, these requirements will not be enforced until 2024. Consequently, there are still no improvements visible[396]. The requirements are also rather flexible to ensure that the system does not collapse when professionals who are not meeting these requirements are no longer allowed to work in ECE and then a shortage of teachers to appear. More specifically, the requirements foresee that if the ECE teachers do not have a bachelor's degree in the field, they can get a mandatory training of 66 hours that covers the basics of ECE field and still be able to work in ECE. This means that these developments will not necessarily bring a lot of changes, but it is a good start and a basis for the future work[397]. Although these new requirements are also more in line with the international standards[398], they are still slightly lower. For example, in most European countries ECE teachers working with 3-6 age group are required to have a Bachelors' degree, and some even require a Masters' degree[399].

It is important to note that, as already mentioned, 9 universities are at the moment developing new bachelor's programmes focusing on ECE. The new programmes are carefully planned, taking into account the experience of foreign countries[400] and suggestions from the international experts[401]. Due to such extensive planning and design and the help of numerous experts throughout the process, the programmes are seen as of high quality and in line with international standards[402]. They are trying to address a lot of different challenges that are currently faced in the field of professional development of ECE personnel[403]. Consequently, the availability of these programmes will likely change the state of the existing professional development and, consequently, qualifications and skills of ECE professionals. The programmes, most importantly, are based on caregiver-educator standard and ECE quality standards. This means that the programmes are designed to ensure that the future ECE professionals receive the knowledge and skills they need to provide high quality ECE education[404]. The new programmes will also horizontally integrate different issues that ECE professionals need to get acquainted with, such as knowledge needed to implement the school readiness programme[405]. They are also addressing the importance of linking theory with practice during internship in professional development programmes by trying to ensure that significantly more time is spent on practice related activities[406]. However, while the programmes are designed to prepare future ECE teachers as well as possible, their successful implementation will be a great challenge. At the moment, the university staff seems to lack some competences to deliver the programmes that are of high quality, and they will need a lot of support to change that and

394 Interview with Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University

395 Interview with Sokhumi State University

396 Interview with UNICEF Georgia

397 Interview with UNICEF Georgia

398 Interviews with the Teacher Professional Development Center, and Ilia State University

399 Oberhuemer, P. & Schreyer, I. (eds.) (2018). *Early Childhood Workforce Profiles in 30 Countries with Key Contextual Data*. Available at: http://www.seepro.eu/ISBN-publication.pdf

400 Interview with World Vision

401 Interviews with Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University, and Akaki Tsereteli State University

402 Interview with Civitas Georgia

403 Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

404 Interview with Ilia State University

405 Interviews with Sokhumi State University, Akaki Tsereteli State University, and Ilia State University

406 Interviews with Sokhumi State University, Akaki Tsereteli State University, and Ilia State University

successfully implement the planned programmes[407]. It is also important to keep in mind that while the programmes will prepare well-trained teachers, they will require continuous support through professional development activities to further develop their skills and competences[408] and keep up with the latest developments in the field.

There is also more progress towards ensuring that teachers have competences and skills to address different challenges that arise in their everyday work. For example, the school leader in Akhaltsikhe municipality, who was interviewed when preparing the municipality's case study under the framework of this project, mentioned that a bilingual teaching project, which includes training for teachers to be able to work with children speaking other languages as well, is being developed. Such project would allow the teachers get skills and competences necessary to work in bilingual environment and address the needs not only of the children speaking Georgian, but also of the children from ethnic minorities[409].

International organisations and non-state actors, including UNICEF, the World Bank, World Vision and Mac Georgia are also more and more actively involved in the ECE field in Georgia, which can partly account for the lack of financial and human resources of the public institutions. UNICEF, for example, played an important role in assisting the universities with the development of the new bachelor programmes focusing on ECE. The organisation has provided a lot of guidance and advice in planning the programmes, and in including different aspects that were disregarded before, such as linking theory to practice, and suggested different ways how the responsibilities between the different actors involved can be divided. UNICEF also provided an opportunity for the Georgian actors working in ECE field to work together with international experts. This allowed them to gain a lot of very valuable knowledge[410]. The international experts also helped set the ECE professional development programme benchmark requirements for a more effective monitoring system[411]. The municipal staff from Ozurgeti interviewed under the framework of this study also noted that various organisations, such as Mac Georgia, contribute to the provision of professional development activities and in that way ensure that it is more accessible to more teachers.

While there is some progress, there are also some remaining challenges, which may present themselves as great opportunities for progress. For example, as there is now a lot of focus on developing new bachelor's programmes in ECE, it seems that there is still too little attention paid to continuous professional development courses. While new bachelor's programmes will likely contribute to improving the quality of ECE services, the improvements will become visible only after a while as training new teachers will take time. Consequently, having some shorter programmes, for example 60-credit programmes for one year, could help the already working ECE professionals improve their qualifications and ensure that improvement is visible faster[412]. Moreover, monitoring of the available professional development is still lacking and presents a great opportunity for improvement[413]. Having an elaborated monitoring system for professional development would help ensure that the offered activities are useful, relevant, and needed and would provide a lot of information about potential ways to improve the available trainings and better meet the needs of ECE professionals. Of course, all these improvements would require significantly more material resources[414]. Consequently, it is also crucial to think about the potential ways to ensure those needed resources. One way would be to use the support from international organisations and other actors, which is being done to some extent already. Another possible way forward would be to reconsider the funding schemes and mechanisms of ECE and try to make them more

[407] Interview with Ilia State University

[408] Interview with World Bank Financed Program: Education Quality, Inclusion and Innovation

[409] Interview with school leader in Akhaltsikhe municipality, conducted when preparing a case study for Akhaltsikhe municipality

[410] Interviews with Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University, and Akaki Tsereteli State University

[411] Interview with Sokhumi State University

[412] Interview with Sokhumi State University

[413] Interview with Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University

[414] Interview with MDF

efficient. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that the improvements in the available pre- and in-service teacher training can greatly improve the quality of ECE education. With ongoing support through training and professional development programmes, teachers may be able to transform their practices. However, for the trainings to be effective they should ensure long-term support and development opportunities for teachers[415]. Finally, while there is quite a lot of focus on improving the training for ECE teachers, a need to address the challenges related to the professional development of other ECE staff and municipal workers focusing on ECE is often disregarded. To ensure that they can better support ECE teachers and ensure better standards in ECE they should have relevant training available as well[416]. This could also contribute to the improvement of the ECE conditions for both children and teachers.

3.6. Remuneration for professionals in ECE and attracting ECE professionals

The European Commission Council Recommendation on High-Quality ECEC Systems states that: '*ECEC systems that aim at improved working conditions, including more adequate wage levels, can make employment in early childhood education and care a more attractive option for better-qualified staff, looking for proper careers'* (EC, 2019). The recommendation also highlights positive professional learning communities, more diversified career paths and mentoring and supervision of newly recruited staff as key actions to attracting persons to the field. This section focuses on financial remunerations and working conditions for ECE staff given that the previous chapter covered learning opportunities.

3.6.1. Current remuneration conditions for ECE professionals

This section describes the current situation with regards to remuneration of staff considering the law and data on minimum wages, average salaries compared with working conditions and job requirements. The main findings are that the average wages for ECE professionals are significantly below the average salaries in the country, and that the main responsibility for improving the remuneration and working conditions lay with municipalities and unions.

The EPE law of 2016 sets out the overall conditions for the operational activities of ECE and levels of responsibilities. It comments on the financial support of ECE institutions or professionals in the following instances:

- **Article 10 h** proclaims that municipalities in the field of preschool education have the power and obligation to approve the mandatory provisions of employment contracts with persons employed by institutions upon consultation with the professional union;
- **Article 24** states that the maximum limit of the reimbursement of caregiver-pedagogues shall be determined by a normative act of the Government of Georgia.
- **Article 27** clarifies 1) that municipalities shall annually allocate necessary funds from their own budget for the management and provision of services to the institutions founded by such municipalities; and 2) that the form, rules and conditions for the financing of public institutions by municipalities shall be determined by the municipal Sakrebulos (municipal assemblies).
- **Article 28 2** stipulates that the normative act mentioned in Article 24 will be established by 1 September 2017;

[415] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[416] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

— **Article 28 c** stipulated the future adoption of a normative act for the approval of professional standards for caregiver-pedagogues before 1 April 2017, and **article 28 4 d** stipulates normative acts to be adopted at the municipal level before 1 April 2017.

Therefore, EPE (2016) does not specify wage levels or financial conditions for ECE professionals. The normative act to stipulate the maximum limit of reimbursement has not been created. Decree N 478 on Approval of the Professional Standards for Caregiver-Pedagogues does also not mention financial remunerations. The legal responsibility for defining the wage and financial incentives for ECE professionals is decentralised and depends on municipalities' budgets and capacities.[417] The GoG has not defined a minimum wage for ECE professionals as this is to be defined by the municipality in close collaboration with the relevant unions. Article 84 of the Labour Code of Georgia clearly indicates that wages should be set through the Tripartite Commission, social dialogue and consultations with the government and social partners. The latter law provides guidance on working conditions, the maximum hours of standard work per week (40), the content of employment agreements, special protection for those in need, anti-discrimination policies etc., but not salary levels.[418] The table below presents an overview of the average salaries reported among ECE professionals and the average population in Georgia and is based on official national statistics.

TABLE 13. AVERAGE MONTHLY SALARIES OF ECE PROFESSIONALS COMPARED TO THE GENERAL POPULATION

EMPLOYMENT STATUS	CAREGIVER	ASSISTANTS	SPECIALISTS	MANAGERS	OVERALL POPULATION
FULLTIME	GEL 336 (Min = GEL 130, Max = GEL 660)	GEL 273 if employed full time (Min = GEL 130, Max = GEL 550)	GEL 250-310 (Max = GEL 700)	GEL 437 (Min = GEL 140, Max = GEL 1000)	GEL 1068 (Average for managers GEL 1700, average for teachers GEL 648)
PARTTIME	GEL 190 (Min = GEL 140, Max = GEL 330)	160 GEL	N.d.	N.d.	N.d.

Source: NAEC, 2018 and National Statistics Office of Georgia for overall population (average monthly nominal earnings of employees by economic activity, 2018: http://geostat.ge/index.php?action=page&p_id=149&lang=eng)

The table above shows that compared to overall average salaries in the country, salaries in the ECE are low. The average salary of a caregiver in ECE is less than a third of the average salary of the overall population. The average salary of an assistant in ECE is about one-fourth of the average salary level in general. The average salary is also half the average salary for teachers across education levels. The situation is scarcely better for managers in ECE whose average salaries are about a fourth of the average salaries for managers in smaller firms. Even the salary of a director is not enough to support a family (lone mother with two children). In 60% of the surveyed municipalities, the manager's salary does not exceed GEL 400[419]. Peeters (2018) report that formalised systems of salary increase for workers in ECE are non-existent, meaning that the salaries of workers do not increase over time.

In terms of absolute poverty, the average salary levels are above the nationally and internationally set poverty lines for most of the ECE positions. For instance, the monthly salaries for caregivers and assistants constitute

[417] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[418] Parliament of Georgia (2010) Labour Code of Georgia. Available at: https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/1155567?publication=21

[419] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

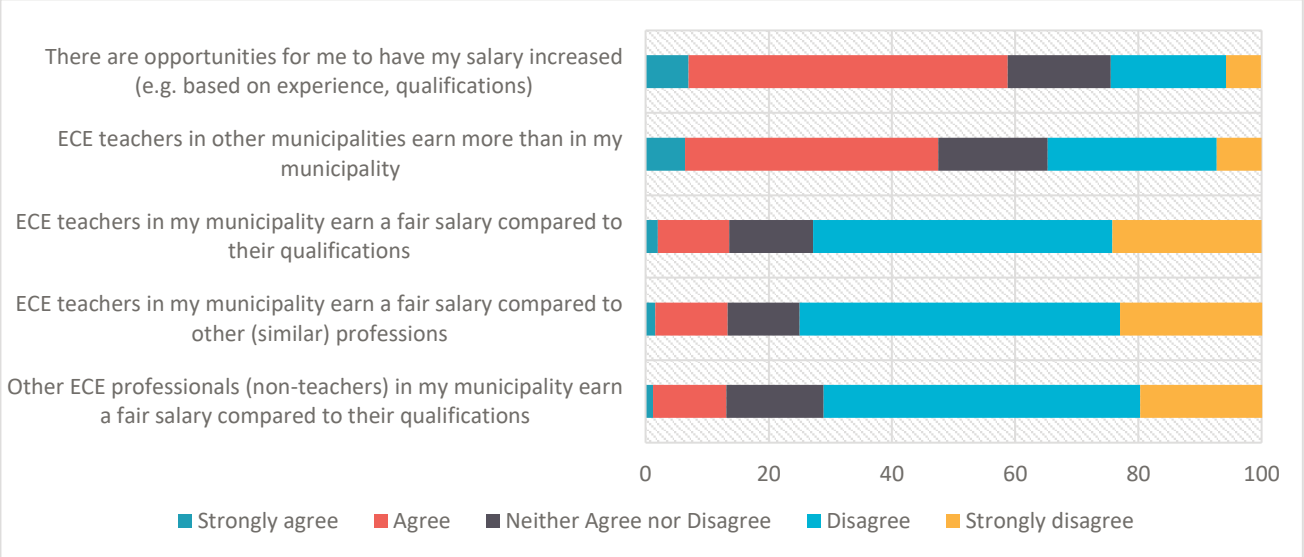
daily earnings of 9 and 11 GEL respectively.[420] This is above the per day poverty line for lower-middle-income class countries in 2018 (3.2 GEL, USD 3.2) as well as upper-middle-income class countries (5.4 GEL, USD 5.5). However, it should be noted that the lowest reported salary for caregivers and assistants (130 GEL per month) as well as the average salary of part-time assistants (160 GEL) are below the poverty line for upper-middle-income class countries.

3.6.2. The main challenges with remunerating and attracting ECE professionals

This section describes the main challenges with regards to remuneration and attraction of staff. The survey, interview and focus group data display a wide concern with the low levels of salaries both in relative and absolute terms. The most frequently reported challenges in the interviews and focus groups were the budget limitations in poorer regions, the low status and political prioritization of ECE and the lack of efficient national wage policies. Overall, there was a wide concern about the mismatch between the low salaries and high expectation and responsibilities of ECE staff and its implications on the ability to attract new staff and implement the SRP comprehensively.

Interview, focus group and survey participants perceive the current remuneration for ECE professionals as insufficient to sustain a good quality of life. All consulted stakeholders from the municipalities analysed for this study agree that the salaries in ECE are very low and that the remuneration given to caregivers and caregiver assistants is not enough to guarantee basic living conditions. An interviewee stated: '*The salary of educators is social assistance only*'.[421] Focus group participants who work as caregiver-pedagogues informed that they are not able to sustain their lives on the current salary and that caregiver assistants are in an even worse situation.

FIGURE 32. PERCEPTIONS ON REMUNERATION POLICIES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ECE PROFESSIONALS



Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the remuneration of ECE professionals in your municipality?"

The study participants considered the salaries particularly low and, unfairly so, when compared with the salaries of schoolteachers and ECE personnel in wealthier regions. **Error! Reference source not found.** show

[420] World Bank (2020). *Poverty and Equity Brief Georgia.* Available at: https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/poverty/987B9C90-CB9F-4D93-AE8C-750588BF00QA/current/Global_POVEQ_GEO.pdf

[421] Interview with Kivitas Georgia

that more than 75 per cent of the survey participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that ECE teachers earn a fair salary compared to other similar professions, while half of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that ECE teachers in other municipalities earn more than them. Focus group participants highlighted that it is unfair to be paid less than schoolteachers given that preschool teachers also work throughout the summer and often have more demanding responsibilities but lower salary and fewer benefits. These perceptions also increased with the number of years the survey respondent was employed. Among respondents employed for more than 15 years, 74 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed that ECE professionals in their municipalities earned fair wages considering their qualifications, compared with 68 per cent of ECE professionals employed between 0-5 years.

Particularly the differences between regions were a concern among the interviewees. One interviewee explained: "*Educators (preschool teachers and caregivers) have very low salaries, with different municipalities setting salaries according to their economic viability*."[422] NAEC (2018) reported the same: "*It is unclear for [ECE professionals] why do caregivers from urban regions receive higher salaries than their colleagues from rural Preschools*[423]. This concern is not apparently logical given that the purchasing power differs between rural and urban areas, requiring salaries in cities to be bigger. The challenge must be understood from the context of the working conditions in the rural areas where the group sizes in the preschools often are bigger and where the institutions do not benefit from additional project funds or helpful infrastructure as in cities, and where it is also more difficult to attract talent. Desk research shows that thirteen municipalities do not have a single caregiver with a relevant bachelor's degree in ECE or BA degree in any other field, which is required by state and regional Professional Standards.

Besides, the interviewees reported the wealth and political capacity of the municipality as the most important element that affects remuneration levels in public ECE. Given the importance of unions and social partners in leveraging wage increases and the decentralised nature of wage policy, the financial and regulatory capacity of local municipalities and actors matter greatly. This is supported by NAEC (2018) which shows that the lowest share of budget spent on ECE is in Mtskheta town (2 per cent) which is significantly lower than the 12 per cent spent on ECE of the annual municipality budget in Tbilisi. While educators are paid more in Tbilisi because of the stronger economy, it must also be mentioned that the municipality has developed a local minimum wage for ECE professionals which is rare in the country.[424] This shows that political decision-making and capacity of cities matter as well as the size of their budgets, and that the wage policies and management of ECE at municipal levels in regions have been particularly insufficient to address the needs of the ECE professionals.

In terms of political will, the main concern of interviewees was the low status and prioritization of ECE in politics. While salaries have improved in some instances, the wage increases are not matching up to the needs of the employers and the real value of the profession. An interviewee explained: "*We cannot say that in any municipality this is a priority area and therefore a high-paying position, salaries are low everywhere in preschools compared to other professions.*"[425] At the national level, this political will was also lacking according to an interviewee: "*In the strategy of the ministry for 2022 -2032, the increase of the salary fund is invested but very little*".[426] Finally, an educator stated: "*People think that working with children is funny and easy, but we know that it's a great responsibility*."[427] The low status of ECE may implicate the prospects of wage increase for individual educators as it results in lower self-esteem.[428] It may also implicate the perception of ECE personnel among parents. Focus

[422] Interview with Sokhumi State University

[423] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[424] Interview with the MoES

[425] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[426] Interview with NCEQE

[427] Interview with Samtkhe-Javakheti State University

[428] Interview with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

group participants explained that "*As much as the state does not value preschool teachers, so little the parents will value us, they have a corresponding attitude towards us [as the state].*"

The mismatch between salary level, responsibilities and working conditions was a frequently reported challenge among the interviewees and especially in rural areas. The caretaker interviewees confirm that their salaries are much lower than those of schoolteachers, although their responsibilities are higher - preschool pedagogues are responsible not only to educate but also to nurse and provide care to young children[429]. An interviewee stated: "*Remuneration for preschool staff is minimal and unmatched by workload and responsibilities*."[430] Another stated: "*The average salary in preschools is 300 GEL which is unbelievable. In the case of Batumi, where you have up to 30 children in the group, you must deal with so many children and parents and the remuneration is minimal.*"[431] Focus group participants also elaborated on the poor working conditions and lack of overall benefits and support (no health or social insurance, no additional personnel in case of illness and no protection and support against insults from parents, etc): "*Most of the women work in preschools and imagine that even the maternity leave is not paid.*" In the focus groups in regional areas, participants particularly complained about the institutions having so few resources that the ECE professionals are forced to pay out of their own pocket for everything from materials to food for the children and that ECE professionals are not able to pay for the union membership which further makes them more vulnerable and unable to challenge the poor working conditions and pay.

Importantly, interview and focus group participants described this mismatch between salaries and responsibilities as the main challenge for attracting and retaining staff in the ECE. First, the low salaries and harsh working conditions lower the motivations of already hired staff to continue working and achieving the ambitious standards for ECE set out in EPE (2016) and EC (2019). An interviewee stated that it "*It's a very acute issue, which should be arranged because teachers need elementary motivation to do their job well and maintain quality*".[432] Another wondered: "*How do they have the intrinsic motivation? I believe that they really love children, but it's not enough when you have so many responsibilities and financial problems*".[433] The caregiver-pedagogues in the focus groups explained that the preschools struggle to attract qualified specialists due to the low salaries. Second, low remuneration and poor working conditions, coupled with great responsibilities, are demotivating for teacher students considering becoming ECE professionals. An interviewee explained: "*People will not be motivated to get into the ECE field if they cannot get good salaries and have better options*".[434]

Besides, ECE institutions do not have sufficient resources or independence to spend time on attracting and retaining staff[435]. A significant share (40,6 per cent) of municipalities do not have elaborated human resource management policies. In most cases (94,2 per cent), public preschools, especially in smaller towns, do not have the right to select and hire their own personnel[436] and hiring processes are shaped by nepotism.[437] Also, most public preschools (83 per cent) cannot select and hire personnel as this is the responsibility of the municipalities (Peeters, 2018). In big cities (Tbilisi, Batumi, Gori) and Oni municipality, ECE institutions are given such authority[438].

Furthermore, interview and focus group participants described the mismatch between salary and working conditions/responsibilities as making it very difficult and lowering the motivation to implement the SRP programme. Focus group participants stated: "*we just do not have the appropriate environment and resources to*

[429] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[430] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[431] Interview with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Adjara

[432] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

[433] Interview with Kids Office

[434] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[435] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

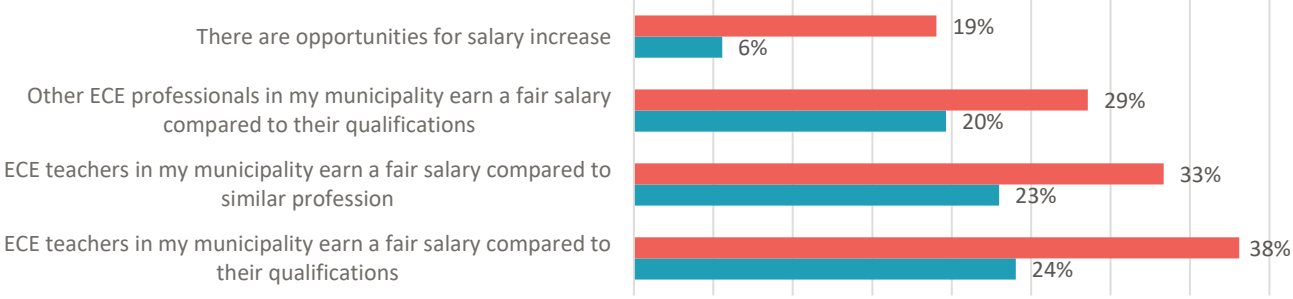
[436] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[437] Interview with Kids Office

[438] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

implement this program"; *"To attract people to SRP, we must first create those conditions that will increase interest in this profession. Remuneration should be adequate for that very large work"* and wondered *"If I am asked to work according to the standard, should not the working conditions also meet the standard?"*.

FIGURE 33. OPINIONS ON REMUNERATION LEVELS, BY GENDER



	ECE teachers in my municipality earn a fair salary compared to their qualifications	ECE teachers in my municipality earn a fair salary compared to similar profession	Other ECE professionals in my municipality earn a fair salary compared to their qualifications	There are opportunities for salary increase
Male	38%	33%	29%	19%
Female	24%	23%	20%	6%

Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about remuneration of ECE professionals in your municipality?"

Another issue is related to difficulties in attracting male professionals in the field as there are few male ECE professionals. Desk research suggests that this is linked to low remuneration and to the traditional view of caretakers as women. Survey findings also suggest that gender may also play barrier role in ensuring higher and fair remuneration for ECE staff. Interestingly, men were 10 percentage points more likely to disagree that their salary levels were fair compared to their qualifications and other ECE teachers or professionals regardless of only 70 per cent of the male participants having had initial training on ECE compared with 90 per cent of female participants. At the same time, only 30 per cent of the male participants believed that there were opportunities for them to have their salaries increased compared with 50 per cent of female participants. Although caution should be taken in overemphasising these findings due to the low levels of male participants, it seems likely considering desk research that male ECE professionals have higher expectations and thus more disappointments from the low remunerations in ECE compared with women.

This study also aimed to understand salary differences between SRP preschools. Interviewee data suggest that there are few differences in terms of salary between SRP and non-SRP institutions. One interviewee reported overcrowding in SRP schools resulting in poor working conditions.[439] An interviewee explained that "*if salaries differ, they differ due to the different levels of qualification that employees can use to leverage higher salaries, and not due to the type of institutions*."[440] If the type of institution matters, it is rather its financial set-up. One interviewee reported significant salary differences between public and private preschools, with the latter being able to pay twice as high salaries.[441] It should also be noted that male ECE professionals are more likely to work in private

[439] Interview with Civitas Georgia

[440] Interview with MDF

[441] Interview with NCEQE

institutions and benefit from these higher wages. Self-funded private schools have more opportunities to pay fair salaries due to the additional funding from parental fees.

In relation to qualifications, interviewees often suggested improving the qualifications and standards of ECE professionals' competences to improve the status of ECE and ultimately the salaries (See 3.6.3). However, since this has already been attempted through the 2024 caregiver-pedagogues standard, interviewees also raised key challenges blocking the effectiveness of this policy change. Interviewees argued that as long as there are no salary increases or promises, this new educational pathway will not be attractive for students. Hence, the lack of a national wage policy blocked the efficiency of other policy efforts to improve the standing and salaries of ECE professionals. An interviewee explained: *"The position of caregiver-educator has emerged, which requires much more competencies, but the workload is not reflected in the salary and the minimum wage is not defined across the country*."[442]

3.6.3. Progress toward better remuneration and opportunities for professionals

This section presents the main recommendations put forth by participants in the study regarding the improvement of wage policies and opportunities for attracting qualified staff. The most frequently mentioned recommendations among interviewees were the minimum wage, followed by a formalised track for growing salaries and raising the standards of ECE education and training. The overwhelming emphasis in the responses to survey, interviews and focus groups was on the need for a more efficient national wage policy to work in parallel with the increasing professionalisation of the sector, coupled with continuous effort to improve the working conditions.

Interviewees argued that to ensure the necessary salary improvement in ECE, it is necessary to develop a formalised track for growing salaries of which the minimum wage would be a first minor step. The lack of a minimum wage was seen as a huge barrier and thus introducing it would be the first vital change needed to improve wage policies for ECE professionals. Introducing minimum wages could limit the bargaining power of unions and leave room for wage improvement for social partners engaging in negotiations. The interviewees were nevertheless certain that a national minimum wage for ECE professionals would be successful due to the lessons learnt from introducing such a minimum wage in Tbilisi and for schoolteachers in general. Interviewees explained: "*When the minimum salary requirement for full-time teaching in schools improved dramatically, universities started receiving applications of significantly more successful students*";[443] "*If policies and minimum wages are thought out at the national level, it will significantly change the picture*"[444]. A coherent wage policy is needed and given the decentralised nature of the current system and the role of the municipalities, unions and social partners, these actors should be involved in the potential discussion and development of a national wage policy.

In this regard, the most important improvement would be the introduction of formalised wage tracks in line with specific professional positions. This would ensure that it is possible for ECE professionals to get promoted and improve their salaries over time, in line with their increasing professional development and experience. Interviewees explained: "*A minimum wage policy must be formed first. We are waiting for the approval and maybe this will be followed by the creation of a position of caregiver – pedagogue*"[445]; "*Different salaries and schemes depending on qualifications and background would be good*."[446]; "*Preschool specialists should be given motivation and those who have*

[442] Interview with the Center for Teacher Professional Development

[443] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[444] Interview with Ilia State University

[445] Interview with Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency

[446] Interview with Samtkhe-Javakheti State University

higher motivation will have their salaries increased accordingly. It may be good to assign categories to preschool teachers and different salary levels".[447]

Most interviewees suggested that the professionalisation of the ECE sector by increasing the expectations towards ECE professionals would be the most efficient solution to raise overage salary levels by interview statements such as: "*If you want to attract more qualified and motivated staff in ECE and SRP, this profession must be prestigious."*[448]; "*If salary will be bound to qualification, more teachers will have the motivation to do their work well-wrought*"[449]; "*Ideally in my opinion she should have a higher education qualification, a recommendation from a psychologist concluding that they can work with children, working experience with his children, as well as the recommendations of a previous employer*."[450] Focus group participants repeatedly argued that: "*We need to receive the same "teacher quality" as the schoolteachers have and this will cause an increase of salaries and access to some social benefits such as transportation and health insurance."* Career progression opportunities and CDP opportunities were also highlighted as important for improving salaries by more than 60 per cent of the survey participants. Focus group participants argued that increasing the qualifications of ECE participants could help to improve the status of the profession and their self-esteem: "*When you are qualified you have a feeling that you are worthy of better remuneration."*

To some extent, several measures have already been set in motion in this regard. In addition to the SRP, municipalities have implemented the educator-caregiver's 66-hours training module which is required for a new educator-caregiver position. Interviewees were not certain as to whether this policy would be efficient as the salary level has not increased enough to attract the new generation of students. Besides, desk research finds that the reliance on training for the professional development of staff is not easy to implement in practice. Municipalities mention the fact that training is costly (e.g., the need to invite specialists, the necessity to re-arrange the working environment) and thus training does not have a systematic character[451].

Interviewees also recommended formalization to go along the professionalisation process. Formalisation differs from professionalisation in that it focuses on the authorisation of education, quality assurance and state monitoring of ECE education, as opposed to simply increasing the demands on qualifications. For example, while some interviewees complained about overwork and poor working conditions, the rules are already laid out against poor working conditions in Georgian law, hence it is the monitoring and quality assurance of the working conditions that is the issue and not the law per se. Better monitoring and quality assurance of the law should lead to an increased sense of security, to ensure that ECE professionals are not easily laid off, which would in turn improve their working conditions and bargaining power when discussing wages with their employers and social partners. Given the earlier identified issues that limit the GoG financial, human and material resources to monitor the quality of ECE and SRP[452], emphasis could be placed on training qualified personnel to conduct monitoring and develop a unified document to guide the monitoring process.

[447] Interview with KSA

[448] Interview with Samtkhe-Javakheti State University

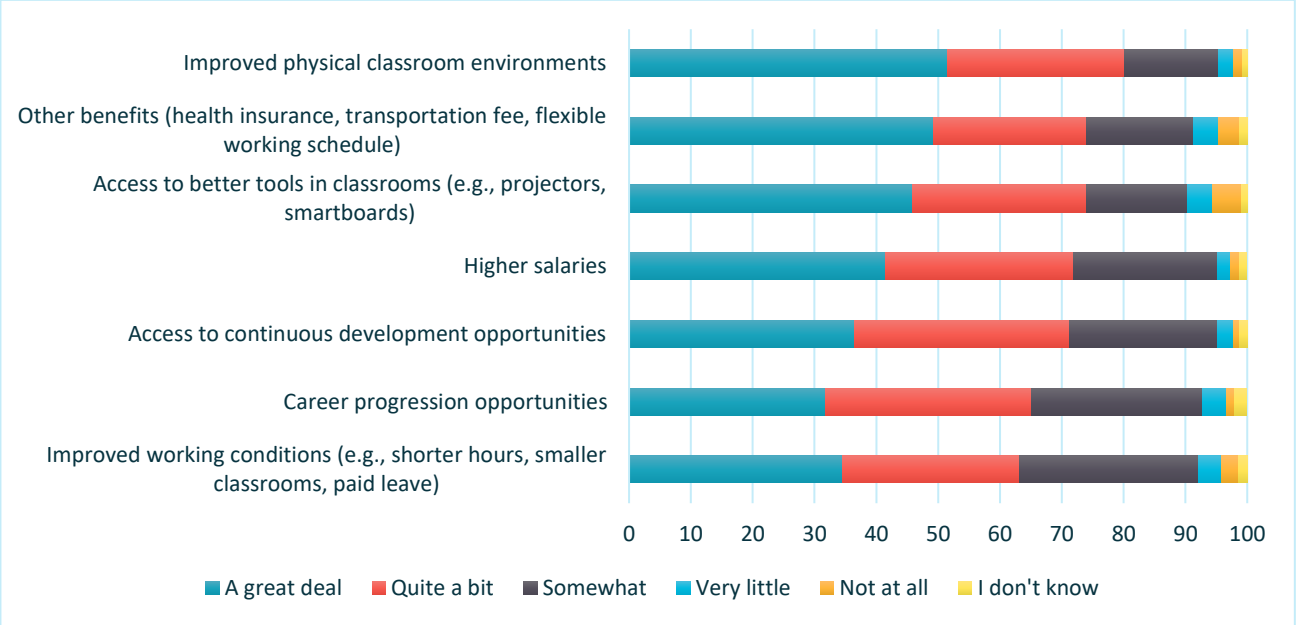
[449] Interview with Akaki Tsereteli State University

[450] Interview with Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency

[451] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

[452] National Assessment and Examination Center (2018). *Preschool Education Quality Study.*

FIGURE 34. TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU THINK THAT THE FOLLOWING MEANS WOULD HELP TO ATTRACT MORE QUALIFIED STAFF TO WORK IN ECE?



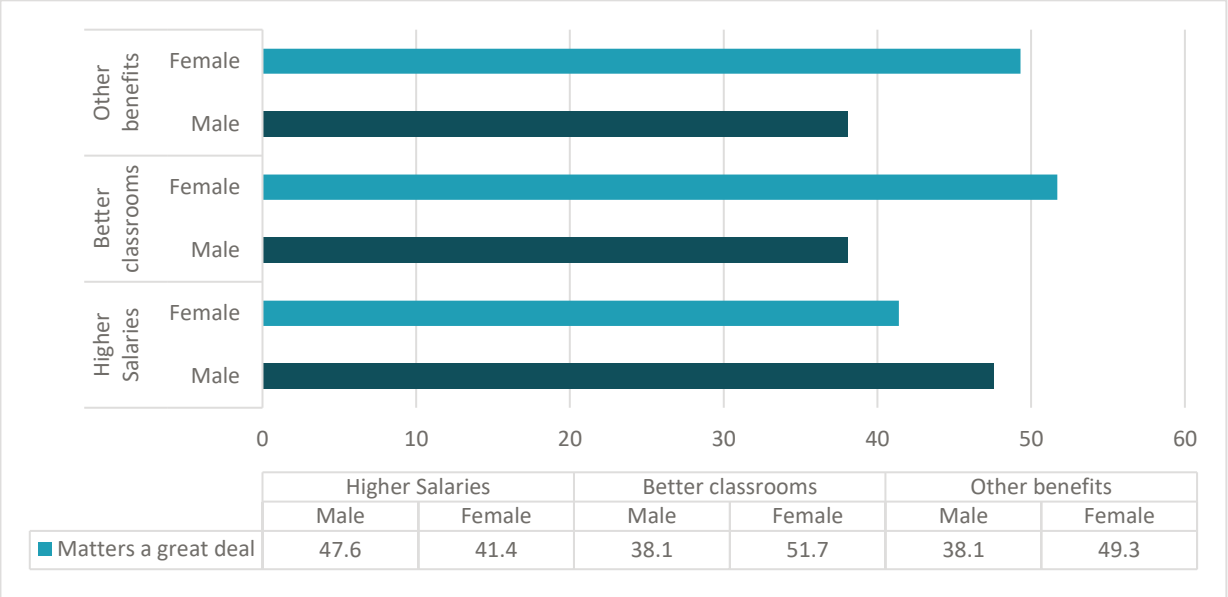
Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "To what extent do you think that the following means would help to attract more qualified staff to work in ECE?"

Error! Reference source not found. shows that when asked which means would help attract more qualified staff, survey respondents first listed improved physical environment followed by other benefits and access to tools. It may be surprising that given the big emphasis in the interviews on the recommendations for wage policy, the survey respondents highlighted physical infrastructure rather than improved wages. Yet, this is very much in line with the findings that the challenges with the current wage level must be seen in the context of working conditions.

Besides, it may also be that the respondents did not find their ECE institutions modern enough for younger professionals who are more adept and used to ICT or who, due to their higher level of education, would have higher expectations for a supportive physical infrastructure in their day-to-day work. Some focus group participants in rural areas reported that their ECE instructions do not have internet or helpful digital infrastructure. The finding on the need for improving the physical environments resonates with desk research which shows that the biggest gaps in the provision of high-quality preschool education are poor infrastructure not adapted to children with physical special needs or overcrowded groups. Unions and social partners could negotiate not only wage policies but also on the working conditions of ECE professionals, and on other revitalisation discourse topics in ECE that could help attract younger and more talented staff (e.g., digitalisation, sustainability etc).

Male survey participants were more likely to strongly emphasise the importance of higher salaries for attracting new staff, while women were more likely to emphasise other benefits such as health insurance and transportation card and improved physical classroom environments. Especially the emphasis of male respondents on higher salaries and less interest in other means could suggest that improving the efficiency of the wage policies is particularly important to attract more male professionals to the field and make it more inclusive.

FIGURE 35. MEANS TO ATTRACT TALENT, FEMALE VERSUS MALE RESPONDENTS



	Higher Salaries		Better classrooms		Other benefits	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Matters a great deal	47.6	41.4	38.1	51.7	38.1	49.3

Source: Survey among 1732 preschool staff and municipal officers. "To what extent do you think that the following means would help to attract more qualified staff to work in ECE?"

Lastly, some interviewees also highlighted raising awareness through community work and PR campaigns as potentially influential in attracting new professionals, informing on the SRP and raising the status of ECE overall. This is particularly important given the challenge that ECE often is deprioritised or not seen as important in society. Thus, several interviewees called for awareness-raising on the importance of ECE, and letting society know that "*educational development begins from birth*".[453] One particularly good example highlighted was the national teacher prize given to an exceptional teacher giving visibility and respect to the work. The prize could be replicated for educators at the ECE level and help to draw attention to good practice as well as heighten the status of ECE. The interviewee explained the need for such a prize: "*Even in institutions, it is sometimes believed that the ECE professionals do not need qualifications for taking care of children. However, emphasizing the need for qualifications and the importance of ECE is crucial.*"[454] To make the most of information campaigns, an interviewee highlighted the need for all these policy recommendations to work holistically in tandem to lift the status and quality of the profession successfully: "*We must do everything on the local and central government level to make this sphere a priority: improving working conditions, remuneration, permanent information campaign with concrete examples.*"[455]

[453] Interview with the MoES

[454] Interview with UNICEF Georgia

[455] Interview with Tamar Toloraia, Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The research has shown that, in comparison to five years ago, **great progress has been made at all levels and dimensions of ECE**. Enrolment in ECE has grown over the years, the legislative and policy frameworks for ECE quality and management have expanded, and the content of ECE has been updated to include modern, child-centred pedagogies and approaches to holistic socio-emotional development of the child.

The challenges that have been identified in the six sections of Chapter Three have several underlying causes in common that, if addressed, would significantly enhance all aspects of ECE. Therefore, while the conclusions and recommendations are grouped by thematic dimension, each dimension is significantly affected by developments in the other dimensions.

4.1. Access to ECE

4.1.1. Conclusions on access

Visible progress has been made in the last years in the enrolment of children in ECE. Although comparable, systematic data on enrolment is not available, various surveys carried out in recent years suggest that the percentage of children enrolled increased from 69, 5 % to 82% today and the number of public preschools grew from 1540 in 2017 to 1647 in 2020. Similarly, preschool staff perceive that enrolment increased over the past years.

However, the increased enrolment has not yet led to universal access to ECE, and a significant share of children is left out. There are various challenges regarding access to ECE especially relating to the supply side. The low quality, the overcrowded classrooms, the poor infrastructure, the sanitary conditions (i.e., fear of disease spread) hindered access to ECE for preschool-aged children in general, and for disadvantaged children in particular.

Children with special needs, children from ethnic minorities, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, have less access to kindergartens than other children. There exists no comprehensive systematic approach at national or municipal level to ensure more accessible ECE services for those children from more vulnerable groups. Another group that has limited access to ECE are children from rural areas, because not in every village there is a kindergarten and there is not always transport available (or recommended) to bring the children to another village.

A key barrier to implementing effective policies to enhance access of children to ECE service is **the lack of a systematic data collection tool** which provides reliable statistics on enrolment rates of children across the country. Without such data, it is impossible to assess which municipalities face enrolment/attendance challenges, which groups of children are more often left out (since the above conclusions are based on perceptions rather than statistics) and which factors often correlate with lower enrolment.

Additionally, granting physical access to the ECE institution does not guarantee **meaningful participation in ECE, or access to quality ECE**. Namely, many teachers do not possess the necessary competences, and many institutions do not possess the resources to ensure that disadvantaged children can benefit from ECE services

on equal footing with their peers. For example, there exists a policy for the inclusion of children with special educational needs but no additional funds to implement this policy were allocated. There is also a lack of qualified personnel that is specialised in working with children with special needs. As a result, physical access does not result in actual learning.

4.1.2. Recommendations on access

A key challenge to enhancing access is related to reliable, systematic data collection. Without correct, detailed information, no conclusions can be drawn on enrolment. Furthermore, without such data, no targeted local-level measures can be introduced.

Therefore, the following steps should be taken:

- The MoES should introduce a *systematic data collection tool* for the whole country which can provide reliable statistics of children and preschools, both in terms of enrolment and attendance (see also the recommendations under 4.3.).
- *MoES and municipalities should collect systematic data on disadvantaged groups of children* to monitor their enrolment and attendance. Based on analysis of enrolment data, identify which children in which municipalities are out of ECE services. Coordinate with the respective municipalities to identify the factors hindering enrolment and to design concrete policies and measures to enhance access to ECE for these children.
- *Clearly define the responsibilities of the MoES and the municipalities.*

The type of data that can be collected about children should be in line with the legislation in country as well as with policy priorities. The indicators need to be very precise in terms of what they cover and how they are formulated, as they have statistic relevance, therefore they need to be highly standardized. Some indicators that could be part of the enrolment data collection can include:

- Name
- Age
- Gender
- Municipality
- Residence area (peri-urban, urban, rural, etc.)
- Socio-economic status (incl. level of poverty) – this is usually defined at country level
- Parents employment status
- Parents education
- Family status (e.g. single mother/father, guardianship, extended family, no. of siblings)
- Living conditions (e.g. housing, access to basic utilities)
- Health status (e.g. chronic diseases, type of disability, etc.)
- Social assistance benefits (depends on what the country provides)
- Migrant background

For the Georgian MoES, peer learning activities with other MoES's in Europe can be highly beneficial to understand what type of enrolment data can be collected.

Additionally, the EMIS system and UNESCO Institute for Statistics should collect data on the ECE institutions and staff themselves, namely:

- *Data on ECEC staff* (leaders, educators, assistants, other staff) would be useful to collect (qualifications, participation in CPD (how many times per year), as well as higher education graduates with specialisations in ECEC (enrolment vs graduation).

- *Data on ECEC institutions/places*, inclusive classes (integrating children with SEN), etc.

The Spanish Ministry of Education and Vocational Training publishes annual statistics by educational level (including Educación Infantil 0-6) with data on students with specific need for educational support (number, educational level, type of center, type of need, geographical distribution, etc.).

Similarly, the Lithuanian national Pupil's Register collects information about all the children who are in institutional education, including early childhood education. It includes information about children with special needs (and the level of needs), children who receive compulsory ECEC by the municipalities Children Welfare Commission, usually because of socio-economic reasons, and the migrant background children.

Additionally, when factual access is achieved, disadvantaged children do not always benefit equally from education opportunities. Therefore, the MoES should:

- Design *national-level policies and guidelines for the provision of inclusive education* in preschools for disadvantaged children. Provide additional support (for example through coaching) on teaching in a context of diversity, in order to give disadvantaged children the opportunities and support they need.
- *Clearly define the responsibilities of MoESD in infrastructure development*. Ensure coordinated work between ministries, led by the Ministry of Education. See also recommendation 1 under 4.2.2.

The European Commission published a comprehensive "Toolkit on Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care". This toolkit provides policy measures and practical examples from EU countries, that can be implemented to enhance ECE inclusivity, such as:

- How to design a strategy for inclusive ECE
  - In 2019 the Norwegian Government presented a White Paper on "Early intervention and inclusive education". The two main objectives in this White paper are that all children and youth must get adequate support when they need it (early intervention), and that all children and youth should have a well-adapted and inclusive pedagogical program.
  - The Estonian Preschool Child Care Act was updated in 2018 to include policies to support children with special needs, such as their admission to an integration group and to ensure that the number of teachers who work in an ECEC institution and comply with the qualifications requirements is sufficient.
  - Ireland's Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is a national programme which was introduced in 2016 to support the inclusion and meaningful participation of children with disabilities within the universal, free pre-school programme in mainstream preschool settings.
- Monitoring and evaluating inclusivity of ECE. Examples of indicators include:
  - The percentage of ECEC setting with access to language support measures and support measures for parents
  - whether a system-level policy is in place to encourage disadvantaged families to use ECEC services;
  - the number of professionally-trained ECEC staff.
- Materials for practitioners and parents to increase inclusivity of ECE
  - Embracing Diversity is a two-folded training package developed and rolled out by ISSA in more than 20 countries and promotes the values of anti-discrimination, anti-bias, and respect for diversity.
  - The research project ISOTIS published an inventory to identify, describe, and critically analyse promising interventions aiming to promote educational equality and belongingness for immigrant, Roma, and low-income children. Interventions include curriculum, pedagogy, and (pre)school social climate approaches.

- The College of Early Childhood Educators in Canada prepared guidelines specifically on the inclusion of children with disabilities in ECE.

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education furthermore gathered successful practices for inclusive ECE from across Europe. These examples are listed here.

4.2. Quality of ECE

4.2.1. Conclusions on ECE quality

The **Law on Early and Preschool Education and Care adopted in 2016** is the first ever preschool law in Georgia and predominantly assigns responsibilities to preschool actors, presents universal access and equity in ECEC, and lays a legal basis for various reforms in the sector. A key element of the Law is the requirement for the government to develop **national standards for preschool education** in the country. As a result, four sets of national standards were adopted in 2017, namely the Professional standards for preschool caregiver-pedagogues; the Early and Preschool Education program quality standards; the Preschool WASH standards and the Nutrition Standards for preschools. The first two standards are based on a contemporary holistic child centred vision on ECEC.

With the Law on Preschool Education and Care and national standards, it is clear that **a strong legislative basis for quality ECE services in Georgia exist**. This is also evident form the existing national curriculum for ECE institutions. The national curriculum, at least in theory, provide clear guidance for teachers on what pedagogies and activities they could introduce in their classrooms and what results are expected from their teaching.

However, **in reality the legislative framework and standards are not implemented**, which significantly hinders the quality of available ECE services. As the quality standards for preschool education programme are not actively monitored and enforced, the pedagogies used, and activities implemented are often outdated and do not focus on supporting the important aspects of child's development and growth in the ECE stage.

A lack of implementation of the national standards and pedagogies that should bring positive change for ECE in Georgia are also visible from the case study observations presented in this study. The case study observations were based on two different scales – the ISSA Quality Scale and the Leuven Scales for Well-Being and Involvement. Both of these scales confirm that **the quality of ECE is rather low**. According to the Leuven Scale, child involvement is low as children do not get enough opportunities for active learning, and focus on child well-being is questionable despite most of the teachers offering enough emotional support to children because the activities and pedagogies implemented are very teacher-cantered. The observations form the ISSA scale confirm that pedagogies used are teacher-centred and the child-centred approaches, introduced in by the above-mentioned national standards for ECE, are not observed on the ground.

The observation findings indicates that a lot of challenges still hinder the quality of ECE services in Georgia and prevent the teachers from implementing child-centred pedagogies focusing on child well-being and involvement.

The most important challenge that hinders the quality of ECE services is the **lack of well prepared, supported and competent ECE teachers** that would be capable to implement the needed changes in the ECE field. The available initial and in-service training for ECE teachers is scarce and its quality is questionable. For example, at the moment there are no bachelor's programmes specifically focusing on early childhood education. Most of the teachers have either no educational background in ECE or received their training more than a decade ago,

which means that they lack the competences needed to introduce different child-centred approaches and methodologies that could effectively support development and well-being of different children.

Moreover, due to the lack of resources and knowledgeable experts, there are few professional development opportunities for in-service teachers and even when they exist, they are either of poor quality or not accessible due to the lack of resources.

Other challenges to the quality implementation of the national standards relate to overcrowdedness of (some) preschools, lack of educational materials that support the implementation of the ECE curriculum, lack of suitable and safe physical environments, and lack of parental involvement. The gaps in monitoring practices prevent municipalities and the MoES from designing targeted interventions to improve the quality of ECE.

4.2.2. Recommendations towards improved ECE quality

The interviews and observations have demonstrated that quality of ECE provision faces significant gaps and does not meet the standards and approaches designed at the national level. There are a few dimensions of ECE that need to be addressed to ensure that the local-level ECE provision meets the standards set at the national level.

It is important to note that each of the following sections (monitoring and coordination; professional development) contain recommendations that affect the quality of ECE. Therefore, the current section provides basic recommendations that are elaborated in the following sections.

1. Improve the physical preschool environment

Observations and interviews informed that most preschools lack sufficient educational materials, technology, equipment, lack decent infrastructure (including outside areas such as yards) and are unsafe for preschool-aged children.

The following steps should be taken to improve the preschool environment:

- Develop a new or revised set of *standards for the physical environment and infrastructure of the preschool* (see recommendation 2 under 4.3.2.).
- Invest in *reconstruction and renovation of current preschool institutions*, in line with the new/revised standards.
- Introduce *minimum standards (quantity and quality) for educational materials* available in each preschool and allocate additional budgetary resources for procurement of new, contemporary materials, in line with the curriculum requirements. The minimum standards will indicate what is mandatory to be provided in all kindergartens and it is part of the quality assurance program/process.
- *Arrange spaces of school-based SRP (indoor and outdoor) in accordance with general ECE standards.*
- Ensure that *teachers have all required materials, support and working conditions* to implement the curriculum programmes (i.e. specific materials, access to internet, resource room for teachers)

The following documents are examples of minimum requirements for physical facilities of ECE institutions, that can be taken as inspiration for the review of current Georgian standards and the elaboration of new minimum standards for Georgian ECE buildings:

- "Minimum standards for child-care centers. Childcare regulation" of the Texas Health and Human Services Commission 2021. Particularly subchapter S (safety practices), subchapter T (physical facilities) and subchapter U (indoor and outdoor active play space and equipment).

- The Australian government of Queensland adopted the Education and Care Services Regulation of 2013 with Division 3 of the document detailing the minimum physical environment requirements for preschools.

The Canadian government of Novia Scotia indicates in their Early Learning and Child Care Regulations that: "A facility or a family child-care home must be equipped with indoor play equipment and toys that are:

- developmentally appropriate, safe and sanitary;
- accessible for independent selection; and
- available in a quantity and variety to engage all children in each group of children served".

The Arizona Department of Health Services – Bureau of Child Care Licensing compiled a list of toys and resources that comply with their licensing regulations and address the specific needs of each age group (e.g. small muscle development, creative expression, sensory perception). This can serve as inspiration for Georgian preschools.

The Care Inspectorate Wales (UK) outlines in the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare for children up to the age of 12 years that:

- "Furniture, equipment and toys are provided which are appropriate for their purpose and help to create an accessible and stimulating environment. They are of suitable design and condition, well maintained and conform to BS EN safety standards or relevant Toys (Safety) Regulations where applicable;
- Sufficient suitable toys and play materials are available to provide stimulating activities and play opportunities for the children in all areas of play, learning and development. These are appropriate for the ages and individual developmental needs of the children attending and promote their cultural awareness and equal opportunities".

2. Improve the ECE delivery process

While national standards and ECE curricula include contemporary pedagogies, teachers have not received sufficient training to implement child-centered activities. To improve the delivery of quality ECE, significant investment in pre-service and in-service teacher training is needed. This is elaborated in section 4.4.

3. Enhance collaboration with parents and families

Currently, stakeholders and teachers indicate that parental engagement is limited and perceived as challenge by teachers. However, parental engagement is included in the national standards and particularly in the SRP curriculum.

The following steps should be considered to improve parental engagement:

- Provide *concrete guidelines for teachers* on the diverse ways of building partnerships with parents and their active participation in ECEC and their children's learning and development (e.g., communication tools, settings, purpose).
- Introduce *CPD trainings or online workshops on parental engagement* for ECE teacher and other ECE staff (e.g. preschool leaders).
- Ensure that *the new bachelor's programme incorporates parental engagem*ent in its curriculum both from the theoretical perspective (why is this important?) and the practical perspective (how can parents be engaged?).
- Encourage preschools and preschool unions to *organize events for parents*, informing them about preschool enrolment, preschool education content and processes, and explaining the benefits of close involvement in ECE for their child's development.

In Finland, parents have been involved in curriculum development at various stages. Parents are involved in developing an educational plan for their children, along with ECEC staff. They also jointly draw up a plan on how to achieve these objectives. Such direct engagement further encourages parents to follow the progress of their child, because they are thoroughly familiar with the curriculum plan. Staff also inform parents about the curriculum in the ECEC center, as well as offering parents advice on how they can implement learning activities in a home setting.[456]

Examples of guidelines on how to include parents and caregivers in ECE include:

- "Parental Involvement – A Handbook for childcare providers" from Ireland.
- "Family-School partnership framework" from Australia (particularly Case A).

4.3. Monitoring and coordination

4.3.1. Conclusions on monitoring and coordination

Firstly, **a clear gap exists between what is regulated at the national level and what is implemented at the municipal level**. ECEC law and policy includes provisions for universal access, for holistic curricula and child centred pedagogies, for division of responsibilities and for monitoring of the implementation of the legal and policy framework. However, in practice, stakeholders at all levels and the observations in the case studies indicate that there is limited practical implementation of these provisions.

This disconnection between national and municipal actors is visible in terms of **coordination and communication from the national to the local level**. Namely, national level provisions, standards and guidelines are insufficiently communicated to the municipal level. At the local levels, actors are unsure what the ECE standards mean and what their responsibility entails in relation to implementing and monitoring national level provisions. Similarly, teachers have insufficient knowledge of the ECEC standards and how they can implement them in their pedagogical practice. While some national level stakeholders indicated that some monitoring tools exist, municipal level actors are not aware of them and are tasked to invent their own monitoring mechanisms.

Additionally, there is **lack of communication and data sharing from the local level towards the national level**, resulting in an unclear picture of the government regarding the actual enrolment and attendance of preschool education, and regarding the implementation of the curricula and quality provision of ECEC by preschools. The lack of common monitoring mechanisms also prevents the government from gathering data in uniform, comparable formats, and subsequently designing evidence-informed policies that address concrete needs at the local level.

A comparison of the survey and the interview responses show that **national and local stakeholders have a different picture of the situation of ECE in Georgia**. Local level stakeholders are most optimistic about the quality of preschool education and the curriculum, as well as about ECE monitoring. However, national level stakeholders perceive many issues with ECE quality, monitoring, and coordination, supported by national and independent research on the sector. This discrepancy in perceptions likely relates to the limited knowledge of local actors of the national standards, therefore not being able to compare local practice with national standards. Additionally, local actors have less specialised ECE experience and are therefore unaware of contemporary (international) preschool standards and quality.

[456] https://okm.fi/en/early-childhood-education-and-care-services

The analysis of the current conditions in ECE institutions also indicated that besides of ineffective implementation of national standards for preschool education and lack of competences among ECE teachers, the ECE institutions are overcrowded, their infrastructure is poor, and there is a lack of needed resources, such as educational resources or toys. However, these challenges would be addressed if the national standards were properly implemented, and the teachers had enough competences to implement different educational pedagogies and approaches as the existing legislative framework and the standards already address these issues.

4.3.2. Recommendations for monitoring and coordination

The study identified several challenges in the monitoring and coordination system related to ECE, which can be improved through interventions that would affect both dimensions equally.

1. **Develop a national-level quality monitoring system for use by municipalities and preschool unions.**

Currently, municipalities are responsible for the development and implementation of a monitoring system, based on the national standards. Given the lack of national-local coordination, gaps between the national standards and local implementation, gaps in comparable data on the national level, and gaps in monitoring skills at local level, it is recommended that municipalities do not carry the sole responsibility for developing monitoring tools, but received significantly more guidance from the national level.

Monitoring activities should comprise three distinct elements:

1. *Authorization*: The authorization procedure measures the readiness of a preschool institution to provide ECE, in accordance with national standards. Therefore, this procedure ensures that minimum standards are met.
2. *External monitoring*. Upon authorization, municipalities should monitor regularly whether the preschool setting and ECE content are in line with the national standards. This type of monitoring can be guided by a national monitoring framework and data should be collected nationally to support policymaking.
3. *Self-evaluation*. This type of monitoring is done by the preschool themselves and by preschool unions, and should inform ECE staff to set strategies for their respective preschool and identify areas for improvement.

Authorization

It is important to recognize the purpose and limitations of the authorization tool to be launched this year. The authorization tool serves to measure whether a preschool institution meets the minimum requirements necessary to receive the authorization to initiate preschool education. However, the authorization tool is not necessarily suitable to monitor the implementation of ECE *after* authorization has taken place. It also does not provide detailed insights into how preschools can improve their practice. During a transitional period (until 2030) NCEQE is responsible for the authorization, after this period the local municipalities will have the responsibility and it is important that in the coming years, they will be supported for taking over this responsibility.

The following recommendations can enhance the role of the authorization procedure and its alignment with other monitoring activities.

- *Launch, and enforce the use of, the authorization system* to systematically monitor the situation of ECE institutions. Review the current questionnaires and monitoring tools for the authorization system

to ensure their suitability, relevance, and effectiveness in relation to the national standards. Select, train, and hire staff responsible to support and monitor the authorization process.

- *Ensure alignment between the authorization tool and other external monitoring tools such as unscheduled monitoring visits.* The indicators used for authorization should be aligned with other monitoring tools to avoid confusion. Additionally, it will enhance the understanding of the preschool standards and indicators, since the preschool will continue measuring its performance against the same/similar indicators. Lastly, the subsequent monitoring activities should provide information on whether the preschool keeps their authorization (e.g. renewal) or whether the authorization should be revoked.
- *Include immediate recommendations for improvement in the authorization tool.* While preschools may pass the authorization requirements, the results of the authorization can already inform the preschool of possible areas for improvement. Therefore, the results should be used by preschools – together with municipal officers – to set out a first strategy for the preschool.
- *Engage with preschools on the planning of subsequent monitoring activities.* Upon completion of the authorization procedure, municipalities need to actively engage with preschool to inform them of the external monitoring and self-evaluation activities. Inform preschools of the data they are expected to collect and support preschools in conducting their first self-evaluation.

Examples of licensing (authorization) practices and resources of other countries can be found here:

- New Zealand introduced the "Licensing Criteria for Early Childhood Education & Care Services 2008 and Early Childhood Education Curriculum Framework" with criteria to assess compliance with the New Zealand Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008.
- The United States National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance prepared a document on the Key Competencies for Licensors of Child Care Programs. This document can help the Georgian government to determine how to train staff on executing the authorization procedures. Additionally, the Center developed examples of training programmes to facilitate Professional Development for Child Care Licensors.
- The Canadian government of Ontario developed a Child Care Licensing Manual that provides information about the legislative and regulatory requirements for licensed childcare centres as set out under their legislative framework. In particular, it includes "compliance indicators" covering three categories:
    - *Observation* – information collected during physical observation by the program advisor while conducting an in-person site visit
    - *Documentation* – information collected by reviewing written documents (e.g., reviewing policies and procedures, reviewing files and records)
    - *Interview* – information collected by speaking with licensees and/or staff
- In Washington D.C., United States, preschools need to renew their license every year. The Office of the State Superintendent of Education developed a flowchart demonstrating the licensing process and steps for renewal that can inform the Georgian Ministry of Education on how to organize the authorization procedures.

External monitoring

The purpose of external monitoring is to determine to what extent preschools are providing education in line with the national preschool standards. This information can be used by the MoES and municipalities for budgeting and policymaking. Since this data is supposed to be aggregated and analysed at the national level, the Ministry should take responsibility for developing monitoring frameworks and data collection tools (e.g. using EMIS). Even after decentralization from 2030 onwards, such data collection should continue to be led by the Ministry, since they are the end user of the data.

Given that MoES is already working on a monitoring tool, the following recommendations can be used to support its finalization:

- Develop *ECE quality indicators* at the national level, which are aligned with the national preschool standards, and which are clearly measurable through quantitative and qualitative data collection tools.
- Create a *data collection and reporting template at national level, as well as a national database* for preschools (possibly integrated in EMIS), to ensure that data is collected in a similar manner across the country, and therefore produces comparable data on preschool quality. Municipalities should be responsible to collect data, while the Ministry of Education should analyse data from the municipalities for the purpose of policymaking.
- *Engage municipal and preschool staff in the design of the indicators and data collection templates*, to ensure their understanding, and *pilot the materials* in selected municipalities to determine their relevance and effectiveness.
- *Ensure the capacity-building to improve the monitoring on municipal level. Train municipal and preschool union staff* on the use of the data collection and reporting templates, as well as practical instructions for reporting (frequency, format, addressees).
- The MoES should conduct *regular (at least yearly) assessments of the monitoring data* to identify which quality indicators or which municipalities are evaluated most poorly and design targeted interventions to address these gaps. The results can be discussed in the Coordination Council described below, to jointly identify solutions.
- Develop a *national database of children and preschools*, to monitor systematically how many children are enrolled in ECE and attend ECE, and how many children are not enrolled. Ensure that this database allows for analysis of data by gender and municipality, to enable targeted support for municipalities with lower enrolment levels. The existing EMIS can be expanded for this purpose.

Monitoring and evaluation systems vary a lot across countries due to different governance models in the ECE systems, thus there are different ways in which responsibilities are shared among the national and sub-national level and the level of autonomy that is invested at service level. Decentralized systems deploy more responsibility at the local level and use national regulatory policies (e.g., quality frameworks, standards) to guide the monitoring processes at the municipality level.

Countries conduct monitoring and evaluation processes as part of their Quality Assurance system, which may include external evaluation (accreditation and inspection) and internal evaluation (self-evaluation and quality improvement plans validated by a national/local authority). The Quality Assurance systems are based on quality standards (frameworks) and differentiate between basic requirements for the purpose of accreditation towards higher levels of quality, incentivizing quality improvement.

Useful country examples:

- The National Quality Framework for ECE in Ireland (Siolta), the Guide To Early Years Education Inspection carried out by the Department of Education in MoE Ireland and the Early Years Quality and Regulatory Framework Tusla - Child and Family Agency, carried out by the independent authority for quality assurance, Tusla. A recent initiative in Ireland for quality development in early learning centers is Better Start, based on the national quality frameworks.
- The Finnish "Guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education and care".

The OECD's Starting Strong IV report, focusing on Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care, is a comprehensive report which provides many examples of:

- How quality monitoring systems are set up in different countries

- How monitoring systems are governed
- How the responsibility for monitoring is divided in different countries
- What are countries monitoring
- How structural quality and process quality are monitored
- How are evaluators/assessors trained and on what topics
- How services are monitored (self-evaluation, internal evaluation, external evaluation) and what is monitored in the service.

In addition, UNICEF's publication Quality Standards and Quality Assurance Systems for Pre-primary Education provides guidance on setting up a quality assurance system with examples from different countries

Finland has created a national evaluation system for ECE led by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC). The government has set quality indicators i.e. "desired quality descriptions" which form the basis for the system. FINEEC's task is to conduct national external evaluations of ECEC and provide support for ECEC organisers in their statutory task of self-evaluation and quality management.

Self-evaluation

Besides national-level monitoring for the purpose of measuring alignment with national standards and to support policymaking, monitoring can also support preschools themselves, to assess how they are faring against national standards and to determine how to improve their practice. Prior research has shown that self-evaluation is an effective tool for professional advancement by improving reflection and staff collaboration.[457]

For this purpose, there is a need to develop self-evaluation tools for preschools and to train preschool staff on how to use the tool and how to use the results.

Self-evaluation tools that can be used at the service level differ greatly across countries. The aim of such evaluation is to obtain knowledge of how the quality of the preschool (i.e. its organisation, content and actions) can be developed so that each child receives the best possible conditions for learning and development. In countries where quality standards are in place, the self-evaluation is aligned with the standards. Usually, the self-evaluation is accompanied or includes a plan for quality improvement.

In the Belgian MeMoQ project (Measuring and Monitoring pedagogical Quality), the following steps were taken to set up a self-evaluation system:

- First, a pedagogical framework was conducted with a wide group of stakeholders from policy, the practice and research (the framework can be consulted in English here: https://www.kindengezin.be/img/pedagogische-raamwerk-engelseversie.pdf)
- Based on that framework, scientific instruments for a baseline study were conducted (with focus on process quality)
- Based on the framework and the scientific instrument, an instrument for self-evaluation and an instrument for external monitoring was designed.
- As a result, the three types of instruments (scientific, self-evaluation, external monitoring) have the exact same content and are all based on the pedagogical framework and that framework is made in agreement with diverse stakeholders

The self-evaluation may cover aspects related to:

- Compliance with national regulations

[457] OECD (2015). *Starting Strong IV: Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/publications/starting-strong-iv-9789264233515-en.htm

- Availability of resources, quality of the learning environment/staff environment
- Curriculum implementation
- Quality of staff
- Management/leadership of the service
- Collaboration between staff and between staff and management
- Working conditions (workload, professional development needs, salaries)

Some examples of self-evaluation tools include:

- Self-evaluation tools for staff in ECEC (Belgium): https://expertisecentrum.cego.be/resources/?lang=en
- Centre templates for self-assessment, quality improvement plans and on-site consultation. (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Nova Scotia - Canada): https://www.ednet.ns.ca/earlyyears/documents/quality_matters_centre_templates_en.pdf
- Self-Assessment Tool (Australian Children's Education and Care Authority - Australia): https://www.acecqa.gov.au/assessment/quality-improvement-plans#SAT

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education developed a special self-evaluation tool for ECE staff to reflect on their institution's inclusiveness, focusing on the social, learning and physical environment.

2. **Renew and expand existing standards for preschool environments.**

Currently, sanitation, hygiene and food safety in preschools are monitored on a regular basis using recently developed standards, and the early and preschool education program quality standards provide contemporary standards for the curriculum, methodology and parental/family engagement. However, other elements affecting preschool quality are insufficiently regulated, such as standards for the physical environment, which date from 2001, and inclusive education for which almost no guidelines or policies exist.

The following steps should be taken to expand the standards for preschool education and, as a result, the scope of monitoring activities.

- Conduct a *review of the 2001 technical regulations* affecting preschool infrastructure and determine their relevance in relation to the preschool standards and in relation to international standards for preschool buildings and infrastructure. If needed, implement a *revision of the regulations, or introduce specific standards* for preschool buildings which include minimum standards for buildings, internal infrastructure and safety and security measures.
- Recruit/involve *monitoring staff with sufficient knowledge of engineering and construction* to ensure that reliable conclusions can be drawn on the suitability of preschool buildings.
- Ensure that *new standards and regulations are aligned with the 2016 Preschool Law and preschool standards* in terms of scope, terminology, etc., so that new indicators and tools for monitoring can be integrated into existing monitoring systems.

3. **Aligned with the Preschool Law, design in more detail the responsibilities and coordination levels among the government, municipalities, preschool unions, and preschool institutions**

Currently, monitoring for the purpose of improving ECE quality is hindered by the unclear distribution of responsibilities. Clarification of responsibilities and tasks is hindered by the lack of clear coordination and communication frameworks. Therefore, effective communication between national and local levels can significantly enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of ECE management and the awareness and knowledge base of ECE staff in relation to national developments.

The MoES should take the leading role in clarifying the roles and responsibilities of different actors, and bringing them together to improve coordination and planning. The following steps can be introduced by MoES to improve coordination:

- *Identify the main, core ECE institutions in Georgia, who should be involved in ECE coordination, and set up a working group or coordination council.* The MoE should take the leading role in bringing together representatives of the national and local governments, universities, NGOs and other preschool actors.
- *Develop a concrete, written coordination plan* which outlines in detail the responsibility of each actor involved in the Coordination Council. Ensure that this coordination plan also includes methods for communication and frequency of communication and meetings to discuss developments and challenges affecting ECE in Georgia.
- *Appoint a specific entity (i.e. the MoES) to take responsibility to ensure that communication and coordination takes place* in accordance with the coordination plan. This includes scheduling the meetings, preparing meeting agendas, and collecting input from the ECE actors.
- *Enhance communication* between the Ministries, municipalities, and preschools on the purpose, content, and frequency of monitoring activities, as well as on national-level standards, expectations, and development. For example, MoES could introduce an ECE platform with national-level developments and opportunities for peer-exchange, where ECE staff can find information on new standards, reforms, or policies and where ECE staff can exchange and ask questions to their peers (more information on this topic is included under 4.4.).
- *Evaluate/review on a yearly basis the relevance and effectiveness of the coordination plan* and adjust the roles, responsibilities, and practicalities of coordination accordingly.

The Coordination Plan should be developed jointly by the main ECE actors, such as the Ministry of Education, main education agencies, and municipality representatives. The Plan should comprise concrete steps and actions, such as:

- Who are the main actors/representatives involved in the coordination? Should they form a Coordination Council?
- How often should this Coordination Council meet?
- Who is responsible for organizing these meetings, preparing the agenda, and chairing the sessions?
- What are the other communication tools, channels and frequencies for the working group?
- What are the specific actions and responsibilities to be executed by each actor?
- Who does each actor report to when executing their responsibilities?

Some countries have set up cross-ministerial coordinating committees or task forces. In countries with many ECE actors (e.g. with many NGOs who play a large role) ECE Networks have been set up to connect and coordinate between government and NGOs.

- The Office of the State Superintendent of Education in Washington D.C., United States, set up a State Early Childhood Development Coordinating Council (SECDCC), to improve collaboration and coordination among entities carrying out federally funded and District- funded pre-K and other early childhood programs. Their meetings take place four times per year and past agendas are available online.

4.4. Professional development for ECE staff

4.4.1. Conclusions on professional development opportunities

A second major barrier to the successful and quality provision of ECE relates to the **lack of adequate initial and in-service training for preschool staff**. The effect of limited competence training is visible across various ECE dimensions. Namely, teachers lack the pedagogical competences to implement the child-centred preschool curriculum, to effectively engage parents and other stakeholders, and to monitor and (self-)evaluate classroom practices.

However, **gaps in ECE knowledge and competences applies,** namely, current monitoring and data gathering practices, as well as feedback quality is hindered by a lack of ECE expertise among municipal staff and preschool union/agency staff. Their lack of expertise hinders them from drawing conclusions on educational practice in their preschools and communicating their needs and challenges effectively to the Ministry of Education and other ECE policy actors.

Prior research shows that being competent in ECE is not the sole responsibility of the individual teacher, we need a competent system, with the necessary competences on all level of the ECE system. This diagnostic study on ECEC in Georgia revealed that there are problems on different levels of the system (national, municipal, training institutions, and teacher level) regarding the competences of ECE staff.

A. Teacher level

On the level of the teacher the diagnostic study shows that the teachers are not well prepared for their job, and especially to implement a child-centred pedagogy. The observations in the case study, as well as interviews, show that teachers lack the necessary competences to work in a holistic child-centred way, to increase the parental participation, to work in a context of diversity and to monitor their own practice.

However, the observations pointed out that teachers are generally kind and motivated to work with the children, and the survey found large interest in CPD among teachers. Therefore, there is a clear opportunity for upskilling the current workforce.

B. Level of the municipality

Our study also reveals a lack of **knowledge and competences** among municipal staff and preschool union/agency staff. They miss the necessary competences in monitoring and data gathering practices, and general ECEC expertise. Their lack of expertise hinders them from drawing conclusions on educational practice in their preschools and communicating their needs and challenges effectively to the Ministry of Education and other ECEC policy actors.

C. Level of the training institutions

At the moment, there is no initial training on bachelor level with a focus on ECEC, and the teachers who have a qualification received their initial training several years ago, which was teacher-centred and overly focused on knowledge acquirement. In these initial trainings the students were not coached on how to implement the theoretical knowledge into practice. Therefore, the gap in the competences of current teachers is a direct result of the lack of adequate educational preparation for the ECE workforce.

Current teachers did not receive training on contemporary pedagogical approaches that start from a holistic, scientifically inspired and child-centred approach. The teacher-centred approach was the main source of

inspiration of the course they followed. Therefore, it is not surprising that the results of the ISSA scale observation (which is measuring the child centeredness of teaching approaches) are so poor.

The universities are working on a new bachelor training. UNICEF gives them support to get more information on contemporary pedagogical theories that start from a child centred holistic pedagogy and to help them to set up a new training that is based on a competence approach in which theory and practice are linked.

From the survey we learned that there is a lot of interest in professional development opportunities in the ECEC field. However, the demand is not always met, and the available CPD offer does not satisfy the needs of ECEC professionals or their interests. The available CPD seem to be of rather questionable quality and do not cover a lot of topics that are very important for the ECEC personnel. It seems that most of CPD is based on transmitting knowledge and here we see again that there is no link between theory and practice. Besides the institutions have not always enough autonomy to develop their own policy on CPD for their teachers.

The institutes responsible for CPD work mostly on the municipal level and some municipalities have not enough knowledge about ECEC to organise CPD's that are relevant for the practitioners and are effective to improve practice. In municipalities with a lot of ethnic minorities the language barrier often prevents ECEC professionals from participating in available professional development activities or use the available resources for self-learning.

The lack of CPD opportunities is a particular barrier for the implementation of the SRP curriculum and pedagogies since the SRP was designed and introduced while most current teachers were already in service. As the current study has shown, teachers lack the skills and knowledge to implement the SRP in a child-centred manner. Since the SRP includes new pedagogical, child-centred approaches not priorly introduced in pre-service training, current teachers need to receive in-service training to adopt the SRP approaches. Therefore, the effective implementation of the SRP relies not only on the pre-service teacher reforms, but also on the introduction of a comprehensive CPD approach.

There are also some interesting initiatives on mentoring or coaching. But most of the pedagogical mentors (methodologists) who are responsible to coach the teachers do not have a training in a scientifically inspired method of coaching. Recent research reveals that pedagogical coaching by a specialised coach is the most effective way to implement change and improve the quality of ECEC, while classical trainings based on knowledge transmission have very few impact on improving pedagogical practice. (Eurofound, 2015, 2018). An important challenge is the coaching of the teachers who work in the SRP's. Here again it is important to choose for forms of SRP that make the link between theory and practice.

D. Level of the national government

On the government level, many interesting documents have been published the last years. Our diagnostic research reveals that there is a need to transmit the information and knowledge from these important documents to the municipal level. There is no systematic approach to increase professionalization in the ECEC field. There is a need for a comprehensive policy from the national government towards CPD and initial training and qualification requirements. There are some requirements towards qualification and professional development, but they are rarely enforced and requirements on qualifications and professional development tend to vary between the municipalities.

The challenges related to the professional development of municipal workers focusing on ECEC is often disregarded. To ensure that they can better support ECEC teachers and ensure better standards in ECEC they should have relevant training available as well. From European research (Sharmahd, et al. , 2017) we know that professional learning communities in which representatives of national government organisations and

ECEC workers from the municipalities meet each other on a regular base are an effective way to give the local ECEC workers a sense of ownership over the policy documents.

E. International level

International organisations and non-state actors, including UNICEF, the World Bank, World Vision and Mac Georgia are also more and more actively involved in the ECEC field in Georgia, which can partly account for the lack of financial and human resources of the public institutions. UNICEF, for example, played an important role in assisting the universities with the development of the new bachelor programmes focusing on ECEC. The organisation has provided a lot of guidance and advice in planning the programmes, and in including different aspects that were disregarded before, such as linking theory to practice, and suggested different ways how the responsibilities between the different actors involved can be divided.

Next to the challenges regarding the professionalization of the ECEC workers, the **poor working conditions** are another major concern for the quality of ECEC in Georgia. Teachers earn about one third of an average salary in Georgia. It is important to consider that the preparation of a new bachelor's degree based on contemporary pedagogical approaches will have no effect to attract students if the wage will not increase.

ECE teachers have long working hours and very few child-free hours. The groups in most centres are too large and this in combination with a workforce preparation that is poor, hinders teachers from providing quality education in ECEC. The mismatch between low salary, high responsibilities and difficult working conditions makes the job of teacher or assistant teacher not attractive.

Besides ECEC institutions do not have sufficient resources or independence to spend time on attracting and retaining staff. A significant share (40,6 per cent) of municipalities do not have elaborated human resource management policies, public kindergartens, especially in smaller towns, do not have the right to select and hire their own personnel.

4.4.2. Recommendations regarding professional development

The study has highlighted and concluded that a core challenge to quality ECE provision is the lack of knowledge and skills of ECE staff regarding contemporary, child-centered pedagogies. Therefore, the improvement of pre-service and in-service teacher training is an absolute indispensable precondition for the improvement of ECE quality. There is also a need for data gathering about which kind of competences the teachers are missing for the moment

1. Continue the current work on, and investment in the new ECE bachelor's degree

The initiatives that have been taken by UNICEF and the nine Georgian universities to start up a new bachelor's degree is an important step forward. This new bachelor's degree on ECEC need to start from a competences approach that links knowledge and skills, theory, and practice. It needs to be inspired by contemporary pedagogical theories that are child centered and are scientific inspired

The following steps should be taken to finalise the new programme:

- Ensure that the *content and practices taught in the new programme are aligned with the curriculum, pedagogies, terminology, concepts and standards that are presented in the national preschool standards*. In fact, training on the national standards should be an integral element of the bachelor's curriculum. The bachelor's programme should ensure that new teachers have in-depth awareness of the ECE programme as designed on the national level.

- Invest in *the capacity building of the lecturers of the new bachelors degree* especially in the teachers that are responsible for coaching the students during internships.
- Integrate *practical training, internships, preschool visits, and other hands-on experiences* in the bachelor's programme to provide student teachers with the opportunity to practice the theoretical concepts and receive feedback to their approaches. Invest in *pilot centres with high-quality ECE* where students can do their internships.
- *Promote connections and exchange with universities in Europe providing high quality ECE teacher education*, to exchange experiences, introduce exchange programmes for students and collaborate on joint research projects in the field of ECE. This ensures the continuous updating of universities' awareness of contemporary ECE approaches that can subsequently be absorbed into university courses.

There are different initial trainings in Europe that succeeded in linking theory and practice (Seepro, 2017). The new bachelor training *Pedagogy for the young child* in Belgium is a good example where more than one fourth of the ECTS points are reserved for internship. Pedagogy for the young Child is a competence-based training, meaning that knowledge and skills are intertwined.

The initial training is composed of clusters in which lecturers of different theoretical courses are working together with the practice facilitator. Each cluster is based on Pedagogical Standards (a pedagogical training profile) and is in alignment with a pedagogical framework that integrated theory and practice. Examples of inspiring pedagogical frameworks are the Leuven scale of Wellbeing and Involvement, The Step-by-Step approach, and the North-Italian approach of Documentation. By using the same pedagogical framework, the lecturers and the practice facilitator develop a common vision. It is also crucial that the practice facilitator has experience in high quality ECEC practice.

The following two examples are clusters in which lecturers work together with practice facilitators:

1. **Cluster: Watching children**:

- *Lectures and courses:*
    - course of child development
    - course on working children with special needs,
    - course on a contemporary pedagogical approach, e.g. Wellbeing and Involvement or Documentation approach.
- *practice facilitator*: importance of observation, practical exercises, documentation, portfolio's, self-assessment of pedagogical approach of student.

2. **Cluster: Growing up within a family**

- *Lectures and course*:
    - child development
    - positive parenting and consulting
    - contemporary pedagogical approaches, e.g., Step by Step
- *practice facilitator*: importance of observation, tools to work with parents, organising activities for parents and children

3. Invest in a comprehensive continuous professional development training programme, accessible to all ECE staff

Besides guaranteeing the quality of new ECE teaching staff through the bachelor's degree programme, the current teacher workforce should be upskilled to ensure that they have the capacity to provide quality education.

The following steps should be introduced to strengthen in-service training.

- Set up a *system of training centres that provide CPD in the field of ECE*. The training programme should be based on ongoing developments in ECE pedagogies, aligned with national preschool standards, and centres should cooperate closely with universities and other organizations providing the pre-service education.
- Introduce a *CPD financing and organization model* that allows for all ECE staff to participate in at least a minimum level of additional training. The model can differentiate between courses that are mandatory for ECE staff (e.g. when new curricula and pedagogies are introduced such as the SRP) and those who can be attended voluntarily. For example, ECE teachers could receive vouchers to attend a certain number of voluntary courses for free.
- Ensure that in-service training also meets *minimum quality standards*, for example by setting qualification requirements for the trainers, and introducing practical training as part of the CPD.
- Ensure that -besides ECE teachers- methodologists, *ECE managers and all other relevant staff participate in professional development*. Tailor ECE CPD programmes for non-teaching staff to their specific needs and roles.

The Step by Step Program, which was implemented in 29 countries across Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, provides a good example of how to shift towards and scale-up child-centred pedagogy in ECEC (for more information: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264896027_Stepping_into_the_Future_The_History_of_the_Step_by_Step_Program)

Key components of the program include:

- provide a package of resources that will enable the change (e.g., curriculum, training modules for training staff, training modules on mentoring the staff, quality program standards and tools for assessing quality)
- set-up and invest in a professional development system that supports the change in practice (starting from a small scale and then scaling-it up)
    - build the capacity of master teacher trainers (through trainings, study visits to child-centred settings abroad) to train practitioners on child centred pedagogy – design a training program
    - train mentors from among the trainers – design a mentoring program
    - train and mentor practitioners from the first cohort of ECEC centers so that they become knowledge and practice-resources for other settings
    - train trainers, mentors, teachers, preschool leaders on quality standards
    - ongoing monitoring, provide needs-based training and mentoring for the teachers to achieve quality standards
- training for pre-service training providers (leading to a new curriculum for pre-service)

4. Introduce Professional Learning Communities (PLC), coaching and peer-learning opportunities

Coaching or mentoring in the workplace should be supported, since this kind of CPD has the possibility to improve the pedagogical practice with children and parents. However, to be effective, coaching practices should be implemented using renowned approaches validated by research and inspired by ECE research. Additionally, PLC's involving local and national ECE staff and stakeholders have proven to be effective for transmitting information about important laws, regulations, and standards from the national level to the local. PLC's can give a sense of ownership and involvement to the local ECEC workers which motivates them to implement the national regulations into practice. ECE teachers can furthermore use such as system to discuss their challenges and good practices.

The following steps can help to set up such peer-learning and coaching systems:

- Develop one *online platform* (as mentioned under 4.3.2.) that can facilitate communication and exchange between the national and the local level. This includes regulations on safety and security, curriculum and pedagogical approaches, parental participation, inclusive education and management and monitoring of quality. The platform should include a dedicated forum or other tool for communication between ECE actors, particularly teachers.
- *Encourage use of the platform* by developing interactive tools, videos, links, self-assessments, webinars, and CPD opportunities that platform visitors can use to improve their practice.
- *Identify exemplary ECE staff* (or provide additional CPD training for interested ECE staff) who are well-versed in the child-centered pedagogical approach and can provide coaching or peer-learning support to other ECE staff, particularly new ECE teachers. An online platform (e.g. the PLC) can be used to connect coaches with new teachers who request support.

In many countries, each NGO that is involved in CPD in ECEC has its own website with tools, books, photos, and videos that can be used in coaching or other professional development. However, for the ECEC institutions it is difficult to have an overview of all the tools for CPD that are available. Therefore, it is important that in the Georgian context the MoE invests in an on-line platform that gathers all the tools in Georgian language that are illustrating how the Standards can be put in practice. The MoES can take the initiative to do this or collaborate with another public or private partner (e.g., NGO, research-based or professional development-based institution). Both options can work provided that the tools, resources and videos are free available and are not too theoretical but illustrate inspiring practice.

Although focusing more on primary schools, the CPD example of South Africa can provide inspiration for the ECE sector as well. In case of the South African Council for Educators platform:

- Both providers of CPD programmes and teachers themselves are brought together by an online platform
- The programs of CPD providers have to go through an endorsement procedure in order to be featured on the platform. This ensures quality.
- Once a program has been endorsed, it receives a certain amount of 'study credits'
- Teachers have to compile a professional development portfolio with different types of CPD activities (such as self-study reading books and magazines, school-based meetings, external trainings and PLC, etc….)

Additionally, the following platform comprises various educational resources for parents/caregivers and teachers on a specific didactic theme (gender equality): https://southafrica.vvob.org/news/open-educational-resources-promote-gender-equality-early-childhood-development

Although not focused on ECE, this example of a digital professional learning community for school staff led by the Ministry of Education in New Zeeland could be inspirational.

5. Improve remuneration and working conditions

While attracting new, highly skilled ECE professionals is of great importance to enhance ECE quality, the salary and working conditions of ECE staff do not create an attractive job profile. Once the qualification requirements are enhanced, and the bachelor's degree programme is launched, salaries and conditions need to improve to match the requirements of staff.

The following steps should be implemented to enhance the attractiveness of the ECE sector:

- Prepare a *clear remuneration policy* with minimum salaries per qualification and level of experience, as well as opportunities for salary raises. The policy should be designed so that not only qualification

requirements but also earlier acquired competences (for experienced workers) influence the salary ranges and raises.
- Introduce a *system of yearly evaluations* of the teachers. In case of several positive evaluations the teachers can get an increase of their salary after a certain number of years.
- *Introduce child-free hours* at set moments to ensure sufficient space for teachers to reflect on their practice with colleagues.
- *Reduce and control the number of children per classroom* in line with the adult /child ratio. Besides ECE quality, over crowdedness negatively affects the working environment of the teacher.
- *Provide more visibility to the work teachers are doing* and importance of ECE (meetings, campaigns, social media presentation etc.)
- Ensure that *teachers have agency*, include them in decision making process on the level of kindergarten, municipality, and on national level – inform them and consult with them when new curricula or standards are introduced.
- Introduce *clear pathways for professional progress,* selecting the best teachers to be mentors, offering sufficient free CPD opportunities and incentives for participation in CPD.

4.5. The School Readiness Programme

4.5.1. Conclusions

Throughout this report, the SRP has been discussed as particular element of interest. Although there is a specific curriculum and pedagogical approach designed at the national level, the study found that most issues affecting ECE in general, apply equally to the SRP.

First and foremost, the study found that the SRP is currently not implemented as foreseen on the national level. While specific activities are implemented by teachers, the study found that the designed holistic, child-centred pedagogical approach and preschool-school transitory activities are not carried out. There are a variety of factors hindering the SRP implementation, most of which relate to ECE implementation in general.

- Current *ECE staff are not trained* on the SRP methodology and pedagogy, and therefore use teacher-centred approaches for the SRP. Therefore, the SRP currently witnessed in preschools does not reflect the SPR designed at the national level.
- However, many ECE staff are unfamiliar with the national standards and expectations that affect their work on the SRP. Therefore, *ECE staff are often unaware about their SRP teaching performance and needs for additional training*. Namely, many teachers believe they are, in fact, fully implementing the SRP programme, while the research findings suggest otherwise.
- Insufficient use of the child-centred SRP pedagogy by ECE staff poses a risk for the *schoolification of preschool education* and heightened focus on academic skills. This risk is higher in school based SRP settings, where the learning environment, teaching practice, and presence of older children already create a more school-like academic environment rather than a preschool (play-focused) environment.
- Many *ECE institutions do not have the resources and educational materials* to create a suitable learning environment for the SRP.
- *Municipalities and Preschool Unions lack the human and financial resources, materials, and skills to monitor* the quality of the SRP and guide preschools with its implementation.

The SRP is therefore strongly affected by the challenges mentioned under point 1, namely the gap between national-level provisions and local-level implementation. The opportunity in this regard is that the provisions for the SRP are already in place: stronger support from the national level to the municipalities, regular exchange

between the national and local level, and additional CPD training for ECE staff will directly affect the SRP quality, without introducing national-level reforms.

4.5.2. Recommendations regarding the School Readiness Programme

During the current study, the research was unable to provide a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities of the national SPR curriculum content, because the SRP as designed on the national level is not implemented on the local level. Therefore, at the moment, recommendations towards the SRP are aimed predominantly at the delivery process of the curriculum, and at monitoring and evaluating the implementation (when done correctly). If these recommendations are implemented, the Georgian government can assess the need for national-level content revisions of the programme.

1. **Provide comprehensive teacher training on the pedagogies behind the SRP curriculum and its activities**

The core gap in the current SRP is the lack of ECE teachers' competences (skills and knowledge) about child-centered pedagogies necessary to implement the SRP in line with national standards. The effective preparation of teachers during initial and in-service training is crucial to ensure the full, quality implementation of the SRP.

Besides the general recommendations for teacher professional development in section 4.4., the following steps should be taken to enhance the skills of ECE staff:

- Initial teacher training should include a *comprehensive course on the SRP*, focusing not only on the activities, but also on the concepts of SRP, schoolification, school's readiness to welcome young children, and the pedagogical approaches that enable the smooth transition from preschool to school.
- Initial training should focus on the link between theory and practice (a competence approach) include mentoring during *internships and practical exercises* where students use child-centered pedagogies and receive feedback to their practice.
- A *country wide CPD programme* should be implemented to familiarize all current ECE staff with the SRP, not only theoretically, but also through practical exercises that allow teachers to implement the SRP pedagogies that are child-centered and receive feedback from a pedagogical coach or mentor.
- *Regular communication* from the national level and municipal level to ECE institutions should take place, informing about changes or updates in the national preschool standards, suggestions for SRP improvement, and other information that can support ECE staff with the SRP implementation and raise awareness of the national standards and provisions.
- A *peer-learning, mentoring and/or exchange programme for the SRP* should be implemented that allow ECE staff (including managerial staff) to share experience, illustrate, share, and discuss good practices, and pose questions for discussion, and with PD activities that bring together preschool and primary school teachers (leaders) to discuss child-centered pedagogical approaches, appropriate for young children. P*rofessional Learning Communities are an effective form of CPD to realize this.*

2. **Conduct relevant and systematic monitoring of the SRP implementation at the local level, using national-level monitoring tools**

To assess effectively how the SRP is implemented and which factors cause barriers, the monitoring of the SRP should follow monitoring guidelines and indicators that are set at the national level, and therefore facilitate comparison across the country.

The following steps should be taken to improve SRP monitoring:

- Ensure that the *SRP standards are aligned (e.g., terminology, components, understanding of quality) with the general preschool quality standards*, to facilitate comparison and reduce confusion at the local level.
- Design *concrete quality indicators, aligned with the SRP standards*, which are measurable through quantitative and qualitative assessment tools, and comparable across municipalities and preschools.
- Provide *guidelines and trainings on the indicators and monitoring tools* for municipal ECE officials and Preschool Unions, to ensure that monitoring staff have sufficient knowledge about the SRP programme and sufficient monitoring skills to provide judgments against the quality indicators.
- Design a *national-level database* with preschools and school based SRPs, where data against the indicators is collected (this database can be combined with general ECE statistics and monitoring tools). Conduct regular reviews on progress against the indicators and assess where implementation gaps exist (for the purpose of providing additional support).
- Allocate *additional human and financial resources* for municipalities to implement regular monitoring and reporting.

3. **Improve the SRP learning environment, both in preschools and in school-based SRP settings**.

Similar to ECE institutions in general, there are various challenges related to the learning environment that hinder the effective and quality implementation of the SRP.

- Develop a list (quantity and quality) in collaboration with directors and teachers inside a professional Learning Community of *minimum educational materials* that are necessary for the quality implementation of the SRP. Budgetary arrangements should be put in place to ensure that each preschool institution or municipality can procure these materials.
- Ensure that *SRP settings comprise ECE materials and environments for play, as well as materials to support the transition to school*. SRP settings should limit academic or school-based materials and environments.
- *It would be advisable to provide meals especially for disadvantaged children* if the school infrastructure can provide this.

For school-based settings, the following specific steps should be considered.

- Ensure that the *SRP setting within the school is sufficiently separated from the rest of the school*, to ensure that the play-based preschool setting can be maintained and is not influenced by more teacher-centered, academic learning settings common at schools. Additionally, the SRP groups should have access to facilities (e.g. bathrooms) suitable to young children.
- Ensure that *SRP staff are trained in contemporary and scientifically inspired ECE pedagogies* to avoid a schoolification of the ECE curriculum. This is a high risk that occurs when SRP at school is provided by primary school staff instead of ECE staff.

The **School Readiness Program - Example from the Slovenian education system**

In Slovenia, the reform of the education system in 1996 created a change in the education system structure, extending the compulsory basic school years from 8 to 9. The extension of the duration meant the integration of the school readiness program, previously implemented by kindergartens, into the compulsory basic school[458]. According to the reform, the starting age of basic school changed from age 7 to age 6-years and the one year of school readiness programs was included with significant curricular adaptations.

[458] Compulsory education in Slovenia comprises both primary and lower secondary education within the Basic School.

The new **Act on Basic School Education** goal was to bridge the gap between children entering the first grade who have been enrolled in kindergarten and attended the school readiness programs and those who did not attend kindergarten at all or have been enrolled only in a short preparatory program. In the old structure of the education system in Slovenia, the school readiness program was delivered in the last year of kindergarten for the age group 6-7-years-old. To ensure that the change will promote a child-centred approach and a smooth transition to school, a few important elements were taken into account:

The SRP curriculum:

- The new curriculum for the first grade was carefully prepared and adapted to the age and development of the children. School teachers and kindergarten/preschool educators participated in preparing curricula with their suggestions and experiences. In particular, they took into account the good experience from the program of compulsory preparation for school (school readiness program) and the first grade of the previous eight-year basic school system.

SRP Staff:

- For the first grade of basic school, **besides a schoolteacher, an additional professional was required in the classroom**. The Act introduced the profile of a kindergarten/preschool educator as a second teacher in the first-grade classroom. The schoolteacher and kindergarten/preschool educator should have at least ½ school day time when their working program overlapped, meaning that at least for half a school day they were in the classroom together – planning, organizing, and facilitating activities and learning for children.

Training of staff:

- The new educational reform with the adopted Act in 1996 set the transition period from the old to **a new system over three school years** between 1999 and 2003. In the school year 2003/2004, all basic schools in Slovenia transitioned to a new structure of the education system. During the transition period, schoolteachers working in the first grades had to acquire additional knowledge and competencies to implement the new curricula and work with younger children. The new curricula introduced play-based learning, learning centers, or play areas equipped with developmentally appropriate toys and didactic materials stimulating learning, development, and growth in friendly and warm environments.

Learning environment:

- In addition to appropriately qualified teachers, the schools must also have appropriate space conditions for the first-graders:
    - classrooms with adapted furniture,
    - developmentally and age-appropriate didactic toys and materials,
    - playgrounds,
    - special entrances to the schools, etc.
- Schools must ensure the mentioned conditions by the Act with the financial support of municipalities and the Ministry of Education to implement the first-grade program for children in the basic school.

Assessment:

- The educational reform also introduced the new concept of school assessment, stipulating that in the first three grades of basic school, teachers use **descriptive assessments and not marks**, which also meant that children would not repeat a year but graduate to the next grade in the beginning of the new school year.

Legal documents:

1. The Basic School Act (ZOsn) - Zakon o osnovni šoli (ZOsn) (pisrs.si)

2. Decree on the gradual introduction of the 9-year primary school program Odredba o postopnem uvajanju programa 9-letne osnovne šole (pisrs.si)
3. Single-structure primary and lower secondary education | Eurydice (europa.eu)
4. Organization and Financing of Education Act (Ur. l. RS, št. 16/07 – UPB5, 36/08, 58/09 (64/09 popr., 65/09 popr.), 20/11, 40/12 – ZUJF, 57/12 – ZPCP – 2D, 47/15, 46/16, 49/16 – popr., 25/17 – ZVaj, 123/21),

Annex 1. Research Framework

The following research questions were developed during the Inception Stage, which formed the basis for the study.

TABLE 14. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

DIMENSION	RESEARCH QUESTIONS
ECE supply and demand	- What share of ECE-aged children in Georgia attend preschool? - What share of female and male children in Georgia attend preschool? - What share of children with special educational needs attend preschool? - What are the main gaps in the supply of preschool services? - Why do some children not attend ECE services? - Which groups of children have less access to quality preschool services and to SRP in particular? (age and gender based) - What are the main reasons for low access to preschool services and to SRP? - What measures have been implemented in the past three years to enhance access to preschool services SRP and the offer of SRP?
ECE professional development	- What educational backgrounds do ECE professionals have? - What are the qualification requirements to various positions with ECE and how does that compare to the international practices? - Is there a gap between the requirements for qualifications as defined by law, municipal decrees and ECE standards, and the qualifications of existing personnel? - What professional development needs do ECE professionals have, particularly for the implementation of SRP? - Are the programs of the new BA initial training for ECE (that are developed by six universities) in alignment with international standards? Is the link between theory and practice strong enough? - Does the BA programme also train competences that the teachers of SRP need for their job? - How are ECE professionals trained to implement the SRP and are they competent enough in this regard? - What continuing professional development opportunities exist for ECE professionals, particularly in relation to SRP? - What are the current gaps in ECE professional development systems for the provision of quality ECE and SRP? - How can more qualified staff be attracted to work in ECE?
ECE quality monitoring system	- What monitoring system for ECE is currently in place, including procedures and responsibilities of MoES and its staff? - How do the national government and local governments monitor the quality of ECE and of SRP in particular?

	- What quality assurance and control tools, guidelines, trainings and other resources are available for the staff responsible to monitor, assess and support quality in preschools and SRP in particular? - Are these tools differentiating between the quality of the curriculum, pedagogies, educational resources, physical environment, safety measures, infrastructure, and other elements of ECE and SRP? - Do these tools take the Best Interest of the Child into consideration? - Does the GoG have sufficient financial, human, and material resources to monitor the quality of ECE and SRP in particular?
Utilisation and coordination mechanisms for ECE	- Who are the main actors at national and regional and local level involved in ECE and SRP and what are their functions? - How do different ECE actors interact and coordinate tasks and responsibilities amongst each other? - How efficient and effective are the current methods of coordination, particularly for the implementation of the SRP? - What gaps or overlaps exist in current ECE coordination mechanisms and how does that affect the implementation of ECE and SRP in particular? - What are the challenges for the implementation of SRP at the municipal level and government / ministry level?
Quality and content of the SRP	- To what extent do preschools implement (supply) the SRP curriculum? - What are the main barriers for preschools to implement (supply) the SRP curriculum? - Do the current preschool and school-based SRP meet current national preschool quality standards? - Do the current SRP meet international preschool standards? - Is there enough focus on the holistic development of the young child in SRP and in available ECE resources? - How does the SRP link with primary school, but avoid schoolification of ECE? - What preschool education trends have occurred in recent years that should be reflected in the SRP? - How can the SRP be adjusted to reflect current standards in ECE? - Does the SRP provide for a transition period before the implementation of the conditions set by law and standards in the early education system? What recommendations can be added to the program for this period? - Do preschools and schools provide sufficient educational resources and a suitable learning environment to support the SRP? - Do preschool teachers facilitate sufficient quality interactions with and between children? - Do preschools and schools provide a safe and suitable physical and mental environment for the child enrolled in the SRP?
ECE remuneration	- What are the remuneration policies for ECE professionals and how do they compare to minimum wages and the job requirements? - How do ECE professionals perceive their remuneration? - Does remuneration differ for professionals involved in the SRP? - What other elements affect remuneration? - Is the current remuneration policy efficient?

	- How can and should remuneration be improved?

Annex 2. Interview participants

National-level interviews were carried out with the following organisations:

Organisation
MInistry of Education and Science (x2)
National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (x2)
National Center for Teacher Professional Development (x2)
National Association of Preschool Education
Kivitas Georgika
ESIDA
Georgia Innovation, Inclusion and Quality Project, World Bank (x2)
UNICEF
National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement
Ilia State University
Local NGO
MAC Georgia
Akhaltsikhe State University
Kutaisi State University
Telavi State University
Ministry of Education and Science of Adjara
Tbilisi Kindergarten Management Agency
EMIS
Sokhumi State University
Ministry of Education and Science
Local NGO
Local NGO, Tbilisi State University
Batumi State University
World Vision
The Georgian Portage Association
National Food Agency
Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia

Annex 3. Case study samples

The observation sample consist of 43 groups, settings spread over 7 case studies. In total 95 adults (teachers and teacher assistants) and 542 children were included in the sample. Observations were carried out between 15 February 2022 and 15 March 2022. Both age groups and mixed groups are observed.

In case of the ISSA Scale, the observations focused on teachers. In total, 43 teachers were observed. The data collection for the Leuven Scale contains 1073 observations of well-being and 1074 observations for involvement and collected by 8 different observers.

There are large differences in the group size of the observed groups, ranging from 4 to 30 children in one group. On average, there are 12 children in the group. This means that in most groups all children have been observed at least twice. The number of adults (incl. teacher assistants) for a group is between 1 to 3 adults. In general, there is one adult for 6 children, but the adult child ratio also varies a lot (between 1.67 to 18 children for one adult).

TABLE 15. OVERVIEW OF THE LEUVEN SCALE SAMPLE

		N
Sample	N case studies	7
	N settings	29
	N groups	43
	N observations	1073 (well-being) -1074 (involvement)
	N observers	8
	N children	542
	N adults	95
N children/group	M (SD)	12.60 (6.47)
	Min.-Max.	4 - 30
N adults/group	M (SD)	2.21 (.60)
	Min.-Max.	1 – 3
N Children/adult (ACR)	M (SD)	5.97 (3.29)
	Min.-Max.	1.67 - 18

Annex 4. Observation methods

Leuven Scales for Well-being and Involvement

Both well-being and involvement are observed with the Leuven Well-being Scale and Leuven Involvement Scale, developed at the Centre for Experiential Education, KU Leuven. These scales focuses on the experiences in children while being in the preschool setting and participating in all activities. By using the Leuven scales, observers i) get an insight of child-orientedness of the preschool practice, measuring the effectiveness of learning (indicated by the levels of involvement) and ii) the degree to which children feel at ease in the setting (indicated by the levels of well-being).

a. Process variables

Well-being and involvement are two essential, distinguishable variables. They are not seen as characteristics of the learners, as competences and dispositions are. Both well-being and involvement are the result of a complex interplay between two entities: the child with its background and individual profile on the one hand, and the pedagogical approach and all the characteristics of the learning environment – i.e. at the level of the ECE setting – on the other.

b. What is well-being?

Well-being is defined as a state in which one feels like a 'fish in water'. The prevailing mood is pleasure: They have fun, enjoy each other's companies and feel at home in their environments. They radiate vitality as well as relaxation and inner peace. They display an open and receptive attitude towards their environment. They are spontaneous and feel comfortable, truly being themselves. All this indicates that their emotional well-being is in order and that their basic needs are satisfied. A low level of well-being is a cause for concern. It means that a child in its present situation is under pressure because the environment is not meeting one or more of his/her basic needs and/or because the child lacks the equipment (competences, dispositions, emotional health) to cope with that environment. A low level of well-being can be considered a condition that can eventually affect emotional health and become a structural problem.

c. What is involvement?

Involvement is a wonderful state of mind characterized by extreme concentration, uninterrupted attention, total absorption, lack of awareness of time, a high level of motivation, interest, fascination and perseverance, intense mental activity, vivid sensations and an embodied sense of meaning, deep satisfaction stemming from fulfilment of the exploratory drive. Children act at the very limits of one's capabilities, the 'zone of proximal development'. With all these characteristics, involvement can be considered one of the most direct and reliable signals for the occurrence of deep level learning. The exploratory drive, as a factor within the child, is a great facilitator for involvement.

d. Assessment of well-being and involvement

Well-being and involvement are assessed using a five-point scale, where also the values in between can be used. Ratings lower than 2.5 are considered as low scores, rating between 2.5 and 3.5 are considered as moderate and ratings higher than 3.5 are considered as high.

TABLE 16. OVERVIEW OF THE SCALE LEVELS FOR THE LEUVEN WELL-BEING SCALE AND LEUVEN INVOLVEMENT SCALE

	THE LEUVEN WELL-BEING SCALE	THE LEUVEN INVOLVEMENT SCALE
Score 1	>1 Outspoken signs of distress	>1 No activity
Score 2	>2 Signs of distress predominate	>2 Interrupted activity
Score 3	>3 A mixed picture, no outspoken signs	>3 Activity without intensity
Score 4	>4 Signs of enjoyment predominate	>4 Activity with intense moments
Score 5	>5 Outspoken signs of enjoyment	>5 Continuous intense activity

In the course of 1.5 hours, 25 observations are carried out, using a strict protocol to exclude subjectivity. Data are collected through observation of a sample of children from a group during consecutive two-minute episodes per child (+ one minute to process the observed info). A score on the well-being and involvement scale is assigned during each episode.

e. Explanations for the observed levels of well-being and involvement

In a second step, observes seek explanations for the observed levels of well-being and involvement, using a open framework for analysis, where elements that contribute positively or negatively towards the scores of well-being and involvement can be noted down (eg. a sensitive teacher will have a positive impact on well-being-scores, a challenging learning activity will impact positively on involvement-scores, a good organisation of 'time on task' will be reflected in higher involvement scores,…). This framework consist of five categories

- the offer: how 'rich' or well-equipped is the learning environment (both in offered materials and activities during the observation)
- the group climate: to what degree do children feel at home in the group (visible in relations between children and between adult(s) and children)
- the degree of freedom: how much freedom and autonomy do children have?
- the organisation: how effectively is the day organised and is it taken into account the needs of all children?
- the guidance of the teacher: how much empathy is there while interacting with children?

ISSA Quality Scale

ISSA's Instrument for Assessing Quality Practices in Early Childhood Education Services is based on ISSA's Definition of Quality Pedagogy, developed and used extensively in more than 27 countries in Central Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. The *Instrument* covers 36 indicators around the following areas:

- Interactions,
- Family and Community,
- Inclusion, Diversity and Values of Democracy,
- Assessment and Planning,
- Teaching Strategies, and
- Learning Environment.

The Assessment Instrument focuses primarily on staff competences.

The Instrument for Assessing Quality Practices is a shorter version of The Professional Development Tool for Improving Quality of Practices in Kindergarten and the Professional Development Tool for Improving Quality of Practices in Primary School which are based on the ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy. It is comprised of

a subset of 36 key Indicators identified as predictive of quality practice captured by and linked to the larger set of 85 Indicators in the ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy and the Professional Development Tools. It provides a way to quickly gather a snap shot of educators' practice, in order to gauge the implementation of the larger set of Indicators of quality.
The 36 Indicators in the Instrument are the most distinguishable, and serve as proxies for other indicators in terms of defining quality practice. The large majority of these 36 indicators are easily observable, with the exception of five indicators in the Focus Areas on Family and Community and Assessment and Planning, which require documentation and/or an interview to score.

Practice is rated by an observer on a 3-point scale as:

LEVEL 0	LEVEL 1 GOOD START	LEVEL 2 QUALTIY PRACTICE
Describes practice that is INADEQUATE to be considered a child-centered approach	Describes practice that shows a shift towards more child-centeredness, but may still lack consistency, intentionality, or depth, especially in terms of working with the agency of the child.	Describes what is evidence for engaging in quality practice. Child-centered practice at this level is internalized by the educator in terms of consistently demonstrating his/her belief that young children have the right to realize and expand their own potential and to express their voice in the development of their own identities and abilities, relationships, and interactions with others, with ideas, with objects, and real and imaginary events