

## Result 1. Transnational Consolidated Report

Research findings for developing the Guide on Positive Behaviour Support in Early Childhood and Care

Prepared by International Hellenic University (IHU)

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**Project: Implementing Positive Behaviour Support in Early Childhood Education and Care**

2021-1-PT01-KA220-SCH-000034367



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The present report was developed within the context of PBS-ECEC project's output 1. This report aims to provide the theoretical framework based on the findings from the desk and field research conducted by the project partners. This report will function as the basis for developing the Guide on Positive Behaviour Support in Early Childhood and Care in European Countries, a guide specially designed for preschool educators for implementing the first level of Program-wide Positive Behaviour Support (PW-PBS). There are considerable differences in educational context and cultures in partner countries. Therefore, extensive preliminary research was essential prior to the development of any of the Project Results. This research allowed the partnership to gain a better understanding of the current situation in each partner country regarding preschool education and Positive Behaviour Support across Europe in ECEC settings. Each partner country has carried out activities to collect reliable and evidence-based data from target group members to identify the needs, the current status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in young children, the respective current pedagogical practices across early childhood settings and the impact of these practices. A mixed-methods approach was followed by partners in order to answer the research questions by: (1) conducting a research literature review focusing on national resources, (2) reviewing and analysing policy reports and official documents with respect to intervention efforts on behavioural and socioemotional supports in young children at policy and ECEC settings levels, (3) conducting focus group interviews with a sample of educational policy stakeholders, ECEC administrators and educators to elicit responses to the research questions, (4) conducting a needs assessment survey in order to examine the concerns and needs of early childhood educators, regarding preschool children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties. Overall, 199 preschool educators participated in the Preliminary Field Research Phase (focus group interviews and needs assessment survey). The present ecosystem map and gap analysis synthesis report presents the findings derived from the above mentioned mixed-methods approach.

## PROJECT'S INFORMATION

The present report has been prepared within the context of the project **PBS-ECEC- “Implementing Positive Behaviour Support in Early Childhood Education and Care”**, which has been funded with support from the European Commission; project number: 2021-1-PT01-KA220-SCH-000034367.

The **PBS-ECEC** Consortium is constituted of five partners (Partner 1: Instituto Politécnico do Porto – leader, Partner 2: Centre for Advancement of Research and Development in Educational Technology LTD, Partner 3: International Hellenic University, Partner 4: Institute of Child Education and Psychology Europe, Partner 5: Neophytos Charalambous - Institute of Development LTD) from four countries (Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, & Portugal). The Project duration is 24 months (01/01/2022 – 01/01/2024).

The **PBS-ECEC project** aims to promote **a whole school approach titled Program-wide Positive Behaviour Support (PW-PBS)** across Europe in **Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)** settings. Through collaboration between ECEC centres and academic institutions in Europe, **PBS-ECEC** focuses on applying **a program-wide approach to promote children’s socioemotional competence**. Specifically, PBS-ECEC will examine the design and implementation of PW-PBS across ECEC settings, emphasizing on:

- training centre-based teams to deliver key elements of PW-PBS to the other professional of the centres;
- producing educator training resources regarding the evidence-based practices to develop socioemotional competence and to respond to challenging behaviour, and
- developing a web-based space to disseminate project activities, facilitating communication between consortium partners and other participants, as well as the use of resources and their sustainability.

Key activities include reviewing evidence basis of socioemotional competence and mapping practices in each partner country, educator professional development and coaching on effective classroom management, socioemotional learning, and children behaviour assessment.

The project will serve the basic need of all partners and their respective target groups to effectively address behaviour problems from the very early years of children’s education, by building socioemotional competence in a socially inclusive environment.

To achieve the aforementioned aims, the following Results (i.e., outputs) will be created during the lifespan of the PBS-ECEC project:

- 1. Guide on Positive Behaviour Support in Early Childhood and Care:** This result serves as a planning tool for educators in early childhood settings to create a proactive program-wide and classroom high-quality environment, where positive behaviour support (PBS) is promoted.
- 2. Online Modules of PW-PBS Instructional Practices in Early Childhood and Care Settings:** Result 2 includes the development of online learning modules and Open Educational Resources (OER) which will support, among others, the delivery of the curriculum and the material workshops for educators and other relevant stakeholders.
- 3. Impact assessment study and practice recommendations:** During this result, the Training Program and the material of the e-learning space (Result 2) will be used to effectively implement blended learning training with 100 early childhood educators and 40 trainers from all partner countries.
- 4. Policy and Strategy Toolkit and recommendations for PBS in ECEC:** Result 4 will include a collection of lessons learned, promising practices with concrete examples, challenges, policy



recommendations, easy-to-use tools for professionals and policy makers, to implement PW-PBS strategies.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE REPORT

The present report was developed within the context of **Result 1** of the **PBS-ECEC project**. This report aims to provide the theoretical framework based on the findings from the desk and field research conducted by the project partners. This report will function as the basis for developing the **Guide on Positive Behaviour Support in Early Childhood and Care (Result 1. Activity 4)**, a guide specially designed for preschool educators for implementing the first level of PW-PBS.

**There are considerable differences in educational context and cultures in partner countries.** Therefore, extensive preliminary research was essential prior to the development of any of the Project Results. This research allowed the partnership to gain a better understanding of the current situation in each partner country regarding preschool education and Positive Behaviour Support across Europe in ECEC settings. Each partner country has carried out activities to collect reliable and evidence-based data from target group members to identify the needs, the current status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in young children, the respective current pedagogical practices across early childhood settings and the impact of these practices. The main questions that were addressed during the desk and field research were the following:

1. What is the perceived impact of current preschool practices developed to promote the child's socioemotional competence and to prevent challenging behaviours on educator and child outcomes?
2. What is the status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of young children in ECEC settings in partner countries?
3. What are the possible contributing factors of children's socioemotional difficulties in partner countries?
4. What implementation efforts have been made at the policy and ECEC settings' levels to address these issues?

A mixed-methods approach was followed by partners in order to answer the above questions by:

1. conducting **a research literature review** focusing on national resources.
2. **reviewing and analysing policy reports and official documents** with respect to intervention efforts on behavioural and socioemotional supports in young children at policy and ECEC settings levels.
3. conducting **focus group interviews** with a sample of educational policy stakeholders, ECEC administrators and educators to elicit responses to the above questions.
4. conducting **a needs assessment survey** in order to examine the concerns and needs of early childhood educators, regarding preschool children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties.

Overall, 199 preschool educators participated in the Preliminary Field Research Phase (focus group interviews and needs assessment survey) of the PBS-ECEC Result 1 (Table 1):

Table 1. Number of participants

	Focus Groups	Needs assessment survey	Overall
Cyprus	7	44	51
Greece	6	40	46

Ireland	6	41	47
Portugal	15	40	55
			<b>199</b>

The present ecosystem map and gap analysis synthesis report presents the findings derived from the above methods and consists of three major parts:

1. **The first part presents the findings from the desk research** (a. literature review, b. review and analysis of policy reports and official documents) **from each partner country** concerning a) the implementation efforts and practices to provide support for children’s behavioural and socioemotional competencies and for developing a system for discouraging challenging behaviours, b) the impact of current practices, c) the status of children’s behavioural and socioemotional difficulties attending early childhood settings and d) their possible contributing factors.
2. **The second part presents the most indicative results collected from the field research**, namely the focus group interviews and the questionnaire distribution during the needs assessment survey, concerning the above topics.
3. **The third part, the conclusion section, presents a critical synthesis of the above case findings.** The synthesis describes commonalities and discrepancies evident among the four countries regarding the behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in young children and the current efforts implemented in ECEC, thus far at the policy and practice levels.

## 1. DESK RESEARCH

Desk research was conducted by doing a) a research literature review and b) the review and analysis of policy reports and official documents. The following key words were used to find all the relative research: behavioural difficulties/problems/disorders, externalizing/challenging behaviours, socioemotional difficulties, socioemotional/ social/ emotional competence, prosocial behaviour, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), preschool, kindergarten, young children, early childhood settings and country’s name (e.g., Portugal).

The literature review was focused on each partner’s country national resources. It included the review and analysis of all relevant data and resources (research since 2010) such as studies, surveys and previous research concerning the following points: a) the status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of young children in early childhood education and care settings in partner countries, b) the possible contributing factors of children’s socioemotional difficulties in partner countries, and c) successful practices to provide support of children’s behavioural and socioemotional competencies and for developing a system for discouraging challenging behaviours.

The review and analysis of policy reports and official documents were conducted with respect to intervention efforts on behavioural and socioemotional supports in young children at policy and ECEC settings levels concerning the following points: a) each partner’s country early childhood education system, b) early childhood teachers’ careers and professional development, c) implementation efforts made at the policy and ECEC settings’ levels to address children’s behavioural and socioemotional difficulties, d) the impact of current practices developed to promote the child socioemotional competence and to prevent challenging behaviours on educator and child outcomes.

During the desk research, data and resources were organized in an excel document, where the main topics of each document, such as: goals; theoretical framework; level of evidence, if applicable (Evidence-based vs. Promising); design; sample; measures; details of the intervention, if applicable; results; discussion/conclusions were registered. The following sections present the findings of the desk research from each partner country.

## 1.1. CYPRUS

VICTORIA MICHAELIDOU (CARDET) & ANDRI AGATHOKLEOUS (IOD)

The literature review was implemented by searching all the relevant research on behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in young children attending early childhood settings in Cyprus in the last 10 years (2012 - 2022). In addition, a review of the relevant implementation efforts and the impact of the implementations aiming to address children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties was conducted. The following sections describe the findings from Cyprus.

### ***The early childhood education system in Cyprus***

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Cyprus is organised into two discrete systems based on age: preschool and the pre-primary systems (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021; Eurydice, 2020; Loizou, 2007). The preschool system involves day nurseries (International Standard Classification of Education level 0), and childminders, all operating under the remit of the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance (MLWSI). In particular, the MLWSI is responsible, since 2014 for the infant/child care centres (public, community and private) for children under the age of three, under the 1196 Law on Centres for the Protection and Occupation of Children in Cyprus and in accordance with Article 52 of Cyprus Constitution (N.2(1)/96) (Social Welfare Services, 2014). The pre-primary system involves kindergartens operating under the remit of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth (MoECSY) which is responsible for the infant/child care centres (*nipiagogeia*) for children from three years until 4.7 years who attend public, community and private schools and the pre-primary education (starting at the age of 4.8 until 6 years old) which is provided in the Kindergarten schools (*prodimotiki*) with compulsory attendance. The Council of Ministers (2018), with decision No. 84.078, established the compulsory age for Pre-Primary education at the age of 4 years and 8 months old and the compulsory Pre-Primary class at the age of 5. For children in the age range of 3 – 4.8/12 years old, attending school is optional and the decision relies on the parents to choose the type of school their child will attend (public, community or private) (Childhood Education International, 2018).

All three types of pre-primary schools' function voluntarily as all-day schools. The preschool system Day nurseries (*pedokomikoi/vrefokomikoi stathmoi*) are open to children from birth until the age of 5 years old. There are public, community and private day nurseries. Public day nurseries are established by the MLWSI in cooperation with the Parents' Association and the local authority for the area where the institution is located. Community day nurseries are established and run by local authorities on a not-for-profit basis. Private day nurseries are established and supported by individuals, usually on a for-profit basis. Home-based ECEC is also available. Childminders are persons entitled to look after several young children at home. There are no educational guidelines from top-level authorities for the pre-school system. The pre-primary system Kindergartens (*Nipiagogeia*) is open to children from the age of 3 years. In September 2004, attendance for children aged between 4 years and 8 months and 5 years and 8

months became free and obligatory. As the starting age for compulsory primary education has recently been raised by 2 months since 2020/2021 attendance has been free and obligatory until children are aged 5 years and 10 months. Starting September 2021, attendance is free and obligatory until children are 6 years old. The Department of Primary Education is responsible to ensure that all children aged 4. 8/12 and above are enrolled in a public Pre-Primary school. In addition, in public Pre-Primary schools, the educational needs of a number of 3 - 4.8/12-year-olds are satisfied, provided that there are available places. However, it's the parent's decision which type of Pre-Primary school they wish for their children to attend, that is public or private (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021).

There are public, community and private kindergartens in Cyprus. The maximum number of pupils in a class of public, community or private Pre-Primary school should be 25 or in accordance with the size of the classroom. All of the different types of kindergartens are registered with the MoECSY and they are subject to inspection by the Department of Primary Education of the ministry. Note that a day nursery may be integrated with a kindergarten and thus open to children up to the age of 6 years old. Integrated day nurseries are registered with both the MLWSI and the MoECSY, each ministry is responsible for one age group of children (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021; MoECSY, 2021).

**Public kindergartens** are established by the MoECSY and since September 2004, when free compulsory Pre-Primary education was introduced, the MoECSY undertakes all the expenses of the public Pre-Primary schools (salaries of teachers and other staff, educational equipment, building expenses, cleaning expenses, stationery, electricity, heating and other). Moreover, the MoECSY is responsible for the assessment and continuous training of the staff on current educational approaches. Public Kindergartens may operate with one teacher (*monodidaskala*), with two teachers (*dididaskala*) or with three or more teachers (*polydidaskala*).

**Community kindergartens** are established by a Parents' Association, a local authority, a municipality, a Welfare Community Council, a Trade Union or a charitable organisation, following approval by the MoECSY. They operate on a not-for-profit basis, usually in areas where the number of public kindergartens is insufficient to meet the needs of the community. In many cases, they are co-located with public kindergartens and they serve children in the age range of 3–4 8/12 years. Community kindergartens are subsidised by the government, with an annual grant of EUR 6 834–11 960 each. The community Pre-Primary schools operate under the "Private School Law of 2019" and are subsidized by the MoECSY, on an annual basis. The majority of the Community Pre-Primary schools function together with the public Pre-Primary schools. Moreover, their functioning is regulated by the circulars which are sent by the MoECSY.

**Private kindergartens** are established and operated by private individuals with the approval of the MoECSY, and they run on a for-profit basis. According to MoECSY (2021), there are three types of private Pre-primary schools in Cyprus: a) the schools of the same type, which follow the curriculum of public Pre-Primary Schools, b) schools of a similar type, which follow at least  $\frac{2}{3}$  of public Pre-Primary Schools curriculum and c) schools of a different type in which are the schools who don't fall into the other two categories.

**Home-based provision**, children from birth until the age of 5 years old may attend home-based care (*kat'oikon paidokomoi*), which operates under the jurisdiction of the MLWSI. After the age of 5 years,

the home-based provision applies only to children with special needs who are not able to attend a kindergarten.

All the children whatever their country or nationality, who permanently or temporarily live in Cyprus, have the right to registration at public Pre-Primary schools. If public Pre-Primary schools have available places, then these are offered to younger children who will reach the age of 3 before the 1st of September of each new school year according to approved criteria. Priority for registration is given to the children with special educational needs, aged 3 and above after they are approved by the District Committees of Special Education (Eurydice, 2020).

Pre-Primary education is compulsory and free for children aged 4 8/12 years old and above who enroll in public Pre-Primary schools. Younger children aged between 3 to 4 8/12 that approved and enroll in public Pre-Primary schools pay fees, which are defined by the MoECSY in cooperation with the Ministry of Finance. For the education of the children in community kindergartens, parents or guardians pay tuition fees, the amount of which is determined by the owner of the community kindergarten according to the financial obligations and the particularities of each community kindergarten. The setting of tuition fees, however, is by no means intended to generate profit. Private kindergartens decide on the tuition fees according to the services that they provide (MoECSY, 2021).

The preschool education curriculum for kindergartens is approved by the Council of Ministers following suggestions made by the MoECSY. The preschool education curriculum applies to kindergartens (Eurydice, 2020). The curriculum is the same for all types of kindergarten and must be followed in its entirety by all Public and Community kindergartens. The current curriculum forms part of a new, integrated curriculum for pre-primary to secondary education, written in the framework of the ongoing Educational Reform. The integration of the curriculum started in June 2008 with the establishment of a Scientific Commission for the Revision of the School Curricula (*Epistimoniki Epitropi gia tin Anatheorisi ton Analytikon Programmaton*), and it was completed by the work of teams of specialists for each subject, consisting of university lecturers and teachers in primary and secondary education (Loizou, 2018). There was a period of public consultation before the new curriculum was officially accepted and published. The new curriculum has been being gradually implemented since September 2011. There has been a gradual increase in the age of the first enrolment in pre-primary education and the first grade of primary school. Children today need to be aged 5 years old to register for pre-primary education. The primary role of kindergarten education in Cyprus is to satisfy the basic needs of the child. Pre-primary education is considered fundamental to the development of human nature, contributing to the child's cognitive, emotional, social, moral, aesthetic and psychomotor development, the acquisition of useful life skills, and the development of the right attitudes and values (Loizou, 2018).

### ***Early childhood teachers' careers and professional development***

Day nurseries are not considered to be educational institutions, as they aim to provide care and safety rather than education to children (MoECSY, 2021). As a consequence, day nursery staff in the public sector is not required to hold any teaching qualifications. They are qualified social welfare personnel with the status of a civil servant (Loizou, 2018). On the other hand, all kindergarten teachers in the public sector are university graduates (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Most of them are graduates of the University of Cyprus with a Bachelor's degree (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019) from the Pre-School Section of the Department of Education (*Tmima Epistimon tis Agogis*), Faculty of Social Sciences and Education (Loizou, 2007). There are also graduates of other universities with a minimum qualification recognized by the Cyprus Council for the Recognition of Higher Education

Qualifications (KY.S.A.T.S.) as 'equivalent and corresponding' to those offered by the University of Cyprus. Primary teachers in the public sector are either university graduates or graduates of the Cyprus Pedagogical Academy, which was abolished upon the establishment and operation of the University of Cyprus, in 1992. The graduates of the Cyprus Pedagogical Academy are considered to be university graduates upon graduating from a special program (*Programma Exomeiosis*) conducted by the University of Cyprus and a number of Greek universities, in the period 1997-1999, upon an agreement between the primary teachers' union and the MoECSY. The Bachelor's degree program at the University of Cyprus, both for pre-primary and primary school level teachers, is a four-year full-time course, which comprises compulsory and elective courses. The main areas of study are Pedagogical Science, Teaching Methodology, Content Area Courses, Specialisation, General Education and Foreign Language. The program is based on the system of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Students are required to complete at least 240 ECTS (Cyprus Council of Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications, 2021; Cyprus Education Service, 2021; Childhood Education International, 2017)

Pre-primary teachers in the public sector in Cyprus are appointed. Until recently they were appointed based on the date of application by an independent body. Since 2018 and through legislation n<sup>o</sup> 10/1969 (CYLAW, 2021), an opportunity is given for professionals to be appointed via examination (exams test teaching approach of the specific subject, pedagogy and Greek language), additional academic qualifications, teaching experience, grade of Bachelor's Degree and year of application. The new system of appointment is gradually replacing the old system (MoECSY, 2021). In Cyprus there are a total of 273 public, 74 communities and 1 pre-primary school in the occupied area of Cyprus, reaching a total of 348 pre-primary schools. The total number of teachers is 910, with 801 working in the public sector (MoECSY, 2021). Based on official announcements of the Cyprus Education Service (2021), during 2017 - 2020 there was a total of 30 promotions to vice-principal and a total of 22 promotions to the principal in the public pre-primary education sector, showing a minuscule window for a pre-primary teacher to advance their career via a promotion. In many cases, pre-primary teachers are transferred to schools with 1 or 2 teacher positions to undertake the responsibilities of a Principal without getting a formal promotion or a salary raise. However, there is a reduction of the teaching hours to be able to respond to the administrative duties. This role is entitled Acting Head teacher and once undertaking this role, a pre-primary teacher can be allocated to another school to resume their duties as a pre-primary teacher. Moreover, depending on the number of years in the public sector and any further education one can become an Assistant Principal and then a Principal. These positions are limited within the Early Childhood sector since for a school to need to have a principal it must have at least 3 public classes and there are not many schools that have that number of classes (Childhood Education International, 2017; Loizou, 2018). In addition, in the MoECSY, three Early Childhood Supervisors are responsible for supervising and providing guidance to all early childhood teachers. Each supervisor is responsible for one or two main cities on the island. They also organize conferences, seminars and workshops for the teachers under the framework for professional development to further enhance practice and quality. The evaluation of the teachers is done by the Early Childhood Supervisors (Loizou, 2018).

The Ministry of Education and Culture working through the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute is responsible for the continuing professional development of staff in ECEC in Cyprus, for both the public and the private sector (Loizou, 2018; Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, 2021). Moreover, professional development programs are organized and offered to early childhood in-service practitioners by public and private institutions of higher education in the form of seminars, workshops, and conferences. Specifically, the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute is responsible for the provision of professional development for in-service teachers and offers compulsory and optional seminars (Loizou, 2018). There are different options for the

teachers regarding school-based seminars namely informative seminars, workshops as well as action research projects. The Cyprus Pedagogical Institution was founded in 1972 and its main activities involve in-service training of teachers, educational research and educational technology and educational documentation. About Early Childhood, the pedagogical institution offers in-service training, undertakes various research projects, and publishes a variety of educational materials and books disseminating information to Early Childhood teachers. For instance, in June 2018, a Pancyprian conference addressed to private sector pre-primary teachers was held at the Pedagogical Institute in Lefkosia following the conference held in June 2019. The conference covered topics concerning the Curriculum for Pre-primary Education (3 - 6 years). The conference aimed to inform the participants about the curriculum and its philosophy. During the conference, workshops were organized through which the participants had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with practical ways to apply the basic principles of the curriculum (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021).

### *Implementation efforts have been made at the policy and ECEC settings' levels to address children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties*

The ECEC systems and processes in Cyprus are reported to be under development (Bouget et al., 2015; Mills et al., 2013; Childhood Education International, 2017). Professionalization of the ECEC sector emerges as a need in the Cypriot educational system, since ECEC professionals, workers and carers have different qualifications, from two- and three-year diplomas to four years university degrees, especially those working in the public sector (Childhood Education International, 2017; Rentzou, 2016). The need to improve ECEC services quality in Cyprus emerges and actions taken towards this direction are reported necessary (Peeters et al., 2016; Loizou, 2009). Moreover, the issue of early childhood teachers' careers and professional development is not officially on the agenda with governmental initiatives, being limited to a few actions taken by the Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus (2021) such as New/ Revised Curriculum and professional development training on Curriculum implementations. Contrary to governmental actions, a few initiatives on the topic may be found in the private sector, mainly in the form of EU-funded actions and activities (e.g. projects, training the trainer's programmes, LTTAs and study visits, workshops, and conferences, etc.) (Loizou, 2018). Though there are minimal attempts to approach early childhood teacher's well-being in Cyprus, the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (2018) reports on primary teachers' job satisfaction in Cyprus and states that about 91% of the teachers in Cyprus express their satisfaction with their jobs and their salaries, with no similar data existing on early childhood teachers in Cyprus. Although the early years' teachers have the same qualification as other teachers in all levels of education (primary, high school), their work is undervalued. The status of early childhood teachers in Cyprus is low, and their contribution and professionalism are often undervalued (Vrasidas et al., 2021; OECD, 2019; OECD, 2020).

At the policy level, a project called "School and Social Inclusion Actions" (in Greek: "**DRAsis Sholikis ke kinonikis Entaxis**", or **DRASE**), from the Cypriot Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Youth, is currently taking place in over 100 schools and offers a range of measures aimed at preventing social exclusion. They include new learning and creativity programmes, access to new information and socioemotional support centres, new school equipment and educational materials, and training programmes for teaching staff. With the support of EU Funds, Cyprus was allowed to implement targeted and innovative programmes in education, through which multilevel support is provided to students and their families (ESF, 2020).



## *The impact of current practices developed to promote the child's socioemotional competence and prevent challenging behaviours*

The research in the area of positive psychology interventions as it relates to teachers' careers is very limited in Cyprus. The literature review documents a number of issues concerning ECEC in Cyprus. There have been considerable changes in the context of reforming the education system, referring to the appointment of pre-primary teachers via criteria and other qualifications (Loizou, 2018). Another issue in the case of Cyprus is the lack of research within the Cypriot context and follow-up research of newly implemented programs (Loizou, 2007). This is expected to bring a new era in the education system which will be evident in the future. In addition, pre-primary teachers in Cyprus have opportunities to learn through voluntarily participating in seminars and workshops offered by the Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus. Taking the above into consideration, the Cypriot education system follows a single-level career structure, as defined by the absence of a predetermined career structure that can give the necessary flexibility to the teachers to evolve in different directions. This system is highly supported by the intrinsic values (wishes, talents) of the educator and on the school needs (Loizou, 2018; Loizou, 2009; Childhood Education International, 2017). On the other hand, as noted, the risk of these educational systems is the limited variety of roles and responsibilities, which subsequently lead to the absence of formal recognition (EUROPEAN COMMISSION/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021; Eurydice, 2020, OECD, 2019). Therefore, there is enough space for improvements concerning several practices and contexts. There is a need to fully understand the concepts of ECEC together and place emphasis on the ECEC teachers' professionalism. Background studies and continuing professional development programmes should not only place emphasis on teachers' job satisfaction with regards to salaries but also consider further teachers' well-being issues. Along with the private sector's relevant actions, governmental teachers' well-being and PERMA (P-Positive Emotion, E-Engagement, R-Relationships, M-Meaning, A-Accomplishment) model initiatives should be prevalent and teachers should be given the opportunity for continuing professional development programmes that will enhance their knowledge and skills on their well-being.

The project "**School and Social Inclusion Actions**" which is co-funded by the European Social Fund aims to mitigate the negative impact of the economic crisis on education and to prevent the social exclusion of vulnerable groups of pupils (ESF, 2020). The various measures offered in 100 schools at pre-primary, primary, secondary and technical education levels in Cyprus include, among others, the provision of morning and afternoon programmes for reinforcing the learning and creativity of pupils and their families, the psychosocial support for pupils and their families through the establishment of "Information and Social-emotional Support Centres" and supporting technological school equipment. So far, 14% of the total student population (15.000 students) have benefited from actions provided through the project. The project's objective is to cover 15% of the student population by 2020 (ESF, 2020). Tens of thousands of pupils from vulnerable groups, which include those from deprived backgrounds and at risk of poverty, are currently benefiting from the scheme – an impressive 15.6% of the total student population. As well as reducing the likelihood of children failing at school, or dropping out completely, it is hoped that DRASE will also help families from the economically weaker groups to integrate more fully into society.

In Cyprus, the implementation of the SWPBS system is fairly new. During the last decade, there have been several interventions led by various research groups. Two such programs were implemented with the Support of the Erasmus+ funding mechanism of the European Commission. Both programs are examples of successful practices which aim to promote the notion of children's socioemotional skills in



primary schools, the ERASMUS+ Key Action 2 project titled **“Tackling School Discipline Issues with Positive Behaviour Support” (TaSDi-PBS)** and the ERASMUS+ Key Action 3 Project titled **“Building School-Wide Inclusive, Positive and Equitable Learning Environments Through A Systems-Change Approach” (SWPBS)**. However, both projects target the primary school level. There is no relevant research nor programs in Cyprus targeting ECEC settings (CARDET, 2021). TaSDi-PBS examined the feasibility of Schoolwide Positive Behavioural Support (SWPBS) in 5 countries of the EU (Cyprus, Croatia, Greece, Spain and Netherlands). TaSDi-PBS is based on the model developed in the United States of America which consists of a three-tiered preventive approach to school violence and discipline. The project ran through 2016-2018 as a pilot in Cyprus schools. The findings of the TaSDi-PBS project (2016-2018) which ran as a pilot implementation in Cyprus schools showed the very promising potential of applying the SWPBS approach for developing inclusive schools and early prevention (CARDET, 2021 Project website: <https://pbiseurope.org/en/>). In addition, the SWPBS project’s preliminary results show the strong potential of the framework, and the need for schools and teachers to gain access to tools, resources, and professional development that will better support them face the challenges of everyday teaching and managing student behaviour. At the same time, the many challenges were documented with regard to the need for systemic reform and ongoing professional development of teachers and school leaders (Vrasidas et al., 2021).

Building on the TaSDi-PBS, the research team at CARDET developed the large-scale policy experiment project, **“SWPBS Building School-Wide Inclusive, Positive and Equitable Learning Environments Through A Systems-Change Approach”**. The project is an ERASMUS+ Key Action 3 Policy Experimentation Program currently being implemented in Cyprus, Finland, Greece, and Romania. The programs aimed to establish an inclusive non-discriminatory social culture and necessary socioemotional and behavioural supports for all children in schools across EU countries (CARDET, 2021). The target groups of the projects were the whole school system including teachers, students, school leaders, school staff, parents, academics, researchers and the general public (CARDET, 2021). The project is implemented through 2018 - 2022 in a total of 100 schools in Europe, with 33 in Cyprus.

A more recent intervention as part of a three-year ERASMUS + project called **“Promoting Teachers Well-being through Positive Behaviour Support in Early Childhood Education” (ProW)** took place in Cyprus in 2021. The ProW action aims to develop evidence-based policies and practices that will promote the early childhood teaching profession in ECEC. The project is informed by Positive Psychology interventions focusing on teacher well-being (PERMA) and School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) framework. It draws from a large body of research arguing that building teachers’ overall well-being and supporting them teaching children social skills and managing their behaviour, will have a positive impact on their professional competencies, self-efficacy, motivation and career prospects (McCarty et al. 2014; PBIS Leadership Forum, 2019; OECD, 2020; Seligman, 2011; Pezirkianidis, et al., 2021; Symeonidou et al., 2019; Charalambous, Stalikas, & Vrasidas, 2021). Early childhood educators from four European countries – Cyprus, Greece, Portugal, and Romania – will be supported through training to manage children’s challenging social behaviours and will also be supported in ways to enhance their career and well-being. The ultimate goal is that as a consequence of such support, early childhood teachers will have a greater sense of self-efficacy and job satisfaction, as well as lower burnout levels.

Another relevant initiative currently coordinated by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute and the Institute for Development is a project called **“Resilient Preschools” (Resilience and Wellbeing in Preschool Education to Prevent Emotional, Social and Behavioural Problems)** (<https://resilientpreschools.eu/>). Resilient Preschools is another ERASMUS+ Key Action 2 project in Cyprus implementing the PERMA

Model to create practical material and application guidance for Preschool Teachers to cultivate resilience and wellbeing to children. Through the material created the project aims to develop personal and social awareness in preschools, emotional empowerment, and psychological improvement. In addition, through the concepts and methodologies of Positive Psychology, the project aims to develop in preschool children creative expression and thinking, prepare them for primary school maximise their potential for school success and develop attributes to their personality. However, this promising program is focusing only on children's well-being.

### ***The status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of young children in ECEC settings***

The literature review revealed a lack of research and data focusing specifically on behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of young children in ECEC settings. The main body of research studies derives from funded research programs or other types of interventions implemented in ECEC settings in Cyprus. The most relevant study was conducted under the Erasmus+ Key Action 3 project "ProW" ("Promoting Teachers Well-being through Positive Behaviour Support in Early Childhood Education") in 2021 (ProW, 2022). The questionnaire's participants (N = 104) were teachers, vice principals and principals working in ECEC settings in Cyprus. The responses revealed that 39% of ECEC settings have explicit discipline guidelines and only 11% reported that in their school's setting they follow a specific discipline program. Most participants considered that guidelines/programs and practices were moderately effective in reducing problem behaviour and that practices were also slightly to moderately effective in supporting children's socioemotional needs.

Through both the questionnaire and the focus group it was evident that the extent to which rules and sanctions are often well understood by staff and children were found to be in the mid-range, suggesting that they are sometimes or often understood, but there is room for improvement. Similarly, expectations about discipline are sometimes/ frequently shared among teachers. Still, professionals indicated that even though schools' philosophy on discipline is sometimes/ frequently agreed, the rules and sanctions are inconsistently enforced.

In addition, ECEC teachers perceived their classroom's behavioural adjustment as positive, whilst, when answering the open question about the 3 biggest challenges regarding children's behaviour, participants referred to several behavioural problems, such as emotional regulation, aggressiveness, self-control and self-regulation, difficulty inhibiting behaviours (e.g., waiting their turn to speak) and difficulties in relationships (e.g., sharing, managing conflicts, and respecting others), and more general features such as not following/understanding classroom rules (ProW, 2022).

### ***The possible contributing factors of children's socioemotional difficulties***

Many factors may affect the way children express their social skills or emotional competencies or the rate at which children acquire social skills or emotional competencies. These factors include:

- 1) environmental risk factors such as living in an unsafe community, receiving care within a low-quality child care setting, lack of resources available in the community or lack of Influence policies supporting children and families, etc.,
- 2) family risk factors such as maternal depression or mental illness in the family, parental substance abuse, family violence, poverty, etc. and

3) within-child risk factors such as a fussy temperament, developmental delay, and serious health issues.

All of these factors need to be taken into careful consideration when gathering information to fully understand and support children's social and emotional health through a comprehensive, ecological approach. This particular section will focus on the individual child aspects of social and emotional development including milestones, risk factors and strategies to support children (Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, 2020).

Though the data on children's socioemotional difficulties in Cyprus are limited, they seem to converge with the overall research on the topic. In a single research under the ProW project, the possible contributing factors of children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties reported were features related to the school environment. Mostly reported are difficulties with families (e.g., dealing with parents' permissive parenting style and managing parental behaviours towards children) and the lack of strong family-school partnerships (e.g., to be synchronized with parents regarding ways to deal with children's disruptive behaviours). Other features reported are human resources (a necessity for more staff) and large numbers of children in the classrooms (ProW, 2022).

Participants reported that the schools' lack/inadequacy of students' support, lack/inadequacy of collaboration among staff and lack of or inadequate teachers' training were among the most meaningful limitations in promoting positive learning environments.

### *Successful practices to provide support for children's behavioural and socioemotional competencies and for developing a system for discouraging challenging behaviours*

The research in the area is very limited in Cyprus. However, in recent years, there are some important practices and initiatives which focus on the development of socioemotional competencies of children attending preschool settings.

A recent intervention as part of a three-year ERASMUS + project called "**Promoting Teachers Well-being through Positive Behaviour Support in Early Childhood Education**" (ProW) took place in Cyprus in 2021. The ProW action aims to develop evidence-based policies and practices that will promote the early childhood teaching profession in ECEC. The project is informed by Positive Psychology interventions focusing on teacher well-being (PERMA) and School Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) frameworks. It draws from a large body of research arguing that building teachers' overall well-being and supporting them teaching children social skills and managing their behaviour will have a positive impact on their professional competencies, self-efficacy, motivation and career prospects (McCarty et al., 2014; PBIS Leadership Forum, 2019; OECD, 2020; Seligman, 2011; Pezirkianidis, et al., 2021; Symeonidou et al., 2019; Charalambous, Stalikas, & Vrasidas, 2021). Early childhood educators from four European countries – Cyprus, Greece, Portugal, and Romania – will be supported through training to manage children's challenging social behaviours and will also be supported in ways to enhance their own careers and well-being. The ultimate goal is that as a consequence of such support, early childhood teachers will have a greater sense of self-efficacy and job satisfaction, as well as lower burnout levels.

In addition, a relevant initiative currently coordinated by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute and the Institute for Development is a project called "**Resilient Preschools**" (Resilience and Wellbeing in Preschool Education to Prevent Emotional, Social and Behavioural Problems). Resilient Preschools is another ERASMUS+ Key Action 2 project in Cyprus implementing the PERMA Model in preschool education in order to create practical material and application guidance for Preschool Teachers guiding

them on how to cultivate resilience and wellbeing to children. Through the material created the project aims to develop personal and social awareness in preschools, emotional empowerment, and psychological improvement. In addition, through the concepts and methodologies of Positive Psychology the project aims to develop in preschool children creative expression and thinking, prepare them for primary school maximize their potential for school success and develop attributes to their personality. However, this promising program is focusing only on children's well-being.

In Cyprus, the implementation of the SWPBS system is fairly new. During the last decade, there have been several interventions led by various research groups. Two such programs were implemented with the Support of the Erasmus+ funding mechanism of the European Commission. Both programs are examples of successful practices which aim to promote the notion of children's socioemotional skills in primary schools, the ERASMUS+ Key Action 2 project titled **"Tackling School Discipline Issues with Positive Behaviour Support" (TaSDi-PBS)** and the ERASMUS+ Key Action 3 Project titled **"Building School-Wide Inclusive, Positive and Equitable Learning Environments Through A Systems-Change Approach" (SWPBS)**. However, both projects target the primary school. There is no relevant research nor programs in Cyprus targeting ECEC settings (CARDET, 2021). TaSDi-PBS examined the feasibility of Schoolwide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) in 5 countries of the EU (Cyprus, Croatia, Greece, Spain and Netherlands). TASDi-PBS is based on the model developed in the United States of America which consists of a three-tiered preventive approach to school violence and discipline. The aim of the project was to implement elements in a culturally responsive manner across elementary schools with emphasis on 3 key aspects: 1) training the school-based teams to deliver key elements of SWPBS to school staff and students, 2) produce teacher-training manuals to teach students social expectation in the school settings and managing problematic behaviours and 3) develop a web-based platform to disseminate project activities for effective communication, use and support sustainability among consortium partners and others. The above aims are met through systematic professional development, direct behavioural instruction based on classroom-based assessments, and continuous progress and monitoring of student outcomes and implementation procedures. The project ran through 2016-2018 as a pilot in Cyprus schools. Building on the TASDi-PBS, the research team at CARDET developed the large-scale policy experiment project, "SWPBS Building School-Wide Inclusive, Positive and Equitable Learning Environments Through a Systems-Change Approach". The project is an ERASMUS+ Key Action 3 Policy Experimentation Program currently being implemented in Cyprus, Finland, Greece, and Romania. The program aimed to establish an inclusive non-discriminatory social culture and necessary socioemotional and behavioural supports for all children in schools across EU countries (CARDET, 2021). The target groups of the projects were the whole school system including teachers, students, school leaders, school staff, parents, academics, researchers and general public (CARDET, 2021). The project is implemented through 2018 - 2022 in a total of 100 schools in Europe, with 33 in Cyprus.

Another intervention ran by the Institute of Development under the auspices of the Ministry of Justice and Public Order in Cyprus from the academic years 2006 - 2019 is the **"ARETI program"**. ARETI is an education programme in 12 basic life values which form the basis for shaping good character. The programme provided training to teachers and parents and filled a gap in the upbringing of children with special emphasis on moral, emotional and social development (Charalambous 2009; Charalambous 2010).

## 1.2. GREECE

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The present desk research was conducted by the research team of the International Hellenic University (IHU) in order to present relevant data from the review and analysis of national policy reports and official documents with respect to intervention efforts on behavioural and socioemotional supports in preschool children at policy and ECEC settings levels from Greece. In addition, a literature review was conducted in order to present the status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in young children attending early childhood settings in the Greek educational context and the possible contributing factors of children's socioemotional difficulties. Furthermore, successful practices were designed in the Greek educational context to support children's behavioural and socioemotional competencies and for developing a system for discouraging challenging behaviours are presented.

### ***The early childhood education system in Greece***

The early childhood educational system in Greece falls into a split model consisting of two parallel but distinct sections. The first section concerns the ECEC, which includes the municipal infant care (*vrefikoi stathmoi*), infant/childcare (*vrefonipiakoi stathmoi*) and childcare centres (*paidikoi stathmoi*), while the second section covers the pre-primary education and contains the kindergarten centres (*nipiagogeia*). The ECEC centres (*vrefikoi*, *vrefonipiakoi* and *paidikoi stathmoi*) services are provided to infants and children aged from 2 months to 4 years old. Specifically, infant care and infant/childcare centres provide services to infants aged 2 months, subject to certain conditions, up to the age of 4, while childcare centres accommodate children aged 2.5 years up to the age of 4. The kindergarten centres (*nipiagogeia*) provide services to children aged from 4 to 6 years old. Attendance in childcare centres is not mandatory. Since 2018 two-year attendance in kindergartens became compulsory by law. Thus, compulsory education in Greece starts at the age of 4 years old (Eurydice, 2021).

Concerning the administration system, public childcare centres belong to municipalities and are under the authority of the Ministry of Interior. Private childcare centres are within the competence of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. Kindergartens, public and private, are under the authority of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (Grammatikopoulos et al., 2018a). The childcare centres (*paidikoi stathmoi*) operate under their supervision of the municipalities, who are responsible to hire educational staff and receive tuition fees from the children's parents for the nutrition services they provide. With regards to kindergarten centres (*nipiagogeia*) the municipalities are responsible for the construction and maintenance of the buildings as well as for their financial support.

### ***Early childhood teachers' careers and professional development***

Early childhood educators in Greece are graduates of universities. A four-year bachelor's degree from higher education institutions is compulsory for both early childhood educators in childcare centres and kindergartens. The initial education of the early childhood educators in Greece falls into the split early childhood system as well. Preschool educators of the childcare centres are graduates of ECEC departments. Preschool teachers of the kindergartens (pre-primary education) are graduates of pedagogical departments. The initial training for childcare and kindergarten teachers combines theoretical with practical teaching training (Gregoriadis et al., 2018a). The undergraduate course programmes include lessons related to each teaching subject, pedagogical and psychology courses (Gregoriadis et al., 2016). However, as the initial education of the early childhood educators is offered

by several universities following different programmes, the preparation of the pre-service educators is different too. Preschool educators of the childcare centres and preschool teachers of the kindergartens may attend postgraduate studies.

Opportunities for professional development for in-service preschool educators in Greece are limited, at least at an institutional level (Grammatikopoulos et al., 2018b). The regional centres for educational planning (P.E.K.E.S.) are responsible for early childhood educators' professional development. P.E.K.E.S. are educational structures under the authority of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. P.E.K.E.S. monitor, coordinate and promote scientific and pedagogical processes in school units. Each P.E.K.E.S. is composed of Educational Work Coordinators, who organize training programs for educators. Furthermore, universities and institutions provide training seminars, workshops and opportunities for professional development too (Gregoriadis et al., 2018b).

### ***Implementation efforts have been made at the policy and ECEC settings' levels to address children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties***

The Greek early childhood education aims to promote and support children's physical, emotional, mental and social development (Greek Ministry of Education – Greek Pedagogical Institute, 2002). Within this framework, childcare centres aim to support the comprehensive development of children, while providing care services to working parents (Megalonidou, 2020). More specifically, the infant care, infant/childcare and childcare centres aim to provide holistic support for children's physical, mental, emotional and social development, assist preschool children in their smooth transition from home to the school environment, eliminate any discrepancies among children coming from families with several cultural, economic and educational backgrounds, offer daily nutrition and care to children adhering to health and safety rules and inform parents in pedagogy and psychology issues (Eurydice, 2021). However, until recently there were no specific curriculum requirements for ECEC and children's education under the age of 4 (Grammatikopoulos et al., 2014).

The programme "Kypseli" is a proposed pedagogical framework for early childhood education and care for children aged from 0 to 4 years old. The programme proposes a holistic approach for children, educators and parents; it includes values, aspects and pedagogical strategies for quality and developmentally appropriate ECEC. The main aim of the programme is to support infants' and toddlers' cognitive, socioemotional and psychical developmental, in cooperation with families, for ECEC which eliminate social inequalities and foster creativity, democracy and equity. The basic principle of the proposed framework is that the education of infants and toddlers should be structured around play activities aiming to provide stimuli for cognitive, linguistic, socioemotional and motor development. Within this framework, infants' and toddlers' children's socioemotional development is settled in the centre of the programme "Kypseli" along with cognitive, linguistic, physical and motor development. Connecting with others, building relationships and learning through the communication and the cooperation with others are some aspects that are promoted in the programme. Also, adult involvement is proposed as a mean for children's socioemotional development. The programme "Kypseli" within the framework for the ECEC of children aged from 0 to 4 years old in Greece is expected to be pilot implemented and then be established in the Greek infant care, infant/childcare and childcare settings (Meghir et al., 2021).

The Greek Early Childhood National Curriculum for kindergarten was introduced in 2003. The curriculum is designed to cover five learning areas: literacy, mathematics, science and environment, creation and expression, and computer science. However, it adopts a holistic approach, as it aims to promote



children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development (Greek Ministry of Education – Greek Pedagogical Institute, 2002). The curriculum for kindergarten is accompanied by the Preschool Teacher Guide, which is provided to support teachers implement the curriculum efficiently (Dafermou et al., 2006). From this holistic perspective of children's development, the development of social-emotional skills is diffused in all learning areas in the national curriculum for early childhood education. Special emphasis on social and emotional learning is placed in the section on human environment and interaction. The new curriculum for the kindergarten (Greek Ministry of Education - Greek Pedagogical Institute, 2014) introduced the section on personal and social development as a separate learning area of the programme emphasizing the development of children's social competencies. Some of the basic principles of the Greek national curriculum for kindergarten regarding the socioemotional development are: to support children "delimit their behaviours" (p. 72), "resolve conflicts" (p. 76), "follow the rules" (p. 77), "to promote children's autonomy" (p. 76) and "to support children's self-regulation" (p. 70). Thus, the Greek curriculum for kindergarten implies the importance of promoting children's socioemotional development, and early childhood educators are required to support children's social and emotional health beyond the academic outcomes.

### ***The impact of current practices developed to promote the child's socioemotional competence and prevent challenging behaviours***

The frequency and intensity of challenging behaviours at schools have increased during the early childhood years worldwide (Carter et al., 2011). Thus, many international institutes, organizations, governments and policy-makers have focused on the development of practices to promote child socioemotional competence and prevent challenging behaviours.

As far as Greece is concerned, at a policy-making level, the Greek National Curriculum for early childhood education includes the support of children's socioemotional development. It also promotes specific values and behaviours in schools, like mutual respect, cooperation, equality, equity, accepting diversity and helping others. However, this general guidance is not sufficient to prevent or resolve behaviour difficulties. For instance, in contrast to other countries, where specific guides or programmes are provided (e.g., the CASEL Guide (2013) or the Guide to social competence (<https://earlychildhood.qld.gov.au/aboutUs/Documents/aedc-social-competance.pdf>)), in Greece there are few available resources. In addition, for ECEC there are no specific curriculum requirements, while the national curriculum for kindergartens was introduced in 2003 and updated in 2012. Furthermore, Greece does not have an institution or structured curricula, specialized in providing guidance to enhance children's socioemotional skills and prevent challenging behaviours (for instance contrasting with the USA – CASEL). Therefore, applying the schoolwide PBS approach to teach socioemotional skills to children and to train and coach educators to increase child socioemotional competence in the ECEC settings will offer longitudinal positive outcomes for children and schools.

### ***The status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of young children in ECEC settings***

Children's challenging behaviours and socioemotional difficulties have attracted early childhood professionals' attention due to their critical relation to children's social adjustment, overall well-being and educational attainment (Durlak et al., 2011). Socioemotional learning is yet considered a vital

component of important life outcomes (Jones & Doolittle, 2017), thus the promotion of children's social and emotional skills has become a major goal starting from the preschool period (CASEL, 2013). Concerning the Greek educational context there are several research studies and interventions regarding the socioemotional development in early childhood, but only a few available research efforts and interventions regarding the behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of preschool children in early childhood education and care settings.

Gregoriadis et al. (2013) examined the Greek parents' perceptions concerning the impact of a physical education program named ESPEC ('Early Steps' Physical Education Curriculum) on their children's social skills. The "Social Behaviour Instrument" (SBI) was completed by 181 parents (87 from the control group and 94 from the experimental group) before and after the implementation of the ESPEC. Results showed that the implementation of a physical education program (ESPEC) had a positive impact and improved children's various social behaviours and skills of preschoolers, for instance, participation in activities without disturbing others, development of a 'team spirit' and cooperative skills, development a sense of cooperation in helping other children and identification and work in her/his own space.

Kourmoussi et al. (2017) designed the "Steps for Life", an intervention programme aiming to foster kindergarten children's self-esteem, empathy, personal and social skills, with an emphasis on emotion management and problem-solving. The programme was an annual universal kindergarten-curriculum, which was designed to provide 50 whole-day lessons conducted twice a week. The material of the programme was developed by the research team and contained the Teacher's Manual, detailed Lesson Guide, material for the lessons' implementation (pictures and hand-puppets) and material for exercises with parents at home. The curriculum was divided into four modules: a) adaptation period activities; b) instruction of basic concepts; c) emotions' identification and management; and d) problem-solving. In the intervention participated 998 kindergarten children, with 518 of them forming the experimental group and 480 the control group. The program's effectiveness was measured by a questionnaire developed by the research team for assessing children's taught skills. The items were derived from the Greek version of the Behavioural Academic Self-Esteem scale and several items were adapted from assessment tools for early childhood children's skills. The questionnaire was completed by the teachers. Results showed that after the intervention preschool children showed increased concentration of attention, participation/cooperation and self-esteem. In addition, children's skills in emotions' management, friendship and problem-solving were improved. In overall, the programme has a positive impact on children's socioemotional enhancement.

Rekalidou and Karadimitriou (2014) in a preliminary study examined the strategies of early childhood teachers in Greece for managing children's behaviour problems in the classroom. In the study participated seventy-four (74) preschool teachers, who completed the List of Behavioural Problems (LBP) for measuring preschooler's behavioural problems and the List of Preschool Teachers' Practices (LPTP) for reporting the practices that teachers apply when facing children's behaviour problems similar to those contained in the LBP. Results showed that some of the behaviour problems teachers face in the classroom are the following: aggressive, physical or isolating behaviours, difficulty speaking in public (teacher, classmates), conflicts, verbal attacks, destroys the creations of his/her classmates, non-compliance with the rules, excessive attachment to the teacher, excessive shyness and concentration difficulties during the activity.

Rentzou (2014) conducted a study in order to explore Greek preschool children's social and nonsocial behaviours during their free play. Additional goals of the study were to examine if the children were engaged in types of play depending on their playfulness and their potential behaviour problems, as well as if individual or family factors influenced children's social and nonsocial play. In the study participated



128 preschoolers, whose age ranged from 15 to 55 months. The measures used were as follows: Children's social and nonsocial behaviours during their free play were recorded by using the Preschool Play Behaviour Scale (PPBS). The preschool behaviour scale (PBQ) was employed for measuring children's behaviour problems and competencies. Children's Playfulness Scale (CPS) was used to measure Greek children's playfulness. Results showed that the children of the sample exhibited rather moderate levels of reticent and solitary-active behaviour. Specifically, children's behaviour during play was characterised as more social, rough and solitary-passive, irrespective of children's gender. Correlations between social and nonsocial types of play and children's age were also found. As children getting older, they engaged in more social play. Furthermore, a relation between the type of play and children's social difficulties and potential behavioural and social problems was found. Specifically, anxious/fearful children exhibited more reticent and solitary-passive behaviours and less rough play. Hyperactive/distractible children engaged in rougher and solitary-active play while hostile/aggressive children engaged in more rough play. Finally, the sample did not exhibit high levels of nonsocial play behaviours. The author concluded that according to the literature, nonsocial behaviours are difficultly discernible, as educators tend to pay attention rather to disruptive behaviours. Therefore, preschool teachers should be trained to identify social and nonsocial behaviours.

Papadopoulou et al. (2014) explored early childhood educators' perspectives concerning preschool children's socioemotional development and its promotion in the Greek educational context. A qualitative study was conducted, using focus-group discussions with 34 educators working in childcare centres in Greece. Results showed that the educators defined socioemotional development in terms of a) recognition, expression and management of emotions, b) autonomy, c) ability to be involved in the educational programme, concentrate and follow directions and rules, d) verbal and non-verbal communication of needs, desires and experiences, e) ability to build relationships with peers and adults. Kontopoulou (2003) examined kindergarten teachers' views on children's insertion to kindergarten and the difficulties preschool children face in the adjustment period. For the purpose of the study 100 early years educators were asked to fill in a questionnaire during an interview. According to educators' responses child isolation, aggressiveness and protesting were the most frequently mentioned behaviour difficulties preschool children face in the adjustment period. Others were hyperactivity, passivity, language delay, enuresis, destructiveness, over-talkativeness and sucking.

### ***The possible contributing factors of children's socioemotional difficulties***

Regarding the factors related to preschool children's socioemotional difficulties in the Greek educational context, the following factors were identified in the literature as the most prominent: the family, especially the quality of the parent-child relationship, the quality of the teacher-child relationship, the child's individual characteristics and structural characteristics of schools.

Specifically, Papadopoulou et al. (2014) findings revealed that according to the Greek preschool teacher's perceptions the family, especially the quality of parent-child interactions, parental responsiveness and consistent parenting characterized by acceptance, support, encouragement, clear limit setting and good cooperation with the school, were the most prominent factors related to preschool children's socioemotional development. Family type and size were mentioned as contributing factors too. Then, school, especially the teacher's role to manage difficulties during the adjustment period and in peer relationships were reported as secondary contributing factors to children's socioemotional development. Child's temperament and cultural factors are also mentioned as related factors to socioemotional development. Finally, participants noted that centre-wide policies and

practices for supporting socioemotional development in Greece are limited and the available programs mainly focus on dealing with problems. In addition, kindergartens' structural characteristics, such as large group sizes, high staff turnover and inadequate space and resources are factors associated with children's socioemotional difficulties.

Similarly, Kontopoulou's (2003) study revealed that preschool teachers mostly related the adjustment difficulties to the family environment (mother-child relationship or inadequate upbringing of the child) and the child itself (child's immaturity), while the preschool teachers felt less involved in the procedure. However, the child-teacher relationship and school provisions were mentioned by the teachers as possible contributing factors of children's adjustment difficulties too, although they were referred as secondary influences. Teachers may consider their role as a positive influence in preventing children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties. Finally, several factors were mentioned by educators could be supportive in the management of children's adjustment socioemotional and behavioural difficulties, such as organisation of suitable curriculum, positive teacher- child interactions, integration in peer group, individualized treatment, cooperation with parents, consultation of a specialist.

Apart from the family context, certain characteristics of preschool teachers, such as teachers' social and emotional skills and the teacher-child interactions constitute contributing factors of children's socioemotional difficulties too. Ample research evidence demonstrates that high quality teacher-child relationships are important determinants of children's socioemotional and behavioural adjustment in ECE (Gregoriadis & Grammatikopoulos, 2014). Poulou et al. (2018) identified that dimensions of teachers' Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) skills were related to children's emotional and behavioural difficulties. Specifically, the research team examined if there were differences in U.S. and Greek preschool teachers' perceptions regarding their own EI and SEL beliefs and if these perceptions and beliefs related to preschool children's emotional and behavioural difficulties, for each cultural group. The sample consisted of 92 preschool teachers from Greece and 80 preschool teachers from the United States. Teachers' perceptions of emotional intelligence were measured with the Self-Rated Emotional Intelligence Scale (SREIS). Teachers' perceptions of their competence in implementing SEL were measured with the Teacher SEL Beliefs Scale. Greek teachers' perceptions of children's emotional and behavioural difficulties were measured with the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). American teachers' perceptions of children's socioemotional competence and behaviour were measured with the Social Competence and Behaviour Evaluation (SCBE) (LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996). Results for the Greek sample demonstrated that several teachers' EI dimensions and SEL competencies were related to preschool children's emotional and behavioural difficulties. More specifically, teachers' understanding of emotions, management of others' emotions, and comfort were predictors of children's emotional problems; teachers' management of others' emotions was a predictor of preschool children's conduct problems; and teachers' understanding of emotions, management others' emotions, and commitment in SEL were significant predictors of peer problems.

Finally, Belhadj et al. (2014), through a systematic review, examined the emotional and behavioural problems of native children and children with a migration background in several European countries. Authors found that migration background constitutes a risk factor for children's emotional and behavioural difficulties. However, they concluded that among other countries (e.g., Finland, Denmark, Luxembourg, Spain and Portugal) Greece was not included in the review as no studies fulfilling the listed criteria. Thus, further research is needed to explore if immigrant background would be a possible contributing factor of children's socioemotional difficulties in the Greek educational context.

## *Successful practices to provide support for children's behavioural and socioemotional competencies and for developing a system for discouraging challenging behaviours*

The Center for Research and Practice of School Psychology (CRPSP) of the University of Athens, in cooperation with the Society for School and Family Consultation and Research, developed the multi-level prevention, awareness-building, education and intervention project **“Connecting For Caring” (C4C)**. The project included the following programs: a) the Supporting in Crisis program (2012-2013), b) the Ε.Μ.Ε.Ι.Σ [Ενδιαφερόμαστε (Care) - Μοιραζόμαστε (Share) - Ενθαρρύνουμε (Encourage) – Ισχυροποιούμαστε (Empower) – Συμμετέχουμε (Participate)] program (2012-2013), and c) the International Program WeCARE (2012-2016) (Hatzichristou & Lianos, 2016). The purpose of the programs of C4C was to foster positive development, adjustment and support children in the school and the family.

Specifically, the aim of the program “ΕΜΕΙΣ” was to develop a positive climate in school communities, promote resilience, and foster internal strengths, motivation, and skills. In the program participated 39 schools from Athens (125 teachers and 3200 students) succeeded to a nation-wide program **“We.C.A.R.E”**, which involved 79 schools, 128 teachers and 1838 students. A series of successful practices were employed at the individual student, classroom and school unit level to be achieved the programme’s aim. The practices included: (a) positive school climate promotion and practical model of resilience, (b) management of the social-emotional reactions in crisis, (c) identification and management of the patterns of aggressive behaviours, (d) social skills, conflict resolution, and bullying, and (e) support self-improvement strategies in children (Hatzichristou et al., 2017). Findings from “ΕΜΕΙΣ” programme evaluation revealed that the most vulnerable students gained the most benefits from the intervention. Students expressing positive outcomes showed significant improvements in their ability to cope with their difficult emotions, handle stress, and achieve personal objectives set at the beginning of the programme. Similar positive outcomes were found for students with poor academic achievement who exhibited improvement in their self-confidence and an increase in group participation. Also, medium-performing students experienced improvements in coping with their difficult emotions and achieving their goals. Finally, significant differences were observed in relation to important dimensions of the school climate (Hatzichristou et al., 2017).

The international program “We.C.A.R.E” was an online classroom intervention programme aiming to foster a positive school climate and to enhance psychological resilience and create a supportive network of teachers, school psychologists, and students. Specific goals were: a) identification of values and goal setting and fostering resilience, b) emotion recognition, expression, and management, c) coping with stress, and d) understanding diversity. According to Hatzichristou and Lianos (2016) after the intervention, significant improvements in dimensions concerning class climate and school relationships were found, such as increased children’s cooperation and interpersonal relationships, identification and expression of feelings, and improvement of social and intercultural skills.

The **Early Change project** (<http://earlychange.teithe.gr>), a European project funded with the support of the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Union (2011- 2014), involved academic staff, early childhood teachers and caregivers from six European countries (Greece, Portugal, Finland, Denmark, Cyprus and Romania). The Early Change project aimed to support the professional development of early childhood educators, evaluate the quality of the preschool environment in the participating countries and collect good practices in early childhood education from the six partners countries (Zachopoulou et al., 2018). Regarding the collection of good practices, the research team developed the e-book entitled

Good Practices in Early Childhood Education: Looking at Early Educators' Perspectives in Six European Countries (Gregoriadis et al., 2014). The book consists of two parts: the first part presents a comparative study of the quality of the early childhood educational systems of the six partner countries and the second part presents a list of 146 good practices for educators related to five categories of the daily practices in early childhood education environments: (a) Health & Safety, (b) Activities/Play, (c) Interactions, (d) Classroom Management, and (e) Diversity/Inclusion. The practices are examples that the participating early childhood teachers implemented in their classrooms and reflect the ideas of early childhood educators in Europe about what constitutes good practice and a qualitatively good preschool environment (Gregoriadis, Zachopoulou, & Grammatikopoulos, 2018). The interactive e-book is freely available on the project's website.

The **"Resilience and Wellbeing in preschool education to prevent emotional, social and behavioural problems" (RESILIENT PRESCHOOLS)** (2020-2022) is a project funded with the support of the European Commission. In the project participate six partners from five European countries (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Greece, Romania and Portugal). The aim of the RESILIENT PRESCHOOLS project is to build the capacity of preschool teachers to enhance preschool children's psychological resilience and promote their psychological well-being. To achieve this purpose, the consortium developed quality resources for preschool teachers to promote a positive culture in ECEC settings, based on Positive Psychology practices and scientific findings. Specifically, the RESILIENT PRESCHOOL Toolkit includes useful information and practical applications for Preschool Teachers on how to teach children to strengthen their psychological resilience and improve their overall wellbeing. The RESILIENT PRESCHOOL Training Package (training program and material) for preschool teachers includes strategies and techniques that derive from PERMA evidenced based wellbeing Model and Character Education theories in order to improve their student's resilience, psychological well-being and overall school experience. In the material, early childhood educators can find several practices and activities to enhance preschool children's mindfulness, character strengths, positive relationships, positive emotions, achievement and self-esteem ([www.resilientpreschools.eu](http://www.resilientpreschools.eu)).

The **"Building School-Wide Inclusive, Positive and Equitable Learning Environments Through a Systems-Change Approach" (SWPBS)** is an ERASMUS+ Key Action 3 Policy Experimentation program (2018-2022). The consortium of the SWPBS project involved academic staff, primary teachers and primary schools from four European countries (Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Romania). The SWPBS is based on the scientific approach of Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) and it aims to establish an inclusive non-discriminatory social culture and necessary socioemotional and behavioural supports for children at the school level. To achieve this purpose the SWPBS project includes the promotion of the problem-solving model, which provides school administration and staff directions on how to identify their school needs, design and execute an action plan and assess its implementation. In addition, the SWPBS problem-solving framework provides teachers with evidence-based instructional practices and classroom management skills to create inclusive, positive classroom environments for all students. The project is expected to be completed in 2022. By the end of the project, partners will prepare a set of policy guidelines, successes and effective practices regarding research plans for expanding SWPBS implementation to a larger number of schools and European countries and mapping out the contextual policy knowledge on inclusive education and school violence prevention in each country ([www.pbiseurope.org](http://www.pbiseurope.org)).

**Promoting Teachers' Wellbeing through Positive Behaviour Support in Early Childhood Education (ProW)** (2021-2023) is a policy experimentation project, which aims to develop evidence-based policies and practices to enhance the teaching profession and enhance teachers' careers and capacities in Early

Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. Specifically, the goals of the project include the support of teachers in using Positive Psychology and School Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) approaches through the enhancement of their motivation, improvement of their competencies, wellbeing, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and the reduction of burnout levels. ProW project involves 11 organisations from four European Countries (Greece, Cyprus, Romania and Portugal). Among the project's deliverables the consortium will develop a digital platform and eLearning, which will provide online modules for teacher professional development and just-in-time practical tips as well as learning resources to better manage their wellbeing and their students' social skills development. By the end of the project, it is expected the development of a Teacher Wellbeing and Career Observatory that will conduct annual reviews and surveys in the field and most importantly, design and implement initiatives and actions to support early childhood teachers ([www.prowproject.eu](http://www.prowproject.eu)).

### 1.3. IRELAND

ALEKSANDRA SZPROCH & MOYA O'BRIEN (PROFEXCEL.NET LTD)

The current literature review analyses all relevant data, resources, Irish policy reports and official documents regarding behavioural and socioemotional competence in young children (age 2 - 6 years) attending ECEC settings in Ireland. These settings include preschool and childcare services as well as the first two years of formal schooling. In the Republic of Ireland, preschool services are typically provided to children aged between 2 and 6 years. School attendance is compulsory by the age of 6 and a child must be 4 years old to enter formal education (Citizens Information, 2021). However, many parents choose to enrol their children in school by the age of 5. This is a much earlier start to formal schooling than most other European countries (Eivers & Clerkin, 2013) and it is a time of many important and sometimes challenging changes in children's lives. The transition to school requires emotional adjustment and social, emotional and behaviour skills are important for school readiness (Murray et al., 2019). Interestingly, it has been found that Irish children who display more prosocial behaviour start school slightly earlier (Smyth, 2018) and children who attend any form of non-parental childcare before starting school exhibit better socioemotional outcomes and less problematic hyperactivity levels when entering formal education (Murphy, 2015).

The following sections highlight the differences between the resources, funding and guidance provided to preschool and childcare settings versus formal school settings and suggests areas of ECEC where barriers to appropriate implementation of interventions exist. In addition, it discusses the status of socioemotional and behavioural competence of children in both types of ECEC environments, while also highlighting the differences in the volume of research available from preschool versus formal education settings.

#### ***The early childhood education system in Ireland***

In the Republic of Ireland, early childhood education generally refers to a range of preschool and childcare services and the first two years of formal schooling (also known as Junior Infant and Senior Infant classes) (Citizens Information, 2020). Generally, preschools offer their services to children aged 2 to 6 years. School attendance is compulsory by the age of 6 and a child must be 4 years old to enter

formal education (Citizens Information, 2021). However, many parents choose to enrol their children in school by the age of 5.

Services for children before formal schooling are the responsibility of the Department of Health, while children in primary school are the responsibility of the Department of Education and this split results in differences in pay, working conditions and staff qualifications (Murphy, 2015). While primary school education is state-funded, the Irish state tends to view preschool education as the responsibility and choice of the parent (Murphy, 2015). ECEC in Ireland is mostly provided by voluntary, community and private for-profit services and has been found to be amongst the most expensive in Europe (Murphy, 2015; OECD, 2014). However, children are entitled to one year of free pre-schooling under the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme, in the year prior to starting primary school. Preschools which participate in the ECCE Scheme, which is paid for by the state per child attending, provide childcare services free of charge to all children within the qualifying age (2 years 8 months to 5 years 6 months) for a set number of hours over a set number of weeks (Citizens Information, 2021). While this is a welcomed aid for parents, many find that they cannot afford to pay for childcare prior to availing of this scheme, or that the hours offered are not suitable, and may choose to avail of informal childcare instead (childcare provided by family members or friends) before enrolling their child into primary school (Redmond & McGuinness, 2020).

### ***Early childhood teachers' careers and professional development***

As detailed above, early childhood education in Ireland refers not only to preschool services, but also to infant classes in primary schools. It is important, therefore, to understand the differences between the educational requirements placed on preschool teachers versus primary school teachers. In fact, the split between education and care in Ireland is mostly evident in the area of staff qualifications (Murphy, 2015). In accordance to the Teaching Council (Registration) Regulations 2016, primary school teachers must hold a recognised Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree or a recognised Graduate/Higher Diploma in Education (Primary) in combination with a primary degree at level 8 or a qualification at level 9 on the National Framework of Qualifications. Apart from typically holding higher levels of qualifications than preschool teachers, primary school teachers are paid by the state, and may enjoy employment security and opportunities for further development while on a permanent contract (Murphy, 2015).

It is not compulsory for primary school teachers to take part in Continuous Professional Development (CPD) courses, however, many feel it is their responsibility to do so and they actively seek out the opportunities to enrol in additional courses (McMillan et al., 2016). Irish teachers are motivated to seek out CPD opportunities by the notion of career advancement, potential growth and achievement (McMillan et al., 2016). Female teachers have a higher level of take-up of CPD than male teachers and take-up increases with the level of teaching experience, being highest for those who are more than 20 years teaching (Banks & Smyth, 2011). Overall, it is understood that many primary school teachers are in a much better position in terms of primary qualifications and additional professional development than pre-school staff.

Under the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2021, all staff working directly with children in an Irish pre-school and childcare services must hold at least a Level 5 major award in childcare on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), or equivalent (Government of Ireland, 2019). In contrast to primary school teachers, preschool staff has a variety of qualifications and in some cases, despite the guidelines, may not have any qualifications at all. Thankfully, this number is small and continues to decrease. The Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2019/2020 (Pobal, 2021) found that



94% of staff working directly with children held a qualification at NFQ Level 5 or higher and 69% held a qualification at NFQ Level 6 or higher, up from 67% the previous year. The proportion of staff with no formal qualifications fell to 5%, from 6% the previous year. While the current regulations require all staff members working directly with children in pre-school settings to have a minimum relevant qualification of NFQ Level 5, the exception to this requirement is staff who signed the 'Grandfather Declaration'. In this declaration stated the staff members' desire to retire or resign before September 2021 (Pobal, 2021). The 2019/2020 Pobal report stated that at the time of data collection, 4.4% of staff signed the agreement. As this date has now passed, it is hoped that a sharp decline in staff with no qualifications will be seen in future reports.

Apart from the regulations outlining the compulsory level of education required to work in a preschool setting, some initiatives have been introduced in recent years to promote continuous education and professional development of early years staff. For example, the Strengthening Foundations of Learning (SFL) project is an early year CPD intervention which aims to improve the quality of early years practice. The two-year project provides a complex training and mentoring programme to educators in order to deliver 'the best outcomes for children' (Hayes & O'Neill, 2019) and simultaneously aims to encourage preschool staff to partake in CPD.

### ***Implementation efforts have been made at the policy and ECEC settings' levels to address children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties***

#### PRE-SCHOOL SETTINGS

There are some differences in the supports and guidelines provided to preschool versus formal education settings in relation to children's behavioural and socioemotional supports. In Ireland, the Early Years Regulations 2016 require all early years' facilities to develop and put in place a broad range of policies, including a policy related to managing behaviour (Tusla, 2018a). The policy must support children's positive behaviour and ensure that the children's social, emotional and general well-being is supported in a happy, safe and controlled environment. At the same time, the policy sets out approaches for managing challenging behaviours in a way that is appropriate to the age and stage of development of the child (Tusla, 2018b). The Early Years Inspectorate has developed a Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF), to support registered Early Years Services to comply with the 2016 Regulations (Tusla, 2018). Organisations like Tusla (Child and Family Agency), Early Childhood Ireland or Barnardos also provide online templates and sample policies on managing behaviour. The policy templates take into account the children's, parents' and staff members' needs. They set out procedures and practices to be followed in a range of situations, e.g., in daily interactions, during boundary/limit setting, when using positive reinforcement/encouragement, when responding to challenging behaviour or when guidance is needed for conflict management. The policy should be communicated and made available to all parents and guardians (Tusla, 2018b) and should be fully acknowledged and used in the staff members' daily practice to ensure that the management of children's behaviour is being conducted with best-practice approaches in mind.

Aistear is the curriculum framework for children from birth to six years in Ireland, suitable for use by preschool educators as well as teachers of infant classes in primary school (Woods et al., 2021). The framework is the outcome of eight years of partnership between National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the early years' sector (Daly & Forster, 2009) and is an attempt to improve the quality of the Irish early years education setting. Aistear provides information for teachers to help them plan for and provide enjoyable and challenging learning experiences, so that all children can grow and develop as

competent and confident learners within respectful relationships with others. Among the many themes and goals of the framework, Aistear aims to promote educators' ability to support the management of the behaviour of young children and to allow them to understand what behaviour is desirable (Daly & Forster, 2009). The programme's play-based nature allows for the development of opportunities for natural social interaction between students (Cresham, 2021) and it decreased solitary play and increases group play and peer conversations (Murphy, 2016). Aistear has been found to have a significant influence on children's transitions from pre-school to primary school in terms of developing skills and dispositions and the implementation of a playful pedagogy (Boyne, 2020). While the publication of the Aistear framework has been widely welcomed and acknowledged as a necessary step towards improving the quality of early years education, there has been limited funding provided for its implementation and there is no coordinated national plan available to assist settings using the framework (Hayes & O'Neill, 2019). It is not underpinned by legislation, therefore early years settings are not mandated to implement it in their practice. Nevertheless, it continues to be strongly encouraged as an example of best practice. In the absence of a comprehensive implementation plan, Aistear is not used nationally and there is confusion in the sector regarding its status (Hayes & O'Neill, 2019).

#### PRIMARY SCHOOLS

As mentioned above, children as young as 4-years-old may enter primary school, some never having attended preschool education. Primary school may be their first time experiencing an educational setting, where a policy on managing challenging behaviour and programmes to aid socioemotional development are present. In a similar manner to the early years' policy on managing behaviour, all Irish primary schools are required by law to have a Code of Behaviour (Department of Education & Science, 1990). The Education (Welfare) Act (Department of Education & Science, 2000) requires schools to provide parents with a copy of the Code of Behaviour when pupils enter the school (McKiernan, 2012). This code of behaviour is a set of programmes, practices and procedures which underpin the school's plan to aid the students to learn and behave well (NEWB, 2008). It promotes the school ethos and policies to encourage good behaviour and prevent unacceptable behaviour. The Education (Welfare) Act 2000 sets out exactly what should be included in this document, mainly: the standards of behaviour that should be observed by students and measures to be taken when a student fails to meet the standards (NEWB, 2008). The code of behaviour should be based on a whole-school approach (NEWB, 2008).

In 2010, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) published "Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties. A Continuum of Support Guidelines for Teachers" which accompanied the 2007 publication "Special Educational Needs: A Continuum of Support" which was circulated to all teachers. The purpose of the guidelines was the support of school staff in the process of building good practice and to help schools develop systems for responding to pupils' behavioural, emotional and social needs (NEPS, 2010). The guidelines describe a model of assessment and intervention which encompasses three processes: classroom support (an intervention carried out by the teacher in the classroom), school support (an intervention carried out by the teacher and learning support staff that is additional to the classroom support) and school support plus (characterised by the school requesting the involvement of relevant external services in more detailed assessment and development of intervention programmes) (NEPS, 2010). The guidelines also provide details of ways to achieve a whole-school approach to promoting positive behaviour and preventing difficulties (NEPS, 2010). Classroom structures and supports which create a positive environment, maximise learning and socialisation and minimise



disruptive behaviour are described. Lastly, the guidelines present case studies which demonstrate how the model of assessment and intervention should work in practice and how it can be used to support students with socioemotional difficulties (NEPS, 2010). The document was created as an accessible resource for teachers and is still published on the official website of the Irish government.

Apart from official guidelines set out by The Department of Health and The Department of Education, educational staff, primary school teachers, are encouraged to become trained in the numerous programmes available in Ireland, aimed at nurturing the socioemotional development of young children. Examples of these include the PAX Good Behaviour Game (GBG), Roots of Empathy, the Incredible Years suite of interventions, the Class-Wide Function-Related Intervention Teams, Zippy's Friends or The Friends Programmes. A further description of the programmes can be found in the accompanying literature review. All of the programmes have been evaluated and have been found to have a positive impact on children's socioemotional and behavioural well-being. It is unclear, however, whether teachers are actively notified about the opportunities to become trained in the use of these programmes, or whether it is up to them to seek out training opportunities. More guidance and encouragement need to be provided to the teacher in both pre-school and primary school settings in relation to the use of these programmes.

### ***The impact of current practices developed to promote the child socioemotional competence and prevent challenging behaviours***

From the above analysis and the accompanying literature review, it can be deduced that while a number of supports, resources, programmes and policies related to behavioural and socioemotional competencies of young children have been put in place at a national level in Ireland, some differences remain between preschool and primary school settings. Primary school teachers are in a better position to be fully competent in nurturing children's socioemotional well-being. They are typically better qualified, better paid, enjoy more job security, are more likely to take part in CPD, have access to more training programmes in the area of behaviour support and receive clearer guidelines regarding the best-practice in the area. Children beginning school at a much younger age than the rest of Europe may therefore be seen as a positive thing, as they are sooner exposed to staff members who have more qualifications, guidance and training on how best to support pupils' socioemotional development, but also how to spot, assess and intervene if a child needs extra support in this matter. The findings of the current review highlight the need for more research, resources, policy and legislation to be directed at pre-school services which should adequately support children's socioemotional needs and prepare young children for the transition to and progression through primary school. Pre-school services should be able to work at a similar level to primary schools in the area of nurturing children's socioemotional and behavioural competence and should have access to the same training programmes and staff educational opportunities.

### ***The status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of young children in ECEC settings and the possible contributing factors***

Several studies have investigated the status of children's behavioural and socioemotional competencies and difficulties in Irish ECEC settings and their findings indicate mostly positive results, with the majority of children displaying little to no behavioural and emotional problems (Egan et al., 2021; Hyland et al., 2013; McNally et al., 2019; Murray et al., 2019). However, the findings also indicate that a small but

significant percentage of the population display difficulties in these areas and these difficulties can be linked to a number of factors.

The Growing Up in Ireland study is a government-funded study which started in 2006 and follows the progress of two cohorts of children, 8,000 9-year-olds (Cohort '98) and 10,000 9-month-olds (Cohort '08). The 2019 report hones in on the lives of 3-5-year-olds in Ireland, including their socioemotional development (Murray et al., 2019). Growing Up in Ireland (Murray et al., 2019) uses The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997) to measure socioemotional and behavioural wellbeing, as well as potential problems. During this longitudinal study, primary caregivers were asked to fill out the questionnaire when their children were 3-years-old, and later again when their children were 5-years-old. Overall, the 2019 report indicated positive findings. The behaviour of most children was reported favourably by parents, with 31-48% of parents reporting no problems with emotional symptoms, conduct problems and peer problems (Murray et al., 2019).

The study did, however, note some interesting trends in children who scored in the top 10% of the 'total difficulties' scale (emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention and peer problems). Children in the top decile of this scale were more likely to belong to the 'never employed' social class group (22%) than children with families in 'professional/managerial' backgrounds (8%). Children from one-parent families were more likely to be in the top SDQ decile than children from two-parent families (21% vs 12%), boys were more likely to be present than girls (14% vs 9%), urban children were more likely to be represented than rural children (13% vs 10%), and children born at low birthweight were more likely to be represented compared to children who were born within the 'normal' weight range (17% vs 11%). Supporting and extending the above findings is a study by Swift et al., (2021) which also analysed the data from the Growing Up in Ireland study and found that there is a higher risk of socioemotional and conduct problems among children with disabilities, especially among children from lower socio-economic backgrounds and with parents with lower educational attainment.

A study of socioemotional development of language-minority children entering primary school in Ireland yielded some interesting results. Using the data from the Growing Up in Ireland longitudinal study, McNally et al. (2019) found that teacher ratings on the SDQ displayed comparable outcomes for language-minority and language-majority children making the transition to primary school. However, language-minority children were rated more favourably than language-majority peers with poor English vocabulary skills. McNally et al. (2019) suggest that these findings support a growing body of literature which indicates positive socioemotional development for language-minority children or children learning two or more languages. However, the advantages of positive socioemotional development associated with bilingualism will not be significant as the child moves through the school-system if poor vocabulary skills in the majority language are not addressed early (McNally et al., 2019). Overall, the data from the Growing Up in Ireland study provides a valuable insight into the factors which are more likely to place young children at risk of socioemotional behavioural difficulties and it delivers important insight into the status of Irish children's socioemotional competence.

Hyland et al. (2013) investigated conduct problems in young, school-going children in Ireland, their prevalence and teacher response. More specifically, the study set out to examine the teacher-reported prevalence in a sample of young children, aged 4-6, (N = 445) in the first two years of formal education. The study used The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire-Teacher version (Goodman, 1997) to assess conduct problems and socioemotional wellbeing. Hyland et al. (2013) found that overall, the children displayed positive socioemotional and behavioural adjustment but that more than 26% had difficulties outside of the 'normal' range. Teachers reported that 18% displayed abnormal levels of hyperactivity and 11% were reported to have impaired social behaviour. Class size and gender were associated with

the levels of difficulty experienced in this study, with larger classes found to be posing a considerable barrier to addressing the personal and learning needs of children most 'at risk'. Interestingly, the effect of class size was found to be significant for girls only in the current study. Unfortunately, teachers reported having significant difficulty with managing classroom behavioural problems and expressed a need for more support and guidance in this area (Hyland et al., 2013).

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the issue of socioemotional and behavioural difficulties in Irish pre-schoolers and young children. Egan et al., (2021) investigated the impact of closures of early-childhood settings during lockdown periods in Ireland. 506 parents of children aged 1-10 years completed the online Play and Learning in the Early Years (PLEY) Survey in May and June 2020. Parents weighed in on the negative impact of the pandemic related to early childhood settings and school closures on their children's social and emotional well-being. The findings show that parents noticed an increased incidence of tantrums, anxiety, clinginess, boredom, and under-stimulation. Egan et al. (2021) also found that families indicated missing the nurturing environment provided by ECEC settings which support the child's socioemotional development. These results indicate a demand for Irish early-year educators and primary school teachers to receive support and guidance on how best to nurture young students' socioemotional and behavioural needs on their return to formal education post Covid-19 lockdowns.

It is important to note that while all children can display behavioural difficulties from time to time, some children with emotional and/or behavioural difficulties (EBD) require additional support (Kelly, 2019). Difficult behaviour becomes a problem if it affects a child's development and relationships, is ongoing and persistent or if the child does not respond to usual behaviour management strategies (Kelly, 2019). If a child in Ireland is believed to have serious emotional and/or behavioural difficulties, a parent may apply to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for an Assessment of Need under the Disability Act. Concerns may also be raised with the child's school, which can aid in the development of a plan to manage behaviour, or in more serious cases, suggest the involvement of a NEPS (National Educational Psychological Service) (NCSE, n.d.). If the problems are affecting a child's relationships and development at home and in the community, the NEPS psychologist might suggest referral to a Primary Care Clinical Psychology Service or a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). If it is in the interest of the child and their peers, they can remain in mainstream education, while receiving additional support, in or outside of the school.

The above findings indicate that while the status of Irish children's socioemotional and behavioural competencies is typically positive, a small percentage of children display difficulties in these areas. Some links have been made to potential factors which contribute to these difficulties and enable the understanding of the types of children who may be most at risk and may require additional support. The findings also highlight the need for continuous support and guidance to be provided to ECEC staff and teachers as well as parents of young children.

### ***Successful practices to provide support for children's behavioural and socioemotional competencies and for developing a system for discouraging challenging behaviours***

It has been acknowledged that supporting positive behaviour of children is a difficult aspect of the work of educators and that it may be tempting for some to look for 'quick solutions' to behaviour management (O'Toole & Hayes, 2019). Working with children who display challenging behaviour can be stressful. Teachers must be supported with appropriate education and training to enable them to understand the complexity of children's behaviours to better meet their socioemotional needs, rather

than focusing on short-term behaviour 'management' only (O'Toole & Hayes, 2019). In Ireland, a number of programmes have been introduced to promote children's socioemotional competence and prevent challenging behaviours, and their effectiveness has been evaluated.

An evaluation of the **Area Based Childhood (ABC)** Programme (Hickey et al., 2018) found that the programme made a positive contribution in the lives of children and their families, improving relationships between parents and children, increasing children's readiness for school and improving children's social and emotional well-being. The ABC Programme is an Irish, area-based prevention and early intervention initiative which targets investment in evidence-based interventions to improve outcomes for children and families living in areas of disadvantage in Ireland (Hickey et al., 2018). More specifically, the evaluation of the programme covered 13 disadvantaged areas in Co. Dublin in the years 2013-2017. Amongst the many programmes promoted, the ABC initiative utilised programmes supporting social and emotional development in children including the PAX Good Behaviour Game (GBG), Roots of Empathy and the Incredible Years suite of interventions. Descriptions and evaluations of the individual programmes can be found below.

The **PAX Good Behaviour Game (GBG)** is an evidence-based universal prevention programme designed to improve mental health by increasing self-regulation, academic engagement, and decreasing disruptive behaviour in children (O'Keefe et al., 2021). The PAX GBG is made up of nine components, including: the Classroom Vision (sets out desirable and undesirable behaviours in the classroom), PAX Quiet (use of a harmonica to gain attention and achieve silence), Granny's Wacky Prizes (rewards for desirable behaviours) or Tootle Notes (reinforcing positive relations between pupils) (Torok et al., 2019). The programme components are designed to be used every day, at various times, individually or together (Torok et al., 2019). Instead of asking the pupils to wait for the end of the week to receive a 'prize', they offer opportunities for good behaviour to be rewarded daily. In 2015, the intervention was evaluated in Irish primary schools (O'Donnell et al., 2016). The programme was implemented in 21 primary school classes across a number of schools in socially-disadvantaged areas of Dublin and the Midlands. While PAX GBG is suitable for all age ranges and is currently being implemented across a range of primary classes in Ireland, in this study, the pupils were either first- or second-class pupils (N=420), aged between seven and eight years (O'Donnell et al., 2016). The evaluation employed a mixed methods approach. Quantitative data was obtained from classroom observations conducted by the researchers, recording the number of disruptive behaviours and completion of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) by teachers. Qualitative data included interviews conducted pre- and post-intervention with the teachers and PAX mentors. Findings revealed that PAX GBG significantly reduced the levels of disruptive behaviour and increased attentiveness, focus in the classroom and the pupils' ability to self-regulate (O'Donnell et al., 2016).

**Roots of Empathy** is a programme aimed at primary school children which, through enhancing empathy, aims to improve prosocial behaviour and reduce conduct problems (Connolly et al., 2018). The programme does this by inviting local parents with babies into the classroom every three weeks over the school year, along with a trained Roots of Empathy Instructor using a specialised curriculum. The programme uses a broad concept of empathy, which may be divided into four different areas: understanding one's own emotions (emotional literacy), understanding other's emotions (cognitive empathy), being emotionally responsive to others (affective empathy), and caring about other's emotions (strive for inclusion, kindness) (Lätsch et al., 2017). Young children being exposed to babies and their caring parents learn experientially how to recognise emotions in others and observe empathic reactions directly (Lätsch et al., 2017). Emotional literacy develops as children begin to identify and label the baby's feelings, reflect on and understand their own feelings, and eventually understand the feelings

of others. The programme has been evaluated internationally (Connolly et al., 2018; Lätsch et al., 2017; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2012) and has repeatedly been found to increase empathy and prosocial behaviour and reduce aggressive behaviour in young children. Currently, in Ireland the programme is being offered virtually due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Hickey et al. (2017) acknowledged that teachers often struggle to cope with behaviour difficulties in the classroom. Their study assessed the effectiveness of **The Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management Training Programme (IYTP)** for improving teacher competencies and child adjustment. This is just one of many programmes in the suite of The Incredible Years, which also include parent training and child training initiatives (Furlong & McGilloway, 2012). The IYTP aims to provide teachers with the skills to effectively manage their classroom and promote children's social, emotional, and academic competence and in turn decrease non-compliant behaviours (The Incredible Years, 2013). During the delivery of the programme, education providers are taught specific skills including reinforcement strategies such as praise, encouragement and incentives but also non-coercive disciplining techniques and ignoring negative classroom behaviour. Hickey et al. (2017) noted that while the IYTP is growing in popularity in countries worldwide, there is a lack of appropriate evidence for its effectiveness. The study included 22 teachers and 217 children (102 boys, 115 girls) whose average age was 5.3 years. 63 of the children in the study were classed as 'high risk' as they scored above the cut-off (>12) on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire for abnormal socioemotional and behavioural difficulties. Teachers and students were randomly split into an intervention or a control group. Psychometric and observational measures assessed the students' and teachers' behaviours at baseline and after 6 months of the programme being implemented. At the end of the intervention, teachers reported improvements in their positive classroom management strategies (e.g., using more praise and encouragement) as well as negative classroom management strategies (e.g., engaging in less shouting, and reprimanding students). Teachers also reported improvements in behaviour of children in the 'high risk' group.

Preschool teachers in Ireland have expressed the need for evidence-based classroom management interventions to address behavioural difficulties (Mahon et al., 2020). Mahon et al. (2020) analysed the effectiveness of the modified **Class-Wide Function-Related Intervention Teams (CW-FIT)** which is an intervention combining social skills training, group contingencies, and reinforcement as an effective strategy to address problem behaviour in three pre-school classes in Ireland. The CW-FIT has been developed within the PBIS framework to decrease problem behaviours at the classroom level rather than at the school-wide level. The novel aspect of this study was that group functional assessment (GFA) was undertaken to identify functionally equivalent social skills to replace the class-wide problem behaviour (Mahon et al., 2020). In turn, the GFA enabled the development of skills that were guided by teacher input and direct observation (Mahon et al., 2020). 32 pre-school children, aged between 2 years 10 months and 5 years 3 months, took part in the intervention. Data were taken at baseline and following intervention. The intervention was found to increase the children's on-task behaviour and decrease problem behaviour and teachers who took part in the intervention rated it as socially acceptable (Mahon et al., 2020).

**Zippy's Friends** is a 24-session programme for teaching social and emotional skills designed for 5–7-year-olds. The programme was designed to teach children how to deal with everyday difficulties and how to identify, discuss and deal with their feelings. It comprises of 6 modules, including: feelings, communication, making and breaking relationships, conflict resolution, dealing with change and loss, and general coping skills. The programme has been evaluated through the Health Promotion Research Centre, the National University of Galway, Ireland (Clarke & Barry, 2010). A total of 730 pupils (mean age

= 7 years 3 months; gender = 47.7% female) and 42 teachers from 42 schools in Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim and Galway were randomly assigned to intervention (N = 523) and control groups (N=207). The evaluation found the programme to be successful in improving children's emotional literacy skills, including improvements in the children's self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills (Clarke & Barry, 2010). Children's 'total difficulties' score, measured using the SDQ, did decrease post-intervention. However, no significant programme effect was found (Clarke & Barry, 2010). There was a significant decrease in the hyperactivity levels of the children in the intervention group when compared with the control group (Clarke & Barry, 2010). Teachers reported that the programme had a positive effect on themselves as it raised their awareness about the children's emotional well-being, providing them with strategies to help the children deal with difficult situations, and enhancing their relationship with the children (Clarke & Barry, 2010). Teachers can avail of one-day training for the programme through the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the use of the programme is encouraged by the Department of Education.

The Department of Education also encourages the use of **The Friends Programmes**, including 'Fun Friends' (4-7 years), Friends for Life (8-11 years) and My Friends Youth (12-15 years), developed by Dr. Paula Barrett (Higgins & O'Sullivan, 2013). The programmes help students to develop resilience by teaching them effective strategies to cope with, problem solve and manage all kinds of emotional distress, including worry, stress, change and anxiety. The programmes can be run as a whole-class or small group intervention. Several evaluations of the programme found a positive impact on primary anxiety outcome measures compared to control groups and follow-up studies also reported promising results with regard to the longevity of effects (Higgins & O'Sullivan, 2013; Rodgers & Dunsmuir, 2015). While the programme was originally designed to be conducted in clinical settings, it has been found to be similarly effective in educational settings due to its manual-based, short-term nature when delivered by an appropriately trained education provider (Higgins & O'Sullivan, 2013). In Ireland, NEPS psychologists train school teachers to deliver these programmes in the classroom.

A recent practice introduced by the government of Ireland, which amongst other outcomes, aims to promote the socioemotional development of children, is **The First 5 Strategy (2019-2028)**. This is a whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families which aims to build on the many positive developments for young children in Ireland in recent years. Its primary aim is to identify new and additional actions to improve the experiences and outcomes of children from birth up to five years of age. Five main steps underpin all activities under The First 5 Strategy: access to a broader range of options for parents to balance working and caring, a new model of parenting support provided across a range of Government Departments and State Agencies, and new developments in child health through a dedicated child health workforce focussed initially in areas of high population density and disadvantage, reform of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) system and a package of measures to tackle early childhood poverty. The findings that early childhood experiences have a direct link to health and wellbeing in adulthood underpin The First 5 Strategy, as it aims to ensure that the social, emotional and cognitive development of all children in Ireland is adequately nurtured through various avenues from early age.

The need to support young children's socioemotional competencies has been recognised in Ireland and the programmes described above suggest that some small-scale steps have been taken in this regard in recent years, particularly in primary school settings. Research on the practices and needs in relation to behaviour support in primary schools in Ireland indicates that a whole-school behaviour support programme would be a good fit for Irish primary schools (McKiernan, 2012). A comprehensive school-wide model of behaviour management and positive behaviour support for students have been

recommended as good practice in policy, research and legislation in Ireland for many years (Rosenberg & Puntty, 2008). Unfortunately, while conducting this literature review, the authors noted a considerable difference in the levels of programmes recommended to promote the child's behavioural and socioemotional competence in primary schools versus pre-school settings. The accompanying official document and policy review also highlights the inconsistencies between support provided to pre-school and formal education settings in Ireland. This research indicated that while all ECEC staff must be provided with continuous guidance, training and resources to tackle socioemotional and conduct difficulties, going forward, additional attention should be paid to pre-school settings.

## 1.4. PORTUGAL

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In the last decade, the interest and investment in socioemotional competence and learning, and in understanding behavioural problems in ECEC, in Portugal, seem to have increased (cf. Cristóvão, 2017; Major, 2011; Marques-Pinto & Raimundo, 2016). While many efforts related to behaviour problems were relatively common for elementary school and upper educational levels, the research for preschool (3-6 years old) is more recent and still scarcer, and public regulations are still more focused on basic education (after 6 years old) than in preschool. However, positive signs appeared in the last years, with interventions to promote socioemotional competence and decrease behaviour difficulties in preschool contexts being developed and evaluated, either with private or public support, at national and local levels.

### *The early childhood education system in Portugal*

In Portugal, ECEC is organized in a split system: one for children up to 3 years old (i.e., infants and toddlers) and one for children aged between 3 and 6 years old. Services for younger children are regulated by the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, while services for children aged 3 to 6 are part of the national education system and are held by the Ministry of Education. Exception to this is the case of the Autonomous Region of Madeira, where an integrated network (0-6) of public and non-profit ECEC institutions is under the pedagogical governance of the Regional Secretariat of Education, Science and Technology. Compulsory schooling begins at 6 years old.

ECEC for 3-6 is provided by the public sector, free of charge for families, and by the private sector, either in for-profit or non-profit institutions. Preschool education is free of charge in the public system that guarantees universal access from the age of 4 (Legislative Order No. 6/2018, 12th April, republished by Legislative Order No. 10-B/2021, 14th April). Public preschools are included in school clusters (i.e., organisational units constituted by schools providing basic education and upper secondary education; cf. European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022).

In 2019/2020, 97.1% of children were attending preschool, with almost 100% (99.9%) for 5-year-old children, 95.8% for 4-year-old and a lower percentage for 3-year-olds (83.2%) (DGEEC, 2021).

### ***Early childhood teachers' careers and professional development***

All preschool teachers have a professional qualification, obtained by attending bachelor and master level higher education courses. Preschool teachers are currently required to complete a bachelor in Basic Education (180 ECTS) followed by a master in Preschool Education (90 ECTS) or a Master in Preschool and Primary Education (120 ECTS) (Decree-Law no. 79/2014, of 14 May).

The Career Statute of Preschool, Basic and Secondary Teachers (Decree-Law n. 139-A/90, 28 April, subjected to several amendments until the present day) establishes the following formal requirements for career progression: length of service; performance assessment (minimum qualitative assessment: "Good"); the successful completion of continuous education/ training or specialized courses (a minimum of 25 or 50 hours, depending on the career echelon).

The Portuguese Education Act recognizes continuing professional development (CPD) as a right for all educators and teachers. It also states the need for in-service education to be sufficiently diversified in order to ensure its complementary role of deepening and updating professional knowledge and competencies, as well as enabling career mobility and progression. CPD activities are mandatory for early childhood teachers working in 3-6 public sector, influencing performance assessment and career progression. In response to critics over the mismatch between CPD initiatives and identified needs of ECEC teachers and contexts, Decree-Law 22/2014 defined a new paradigm for continuing education/ training in order to guarantee CPD opportunities that would be more contextualized, specific and aligned with the real needs of ECEC professionals and institutions. Despite this, the current system of CPD for early childhood teachers continues to be criticized for the mismatch between the provided offer and the real needs of ECEC professionals (Araújo, 2017).

The ageing and anticipated retirement of a considerable number of early childhood teachers in the public sector has been a topic of concern in the current public policy agenda (Nunes et al., 2021). This circumstance, associated with a lack of attractiveness of the profession (particularly visible outside large urban centres), led to a current discussion around measures to tackle staff shortages over the next decade, as well as measures to promote the social recognition/status of the teaching profession.

### ***Implementation efforts have been made at the policy and ECEC settings' levels to address children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties***

Several official documents acknowledge the importance of socioemotional competence and the central role of the school system in contributing to this developmental domain.

Globally, the Portuguese Education Act (the law that establishes the general framework of the education system; *Lei de Bases do Sistema Educativo*, Law no. 46/86, 14th October 1986) refers: "The curricular organization of school education will take into account the promotion of a balanced harmony, in the horizontal and vertical planes, between the levels of physical and motor, cognitive, affective, aesthetic, social and moral development of the students" (Article 50). Especially concerning the preschool education, this law sets as its goals, among others: to contribute to the emotional stability and security of the child; develop the child's moral domain and develop the sense of responsibility, associated with freedom; etc. (article 5th, Law No. 49/2005, 30 August).

Coherent with the Education Act, the Framework Law of Pre-School Education (Law 5/97, 10 April) states that preschool education should promote the balanced development of children, with a view to their full integration into society as autonomous, free and solidary beings. It specifies objectives of preschool education, of which we highlight the following within the scope of our project: (a) Promote the personal and social development of the child based on democratic life experiences from a



perspective of education for citizenship; (b) Encourage the inclusion of children in social diversity groups, with respect for the plurality of cultures, favouring a progressive awareness of the child's role as a member of society; (c) Contribute to equal access opportunities to school and learning success; (d) Stimulate the global development of each child, with respect for their individual characteristics (...); (e) Develop expression and communication through the use of multiple languages as means of relationship, information, aesthetics awareness and understanding of the world; (f) Awake curiosity and critical thinking; (g) Provide each child with conditions of well-being and security, in the scope of individual and collective health.

The Curriculum Guidelines for Pre-School Education (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016) emphasize core pedagogical principles, including the recognition of the child as a subject and an agent of the educational process, as well as the need to address inclusion and pedagogical differentiation in order to be responsive to all children. The document defines three content areas in preschool education: Personal and Social Education, Expression and Communication, and Knowledge of the World. The first one is considered a cross-cut area, referring to how children relate to themselves, to others and to the world, in a process of development of attitudes, values and dispositions, which forms the basis of succeeded lifelong learning and an autonomous, conscious and solidary citizenship. This area encompasses four articulated components: (a) Building of identity and self-esteem; (b) Independence and autonomy; (c) Self-awareness as a learner; (d) Democratic coexistence and citizenship. Moreover, the document stresses the importance of the educational environment (organization of space, materials, time, group, relations and interactions) and pedagogical intentionality in developing practices that can have a positive effect on children's holistic learning and development. In the same direction, the Specific Professional Profile of the Early Childhood Teacher (Decree-Law 241/2001, 31 August) defines the core professional roles of early childhood teachers, including the organization of the educational environment, observation, planning and assessment, and roles concerning relations and educational activities. About these, emphasis is given to: (a) relating with children in order to promote their affective security and autonomy; (b) Promoting the child's involvement in activities and projects initiated by her, the group, the educator or of joint initiative; (c) Encouraging cooperation among children, ensuring that they all feel valued and integrated into the group; (d) Supporting and encouraging the affective, emotional and social development of each child and of the group; (e) Stimulating the child's curiosity, promoting her ability to identify and solve problems; (f) Fostering children's ability to perform tasks and their dispositions to learn; and (g) Promoting personal, social and civic development from a perspective of education for citizenship. So, these official documents focused on ECEC, highlight the importance of promoting socioemotional competencies and teachers' role in that domain.

Furthermore, the Students' Profile by the End of Compulsory Schooling (2017; <https://cidadania.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/pdfs/students-profile.pdf>) defines competencies in several domains, including social and emotional competencies, thus highlighting their importance throughout the educational system (e.g., competences related to interpersonal relations and autonomy and to personal development and autonomy). Also in 2017, a National Strategy for Educating for Citizenship was developed, also emphasizing the crucial role of schools, at all educational levels, in the promotion of educational practices with the potential to foster future civic adult behaviours that privileges "equality in interpersonal relationships, the integration of differences, respect for Human Rights and the valorisation of concepts and values of democratic citizenship" (Grupo de Trabalho de Educação para a Cidadania, 2017).

As stated above, the Portuguese educational system follows the principles of inclusive education, established by the Decree-law no. 54/2018. This decree intends to change the school system so that each school can address the diversity of needs of their students, assuming the principle that success is within the reach of all students through increased participation in academic and social school life. This piece of legislation abolished the separation between a regular and a special education system, promoting a flexible organization of the supports available in the schools. Supports are organized into a multi-tiered system, including a universal level, addressing all the children, including those that receive support from the other two levels; a selective level, including supports that complement the universal measures; and an additional level, when the student's difficulties are significant and persistent and involve communication, interaction, cognition and learning, and the previous two levels of support are not enough to achieve success. The decree-law also establishes a set of specific resources that should be available, including human (e.g., Special Education Teachers), organizational (e.g., the Multidisciplinary Team Supporting Inclusive Education, and the Learning Support Center), and community resources (e.g., Local Early Intervention Teams). This legislative change is aligned with the documents previously mentioned in this section. The Decree-law no. 54/2018 assumes a positive approach to the education of all students, focused on the development of multiple levels of competencies (e.g., cognitive, behavioural, socioemotional). It also presupposes the organization of a multi-tiered school-wide system of supports that can contribute to the development of all students, changing the focus from a remediate or compensatory approach to a preventive and constructive one (Santos et al., 2021).

Revealing a concern with child health, especially mental health, in 2016, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health published a manual with guidelines in the area of mental health in schools, covering the different levels of education, from preschool to secondary school (Mental Health in School Health. Manual for the Promotion of Socioemotional Skills in the School Context / *Saúde Mental em Saúde Escolar. Manual para a Promoção de Competências Sociais em Meio Escolar*; Carvalho et al., 2016). The manual is defined as a pedagogical resource to facilitate the training and implementation of projects to promote Mental Health at School, framed within the typology of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs (Carvalho et al., 2016). These guidelines are supported by foundational processes and principles, such as: a comprehensive and holistic whole-school approach, integrated into health promotion and education; intervention based on models based on scientific evidence, using the evaluation results to justify decisions; training of teachers and school health teams to be, essentially, a resource to support choices at a personal and group level and facilitators of learning and decision-making regarding health potential; implementation of interactive and participatory methodologies, etc. (Carvalho et al., 2016). The ultimate goals set by this resource are to create in schools "safe and supportive environments that promote well-being, personal development and learning; help children and young people to develop effective socioemotional skills and to understand their own behaviour; develop school organization and community articulation strategies that support well-being, namely, through a survey of needs and the identification of partners to turn to; signalling and referring to appropriate structures for children, young people and families at risk from the point of view of their mental health and well-being" (p. 15). To our knowledge, the effects of these guidelines in schools were not evaluated yet.

In 2017, the same ministries also published The Health Education Reference (*Referencial de Educação para a Saúde*; Carvalho et al., 2017) aiming at establishing a "common understanding and language on the themes, objectives and contents to be addressed in health promotion and education initiatives aimed at children and young people, as well as in the materials, resources and communication platforms that support them". This document identifies five global themes: Mental Health and Violence

Prevention, Food Education, Physical Activity, Addictive Behaviours and Dependencies, Affections and Education for Sexuality. In each of these themes, sub-themes and objectives were defined according to the level of education. For preschool-aged children, in the area of Mental Health and Violence Prevention, several specific objectives are set, such as: to communicate in a positive, effective and assertive way; develop self-knowledge in its emotional dimension and develop emotional literacy; develop autonomy; build positive relationships; identify violence directed at him/her-self and others; adopt a culture of respect and tolerance; use the phases of the decision-making process: setting goals and managing emotions and associated values; learn values of citizenship, solidarity and respect for differences.

This public investment in the last years in socioemotional competencies and behaviours problems was accompanied by private initiatives that could potentially support interventions in any region of the country, such as the funding program from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation called “Gulbenkian Academies for Knowledge” (<https://gulbenkian.pt/academias/>) for supporting about 100 local projects with the final goal of developing social and emotional skills in about 10 thousand children and youth under 25 years old. Note that among the 100 funded interventions, 25 targeted children from 0 to 6 years old, and were promoted by different types of institutions, such as schools, municipalities, private educational institutions, and higher education institutions (<https://gulbenkian.pt/academias/projects/>).

### ***The impact of current practices developed to promote the child’s socioemotional competence and prevent challenging behaviours***

The literature review and the analyses of official documents and reports (e.g., Koltcheva & Coelho, 2022) showed that systematic evaluation of interventions and public policies aimed at promoting socioemotional competencies and reducing behaviour problems in ECEC is not a common practice, at least with the dissemination of results in locations accessible for the general public or in scientific publications. Some specific programs, mostly authored by researchers from higher education institutions, in partnership with ECEC professionals and local authorities and part of them funded by Foundations (such as Gulbenkian Foundation), showed positive results on efficacy evaluations (e.g., Correia, 2019; Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016; Santos, 2017). Others showed promising initial results (Simões et al., 2021). Positive effects for children were identified on social skills (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016; Santos, 2017; Simões et al., 2021), peer relationships (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016), adjustment to school (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016; Santos, 2017), emotional knowledge (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016), decrease in mental health difficulties and increase in well-being (Simões et al., 2021). The positive impact of intervention programmes on decreasing problem behaviours was identified (e.g., Simões et al., 2020) but results tend to be less consistent, with some results showing no impact of the intervention program (e.g., Santos, 2017). Indeed, our revision shows a notorious tendency for intervention programmes to focus on the promotion of social skills and socioemotional competencies and less on reducing behaviour problems or difficulties.

The focus on educators’ outcomes is less common in the analysed studies. In the study conducted by Vale (2011), within the framework of the Incredible Years Programme, teachers reported positive effects of their involvement in training (workshops and group discussions). Specifically, higher scores were reported by the teachers of the experimental group in all subscales of the Practices Inventory (Vale & Oliveira, 2005; Portuguese version of the Best Practices Inventory, part of the Incredible Years Programme), particularly on the “Socioemotional Practices” and “Discipline” components.

Limitations were identified in the evaluation of intervention programmes' effectiveness and sustainability. The most common weaknesses are the lack of assessment of program implementation fidelity and the lack of external evaluators of outcomes.

Moreover, program-wide / system-wide interventions in ECEC were not found in our literature review. One Portuguese team is involved in an Erasmus+ project aimed at developing a program-wide intervention, but it is still being implemented (Prow, <https://prowproject.eu/about/>). In the needs analyses run for that project, in a survey with 100 ECEC professionals, current practices were assessed as of slight to moderate effectiveness in reducing problem behaviour and in supporting children's socioemotional needs (ProW Consortium, 2021). Moreover, they reported some limitations in promoting positive learning environments, with higher results in lack/inadequacy of children's support, lack/inadequacy of collaboration among staff and lack of or inadequate teachers' training. In an open-ended question, they identified challenges related to children's behaviour, the children's difficulty in handling frustration, difficulties in social relationships and more general features such as not following or understanding classroom rules. They also identified features at the school-level, such as those related to relations with families and lack of strong partnerships with families, and lack of common goals shared by different educational stakeholders.

As stated before in this report, curriculum guidelines for ECEC frame pedagogical practices that aim to promote socioemotional competencies. In 2014, the General Directorate of Education launched the study "Characterization of Pre-School Education Contexts" (Pinto et al., 2014) aiming to characterize the situation of the institutions integrated into the national preschool network. Specifically, the study intended to evaluate the implementation of the Curriculum Guidelines for Pre-School Education and the global quality of preschool education in Portugal. It involved 906 institutions from the public and private (non- and for-profit) sectors. A total of 484 preschool teachers from all regions of the country (mainland) completed an online questionnaire on aspects related to the characterization of the group, the preschool teacher, curriculum organization and development, identification of training needs, collaboration with families, assessment and evaluation practices, among others.

When asked to identify children with developmental and/or behavioural problems in their classroom, about half of the teachers from the public sector (50.4%), 43.9% from the private non-profit and 38.2% from the private for-profit institutions responded that at least one child from the group exhibited such problems. The percentages reported in all sectors were higher than those of children with special needs. One third of the teachers (34.4%) identified 1-2 children with developmental and/or behavioural problems in their classrooms, whereas 14.1% pointed out a larger number of cases (nine being the highest number) ( $M=2.12$ ). The proportion of children within the group with such perceived problems presented high variability, from 1/34 to 9/18.

When asked about professional training/education over the last two school years, 48.2% of teachers referred having benefited from such initiatives. The content areas/ domains more frequently referred were Personal and Social Education (19.1%) and Visual Arts (16.5%); these were also the areas/ domains in which the training was longer and in which the teachers reported having less need for training initiatives. Nonetheless, 46.7% of participants reported training needs in the area of Personal and Social Education. Also, when asked about the training needs of assistants, 63.3% of teachers considered that training on strategies for behaviour management was quite or very necessary.

Finally, even if the time allocated to each content area/ domain in teacher-led activities was quite balanced, teachers reported spending more time in activities related to Personal and Social Education, and Oral Language and Approach to Writing.

In spite of a legal framework that clearly addresses the relevance of intervening in socioemotional and behavioural issues in ECEC settings, its translation into practice needs further attention. Moreover, our revision shows that large-scale evaluations of public policies in these matters are not in place. Also, a more methodologically robust program evaluation must be carried out for a better understanding of effective and sustainable interventions, both for children and ECEC teachers.

### *The status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of young children in ECEC settings*

The national research on behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of children attending ECEC contexts has been predominantly based on preschool teachers' and peers' reports.

Studies show that preschool teachers' reports on children's social competencies/ social behaviour tend to be positive (Aguiar et al., 2019; Fernandes et al., 2019; Major, 2011; Vale, 2011), with children being characterized as relatively well-adjusted (Fernandes et al., 2019). Low prevalence of internalizing and externalizing behaviour problems has also been reported by teachers (Aguiar et al., 2019; Major, 2011).

The exception to this tendency is identified in studies conducted with children with disabilities. Teachers reported that these children had fewer friends and relatively low levels of social acceptance (Ferreira et al., 2019). Findings also suggest that children with severe or socio-behavioural disabilities may be at increased risk for social rejection and isolation, having fewer friends and lower social network centrality than children with mild disabilities (Ferreira, 2016).

Some evidence suggests that teachers value children's socioemotional learning in preschool (Neto Costa, 2018; Vale, 2011), with some professionals considering it more relevant than literacy and numeracy competencies (Neto Costa, 2018). The study conducted by Major (2011) with 1000 children revealed that teachers valued children's social skills that were more visible in classrooms and with greater impact on the group/activities, such as seating and listening to stories, being accepted and appreciated by peers, and manage to separate from parents. Inversely, in a small-scale study conducted by Mendes (2017) with 14 preschool teachers a set of socioemotional skills that are perceived by teachers as more problematic in preschool classrooms was described: not understanding the functioning of the classroom, disobedience, opposition, not sharing, aggression and disturbing the teachers work.

The comparison between teachers' and other informants' reports revealed some discrepancies. Thus, when investigating the associations between young children's sociometric popularity based on teachers' classifications and sociometric popularity based on peer nomination, results show that fewer children were classified as rejected by their teachers in comparison with peers' nominations (2.9% and 28%, respectively) (Peceguina et al., 2020). In the same study, 35.7% of children were classified as popular by teachers, whereas only 15.8% were classified as popular by peer nomination. Findings suggest that teachers overestimate the social status of young children, with potentially negative implications on teachers' decisions to develop targeted interventions. Low agreement between teachers' classifications and peers' nominations was also identified on the social status of children with disabilities, with peers nominating a higher percentage of rejected and neglected children, raising concerns about teachers' awareness of processes of social rejection and neglect (Ferreira, 2016).

The study by Major and Seabra-Santos (2015) also points to differences between the perceptions of parents and teachers. Thus, parents systematically rated their children more positively on social skills than did teachers, but more negatively for problem behaviours. A similar tendency was found by Torres et al. (2015) in which parents' reports on externalizing behaviours with peers (anger/aggression) were

slightly higher than teachers' reports and higher for prosocial behaviours. Note that no statistical tests are presented for these differences.

These differences between informants may have implications when analysing predictors of children's social competence and behaviour difficulties. In fact, some studies have found associations with other variables for one of the reports but not for the other / others (e.g., Torres et al., 2015). Torres and colleagues hypothesize that this disparity may represent the difference in the child's behaviour in different contexts (externalizing behaviours in that study), with teachers' reports being more specific to the preschool contexts, while parents have a perception of the child's behaviour in other contexts.

That disparity needs also to be considered in efficacy studies, as positive effects of some programs are found when considering teacher reports of child outcomes but not when considering children reports (Simões et al., 2021).

Overall, results from research have been addressing the need to focus on teachers' preparation for these particular issues. Indeed, despite attributing importance to promoting socioemotional competences, preschool teachers claim that their initial professional studies did not prepare them adequately for addressing it (Neto Costa, 2018). Thus, teachers' specific education/training, either at the level of preservice or in-service initiatives, is considered pivotal for teachers' daily practices for tackling behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of young children and for promoting behavioural and socioemotional competencies (Neto Costa, 2018; Peceguina et al., 2020; Vale, 2011).

### *The possible contributing factors of children's socioemotional difficulties*

Several studies conducted in Portugal demonstrated that, during early childhood, social competence and socioemotional skills show a substantial increase according to age, even when no programs specifically focused on developing social skills are implemented (Fialho & Aguiar, 2017; Leite, 2018; Torres et al., 2014; Torres et al., 2015). Besides age, the child's characteristic most consistently associated with social competence appears to be gender, with higher results for girls than boys (Fialho & Aguiar, 2017; Torres et al., 2014; Torres et al., 2015). Associations were found also with temperament, with lower results for children with difficult temperament (Torres et al., 2014).

Studies focused on emotional understanding appeared less frequently in the literature review, despite its interest in better understanding socioemotional competence. Martins et al. (2016), in a study with 75 pre-schoolers from Porto ( $M_{age} = 55.05$  months), found that child emotion understanding was predicted by higher child's language ability and higher set shifting, and also by mothers' age (children with older mothers showed better emotion understanding).

Family-level variables, such as indicators of mothers' and fathers' mental health, have also been shown to correlate with pre-schoolers' social competence. In a study with 295 children, mothers' parenting stress was significantly related to lower child social competence rated by teachers (teachers  $N=26$ ), but no effects were found for fathers' parenting stress (Torres et al., 2014). In the opposite direction, fathers' involvement in outdoor play was positively associated with child higher social competence (Torres et al., 2014). Attachment security (assessed as a security base script) seems to also play a role in the associations between family-level variables and the child's social competence. Fernandes et al. (2019) found a positive correlation between children's social attachment representations (secure base script) and the child's social competence, controlling for child sex ( $N=82$  children, 34 boys,  $M_{age}=62.60$ ; 4 preschool teachers).

Regarding the predictors related to ECEC contexts, the study by Torres et al. (2015), with 543 children ( $M_{age}=4.5$  years, 50.6% girls) who started childcare between 3 and 64 months, found no relations



between the age of entry in out-of-home care and prosocial behaviours with peers, either for teachers', mothers' and fathers' reports. Quality of ECEC appeared to be associated with social skills in some specific conditions, in a study conducted by Aguiar et al. (2019), with 222 children with a mean age of 63.75 months, including 180 typically developing children and 42 with disabilities receiving support from special education services. In the same study, children who spent more time in classrooms with lower observed quality (classroom organization dimension) were rated as having lower social skills by their teachers. The main effects of quality were not found for ECEC quality, which can be explained, as stated by the authors, by the modest levels for quality, hypothetically not sufficient to have positive effects on social skills. The quality dimension related to instructional support predicted higher social skills for children with disabilities. Days absent from school predicted lower social skills reported by teachers, a result that should be interpreted with caution as it is correlated with mother education and may be correlated with other important educational or developmental variables not assessed in the study. Similar variables were analysed as predictors of behaviour problems, frequently appearing in the literature assessed in the dimensions of externalizing behaviour problems and internalizing behaviour problems.

While, as noted earlier, social skills appear to increase with age, the relations between age and problem behaviours are not so clear, with research showing ambivalent results. In some studies, no associations were found between behaviour problems reported by teachers and children's age (e.g., Aguiar et al., 2019; Fialho & Aguiar, 2019). In a master's degree study with 275 children (48.7% boys,  $M_{age} = 58.40$  months; Carneiro, 2015), no age effect was found for emotional and behavioural problems as reported by mothers. On the contrary, in the study by Torres et al. (2014) anxiety-withdrawal, a dimension of internalizing behaviour problems showed a tendency to decrease with age.

Several studies found sex-related differences in behaviour problems, with higher scores for boys than for girls. Examples are the study by Torres et al. (2014), in which boys showed higher levels of anger-aggression (externalizing problems); the study by Fialho and Aguiar (2019) in which boys were rated by teachers with more externalizing problem behaviours than girls (349 children with typical development, 50.9% female,  $M_{age} = 54.67$  months; 73 teachers). On the contrary, the sex of the child did not have significant effects on emotional and behavioural problems reported by mothers (Carneiro, 2015).

For ECEC predictors, relations between time in ECEC and child problem behaviours were explored in a sample with 295 children, attending 26 preschools (Torres et al., 2015). More hours in out-of-home care per week and a higher number of months since the beginning of childcare attendance were predictors of externalizing behaviours (anger/aggression) with peers, as reported by teachers, but not when reported by mothers or fathers (Torres et al., 2015). Further exploring this relation, more externalizing behaviour problems were displayed by children who spent more time in classrooms observed to be of lower quality in the organizational dimension (Aguiar et al., 2019). Days absent from school did not predict internalizing and externalizing behaviour problems (Aguiar et al. 2019).

Regarding family variables, higher scores of externalizing behaviours with peers (anger/aggression) were assigned by separated parents to their children, and teachers also tended to score higher on the externalizing behaviours of children with separated parents (Torres et al., 2015). Fernandes et al. (2019) found a negative correlation between children's social attachment representations (secure base script) and child teachers' ratings of externalizing behaviours, controlling for the child's sex. Other family variables seem to appear as predictors of behaviour problems. A study by Carneiro (2015) analysed several risk factors common in the literature and found that all risk factors assessed in the study predicted higher social and emotional problems (reported by mothers, CBCL total score): composite of social risk factors (e.g., labour instability, difficulties running domestic economy, house with bad

conditions, one of the parents unemployed; low parent or mother's education), composite of family risk factors (e.g., physical abuse in the family, history of reference to social services in the family, family history of neglect), mother's psychopathology and less maternal sensitive responsiveness. Furthermore, the cumulative risk was a predictor of higher scores in social and emotional problems. Separate analyses were not presented for internalizing and externalizing behaviour.

Father involvement showed effects that seem contradictory: the positive effect of father playing outdoors was found on lower anger-aggression, but father's involvement indoors was negatively correlated with social competence and higher anger-aggression (Torres et al., 2014). These results suggest the need to further understand these relations that may be associated with family dynamics and the tasks and responsibilities shared, or not, by mother and father.

Although focused on practices and behaviours in the family environment and with some methodological limitations, a master study (Almeida, 2021) developed with 103 parents of children (52.4% boys), between 3 and 6 years old ( $M= 4.04$ ,  $SD= 0.89$ ), presents results that may inform further studies exploring relations between sleeping habits and problem behaviours. In this study, children sleeping less than 10 hours a day (i.e., less than recommended) were scored by their parents with more Externalizing Behaviour Problems (in specific, more Opposition/Explosive, Overactive/Attention Problems). In addition, the delay in the time to go to sleep was positively associated with problem behaviours, externalizing and internalizing (except for the subscale Opposition/Explosive). These Portuguese exploratory results followed the tendency of other studies developed with more robust methodologies and analyses.

Notwithstanding the different constructs in analysis, some seem to be associated. In the study by Aguiar et al. (2019) children's higher social skills were associated with lower internalizing behaviour problems. However, associations with externalizing behaviour problems were not found.

In a sample of children with disabilities ( $N= 86$ , children with different disabilities, 63 boys), attending 86 inclusive ECEC classrooms from the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon, Ferreira et al. (2019), when analysing relations between children's individual skills and their friendships and social acceptance, found that externalizing behaviours were negatively associated with peer social acceptance but not with children's friendships. So, it appears that peer social acceptance and friendships work in different ways in relation to group-level social outcomes (social acceptance) and dyadic relationships (friendship).

Child popularity, as rated by their teachers, appeared to be positively associated with higher age and with better social and verbal skills (Peceguina et al., 2020; study with 352 typically developing children,  $M_{age}= 65.22$ , from 89 preschool classrooms, 40 preschools, in Lisbon). The authors highlight the likely reciprocal relation between social skills and popularity, noting that social skills contribute to higher sociometric popularity, through better peer interactions and relationships, and sociometric popularity also contributes to child peer-related social experiences. In the opposite direction, children rated as having more behaviour problems were more likely to be scored with lower sociometric status: controversial children with more externalizing behaviours and rejected children with higher internalizing behaviours. For sociometric data collected with children (peer nominations), the pattern of findings was similar, but no associations were found according to children's age and verbal competence (Peceguina et al., 2020).



## ***Successful practices to provide support for children’s behavioural and socioemotional competencies and for developing a system for discouraging challenging behaviours***

Though educational practices that promote socioemotional development and intend to manage challenging behaviours are not recent, considering that some efforts have been done locally by many teachers and preschool contexts for decades, the nation-wide investment and programs with systematic evaluations, especially with control groups, are recent. The literature review allowed the identification of four programs with research associated. These four programs and the results of the assessment of their implementation are presented below.

The program “**Salto de Gigante**” (Giant Leap) is a universal-type intervention aiming at developing social and emotional skills (Correia, 2019). It also has the purpose to facilitate the process of transition from pre-school to the first year, contributing to child adaptation to elementary school. According to the authors, the Giant Leap is based on “the ecological and dynamic model of transition of Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000), the social and emotional competence framework (Denham, Wyatt, Bassett, Echeverria, & Knox, 2009), and the ABCD model of development (Greenberg et al., 1995), wherein social and emotional competency involves the dynamic integration of emotions, knowledge, and behaviours” (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016, p. 62). The program, which follows the CASEL (2012) recommendations, has one version to be implemented in preschool (Giant Leap PRE) and one version to be implemented in the first year of elementary school (Giant Leap 1). “The “Giant Leap” covers six areas: a) orientation of the transition to school; (b) self-knowledge, body awareness, recognition and communication of emotions, (c) social knowledge, perspective taking, similarities, and differences; (d) emotional regulation and self-management; (e) interpersonal skills, communication, cooperation and conflict management; responsible decision making (Correia, 2019). Activities include instructional videos created for the program, storytelling, games, roleplaying and artistic expression activities, brainstorming, modelling, constructive feedback, individual positive reinforcement, and group discussion/reflection (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016). The version for preschools includes 15 weekly sessions, from 45 to 60 min (per session). It can be implemented by ECEC teachers, teachers and psychologists, trained by the author of the program. The program manual recommends that a pre- and post-test is conducted.

Giant Leap has been evaluated, with positive effects for the intervention group when compared to a control group (Correia, 2019; Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016). Furthermore, one of the studies had two intervention conditions, and positive effects were obtained either when implementing the program in preschool and elementary school or when implementing the intervention only with 1st graders (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016). Children in the intervention group improved peer relationships, academic behaviour, social skills, adjustment to school, emotional knowledge, and school learning skills. Furthermore, there was also an increase in children’s perception of their social support network and satisfaction with the social support in the school.

**The Incredible Years** (*Anos Incríveis*) is a series of programs developed by Carolyn Webster-Stratton with the main goal of reducing risks related to early behaviour problems and socioemotional difficulties (cf. Webster-Stratton et al., 2012). It includes several programs for parents, ECEC and elementary schools’ teachers, other professionals working in educational contexts, and children (Webster-Stratton, 2018).

One version of the program (*Anos Incríveis*/Incredible Years –Teacher Classroom Management (AI-TCM)) is designed for preschool and school contexts, to be implemented with ECEC teachers and elementary school teachers with children aged between 3 and 8 years old (Webster-Stratton, 2018; Webster-

Stratton et al., 2012). The program was originally developed in the USA, and it began to be used in Portugal with parents. The version for teachers began to be implemented in Portugal in 2009. The main purpose is to develop teachers' skills for positively manage the group of children and to promote children's social, emotional and academic competences in the children in a close relationship with their families. Specifically, the program aims at: "(a) improving teachers' classroom management skills, including proactive teaching approaches and effective discipline; (b) increasing teachers' use of academic, persistence, social, and emotional coaching with students; (c) strengthening teacher-student bonding; (d) increasing teachers' ability to teach social skills, anger management, and problem-solving skills in the classroom and (e) improving home-school collaboration, behaviour planning and parent-teacher bonding" (Webster-Stratton et al., 2012). Usually, the version for teachers is implemented through six monthly workshops. Training strategies include discussion of videos, brainstorming, roleplay, tasks and goals to be developed between sessions (Santos, 2017; Vale, 2011).

These programs had undergone several studies to assess their efficacy, both in the version for parents and in the version for ECEC teachers, with positive results in reducing externalized problem behaviours of children in ECEC contexts (cf. Webster-Stratton et al., 2012). In a PhD thesis (Vale, 2011), the version for preschool teachers was tested, comparing an intervention ( $n=8$  teachers) with a control group ( $n=8$  teachers). It was developed in the workshop modality, with five weekly workshops (24 hours), covering five thematic areas: (a) behaviour problems' prevention (b) praise, attention, encouragement, and training; (c) motivation through incentives; (d) decreasing inadequate behaviours; (5) behaviour problem's prevention. The study involved a preliminary assessment, post-intervention assessment and follow-up. The intervention group presented significantly fewer difficulties than at the beginning of the program. The ECEC teachers who implemented the Program described, at the end of the intervention, that children had more pro-social competence than before. The intervention was equally effective of children in urban and rural areas, and with different ages, either boys or girls (Vale, 2011). Positive effects of the Incredible Years for Preschool were also found in a master research project (Santos, 2017) that assessed 210 children during the 1st year of elementary school (44 classrooms), comparing 104 children whose preschool teachers were trained in the Incredible Years with 106 controls. Results showed gains in social skills for children in the intervention group compared to the control group. However, no significant differences were found between the intervention and control groups on behaviour problems. Moreover, the intervention group showed better academic results in at end of the first academic period and better adaptation to school. No differences were found in parents' ratings of children's behaviour and skills.

This study is promising in what regards the positive effects of ECEC teachers' professional development as children's gains during preschool seem to stand during the transition to elementary school contributing to a better performance and to a successful transition to elementary school (Santos, 2017). However, more studies, methodologically stronger are needed to further demonstrate its efficacy, as teachers were the main informants while also delivering the program.

**RESCUR** is a universal curriculum that intends to promote resilience from early education (preschool) until the 6th grade (Cefai et al., 2015; Simões et al., 2016). Its theoretical background are resilience-focused interventions, the SEL programmes (CASEL) and the ecological framework (Simões et al., 2021). The program intends to promote and develop cognitive, social and emotional skills in children, thus contributing to children's ability to overcome adversity (Simões et al., 2021). It has a particular focus on specific groups of children facing challenges or adversities, such as children with disabilities/special educational needs, children from minorities and refugees, although it is to be implemented with all children (Simões et al, 2020; Simões et al, 2021). The curriculum comprises six themes: developing

communication skills, establishing and maintaining healthy relationships, developing a growth mindset, developing self-determination, building on strengths, and turning challenges into opportunities. The teachers are trained to implement the curriculum with children. Then, each session to deliver the curriculum includes different activities, such as: a mindfulness activity; storytelling and analysis of the story, transfer to real life situations and children's experiences; practical, cooperative activities, such as games, role plays, or visual arts; and a take-home activity (Cefai et al., 2015; Simões et al., 2020). The curriculum manuals are focused on three different age categories: 4-5, 6-8, and 9-12 years old. Besides the curriculum to be implemented in preschools/schools, RESCUR also has a manual for parents.

RESCUR was developed within a European Project, in which, after a pilot study in six European countries, its implementation was evaluated in Portugal, Greece and Malta. In Portugal, 123 teachers and school staff attended a 25-hour accredited course to implement the RESCUR in their schools/preschools. For the efficacy study, the curriculum was implemented in 57 classrooms in councils in the Lisbon metropolitan area, with a total of 1084 children (53.2% male), 30.6% of which were pre-schoolers (Simões et al., 2021). Teachers were instructed to organize around 15 sessions to deliver the curriculum to children, which take 45-60 minutes each. This quasi-experimental study was conducted by comparing outcomes for that intervention group with a waiting list control group. Though the efficacy study has some methodological limitations acknowledged by the authors (e.g., same teachers implementing the curriculum and assessing children; Simões et al., 2021), results are promising, showing a higher decrease in mental health difficulties and an increase in prosocial behaviours and well-being on the intervention group in comparison to the waiting list, as reported by teachers. No differences were found in children's reports. Other studies analysing the implementation of the RESCUR were also conducted, but the intervention group was not compared to equivalent controls (Simões, 2019; Simões et al., 2020). So, more studies seem to be necessary to confirm its efficacy.

The program *Amigos do Ziki* is the Portuguese translation and adaptation of **Zippy's Friends**, a program implemented in several countries to promote socioemotional skills in children attending preschool (<https://www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk/what-we-do/programmes-for-schools/zippys-friends.html>). In Portugal, the entity responsible for implementing and evaluating the Amigos do Ziki program is the *Escutar - Associação de Estudos e Prevenção do Suicídio* (Listening - Association for Studies and Suicide Prevention; [www.escutar.pt](http://www.escutar.pt)). It has been implemented by preschool teachers in the last year of preschool (5/6 years), who are trained and have supervision assured by the Association. The main strategies include stories and activities to develop children's ability to: "identify and communicate feelings; communicate and socialize; dealing with difficult feelings and situations (including moving, loss, divorce, etc.); acting in conflict situations (including bullying); listen to others and help them (<http://www.amigosdoziki.pt/>). *Amigos do Ziki* provides materials and activities also to be used at home with parents and other educators.

Currently, the Association does not report any data concerning the program assessment. A small-scale quasi-experimental research plan, including an intervention group and a control group, was carried out within a master dissertation (Leite, 2018), in partnership with the association *Escutar*. The program was implemented by 15 preschool teachers, and the study compared 81 children in the intervention group with 82 children in the control group ( $M_{age} = 5$  years old). Results show that children increased their emotional knowledge, prosocial behaviour and coping skills, and decreased the behaviour problems, independently of the group (i.e., intervention vs. control groups). So, contrary to what happened in studies carried out in other countries, this study did not show specific effects of the intervention with the *Amigos do Ziki*.

The lack of positive effects may be due to methodological issues related to data collection, but also to the need to further adapt the program to cultural characteristics (Leite, 2018). Moreover, the author relevantly notes that these highly structured programs, based on manuals provided to teachers, may not be coherent with Portuguese preschool education guidelines and most frequent pedagogical practices.

Indeed, these considerations may also apply to the small or inconsistent effects of other programs.

Furthermore, most of the efficacy studies did not control for program implementation fidelity, and as said above, in many of the studies, teachers delivering the program were also the main informants for children's outcomes.

Finally, it is important to note that local and small-scale interventions have been developed by Associations (e.g., *Prevenir*, [www.prevenir.eu](http://www.prevenir.eu); Crusellas et al., 2013), municipalities and, also, as part of internships in different bachelor or master degrees (e.g., Andrez, 2013), master dissertations and doctoral studies (e.g., Vale, 2011). Though they may be significant for children, professionals and families involved, frequently these small-scale interventions are limited in the evaluation of their effectiveness and sustainability. Moreover, everyday work conducted in ECEC settings, in coherence to national guidelines, must contribute to the development of socioemotional competencies, but the systematic evaluation is not in place (see section Result 1/Activity 2.3: Review and analyse policy reports and official documents).

In a survey conducted in the scope of another Erasmus+ Project (**Promoting Teachers Wellbeing through Positive Behaviour Support in Early Childhood Education (ProW)**) with 100 ECEC teachers and assistants (85% teachers) working in Portugal with children from 2 to 5 years old, only 28% reported that their institutions had explicit guidelines related to discipline and only 7% reported following a specific discipline programme. Furthermore, most participants considered that the existent guidelines and the current practices in their ECEC settings were slightly to moderately effective in reducing problem behaviours and considered that practices were also slightly to moderately effective in the support of children's socioemotional needs (ProW Consortium, 2021). In a focus group conducted in the same project (with six participants, all with management roles in their schools), participants highlighted that although ECEC curriculum guidelines include directions on socioemotional development, they still need to be translated into practice. They also pointed to the need to reinforce communication with families and to have support from other professionals, such as psychologists and social workers.

## 2. FIELD RESEARCH

After conducting the national desk research phase, PBS-ECEC Consortium was in a position to investigate more in detail the various national territories and find existing policies and good practices. Based on the aforementioned data, during the field research phase, emphasis was given to gathering important information and identifying the most prominent gaps and needs of young children in ECEC settings concerning behavioural and socioemotional difficulties. The field research included focus group interviews (1 per country) and a needs assessment survey (40 participants per partner minimum) with a sample of educational policy stakeholders, ECEC administrators and educators.

### FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

The aim of the focus group interviews was to identify the status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of young children in ECEC settings and the possible contributing factors as well as the efforts made in each country to address these issues as perceived by educational stakeholders. For this

purpose, each country partner was asked to invite 6-8 educational stakeholders (2-3 preschool teachers, 2-3 school principals and 2-3 other stakeholders) for a group interview to collect qualitative data for a needs assessment.

#### NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY

The needs assessment survey was conducted by a questionnaire distribution in order to examine the concerns and needs of early childhood educators, regarding preschool children's behavioural and socioemotional competence and difficulties. Specifically, research team aimed to investigate the status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of preschool children and the possible contributing factors, as well as the efforts made to address these issues. Through the PBS-ECEC questionnaire distribution, the research teams gathered useful information that will help the Consortium to identify with precision the needs of preschool children and professionals, and address the relevant gaps in ECEC. The present results would serve as the basis for the development of the PBS-ECEC Guide, which includes a set of guidelines for developing and implementing the primary level of prevention of Program-Wide Positive Behaviour Supports (PW-PBS) in early childhood education settings.

Each of the four partner countries (Cyprus, Greece, Ireland and Portugal) conducted its own data collection, using the same questionnaire. Each partner country had the option to launch the survey using their native language and/or English. The estimated time to complete the survey was 10 minutes. Due to COVID19 pandemic restrictive measures, all partners agreed to conduct the survey by using online tools to reassure the health and safety of all participants and consortium members involved.

**The Needs Assessment Survey was split into seven main sections in the following order:**

1. Consent
2. Demographic information
3. The status of children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties
4. Contributing factors to children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties
5. Implementation efforts to promote children's behavioural and socioemotional needs
6. Impact of current practices
7. Preschool's current needs in promoting positive learning environments and to further support children's socioemotional and behavioural competence

In the following sections, this report presents the most indicative results collected from the questionnaire distribution based on the above order in each partner country.

#### CONSENT

The field research followed all the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) Guidelines, and the participants were informed that all the information gathered would be strictly used explicitly for scientific research needs. Specifically, participants of the focus group interviews and the needs assessment survey were thoroughly informed that all collected data would be used to create free resources for early childhood educators, specially designed to promote a safe, positive and engaging environment, where preschool children's behaviour and socioemotional competence will be supported. The responses were handled in a discreet manner, and confidentiality and anonymity were granted to all participants. Each participant was encouraged to read carefully GDPR guidelines and agree before proceeding with the focus group and the survey. Overall, 199 Preschool Educators participated in the focus group interviews and needs assessment survey of the Result 1 PBS-ECEC Preliminary Research Phase.

## 2.1. CYPRUS

VICTORIA MICHAELIDOU (CARDET) & ANDRI AGATHOKLEOUS (IOD)

### *Focus group interview*

#### INTRODUCTION

A focus group (FG) was conducted by the Center for the Advancement of Research & Development in Educational Technology (CARDET) and the Institute of Development in Cyprus (IoD), to identify the status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of young children in ECEC settings and the possible contributing factors, as well as the efforts made in Cyprus to address these issues as perceived by educational stakeholders. The process followed the guidelines agreed upon within the PBS-ECEC consortium, adapting to the Cypriot context when required. The FG guidelines, the consent form and the sociodemographic questionnaire developed by the leading team for Result 1 were translated into Greek. The FG in Cyprus was held online on Tuesday 19th of April 2022, between 12:00 am and 1:30 pm. Seven participants got involved in the FG which was implemented online using the ZOOM online video platform since this was considered to be the safer way for health reasons due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. In addition, some of the participants were from different cities in the country and thus, the online option facilitated logistics. Two educational researchers participated in the FG, Victoria Michaelidou as the facilitator of the FG on behalf of CARDET and Andri Agathokleous as the note taker on behalf of IoD. The FG had a 1.5 hours duration and was conducted and recorded using the ZOOM platform. Consent forms were filled out and collected previously to the FG by all participants and were sent via email to the CARDET team. Participants were asked to fill out an anonymous online demographic questionnaire at the beginning of the FG to identify the sample's demographic characteristics. All files were stored in a password-protected folder following the General Data Protection Regulation under the UE Law 2016/679 GDPR.

The following sections include the main topics discussed by participants during the FG. However, the order presented below does not reflect the order in the discussion nor the importance attributed by participants.

#### DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE FOCUS GROUP

Seven (7) participants took part in the FG. All participants were female and their ages varied between 28 and 56 years old (Mean=43). The sample consisted of two school principals/managers who worked in public kindergartens, four early childhood teachers who worked in public and private kindergartens and an academic assistant professor who worked in the Department of Early Childhood Education in a private university in Cyprus. Thus, the private and public sectors were represented in the group. The years of experience in the current job ranged from 1 to 25 years (Mean=11.5) and the years of experience in the education sector ranged from 5 to 32 years (M=17). Regarding the educational background of the participants, one of the participants holds a bachelor's degree, five of the participants held a bachelor's and a master's degree and one of the participants holds a doctoral degree. Concerning the employment location, three participants worked in schools in a rural area, one participants worked in a school in a small town and three participants worked in the city.

**Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants**

Age	Mean= 43
Sex	100% female
Professional Background	2 school principals 4 educators 1 assistant academic professor
Year of Experience in the current position	Mean=11.5
Work Experience in Education	Mean=17
Educational Background	1 holder of a bachelor 5 holders of a master 1 holder of a PhD

Since ECEC in Cyprus covers not only pre-primary/kindergarten school children (age three and above) but also preschool children under the age of three, the preference of this FG was to focus explicitly on pre-primary and kindergarten settings only (and not on the classes with infants below the age of three years old). The literature review informed this decision (Result 1/Activity A2.1) and the official document and policy review (Result 1/Activity 2.2), where different procedures exist when comparing the pre-primary and preschool settings in terms of the responsible organisations for each setting, the ways of support, the resources and the funding resources. The FG allowed the early childhood teachers to share their thoughts about the socioemotional and behavioural competence of young children in Cyprus and describe the support they feel is needed to enhance and empower their teaching practice in developing these skills with children.

#### PRACTICES FOR DEVELOPING AN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT THAT FACILITATE POSITIVE BEHAVIOURS AND SUPPORT SOCIOEMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

The discussion of the FG began by asking the participants to present and describe a range of practices and strategies used for developing an educational environment that facilitates positive behaviours and supports the emotional competence of children. During the FG, the participants referred different practices and strategies they use to prevent or deal with problem behaviours at their schools. Some of these strategies seem to be more related to efforts implemented directly with all children, while others appear to be indirectly implemented through a systematic or school-wide approach.

These practices and strategies include among others:

- (a) the development of relevant activities implemented both in teaching and play,
- (b) the organization of a respectful learning environment that promotes the children's participation and engagement,
- (c) the teacher's participation in seminars focusing on the socioemotional development of the children,
- (d) the use of storytelling in teaching practice to discuss and overcome behavioural problems and misunderstandings;
- (e) the adaptation of a teachers' positive attitude during teaching where children feel welcome and free to share thoughts and make mistakes,



- (f) the introduction of fun activities (e.g. art-related, music-related, etc.) that promote socioemotional competencies,
- (g) the introduction of group activities and games during teaching and outdoor play to enhance teamwork and self-regulation,
- (h) the use of drama-play and theatrical play to express emotions and share experiences,
- (i) the use of evaluation tools to diagnose children's needs and level of readiness in terms of socioemotional competence (e.g. sociogram, performance book, etc.),
- (j) the introduction of a rewarding system at school or classroom level to promote the desired behaviours,
- (k) the use of monthly individual meetings with parents to discuss children's performance and behaviour at school,
- (l) the development of a code of conduct in each classroom,
- (m) the participation of the school in European Research Programmes,
- (n) the use of daily routines (e.g. the happy closing of the day with a positive way and compliments, the hot shower where they say goodbye to one person, etc.),
- (o) the communication and collaboration between family and school in an effort to satisfy the child-school-family triangle (e.g. creative activities at home, rewarding system at home, rules at home, etc).

The participants highlighted that the mentioned practices and strategies are found to positively impact the development of socioemotional competence of children and create a positive and respectful classroom and school environment. As for the main conclusions of this discussion, it has been repeatedly highlighted by all participants that the most important factor in promoting a positive learning environment in school, one that enhances children's social and emotional skills, is the collaboration between school principal, teacher and parents since this appears to have a strong and direct impact on children's behaviour and development. In addition, most of the participants refer to the importance of sense and feeling of love as a component that affects children's development by explaining that if a child is not happy and does not feel loved in his/her belonging space he/she cannot learn. Another assumption was that when teachers show respect to the emotional world of children and provide indoor and outdoor activities that enable children's best character these are of utmost importance to acquire knowledge and behaviours. Also, when desiring the children's participation and allowing the students to take the initiative during learning, impacts children's motivation and encourages them to increase their self-confidence. Last but not least, all participants have mentioned that any practices on behalf of the teachers or principals used to promote socioemotional skills and to develop an appropriate learning environment have to be targeted and systematic in order to be effective.

Concerning the role of the academic sector in using strategies to help preschool students to be well-educated and equipped to be able to build positive and authentic relationships with children in both undergraduate and graduate programs, aim to teach students the importance of creating learning environments that do not only aim at what children learn and how, but also of how they feel. Through the various courses offered by the academic institutions in Cyprus, great emphasis is placed on the learning environment and the socioemotional domain. It is considered fundamental and needs to be included in the whole learning process.



Several implementation efforts and practices took place in the Cypriot kindergartens and other education-related organisations (e.g., academic sector, EU initiatives and projects) to address children's socioemotional difficulties and to prevent problem behaviours or challenging behaviours. In particular, participants mentioned that research has shown that what we do in the early childhood years of a child's life and how we manage their education affects how they develop later into adults. In this context, participants have described current practices they believe are effective when trying to prevent or deal with behaviour difficulties.

At the school level, participants highlighted the importance of first ensuring the teaching staff's well-being to be able to do the same with the children and the heavy workload of the early childhood teachers and principals and the demanding working conditions usually lead to the staff's exhaustion and burnout. The practice of using reflection discussions and activities with children as well as listening to the children's emotions and needs helps prevent challenging or problematic behaviours. Also, participants highlighted the importance of setting classroom guidelines and rules early in the academic year that are clearly and positively stated and easily accessible and visible at all times, since this helps the educators avoid quarrels and verbal conflicts by simply reminding the agreed regulations. In addition, as already mentioned previously, a good practice that helps to prevent inappropriate behaviours at school and home is the establishment of a close relationship between school and family to work in the same direction, to inform the educators' knowledge about the children and to help them understand the reasons for children's challenging behaviours.

Additionally, the establishment and systematic use of routines during the different phases of learning (i.e., play, teaching, outdoor play, visits, transitions) are assumed to be highly important when trying to avoid problematic behaviours occurring. Another preventing practice mentioned was the development and implementation of relevant projects (e.g., about Friendship) with the aim to delve into issues related to the social and emotional domain and promote exemplary behaviours in children. Also, the development of illustrated material that will be exhibited in a prominent position in the surrounding area is supported to be a very effective practice in terms of dealing with behavioural problems (e.g., positive messages, the volcano of love, love mail, 3 compliments to others and ourselves, writing a story about friendship, learning corners about friendship). It was also supported that the establishment of a rewarding system focusing on promoting and rewarding positive behaviours can influence and lead other children to exemplify the desired behaviour. In addition, another idea was to ignore gentle – not serious behaviours to prevent stigmatization or labelling of a child. Finally, the strategy of organizing individual discussions with children who face behavioural difficulties can work as a prevention method to minimize the problematic behaviour. In such meetings with students, teachers can suggest various ideas for working with the child at school and/or at home (e.g., reading suggested fairy-tale, giving alternative choices when working on an activity, preparing and following an individual action plan).

At the systemic level, participants referred to the importance of support from other specialized professionals who, in combination with the teacher's efforts, will help in a better and more timely correction of the problematic situation. The need for communication and collaboration with a school psychologist or special therapist was also highlighted as a good practice in cases of serious or repetitive behaviours.

## THE BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SETTINGS

According to the participants, although behaviour problems and socioemotional difficulties were obvious and serious in ECEC before the COVID-19 pandemic, such phenomena have significantly increased. The status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of young children in the Cypriot ECEC settings was characterized by participants as follows:

- (a) many children have no boundaries at home and the teacher has to put a lot of effort to set the limits, especially when parents are not interested, do not pay attention or abuse children. In cases where there is no continuity between what children have been taught in school and how they are treated at home, is difficult to achieve the desired results;
- (b) some aggressive and negative behaviours are found in some ECEC schools in Cyprus (e.g., throwing objects, running in the classroom, spitting on others, hitting other children, cutting their hair, swallowing pins, do not know how to use the toilet);
- (c) the phenomenon of regular late arrival at school;
- (d) difficulty in managing and expressing their emotions (e.g., crying when losing, always wanting to be first);
- (e) low self-esteem when interacting in a large group or during circle time is revealed in the difficulty of accepting unsuccess, and in the omission of things they do not know or are unable to do;
- (d) children often are demotivated and lose their attention during teaching;
- (e) low levels of empathy, many children are unable to recognize other children's emotions.

## CONTRIBUTING FACTORS OF CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

A range of contributing factors to behavioural and socioemotional difficulties was described by the participants of the FG. These factors were related to different components such as the ECEC settings, the national policies, the children and their families, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regarding the national policy level, several issues have arisen with the participants highlighting the lack of support from the system and the incomplete in-service professional development and training. In addition, the participants mentioned the absence of escorts in many difficult cases of children (e.g., autistic, hyperactive, attention deficit or other disorders) as well as the lack of support from Educational Psychologists to provide support and guidance to teachers and families. In addition, participants mentioned the non-support role of the Welfare Office as a contributing factor. In general, participants referred to the neglect of the system and national education organisations for the socioemotional and behavioural matters in ECEC compared to other educational levels (i.e., primary education, secondary education). Another factor noted was the high percentage of bilingual students and children with an immigrant biography in the classrooms nowadays who face speech and language issues and it is difficult to make them feel that sense of belonging and make the local children accept them. Also, the ratio of one teacher in a classroom of 20-25 students makes the teacher's work much more difficult and often impossible.

Concerning the family and children level, on the other hand, participants sustained that even though the support of the family and the social environment is crucial for the development of the child in this period, many children face many family problems that cause difficulties later in their academic performance and behaviour. Children absorb the challenges of their surrounding environment and present deviant behaviours. Nowadays, serious problems are observed in the ECEC schools, most of which are related to the child's family environment (e.g., education of parents, low socioeconomic

background, financial problems and working conditions of the parents, limited experiences, absence of parents). Another important factor is the parents' attitude and how parents behave toward the teachers. Similarly, parental cooperation and communication refusal leads to limited and incomplete corrective interventions. Moreover, this phenomenon (parental refusal & non-cooperation) is usually combined with the refusal to accept the child's inappropriate behaviour and the lack of ability to help their children limit this behaviour.

Lastly, at the teacher level, participants mentioned that many teachers don't know how to express their own emotions and thus it is difficult to facilitate children's ability to do the same. Furthermore, teachers' well-being has been expressively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. They assumed that they feel exhausted because they had been unsupported since the beginning of the pandemic and the healthy measures and restrictions do not facilitate the promotion of children's socioemotional competence or the development of a positive environment.

#### BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENT PRESCHOOL WIDE PRACTICES TO PREVENT CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS AND SUPPORT CHILDREN'S SOCIOEMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

The participants of this FG identified many barriers. Barriers included, among others: (a) the absence of a common and evidence-based policy and strategy at the systemic level to deal with socioemotional difficulties and prevent inappropriate behaviours of children in ECEC settings; (b) the bureaucratic delays in managing and resolving difficulties (e.g., hiring a classroom assistant in a class with children with special needs); (c) parents refuse to accept the fact that their children may have inappropriate behaviour; (d) the lack of training for parents and teachers in such concepts; (e) safety nets are needed and collaboration with other professionals and educational parties; (f) the culture supporting that children should not have consequences for their actions.

#### NEEDS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SETTINGS TO PROMOTE THE SOCIOEMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL NEEDS OF ALL CHILDREN

Professionals stressed the following needs:

- (a) the need to better understand the origin of behavioural problems to achieve early intervention and to achieve the best for each child;
- (b) the need to offer parents' training and seminars focusing on their role in the socioemotional development of their child and how they can effectively cooperate with the school;
- (c) the need to offer mandatory training to teachers in terms of practices with which they can support children's behaviour and develop a positive climate in their classrooms;
- (d) the establishment of a school- family- system- society learning community with the contribution and cooperation of all members;
- (e) to employ more educational psychologists at schools to provide support immediately and promptly;
- (f) increase the support of the Welfare Office in such concepts and rethink their role in ECEC settings;
- (g) efforts need to have consistency and continuity during the transition from kindergarten to primary school.

## ADDITIONAL NEEDS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SETTINGS TO FURTHER PROMOTE SOCIOEMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

Based on the discussion, the main needs identified were:

- (a) to develop a common and systematic strategy for the management of problem behaviours in ECEC settings and the enhancement of the socioemotional skills of the children;
- (b) to increase the number of specialized staff in ECEC (school psychologists, assistant teachers, escorts, special educators, etc.);
- (c) to reinforce the cooperation with other educational bodies and organisations;
- (d) to integrate socioemotional and behavioural development in the learning process, to become an integral part of the learning curriculum;
- (e) to rethink the induction period of the children at the beginning of the school year and provide ideas on practices how to achieve a smooth adjustment for all children to feel that they belong;
- (f) to encourage ECEC schools to participate in EU research projects to benefit from their actions;
- (g) to provide additional material to teachers with good indoor and outdoor activities as well as activities for parents (i.e., a bank of resources provided by the experts which will be accessible by all teachers, a series of proposed fairy-tale about positive behaviour and videos);
- (h) to increase the interaction between colleagues for sharing experiences and good practices (i.e. co-teaching).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in recent years, major and significant educational reforms have taken place in the ECEC system in Cyprus, which aim to modernise and improve the quality of education and care for preschool children. The perceptions and attitudes of ECEC professionals outline a system that is amenable to many changes and improvements, although several efforts have taken place in recent years, especially after the revision and development of the new Curriculum in 2016 and 2020. Although the curriculum makes clear reference to the importance of the comprehensive development of the child with emphasis on the cognitive, motor, emotional and social domains, the inability of the system to support and educate the child is strongly highlighted. The importance of social and emotional development at this age is reiterated and the role of this area is crucial for improving learning outcomes in general. Therefore, there is a need to develop targeted and comprehensive training and support programmes for pre-school teachers, providing them with practical applications and suggestions in order to develop and cultivate these behaviours in children more effectively.

## *Needs assessment survey*

### INTRODUCTION

Cyprus conducted the survey in the Greek language. In order to attract participation, the Institute of Development (IOD) and the Center for the Advancement of Research & Development in Educational Technology (CARDET) promoted the survey using their networks and other means. Cyprus collected 44 responses. All 44 participants in the Cypriot survey responded that they agreed to complete the online questionnaire.

## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

The vast majority of the participants from Cyprus were female (95.5%), and two were male (4.5%). 80% of the participants were preschool teachers, 11% were preschool teachers with administrative roles (principals, vice principals) and 9% were special educators, teacher assistants or escorts.

The majority of the participants answered that they held a Postgraduate Degree (61.4%) while 38,6% of the participants answered that they held a Bachelor's Degree. The majority (66%) had less than 10 years of experience with the remaining 34% had above 10 years of professional experience in Preschool Education. 57% worked in a private setting, 32% in a public setting and the remaining 11% in other settings (community/university/afternoon/infant and preschool settings).

Early childhood educators, when asked to indicate where they sought opportunities for their professional development, 31 participants answered "Free resources online", 27 participants selected the answer "Public Sector (Ministry, School – Education Sector, State)" and 31 participants answered "Private Providers". Regarding the number of children in the classroom, 98% of the participants worked with over 13 children in the class.

## THE STATUS OF CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

In this section, the focus was on investigating the general status of children's behavioural and socio-emotional difficulties in national settings. To the indicator "nowadays, preschool children experience great difficulty in managing and expressing their emotions", 50% of the responses were concentrated on the answer "extremely" and 32% of the responses were concentrated on the answer "very".

To the second question "nowadays, preschool children experience great difficulty in social interactions with others" 14% of the responses was concentrated on the answer "extremely", 50% answered "very", 18% of the responses was concentrated on the answer "moderately", 18% of the responses was concentrated on "a bit". Furthermore, 43% of the educators indicated that the statement "nowadays, preschool children are more demotivated and more prone to boredom" applies "very" to their institution, 7% responded very much to this question and 34% responded that this is happening "moderately". Regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on preschool children's behaviour problems and socioemotional difficulties, the vast majority of the participants answered that this applies to "very" (39%), "extremely" (36%), "moderately" (14%) and "a little" (11%) to their institution. Preschool educators indicated that at this point in the preschool year preschool children "misbehave very frequently" (14%), "misbehave frequently" (32%), "behave well" (31%) and "misbehave occasionally" (23%).

As far as the status of socioemotional competencies of preschool children is concerned, participants answered that children have "developed extremely well" (9%), have developed "very well" (25%) and have "average developed" (36%), 25% has not developed on a satisfactory level and 5% were indicated as "lower developed" regarding socioemotional competencies.

## CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

The majority of the participants reported that family characteristics (52% answered "very" and 39% "extremely") and children's personal characteristics (52% answered "very") contribute to a great degree to increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in children. Early Childhood Education and Care setting characteristics or conditions also contribute to increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in children (18% answered "extremely", 55% answered "very", 11% "moderately", 14% "slightly" and 2% answered "not at all").

To a lower extent, preschool teachers' characteristics and/or behaviours (48% answered "very") and preschool teachers' practices (48% answered "very") contribute to increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in children. Finally, 39% of the responders reported that the COVID-19 pandemic and relevant safety measures in schools contribute "extremely" (39%) and "very" (37%) to increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in children.

#### IMPLEMENTATION EFFORTS TO PROMOTE CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL NEEDS

79.5% of the participants indicated that their institution doesn't have an explicit set of written guidelines to handle behaviour difficulties. The 20.5% of the responders, who positively answered the previous questions, reported that the written guidelines were developed based on top-level guidelines (58%). In addition, 89% of the participants indicated that their school does not follow any specific behaviour management programme. Of the 11% of the responders, who answered that their school follows a behaviour management programme indicated that the guidelines/programs were "very" (20%) and "moderately" (30%) effective in reducing children's challenging behaviours.

#### IMPACT OF CURRENT PRACTICES

23% of the participants were neutral and positive (48%) in the indicator "there is an agreed philosophy on behaviour management programme in my school/preschool". The majority reported that the rules relating to the behaviour management programme in the school are well understood by the staff to a "very" (16%), "slightly" (5%) and "extremely" (48%) extent. The same tendency was noticed for the consequences relating to behaviour management programmes (9% answered "extremely" and "slightly", 50% answered "moderately"). Participants answered that the rules (41%) relating to the behaviour management programme in the school are "very" well understood by children while the consequences relating to the behaviour management programme are very (43%) understood by children. According to the participants, the consequences relating to behaviour management programmes are enforced consistently in the schools to a very (45%) and slightly (16%) extent. 37% of the participants reported that the existing school behaviour management programme practices are effective in reducing children's challenging behaviours to a moderate extent while they are effective in supporting children's socio-emotional and behavioural needs to a very (37%) extent.

#### SCHOOL'S CURRENT NEEDS IN PROMOTING POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AND TO FURTHER SUPPORT CHILDREN'S SOCIOEMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL COMPETENCE

Regarding school's needs in promoting positive learning environments and to further support children's socioemotional and behavioural competence, the most prevalent answers of the Cyprus sample were:

- The lack of or the inadequate number of personnel with expertise in schoolwide prevention (e.g., school counsellors, psychologists) (45% answered "agree" and 22.5% "strongly agree"),
- The lack or inadequate teacher education/ training in preventative positive-based classroom practices (45% answered "agree")
- The lack of or inadequate support within the school to help specific children with socioemotional and behavioural needs (45% answered "agree" and 27.5% "neither agree nor disagree").

Lower percentages were concentrated on the indicators of lack of families' participation in school/preschool daily life (45% answered "agree") and lack of or inadequate ECEC settings (inappropriate buildings, overpopulated classrooms, etc.) (only 12.5% answered "strongly agree").

## CONCLUSION

The results of Cyprus' needs analysis survey for the PBS-ECEC Project confirmed the aims and reasoning that enabled the Project's Consortium to embark on this Project. Based on the Cyprus Preschool educators' answers, preschool children nowadays experience difficulty in managing and expressing their emotions as well as in social interactions with others. They are also more demotivated and more prone to boredom and misbehave occasionally. The behaviour problems and socioemotional difficulties of preschool children have increased after the COVID-19 pandemic. Results regarding the contributing factors to children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties are relevant to the previous ones found in the literature (Papadopoulou et al., 2014; Kontopoulou, 2003) in Greece. No similar research has been implemented until today in Cyprus, further noting the importance of this project.

Family characteristics and children's personal characteristics were the most prevalent contributing factors. The vast majority of the participants' institutions do not have an explicit set of written guidelines to handle behaviour difficulties. However, the minority of the educators who reported that their schools have relevant guidelines/programs answered that they effectively reduce children's challenging behaviours. In addition, results showed that participants seem to follow an agreed philosophy on behaviour management programmes in their school/preschool, in which the children and the staff understand the rules and the consequences. The most prevalent needs of schools to promote positive learning environments and to further support children's socioemotional and behavioural competence are related to the lack or the inadequate number of personnel with expertise in schoolwide prevention and lack of inadequate teacher education/ training in preventative positive-based classroom practices.

Finally, early childhood educators answered that they seek opportunities for their professional development through free resources online. Therefore, they are eager to use digital technologies and online platforms.

## 2.2. GREECE

KATERINA KROUSORATI & VASILIS GRAMMATIKOPOULOS (IHU)

### *Focus group interview*

#### INTRODUCTION

This section presents the results from the focus group conducted in Greece, aiming to identify the status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of young children in ECEC settings and the possible contributing factors, as well as the efforts made in each country, to address these issues as perceived by educational stakeholders.

The focus group was held online by the International Hellenic University, in Greece, on 6 April 2022 at 18:00. It lasted approximately one hour and a half. Dr Katerina Krousorati and Professor Vasilis Grammatikopoulos assumed the roles of facilitator and note-taker, respectively. The focus group was conducted and recorded using the Zoom online video platform. All participants signed an online consent form and filled out an anonymous demographic questionnaire before the online meeting, which was first translated into the Greek language.



#### DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE FOCUS GROUP

Six participants took part in the discussion of the focus group. All were female, and their ages ranged from 30 to 58 years (mean age = 46). Four of the participants worked as preschool teachers, and two of them worked as inspectors in Early Childhood Education. Specifically, three participant preschool teachers worked in the preschool centres, while one worked in infant/childcare centres. Of the participant inspectors, one inspector worked in the pre-primary education; the second inspector worked in the ECEC. Participants' experience in the current job ranged from 2 to 29 years (mean = 9.3 years), and their experience in Education ranged from 8 to 37 years (mean = 21.2 years). Three participants completed a master's degree, and three participants held a Doctoral Degree. Two of the participants also work part-time as lecturers in Early Childhood Studies. For five participants, their job was located in a large city with over 1 000 000 people, and for one participant, her job was located in a village or rural area (fewer than 3 000 people).

#### PRACTICES FOR DEVELOPING AN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT THAT FACILITATE POSITIVE BEHAVIOURS AND SUPPORT SOCIOEMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

The focus group participants mentioned a range of pedagogical strategies and practices used for developing an educational environment that facilitates positive behaviours and supports emotional competence. Pedagogical strategies mainly used for this purpose were the collaborative approach, discussion, experiential and exploratory learning, and self-assessment. According to the participants, these strategies can promote cooperation, improve self-image, self-confidence, and self-esteem, and support children to take over responsibilities. Rewarding positive behaviours and giving feedback were also identified as successful strategies to promote positive behaviour and support socioemotional competence. In addition, participants mentioned the beneficial effects of the play, especially the free and organized play outdoors, on children's socioemotional development and as means to enhance positive interactions.

Concerning practices, participant preschool teachers said that implementing social-emotional education programs is a common practice used in infant/childcare centres and kindergartens. These programs may start at the beginning of the year as projects, but they are also diffused through the whole academic year. In these programs, children learn the emotions and how to identify, express, and regulate them.

At the school level, participants mentioned that teachers offer children space and time to develop, accept themselves and others, recognize their feelings, and express them. Also, the collaboration between the teachers, the establishment of a positive school climate, and a common view of the expected behaviours were mentioned as practices that help children feel safe and regulate their behaviours.

#### PRACTICES TO PREVENT CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS AND TO DEAL WITH BEHAVIOUR DIFFICULTIES

Participants mentioned several practices that they use to prevent challenging behaviours and to deal with behaviour difficulties: (a) initial diagnostic evaluation (at the beginning of the school year) to recognize the level of children's maturity in social-emotional development and design practices to develop it, (b) developing a climate of mutual respect, cooperation, and solidarity, (c) setting clear rules and limits, discuss their importance and remind them, (d) pretend/dramatic play which helps the children to recognize their feelings, learn how to communicate with peers, and resolve their conflicts, (e) listening to children, recognizing their feelings, taking time to observe their behaviours, and promoting

reflection regarding challenging behaviours and their socioemotional competencies and (f) offering time for outdoor play (to decompress).

#### THE BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SETTINGS

All participants agreed that children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties have increased, especially after the long-lasting lockdown and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Behavioural and socioemotional difficulties included: (a) inability to recognize, express, manage and control the emotions, (b) lack of self-regulation and weakness to delimit their behaviour, (c) difficulties in cooperation and assuming roles and responsibilities, (d) low levels of psychological resilience, (e) inability to stay concentrated, remain in a place, and follow the routines, (f) lack of interest and need for constant change of their representations. A participant mentioned that, nowadays, there are two kinds of children in preschool classrooms: children with low levels of self-esteem and children with extremely high levels of self-esteem and confidence (due to support from the family). However, both categories of children are likely to show signs of anger, discouragement, frustration, shyness, and reluctance. Furthermore, due to the large and significant period(s) of absence resulting from COVID-19 measures and/or quarantine, children come back to school with difficulties adjusting to group settings, following specific rules, and often exhibit unruly or even aggressive behaviours. Participants of the focus group said that preschool children are not used to behaving as before the pandemic. Yet it is likely to see children hitting during their play, shouting, and using more rough movements and screams than speech and communication. Many preschool children did not attend infant/childcare centres and had difficulties adapting to the preschool setting. Concerning the children in the infant/childcare centres, toddlers spend the first two years of their lives at home; thus, they lack basic skills on how to behave in a classroom, how to communicate with others, or even how to play outdoors. In general, participants noted that as preschool children spent an extended period at home with their family members, they are less patient and have greater difficulty collaborating or sharing their toys. In addition, their play was transformed, especially the free play in the classroom, yet it seems like free play outdoors; children run, jump, and climb and have difficulties adapting their behaviour to the setting where they are and play.

#### CONTRIBUTING FACTORS OF CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

Participants identified several factors contributing to children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties. These factors were related to the children, their families, the ECEC setting, the modern lifestyle, and the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the participants, each child has its own rhythm of development; therefore, in a preschool class, there is a heterogeneity of children in terms of their social and emotional developmental stages. Although preschool educators respect and adapt the practices accordingly, it is hard to achieve it on some occasions due to the overpopulated classes.

Families sometimes do not set clear limits and rules at home, resulting in children who transfer several different representations from home to school and face difficulties adapting their behaviour in the preschool setting. However, parents demand educators work with their children to learn how to regulate their feeling and limit their challenging behaviours. Also, the parent's self-efficacy has decreased, and they face difficulties managing their children's behaviours.

Concerning the ECEC setting, preschool children attend classes with many students (20-25 children per class) and, in some cases, in not well-equipped buildings. Many preschool buildings are very small or unsuitable for preschool years, lacking outdoor space or yards for play. There is also a lack of educators

(an educator for 25 children) and educational staff, which influences the quality of individual approaches to children. Also, the majority of in-service preschool teachers are old, with long experience, but limited support by the state and decreased motivation to actually correspond to each child's socioemotional needs.

The modern lifestyle with both parents working many hours, the modern types of families with fewer members or even no siblings, the living in small apartments, with limited space or no access to play and movement outdoor, the limited possibilities for playing in the neighbourhood with peers constitute at risk factors that influence children's socioemotional development, resulting in decreased interactions with peers and adults and increased behaviour difficulties.

Finally, throughout the focus group, participants referred to the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the long-lasting lockdown in children's socioemotional and behavioural difficulties.

#### BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENT PRESCHOOL WIDE PRACTICES TO PREVENT CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS AND SUPPORT CHILDREN'S SOCIOEMOTIONAL COMPETENCES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Several barriers were identified by participants that prevent the implementation of preschool wide practices to prevent challenging behaviours and support children's socioemotional competences in early childhood education and care: (a) overpopulated classrooms, (b) lack of educational staff, (c) preschool educators' advanced age, tiredness and lack of motivation, (d) occupational insecurity of younger teachers as there is no stable professional framework in relation to their work, resulting limited motivations to work on children's needs, (e) inappropriate school buildings, (e) ineffective communication and cooperation teachers and parents, (f) demanding parents who refused to cooperate with preschool educators, (g) lack of knowledge or professional development regarding the prevention or management of challenging behaviours and support children's socioemotional competences (during the bachelor studies it is optional for pre-service teachers to learn how to manage children's socioemotional needs and promote socioemotional development), (h) curriculum does not correspond to children's needs, as it is enough knowledge-centred.

#### NEEDS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SETTINGS TO PROMOTE THE SOCIOEMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL NEEDS OF ALL CHILDREN

Participants highlighted the need to focus on socioemotional learning, as despite the recent efforts to reform the national curriculum, it is still knowledge-centred. Educators should listen to the children and correspond to their individual socioemotional needs. Participants also mentioned the need for constant lifelong teacher training at an institutional level concerning managing challenging behaviours and supporting children's socioemotional development. In addition, in the focus group, it was highlighted the need for preschool educators to enhance their own socioemotional capacity, manage their stress, and express their feelings to secure their well-being, prevent burnout, and correspond to children's needs. Furthermore, participants suggested that the appropriate school buildings, increasing the ratio of teachers per student, and reducing the number of children per class would help teachers implement targeted practices to promote children's socioemotional competencies. Participants also stated that collaboration between teachers and parents is crucial for promoting children's socioemotional and behavioural needs.

## ADDITIONAL NEEDS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SETTINGS TO FURTHER PROMOTE SOCIOEMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

Participants mentioned the need for the involvement of an interdisciplinary team consisting of health professionals, psychologists, social workers, school counsellors, and education experts who will support both preschool teachers and families in topics related to children's socioemotional competencies. Such a team could also help in school-family effective collaboration. In addition, as the incidences of domestic violence have increased, participants also stressed the need for intensive workshops organized by the state, either face to face or online, for families to provide equal opportunities for all, information, support, and targeted interventions as these incidences negatively influence children's behaviour. Finally, support of the preschool teachers at the governmental level, opportunities for professional development, self-motivation for self-development of teachers and management of their own socioemotional state, communication between teachers in a team, and setting the school climate for beneficial cooperation are factors that, although may address teacher's needs, they would positively influence children's socioemotional competence.

### *Needs assessment survey*

#### INTRODUCTION

The needs assessment survey in Greece was conducted in the Greek language. In order to attract participation, the International Hellenic University (IHU) promoted the survey using their networks and other means. Greece collected 40 survey responses.

#### DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

The section of "Demographic information" consisted of 12 questions about the basic characteristics of the target group (Preschool Educators). The main purpose was to define their specific traits, characteristics and needs, regarding preschool children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties, to utilize them for the development of the PBS-ECEC Guide and further material based on the target group's demands and concerns.

The vast majority of the participants from Greece were female (97.5%) and only one participant was male (4%). The majority of the participants answered that they held a Bachelor's Degree (55%), while 20% of the participants answered that they held a Post-Graduate Degree. The majority (72.5%) had 15 and above years of professional experience in Preschool Education. 90% worked in a public setting with only ECEC. Early childhood educators, when asked to indicate where do they sought opportunities for their professional development, 31 participants answered in "Free resources online", 24 participants selected the answer "Public Sector (Ministry, School – Education Sector, State)" and 15 participants answered in "Private Providers". Regarding the number of children in the classroom, 67.5% of the participants worked with over 13 children in the class.

#### THE STATUS OF CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

In this section, the focus was to investigate the general status of children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in national settings. To the indicator "nowadays, preschool children experience great difficulty in managing and expressing their emotions" the 45% of the responses was concentrated on the answer "very" and the 30% of the responses was concentrated on the answer "moderately". To the second question "nowadays, preschool children experience great difficulty in

social interactions with others” the 35% of the responses was concentrated on the answer “very” and the 40% of the responses was concentrated on the answer “moderately”. Furthermore, 52.5% of the educators indicated that the statement “nowadays, preschool children are more demotivated and more prone to boredom” applies “very” to their institution. Regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on preschool children’s behaviour problems and socioemotional difficulties, the vast majority of the participants answered that this applies “very” (45%), “extremely” (35%) and “moderately” (12.5%) to their institution. Preschool educators indicated that at this point in the preschool year preschool children “misbehave very frequently” (12.5%), “misbehave frequently” (22.5%), “behave well” (25%) and “misbehave occasionally” (35%). Only the 5% answered they “behave exceptionally well”. As far as the status of socioemotional competencies of preschool children is concerned, participants answered that children have “developed well” (40%) and have “average developed” (40%). 10% reported “exceptionally well developed” and “lower developed” (10%).

#### CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO CHILDREN’S BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

The majority of the participants reported that family characteristics (60% answered “very” and 30% “extremely”) and children’s personal characteristics (57.5% answered “very”) contribute to a great degree to increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in children. Early Childhood Education and Care setting characteristics or conditions also contribute to increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in children (47.5% answered “very” and 17.5% “moderately” and 17% “slightly”). To a lower extent preschool teachers’ characteristics and/or behaviours (40% answered “very”) and preschool teachers’ practices (43.25% answered “very”) contribute to increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in children. Finally, 35% of the responders reported that the COVID-19 pandemic and relevant safety measures in schools contribute “extremely” (35%) and “very” (27.5%) to increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in children.

#### IMPLEMENTATION EFFORTS TO PROMOTE CHILDREN’S BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL NEEDS

77.5% of the participants indicated that their institution has not an explicit set of written guidelines to handle behaviour difficulties. 22.5% of the responders, who positively answered in the previous questions, reported that the set of written guidelines developed was based on top-level guidelines (70%). In addition, 87.5% of the participants indicated that their school does not follow any specific behaviour management programme. 12.5% of the responders, who answered that their school follow a behaviour management programme, indicated that the guidelines/programs were “very” (36.4%) and “moderately” (36.4%) effective in reducing children’s challenging behaviours.

#### IMPACT OF CURRENT PRACTICES

32.5% of the participants were neutral and positive (30%) in the indicator “there is an agreed philosophy on behaviour management programme in my school/preschool”. The majority reported that the rules relating to the behaviour management programme in the school are well understood by the staff in a “very” (40%), “slightly” (35%) and “extremely” (20%) extent. The same tendency was noticed for the consequences relating to the behaviour management programme (37.5% answered “very” and “slightly”, 20% answered “extremely”). Participants answered that the rules (42.5%) relating to the behaviour management programme in the school are “very” well understood by children while the consequences relating to the behaviour management programme are moderately (47.5%) understood by children. The consequences relating to behaviour management programme are enforced consistently

in the schools to a very (42.5%) and slightly (42.5%) extent according to the participants. 42.5% of the participants reported that the existing school behaviour management programme practices are effective in reducing children's challenging behaviours to a moderately extent while they are effective in supporting children's socioemotional and behavioural needs to a very (42.5%) extent.

#### SCHOOL'S CURRENT NEEDS IN PROMOTING POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AND TO FURTHER SUPPORT CHILDREN'S SOCIOEMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL COMPETENCE

Regarding school's needs in promoting positive learning environments and to further support children's socioemotional and behavioural competence, the most prevalent answers of the Greek sample were the lack of or the inadequate number of personnel with expertise in schoolwide prevention (e.g., school counsellors, psychologists) (45% answered "agree" and 22.5% "strongly agree"), the lack or inadequate teacher education/ training in preventative positive-based classroom practices (45% answered "agree") and the lack of or inadequate supports within the school to help specific children with socioemotional and behavioural needs (45% answered "agree" and 27.5% "neither agree or disagree"). Lower percentages were mentioned in the indicators of lack of families' participation in school/preschool daily life (45% answered "agree") and lack of or inadequate ECEC settings (inappropriate buildings, overpopulated classrooms, etc.) (only 12.5% answered "strongly agree").

#### CONCLUSION

The results of Greece's needs analysis survey for PBS-ECEC Project confirmed the aims and reasoning that enable the Project's Consortium to embark on this Project. Based on the Greek Preschool educators' answers preschool children nowadays experience difficulty in managing and expressing their emotions as well as in social interactions with others. They are also more demotivated and more prone to boredom and they misbehave occasionally. The behaviour problems and socioemotional difficulties of preschool children have increased after the COVID-19 pandemic. Results regarding the contributing factors to children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties are relevant to the previous ones found in the literature (Papadopoulou et al., 2014; Kontopoulou, 2003). Family characteristics and children's personal characteristics were the most prevalent contributing factors. The vast majority of the participants' institutions do have not an explicit set of written guidelines to handle behaviour difficulties. However, the minority of the educators who reported that their schools have relevant guidelines/programs answered that they are effective in reducing children's challenging behaviours. In addition, results showed that participants seem to follow an agreed philosophy on behaviour management programme in their school/preschool, in which the rules and the consequences are understood by the children and the staff. The most prevalent needs of schools in promoting positive learning environments and to further support children's socioemotional and behavioural competence are related to the lack of the inadequate number of personnel with expertise in schoolwide prevention and lack of the inadequate teacher education/ training in preventative positive-based classroom practices.

Finally, early childhood educators answered that they seek opportunities for their professional development through free resources online. Therefore, they are eager to use digital technologies and online platforms.

## 2.3. IRELAND

ALEKSANDRA SZPROCH & MOYA O'BRIEN (PROFEXCEL.NET LTD)

### *Focus group interview*

#### INTRODUCTION

The focus group conducted by the Institute of Child Education and Psychology (ICEP) Europe was held online, on Wednesday 30th of March, 2022, at 3.30pm. Aleksandra Szproch, researcher at ICEP Europe, was the facilitator of the focus group and she was joined by Stephen Smith, the senior research officer at ICEP Europe, who was the note taker. The focus group lasted 1.5 hours and was conducted and recorded using the Zoom online video platform. All participants filled out an online consent form and an anonymous demographic questionnaire before the online meeting.

While early childhood education in Ireland covers not only preschool children but also children in junior classes in primary schools, the organisers of this focus group decided to focus specifically on preschool settings only. This decision was informed by the literature review (Result 1/Activity 2.1) and official document and policy review (Result 1/Activity 2.2), where gaps in the provision of support, resources and funding were identified in this sector when compared to the primary education sector. The organisers felt it was important to give preschool educators an opportunity to share their thoughts about the socioemotional and behavioural competence of young children in Ireland, but also to describe the supports which they feel are needed to aid their work in supporting these children.

#### DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE FOCUS GROUP

Six participants took part in the focus group. All were female, their ages ranged from 33 to 49 years (mean age = 41). Three of the participants worked as preschool teachers (one of them also taking on the role of an inclusion and support leader at their workplace) and three of the participants were managers/owners/leaders of an early years education and care setting. Years of experience in the current job ranged from 2 to 16 years (mean = 9 years). Years of experience in education ranged from 7 to 20 years (mean = 14 years). Three of the participants completed a Bachelor Degree (NFQ Level 8), two completed a Masters Degree (NFQ Level 9) and one participant held a Doctoral Degree (NFQ Level 10). Two of the participants also worked part-time as lecturers in Early Childhood Studies.

#### PRACTICES FOR DEVELOPING AN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT THAT FACILITATE POSITIVE BEHAVIOURS AND SUPPORT SOCIOEMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

The participants of the focus group described a range of practices and strategies used for developing an educational environment that facilitates positive behaviours and supports emotional competence. Some strategies identified included the use of yoga, mindfulness, art activities or the use of an 'emotions board' where children can indicate how they are feeling throughout the day. One participant explained the importance of giving children a safe space to express their emotions: "It's about having a really open conversation about emotions so that children can feel that they can explain things to us".

Two participants working in 'outdoor' preschools with a focus on nature-based education described simply using the outdoors as a way to facilitate positive behaviour. One participant said that children who spend more time outdoors are seen to be more relaxed when they have more space to play, explore, socialise and take time out for themselves. The participant followed up by saying that being



outdoors allows children to be less confined by a small space which can often feel restrictive, busy, loud and can cause internal turmoil: “Everything is so much easier outside, you know? Everything is much calmer and the children are so much happier. We’re so much happier”.

‘Modelling’ was also identified as a successful practice to promote positive behaviour and support socioemotional competence. Participants of the focus group described the importance of showing the children in their care how to respond to various social situations and how to speak to others with respect. One participant explained that many children may come from families or communities where negative or aggressive behaviour and the use of inappropriate language are the norm and that it is important to model positive behaviour as best as possible to these children, even if this is possible only for a few hours per day: “There are children who need, I suppose, appropriate rules and appropriate boundaries modelled for them, because they don't see those things happening in the home, they don't see those things happening with the extended family”.

#### PRACTICES TO PREVENT CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS AND TO DEAL WITH BEHAVIOUR DIFFICULTIES

A range of practices to prevent or deal with challenging behaviours were identified during our focus group. One participant mentioned exercises which require the children to answer questions about themselves which help the children learn about each other’s likes and dislikes in relation to play and interactions with their peers. The same participant explained that on the rare occasion of a verbal conflict occurring between two children, staff members initially stand back from the situation and let the children resolve it between themselves. Only when they deem it necessary do they step in and get involved in trying to solve the conflict, usually by scaffolding the language to support or teach children how to communicate their feelings.

The ‘talk it out’ method was mentioned by one participant, who explained that when children are displaying challenging behaviours, they are usually trying to communicate their frustration, sadness or annoyance but do not possess the skills to do so verbally. The ‘talk it out’ method requires a staff member to allow a child some time away from other peers and distractions and to encourage the child to speak about why they are feeling upset and why they are presenting with a particular challenging behaviour. The participant explained: “Some kids may not be confident enough to talk about their feelings so we ‘talk it out’ together and so we’re scaffolding through talks as well.”

Participants who work in outdoor preschools described the importance of having areas where children can withdraw to when they need to relax, for example, an area with hammocks and books, where children are encouraged to retreat to if they need a break away from staff or their peers: “Sometimes we find that the kids just need a break. You know, they might need the break away from us, or they might need just to sit down alone for a while”.

#### THE BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SETTINGS

A range of socioemotional and behavioural difficulties was discussed in the focus group, including aggressive behaviours like verbal or physical fighting with peers over toys or play areas. According to the participants of the focus group, these behaviours do not occur very often, but when they do, they can disrupt to all children in the classroom as staff are required to spend additional time with the children involved: “I haven't had an experience where any child would put another child in danger, or anything like that. It'll be very small, low-level conflicts and any big issues we would see is when a child is coming in tired, or they've had a bad day, or they've missed their breakfast, or there's something and then you

kind of have to spend some time with her or him talking about, you know, what's going on". In contrast, the participants also explained that instead of presenting with disruptive behaviours, some children display withdrawal behaviours. They may refuse to participate in conversation or play, refuse to talk or constantly seek out quiet spaces away from their peers and teachers. Again, this can disrupt daily activities in the early childhood setting, as staff are thrust into the role of finding out the issue for the withdrawal, and must ensure that the child's needs are still being met.

#### CONTRIBUTING FACTORS OF CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

A range of contributing factors of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties were described by the participants of the focus group. Issues with speech and language, especially in children who are on long waiting lists to receive a diagnosis and/or professional support in this area, were identified as potential contributing factors. Participants pointed out that children who struggle to communicate with their peers or preschool staff, may become frustrated and 'lash out' as a result. While these children often require support which is beyond the qualifications of a preschool teacher, it may not be possible to receive this support as quickly as it is needed, as thousands of children in Ireland are currently on long waiting lists to receive a diagnosis (Dáil Éireann, 2022). This leaves preschool staff and parents in a difficult situation as they try to access professional help to ensure the child reaches their full potential. One participant highlighted the need to meet children's special educational needs as soon as possible, and that financial support should be available to do so: "You know, the money that we need to invest in children, if there are children whose needs haven't been met earlier when you're trying to meet those needs at a later stage, it will cost a lot more money. But the message isn't getting through".

The lack of socialisation during the period of Covid-19 related lockdowns was also identified as a possible contributing factor to children's behavioural difficulties by the participants of our focus group. One pre-school worker noted a huge increase in challenging behaviours since the re-opening of early years services, especially in very young children who experienced peer relationships for the first time at a later stage than usual. However, some differences were noted in the responses given by staff working in outdoor preschools and staff working in traditional early childhood settings. In contrast, staff working in outdoor settings did not report these difficulties in children whose preschool start was disrupted. This finding may support the notion of nature-based education being a good preventative factor for behavioural problems in young children (Monti et al., 2019).

Increased technology use was also mentioned as a possible factor contributing to the increase in children's socioemotional difficulties. One participant expressed concern with the recent push towards using more technology, especially in primary schools, where technology is overtaking more traditional approaches to pedagogy. This participant explained that there should be more of an emphasis towards nature-based education, which has been shown to have a positive impact on mental wellbeing, student engagement, critical thinking and social skills (Kuo et al., 2018; Pirchio et al., 2021). In contrast, technology is increasingly linked with having a negative impact on children's relationships, mental health and overall ability to focus (Small et al., 2022). This participant expressed their surprise that, despite an abundance of research in this area, there is a disconnect between what is increasingly proven to be best for children in terms of natural learning environments free of technology, and what is advised by policy in this area.

Importantly, some of the preschool practitioners highlighted that while they try their best to identify reasons for children's socioemotional and behavioural difficulties, it is often very difficult to do so without knowing the details of the children's lives outside of the educational setting. Preschool teachers

provide education and care to children over a small number of hours daily, and this may not be enough time to establish why a child is presenting with challenging behaviours. A number of participants explained the importance of appropriate communication with parents/guardians in order to better understand what area of the child's life outside of the preschool setting is negatively affecting their behavioural and socioemotional development. One participant mentioned the negative impact of Covid-19 on communication with parents: "There are particular children that you put particular strategies in place for, ensuring that you are providing them with quality interactions, but you don't know what happened that morning at home. The impact of Covid is that having discussions with parents is obviously minimised as well.", "Not having that strong parental connection has definitely impacted us", "I have a particular child in mind, we've tried so many different strategies and we are kind of just hitting a wall and where do you go? What do you do? We have obviously made suggestions to the parents but we can only go so far".

#### BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENT PRESCHOOL WIDE PRACTICES TO PREVENT CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS AND SUPPORT CHILDREN'S SOCIOEMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Many barriers were identified by the participants of our focus group, with a major challenge to implementing preschool-wide practices to prevent challenging behaviours and support children's socioemotional competencies being the lack of government funding and resulting staff shortages. A ratio of one staff member to eleven children is recommended in early childhood services in Ireland. All participants of the focus group highlighted that it is almost impossible to dedicate sufficient time to children in their settings if one staff member must simultaneously take care of up to eleven children. One participant, who is an owner of a private preschool service, explained that they made the decision to hire additional staff, meaning that a group of twenty-two children is being supervised by four teachers, instead of two. However, an issue occurred when this participant applied for government funding for an additional member of staff. This funding was refused because four teacher members were already present in this setting, and that is higher than the recommended number. The participant explained that many of the children in their care have special educational needs, and that even with the additional staff members which they chose to hire, they need extra help to provide appropriate time and support to all children. The participant explained her disappointment at the disconnect between the needs of pre-school staff and the amount of funding and governmental support available. From our focus group discussion with practitioners who work with children daily, it is clear that one member of staff caring for eleven children is simply not enough to accurately meet the socioemotional needs of all children in the service.

The participants of the focus group also highlighted the lack of support being provided to them, compared to staff in primary school settings, in relation to the availability of trauma-informed training and funding for external psychological care. One participant, working as an inclusion and support leader in a pre-school, noted that children who experience bereavement or a traumatic event in primary school are entitled to funding for an external psychologist to visit them in the educational setting. However, this seems to not be the case for pre-school children. The participant explained that when a shooting occurred near her workplace, which could have been heard and seen by children playing outside at the time, the pre-school was refused funding for psychological help. The participant explained that all staff in her setting expressed concern about their lack of knowledge and skills on how best to support children who experience trauma: "Are we doing the right thing? Are we saying the right thing? Are we

interacting with the child in the most appropriate way? Are we having the correct discussion with them?”. The participant also explained that they feel there are not enough opportunities available to develop their knowledge in the area of trauma-informed practice in the early years and feel that there needs to be more of a push at the policy level to encourage continuous professional development in this field. As we highlighted in our policy and official document review (Result 1/Activity 2.3), preschool staff are required to have a very basic level of qualification, and with the lack of funding for additional training, they are not equipped to provide appropriate trauma-informed support.

#### NEEDS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SETTINGS TO PROMOTE THE SOCIOEMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL NEEDS OF ALL CHILDREN

Opportunities for education and funding of continuous professional development were identified as a need for ECEC settings in Ireland. Preschool workers feel like they aren't equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to accurately support children's socioemotional and behavioural needs, especially when it comes to children who display serious difficulties but are not receiving external help, either in the home or due to long waiting lists to see specialists.

#### ADDITIONAL NEEDS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SETTINGS TO FURTHER PROMOTE SOCIOEMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

Support at the governmental level was identified as a need of preschool staff. One participant of our focus group highlighted the need for practitioner voices to be heard, as there is a disparity between the support needed by staff who work with children daily, and the support, funding and policy recommendations provided by the Irish government: “I think unless policy in Ireland starts recognizing the evidence and the practice and recognizing educators as research practitioners, I think we're losing out on a lot of support and we're double working as a result.” All participants expressed their gratitude for being invited to take part in the focus group, as they feel that research in this area can aid future improvements in early years policy and legislation.

#### CONCLUSION

To conclude, the focus group served to further highlight the findings of the literature review (Result 1/Activity 2.1) and the official document and policy review (Result 1/Activity 2.2) conducted by ICEP Europe. It is clear that preschool workers feel that there is a severe lack of support for ECEC services which are needed to better promote positive behaviour and socioemotional competence in young children in Ireland.

### ***Needs assessment survey***

#### INTRODUCTION

Ireland conducted the survey in English language. In order to attract participation, the Institute of Child Education and Psychology (ICEP) Europe promoted the survey using their networks and other means. Ireland collected 41 responses.

## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

The vast majority of the participants from Ireland was female (92.7%), two participants were male (4.9%), while one participant selected the 'Prefer not to say' response (2.4%).

The majority of the participants answered that they hold a Master's Degree (46.3%), while the rest indicated that they hold a Bachelor's Degree (31.7%), an Advance Certificate/Higher Certificate (19.5%) and one participant held the Leaving Certificate only (2.4%). The average time spent working in the current position as an early years educator was reported as 10.15 years. The majority of the respondents worked in a public setting (58.5%) (this is likely to be a primary school setting).

The majority of respondents indicated that they seek opportunities for professional development from free resources online (82.9%).

## THE STATUS OF CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

To the statement "nowadays, preschool children experience great difficulty in managing and expressing their emotions" 39% of participants responded "very" and another 39% of participants responded "moderately". To the second statement "nowadays, preschool children experience great difficulty in social interactions with others", 43.9% of participants responded "moderately", 22% responded "very" and another 22% responded "slightly". The statement "nowadays, preschool children are more demotivated and more prone to boredom", yielded 29.3% "very" responses, 26.8% "moderate" responses and 19.5% "slightly" responses.

Regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on preschool children's behaviour problems and socioemotional difficulties the vast majority of the participants answered that this applies "extremely" (31.7%), "very" (22%), "moderately" (22%), "slightly" (14.6%) or "not at all" (9.8%) to their institution.

The participants indicated that at this point in the school/preschool year children "misbehave occasionally" (46.3%), "behave well" (22%), "misbehave frequently" (17.1%) and "behave very well" (14.6%). As far as the status of socioemotional competencies of school/preschool children is concerned, participants answered that children have "developed well" (46.3%), "developed moderately" (39%) and "developed very well" (9.8%). Only 2 participants (4.9%) responded that children's socioemotional competencies are poorly developed.

## CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

When asked about the contributing factors to children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties, the majority of participants responded as follows:

- family characteristics (51.2% answered "very" and 19.5% "extremely");
- children's personal characteristics (39% answered "moderately" and 36.6% answered "very");
- school/preschool characteristics (43.9% answered "moderately" and 36.6% answered "slightly");
- school/preschool teachers' characteristics (39% answered "slightly" and 31.7% answered "moderately");
- school/preschool teachers' practices (31.7% answered "moderately", 22% answered "very" and 19.5% answered "slightly");
- relevant safety measures in schools/preschools associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (41.5% answered "slightly", 24.4% answered "moderately", 17.1% answered "very").

#### IMPLEMENTATION EFFORTS TO PROMOTE CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL NEEDS

82.9% of the participants indicated that their institution has an explicit set of written guidelines to handle behaviour difficulties. 31.4% of those participants reported that the set of written guidelines was developed based on top-level guidelines (70%), 22.9% answered that they were developed based on a participatory process and another 22.9% responded that the guidelines are based on research-based evidence. In addition, 65.9% of the participants indicated that their school does not follow any specific behaviour management programme. Of the 34.1% of the responders, who answered that their school does follow a behaviour management programme, 47.6% indicated that the programme is "very" and 42.9% indicated that the programme is "moderately" effective in reducing children's challenging behaviours.

#### IMPACT OF CURRENT PRACTICES

The statement "there is an agreed philosophy on the behaviour management programme in my school/preschool" yielded mixed results, with 31.7% of participants responding "very", 22% of participants responding "extremely, another 22% of participants responding "moderately", 14.6% of participants responding "slightly" and 9.8% of participants responding "not at all".

The majority reported that the rules relating to the behaviour management programme in the school are well understood by the staff ("very" (41.5%), "moderately" (19.5%) and "extremely" (19.5%)). The same tendency was noticed for the consequences relating to behaviour management programme ("very" (39%), "moderately" (26.8%), "extremely" (19.5%)).

The participants indicated that the rules relating to the behaviour management programme in their setting are "very" (56.1%) well understood by the children, while the consequences relating to same are "very" (46.3%) and "moderately" (36.6%) well understood. The consequences relating to behaviour management programme are "very" (39%) and "moderately" (34.1%) well enforced consistently in their settings. 43.9% of participants reported that the existing school behaviour management programme practices are "very" effective in reducing children's challenging behaviours, and 29.3% reported that they are "moderately" effective.

#### SCHOOL'S CURRENT NEEDS IN PROMOTING POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AND TO FURTHER SUPPORT CHILDREN'S SOCIOEMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL COMPETENCE

Regarding school's needs in promoting positive learning environments and to further support children's socioemotional and behavioural competence, the responses varied:

- lack of or inadequate number of personnel with expertise in schoolwide prevention (43.9% answered "agree", 24.4% answered "strongly agree" and 19.5% answered "somehow agree");
- lack of or inadequate teacher education/ training in preventative positive-based classroom practices (36.6% answered "somehow agree", 26.8% answered "agree" and 19.5% answered "disagree");
- lack of or inadequate support within the setting to help specific children with socioemotional and behavioural needs (36.6% answered "agree", 26.8% answered "strongly agree" and 24.4% answered "somehow agree");
- lack of families' participation in school/preschool daily life (29.3% answered "somehow agree", 26.8% answered "strongly agree", 22% answered "disagree" and 17.1% answered "agree");

- lack of or inadequate ECEC settings (inappropriate buildings, overpopulated classrooms, etc.) (31.7% answered “strongly agree”, 24.4% answered somehow agree and 22% answered “disagree”).

## CONCLUSION

The results of the Irish needs analysis survey for PBS-ECEC Project confirmed the aims and reasoning that enable the Project’s Consortium to embark on this Project. According to Irish preschool and primary school educators, young children nowadays experience difficulty in expressing their emotions and in social interaction as well as frequently experiencing boredom and demotivation and misbehaving occasionally.

The results of the survey indicate that Irish early years’ educators believe that the COVID-19 pandemic and related closures and restrictions have had an effect on children’s behavioural and socioemotional difficulties. This mirrors the findings of other literature (Egan et al., 2021). Family characteristics and children’s personal characteristics were the most prevalent contributing factors.

The majority of participants indicated that their institution has an explicit set of written guidelines to handle behaviour difficulties but that their school/preschool does not follow any specific behaviour management programme. Those who indicated the use of a behaviour management programme in their setting indicated that it is useful in managing behaviour.

The needs of schools/preschools in promoting positive learning environments and to further support children’s socioemotional and behavioural competence varied largely, with most of the participants suggesting that all of the responses available pose a need in their setting to some extent.

Finally, early childhood educators answered that they seek opportunities for their professional development through free resources online. Therefore, they are eager on using digital technologies and online platforms.

## 2.4. PORTUGAL

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### *Focus group interview*

#### INTRODUCTION

Two focus groups (FG) were conducted in Portugal, with the aim of identifying the status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of young children in ECEC settings and the possible contributing factors, as well as the efforts made in each country, to address these issues as perceived by educational stakeholders. The Portuguese team followed the guidelines agreed within the PBS-ECEC international team, adapting procedures to the Portuguese context when needed. The FG guiding topics, as well as informed consent and sociodemographic questionnaire, were translated to Portuguese.

The two FG were conducted on the 7th of April 2022 and on the 11th of April 2022. They occurred online, for two main reasons: (a) participants were from different parts of the country, so, the online



format facilitated logistics, and (b) due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the online format was considered safer for health reasons.

Informed consents were collected previously, by the coordinator of the project. Participants filled in an online sociodemographic questionnaire, for sample description purposes. A code was used for participants, to assure anonymity. All files are stored in a password-protected folder.

The same member of the team acted as the facilitator in both FG, with another member of the team acting as an assistant. Each FG also had an additional assistant for taking detailed notes. The discussions were recorded, after all participants gave their consents (by signing the consent form and by selecting the agreement option in the online platform used for the FG).

Both FG lasted slightly over two hours. In both FG, two participants left before the end of the discussion. After about two hours, participants were asked if they were willing to proceed, and the discussion continued with their agreements, with no pause, and with an appeal to conciseness in their contributions.

This report includes the main contents discussed by participants during the two FG, while simultaneously highlighting specific examples. For this report, frequencies were not analysed, and the order of themes does not reflect the order in the discussion nor the importance attributed by participants.

#### DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE FOCUS GROUP

The first FG had nine participants, one male and eight females. In this group, three participants had management/coordination roles: one participant was the director of a cluster of schools and two were coordinators. Coordinators were also preschool teachers. One participant was a teacher, with no coordination role, and one was an assistant teacher. Three participants had different links to ECEC: one was a psychologist working in the area of special education, one was an educational psychologist with a coordination role in a professional network, one was the director of a public centre for teachers' continuous professional development. Private and public sectors were represented in the group. Participants' age varied between 24 and 58 years old ( $M=43.89$ ,  $SD=11.42$ ), they had between 1 and 22 years of experience in their current job or role ( $M=9.78$ ,  $SD=6.55$ ) and between 3 and 35 years of experience working in the educational field ( $M=21.00$ ,  $SD=11.73$ ). One participant completed a secondary education level, three completed a bachelor's degree, three a master's degree and two had doctoral degrees. Five participants worked in a city (with 100 000 to about 1 000 000 people), one worked in a town (15 000 to about 100 000 people) and three in a small town (3 000 to about 15 000 people).

The second FG had six participants, all females. In this group, one participant, who was also a teacher, had a coordination role. One participant was a teacher, with no coordination role, and one was an assistant teacher. One participant has currently a role at the policy-maker level, in a municipality; this participant has also experience as a researcher in the education domain. Two participants had different links to ECEC: one was a director of a public centre for teachers' continuous professional development, having worked as an ECEC teacher before that; one was a researcher and professor in the area of teacher education/training. All participants were working in public institutions. Their age varied between 40 and 60 years old ( $M=49.00$ ,  $SD=9.45$ ), they had between 0.5 and 22 years of experience in their current job or role ( $M=18.08$ ,  $SD=11.99$ ) and between 14 and 40 years of experience working in the educational field ( $M=26.67$ ,  $SD=10.71$ ). One participant completed a secondary education level, one completed a bachelor's degree, two had a master's degree and two had doctoral degrees. Three

participants worked in a town (15 000 to about 100 000 people), two in a small town (3 000 to about 15 000 people) and one in a rural area (fewer than 3 000 people).

When considering all 15 participants, their age varied between 24 and 60 years old ( $M=45.93$ ,  $SD=10.63$ ), they had between 0.5 and 36 years of experience in their current job or role ( $M=13.10$ ,  $SD=0.67$ ) and between 3 and 40 years of experience working in the educational field ( $M=23.27$ ,  $SD=11.30$ ).

#### PRACTICES FOR DEVELOPING AN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT THAT FACILITATE POSITIVE BEHAVIOURS AND SUPPORT SOCIOEMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

During the focus groups, strategies to develop socioemotional competence were frequently presented together with practices used to prevent or deal with problem behaviours throughout the discussion, so they may be difficult to disentangle. However, some appear to be more related with efforts implemented directly with all children for the development of socioemotional competences, such as: (a) organization of the learning environment (especially, space and materials) with children's participation; (b) use of storytelling to discuss emotions-related themes with children; (c) doing art-related activities to promote socioemotional competences; (d) promoting outdoors play to increase children's self-regulation and promote attention (focused attention) during indoors activities; (e) implementing tools to learn and recognize emotions, such as the "emotions' box" and the "monster of colours"; (f) creating activities that promote collaboration between children of different ages (e.g., help of older children to younger ones thus increasing their sense of responsibility and ability to work together; active role of preschool children who talked with elementary school children about behaviour expectations); (g) building materials with children to use within the ECEC setting about positive behaviours and social skills (e.g., materials about positive behaviour expectations); and (h) communication with families.

Participants highlighted as having a positive impact in their contexts the following practices and features in creating a positive environment: (a) the collaborative and cooperative work in multidisciplinary teams within ECEC settings; (b) the support and discussion of educational practices within pedagogical teams; (c) the ECEC professionals' training and professional development; (d) the consultancy with other specialized professionals (e.g., psychologists, speech therapists, social educators) to help ECEC teachers to improve their practices, through the promotion and reflection of strategies; (e) the availability of other specialized professionals (e.g., educational psychologist, social educator) within the ECEC setting to work directly with children; (f) the dialogue with children and active listening; (g) doing outdoor play as a strategy to increase self-regulation in children and promote engagement and attention during indoors activities; (h) doing art-related activities (e.g., painting to facilitate talking about emotions and music to sooth their agitation); (i) proper organization and planning of space, materials, and routines according to children's needs and interests, thus reducing possible conflicts (e.g., for the lack of material), (j) promoting a safe environment to assure child well-being and emotional security, (k) promoting multicultural activities; and (l) varying the type of activity (e.g., more energetic or more relaxing) adjusting to the group needs in each moment.

In addition, the Incredible Years Program (see section 1.4) was mentioned by one participant who perceived it as having a positive impact on developing socioemotional competencies.

#### PRACTICES TO PREVENT CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS AND TO DEAL WITH BEHAVIOUR DIFFICULTIES

Several implementation efforts have been made to address children's socioemotional difficulties or challenging behaviours, on several levels: (a) by ECEC teachers/assistants, in the scope of their daily

work, directly with children, (b) at the centre/institution level, and (c) promoted or supported globally, by other institutions, and applied to several ECEC settings. Some strategies concerning problem behaviours were mentioned during the part of the discussion more focused on the promotion of socioemotional competence, so they do share similarities.

Regarding efforts implemented by teachers and teacher assistants in their daily work in ECEC, participants referred to: (a) the importance of being able to talk about their own emotions, thus facilitating children's ability to do the same; (b) listening to children and promoting reflection (with them) regarding challenging behaviours and emotions experienced (e.g., learn to distinguish play from playful behaviours that hurt other children), and having clear classroom guidelines/rules; (c) understanding and establishing a close relationship with the children and with their families ("the child comes in with a non-visible suitcase"); (d) understand the reasons for children's challenging behaviours (e.g., is it related to the family currently structure or dynamics?); (e) active listening of children's needs and interests and act accordingly, which includes talking, active listening, reading, negotiating, and acting according to children's needs and interests (e.g., need for ECEC teachers to constantly seek children's interest when planning and doing activities, for their – perceived – increased prone to boredom and demotivation); (f) their dialogue with parents, either informally when needed or formally and intentional via parents' meetings, to improve the educators' knowledge about the children (e.g., meeting with parents to help the ECEC teacher know better the child, thus improving the planning for the next school year) and to discuss behavioural challenges (e.g., every week); (g) the organization and planning of space, materials, and routines according to children's needs and interests; (h) organization of the group in heterogeneous pairs (e.g., an older/more experienced children with a younger/less experienced children) or in small groups, instead of the whole group, during some activities or moments; (i) develop projects with children without restricting to the usual ECEC routines and settings, thus expanding their experiences to all spaces within and outside preschool; and (j) anticipating and preparing critical moments in children's daily routine (e.g., transitions).

As strategies implemented for the support of ECEC professionals in their practice, participants highlighted the consultancy with other specialized professionals (e.g., psychologists, speech therapists, social educators) to help educators improve their practices through the promotion and reflection of different or new strategies (e.g., behaviours' expectation building and clarification; sensibilization for differences; specific activities; reflect upon the reason for certain behaviours evidenced by children). Participants also referred to the training for ECEC professionals (e.g., educators, educational assistants), either provided by a training centre or through PD activities within the team and directed to address socioemotional competencies (e.g., mindfulness training for educators) or directed to other competences, with the purpose of capacitating ECEC professionals to develop strategies and competencies that will promote and create an environment more responsive to children.

Participants also highlighted implementation efforts made within some of the ECEC settings, though not available in all centres, such as: (a) the presence / availability of other specialized professionals, such as an educational psychologist and a social educator within the ECEC setting to work directly with each classroom (e.g., weekly support of school psychologist with children) or with more severe situations (e.g., hiring a school psychologist orientated to deal with behavioural problems); (b) the presence of a multidisciplinary team (e.g., composed of psychologists, social educators, sociocultural animators, educational mediators) which works in constant collaboration and cooperation (e.g., weekly discussion groups in a ECEC setting to reflect on how to improve the school community); (c) reinforcement of the policies and resources to effectively promote an inclusive education (e.g., through training about inclusion; presence of operational assistants); and (d) support and discussion of educational practices

within pedagogical teams (e.g., discussion of strategies between educators), either formally planned on a weekly basis via meetings, or informally on a daily basis as needed.

As for the efforts implemented by other institutions, and applicable to several ECEC settings, a participant referred to the efforts of the Portuguese Psychological Association which encourages consultancy practices beginning in preschool (and in collaboration with other professionals) and promotes small-scale programs to address socioemotional competencies.

The participants who are responsible for teachers' PD centres mentioned that, across the country, several training centres design and implement training actions to address the needs of ECEC professionals (that sometimes are not included at a policy level). Moreover, across the country some research centres have on-going research projects which address socioemotional competencies and challenging behaviours, either directly (e.g., exploratory analysis of the number of preschool programs which address these issues) or indirectly (e.g., projects focused on children's rights, such as the right to participation, the right to play, and citizenship).

One of the participants specifically referred to the intervention implemented by one municipality for ECEC settings, namely in (a) supporting and promoting practices that enhance socioemotional competencies of educators and operational assistants, (b) supporting centres in mobilizing strategies within the classroom to prevent the occurrence of behavioural problems (e.g., group organization, involvement of children in their routine), (c) defining strategies to respond to behavioural challenges, (d) having a multidisciplinary team in the field that supports the response to children who pose more behavioural challenges to their classrooms, professionals, and families, and (e) occasionally promoting training for families to enhance their knowledge in the management of these issues at home and in collaboration with preschool. In the next year, this municipality will introduce a structured and systematic program promoter of socioemotional competencies to all children transiting to the first school year.

#### THE BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SETTINGS

According to the FG participants, behaviour problems and socioemotional difficulties in the last years have increased, with the pandemic reinforcing such tendency. The status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of young children in Portuguese ECEC settings was characterized by participants as follows: (a) children being sadder, more demotivated, more quickly prone to boredom, and jumping quickly from different fields of interests; (b) the ability of children to recognize other children's emotion, exhibiting some prosocial behaviours (e.g., trying to help the other children manage frustration), but with difficulties to understand their own emotions; (c) children self-centred, focused on their own needs, and with social interaction difficulties until later ages than usual; (d) difficulty of children managing their attention span and need for constant stimulation; (e) children low self-esteem, revealed in the difficulty of accepting unsuccess, and in the omission of things they do not know or are unable to do; (f) a greater difficulty of children managing their own emotions (e.g., managing frustration felt for not being the first one in the group to do something; being intolerant when negotiations in play need to occur); (g) a general increase in challenging behaviours (e.g., opposition behaviours towards peers and adults), which are sometimes of no apparent reason, and previously were only observed later (in elementary school or after that).

## CONTRIBUTING FACTORS OF CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

Participants have identified several factors which may contribute to children's socioemotional difficulties. These were related to the ECEC settings, the national policies and priorities, the children and their families, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

In what concerns the ECEC setting, the factors highlighted - partly of them framed in national policies and priorities - were: (a) the neglect of socioemotional and behavioural matters in preschool (i.e., less national public investment in Early Childhood Education when compared to high school, middle school and primary school); (b) the compartmentalization and discontinuity between preschool and primary school settings that impacts negatively on the transition, with a curriculum-oriented approach in primary school rather than on children's emotions as it occurs more frequently in preschool; (c) the overvaluation of literacy and numeracy in society; (d) devaluation of the importance of preschool for children's well-being; (e) the lack of resources/materials in classrooms/centres which creates more conflicts between children; (f) inappropriate features of ECEC environment, such as the lack of outdoors play; (g) high child:adult ratios in ECEC settings; (h) difficulty of creating emotionally secure environments for all children, and (i) lack of time to observe, to reflect upon practices, and to welcome the individual children within the group; (j) discomfort and tendency to avoid the discussion of sensitive topics (such as emotion-related topics) on the part of some professionals.

Related to the children and their families, the factors highlighted were: (k) an increased egocentrism of pre-school children which, despite being normative, is becoming more and more severe, and prolonged to older ages; (l) children's increased access to excessive information generates new challenges; (m) the lack of time and increased constraints of the agenda and routines of children (e.g., increased after-school activities) and parents (e.g., increased work demands) which makes both children and parents tired; (n) the parents' difficulty in helping children managing their emotions; (o) centralization on the adult, with children's expression not always being considered; (p) the parents' permissiveness to their children (e.g., inability to say 'No' to their children) or overcompensation of children (e.g., with toys and digital devices) for their parents' absence; (q) lack of negotiation opportunities to help the child learn how to share (e.g., in a family with several children, each has its own computer, cell phone and television); (r) lack of dialogue within the home setting which prevents parents from knowing well their children; (s) the early use of digital technologies which may prevent emotional and behavioural regulation development; (t) inappropriate sleep and eating habits and routines; (u) individualist behaviours promoted by parents ("You have to be the best"); (v) parents' pressure and requests to educators to work with their children to reach a final product in terms of curriculum/activity; (w) lack of a support network for families (e.g., neighbours and community) associated to the changes in family structure, or increased isolation which decreases opportunities for children to build and maintain ties with others; (x) life constraints (e.g., unemployment, change of residence, divorce) when children are already integrated within a group and the consequence for the group in having to integrate a new child; and (z) parents' unrealistic expectations about the developmental level of their child.

Lastly, participants also mentioned the negative impact of COVID-19 on children's home and ECEC contexts (e.g., lack of interaction among children, and between children and parents; increase of children's negative emotions which are "learned" from the family experiencing stressful events such as disease and unemployment; insufficient human resources and inappropriate child:adult ratio in ECEC settings).

## BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENT PRESCHOOL WIDE PRACTICES TO PREVENT CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS AND SUPPORT CHILDREN'S SOCIOEMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Participants identified as barriers: (a) the insufficient support of specialized professionals, due to the low number of professionals proportionally to the high number of children with additional needs of support (note that a professional in a smaller school context highlighted the specialized staff as a strength in dealing with behaviour problems); (b) the inappropriate identification of the children's needs by specialized professionals; (c) communication difficulties between preschool and elementary school (e.g., not sharing experiences and practices of success and failure between teachers/professionals); (d) difficulties in implementing or effectively managing inclusion within ECEC setting (e.g., sending a child home due to the absence of a teacher assistant); (e) waiting for primary school years to act upon behavioural challenges and not when they occur in preschool (e.g., perceiving that for a child with difficulties regulating behaviour it is only important to act in the next year when transitioning to school for the inability to reduce their classroom number earlier on in preschool); and (f) the advanced age / aging of ECEC teachers, causing tiredness, closure and less openness to talk about emotions.

## NEEDS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SETTINGS TO PROMOTE THE SOCIOEMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL NEEDS OF ALL CHILDREN

Professionals stressed the following needs: (a) the need to better understand the origin of behavioural problems, which are multifactorial, as to properly intervene with children; (b) the need for programs that specifically address these issues to start earlier on, in preschool years, when challenging behaviours occur and not later, in school years; (c) the need for educational projects within each ECEC and school setting (program-wide or school-wide) to explicitly address socioemotional and behavioural matters and in collaboration with all professionals, families and parents' associations; (d) the need to improve partnerships ("synergies") between preschool and elementary school and the need to improve working conditions; (e) the need for higher public investment on preschool contexts; and (f) the need for parenting education programs or activities.

## ADDITIONAL NEEDS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SETTINGS TO FURTHER PROMOTE SOCIOEMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

Based on the discussions, the main needs identified were: (a) increase the number of specialized staff in ECEC; (b) reinforce the specialized intervention for each child with additional support needs (e.g., need for more frequent support); (c) provide individualized and specialized support to children/families with socioeconomic needs; (d) improve the theoretical and practical knowledge about transitions between different educational contexts; (e) develop the institution's educational project in harmony with nature and the environment (e.g., investing in pedagogical farms); (f) improve teachers and assistants' PD focusing on socioemotional development and behaviour problems, using innovative approaches and strategies; (g) increase communication and collaborative partnerships with families for promoting consistent practices and continuity between home and ECEC, as well as families' truly understanding of what is intended in ECEC; (h) promote the feeling of belongingness to the community (to children, families and professionals); (i) assure everyone has the opportunity to express their perspectives and influence the decisions and dynamics promoted within ECEC settings; and (j) reduce the time children spend in structured activities, such as in extracurricular activities, to promote positive behaviour through play.

## Needs assessment survey

### INTRODUCTION

The Portuguese Needs Assessment Survey had the same structure and items as the original, in English. The survey was disseminated by the IPP team through their networks and other means. The target was for each partner country to collect 40 completed survey responses. This report includes the first 40 valid responses. In the following sections, this report presents the most indicative results collected from the questionnaire distribution and the conclusions of the Portuguese survey ( $N=40$ ).

### DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

The 40 participants from Portugal were female, aged from 33 to 63 years old ( $M=52.4$ ,  $SD=8.68$ ). The majority of participants stated holding a Master's Degree or a Pre-Bologna Bachelor/Master's Degree (ISCED7; 65%), with the remaining 35% holding a Bachelor's Degree (ISCED6).

The majority were early childhood educators (95%) and only two were assistant teachers.

Most participants (90%) had 15 or more years of professional experience in Preschool Education ( $M=28.4$  years,  $SD=9.75$ ), with 10 of these working in the same ECEC setting since having started to work in the field. The majority ( $N=21$ , 52.5%) worked in a public setting with ECEC and other educational levels, and nine (22.5%) worked in a public setting with only ECEC. The remaining participants worked in a private setting, either non-profit ( $N=6$ , 15%) or for-profit ( $N=4$ , 10%).

Thirty ECEC professionals (75%) worked with mixed-age groups of children. The number of children per classroom ranged from 16 to 25 ( $M=22.1$ ,  $SD=2.55$ ).

About half of the early childhood professionals ( $N=21$ , 52.5%) indicated seeking opportunities for their professional development in two or more resources, while 14 (35%) looked only in the "Public Sector (Ministry, School – Education Sector, State)", three (7.5%) only in "Free resources online" and two (5%) only in "Private Providers".

### THE STATUS OF CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

In this section, the focus was to investigate the general status of children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in the Portuguese context.

To the item "nowadays, preschool children experience great difficulty in managing and expressing their emotions", 42.5% of the responses were concentrated on the answer "very" and 30% were concentrated on the answer "moderately". Only one professional answered "extremely".

In the second question "nowadays, preschool children experience great difficulty in social interactions with others", only one professional answered "extremely" (2.5%); 25% of the responses were concentrated on the answer "very", 35% of the responses on the answer "moderately". Note that 27.5% were concentrated on the answer "slightly".

Furthermore, 35% of the ECEC professionals indicated that the statement "nowadays, preschool children are more demotivated and more prone to boredom" applies "very" to children in their institutions. However, 22.5% stated that it applies "moderately" and 27.5% indicated that the statement does "not [apply] at all" to children in their institutions.

Regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on preschool children's behaviour problems and socioemotional difficulties, the vast majority of the participants answered that this applies "extremely" (20%), "very" (30%) or "moderately" (15%), while 27.5% answered "slightly".



A little more than half of preschool professionals indicated that at this point in the school year preschool children “behave well” (52.5%) and 7.5% of participants answered that children “behave exceptionally well”. The rest considered that they “misbehave occasionally” (20%), “misbehave frequently” (12.5%) or “misbehave very frequently” (7.5%).

Concerning the status of socioemotional competencies of preschool children, participants answered that children have “average developed” (52.5%) or “developed well” (40%) those competences, with few having developed “lower” those competences (7.5%).

#### CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO CHILDREN’S BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

The majority of the participants reported that children’s personal characteristics (47.5% answered “very” and 30% answered “moderately”) and family characteristics (12.5% answered “extremely”, 55% answered “very” and 20% “moderately”) contributed substantially to children’s increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties.

According to participants, ECEC setting characteristics or conditions also contribute to increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in children, but with lower percentages of agreement (5% answered “extremely”, 27.5% answered “very”, 32.5% “moderately”, and then 22.5% “slightly”). To an even lower extent, preschool teachers’ practices were perceived as contributing to increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in children (7.5% answered “extremely”, 20% answered “very” and 25% “moderately”; with a high percentage – 35% – answering “not at all”). When considering preschool teachers’ characteristics and/or behaviours there seems to be some variability, as 7.5% answered “extremely”, 22.5% answered “very”, 22.5% “moderately”, 25% “slightly”, 22.5% “not at all”. Finally, the respondents reported that the COVID-19 pandemic and relevant safety measures in schools contributed “extremely” (5%), “very” (32.5%), “moderately” (25%) and “slightly” (27.5%) to children’s increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties.

#### IMPLEMENTATION EFFORTS TO PROMOTE CHILDREN’S BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL NEEDS

The majority of the participants (70%) indicated that their institution does not have an explicit set of written guidelines to handle behaviour difficulties. Of the 30% of the responders that positively answered the previous question, 50% reported that the set of written guidelines developed is based on participatory processes. Besides, 90% of the participants indicated that their school does not follow any specific behaviour management programme. Of the 10% of the responders who answered that their school follows a behaviour management programme, 50% indicated that the guidelines/programs were “very” effective in reducing children’s challenging behaviours.

#### IMPACT OF CURRENT PRACTICES

Concerning the indicator “there is an agreed philosophy on behaviour management programme in my school/preschool”, 40% of participants answered “not at all”, 25% “moderately” and 17.5% “slightly”. The majority reported that the rules relating to behaviour management programme in the school are well understood by the staff in a “very” (37.5%) and “moderately” (25%) extent, with a lower percentage answering “slightly” (17.5%) or other options. The same tendency was noticed for the consequences relating to the behaviour management programme (35% answered “very”, 30% “moderately”, and 17.5% “slightly”). Participants answered that the rules relating to behaviour management in the school are “very” well (40%) or “moderately” well (27.5%) understood by children, with similar responses for the consequences relating to behaviour management procedures understood

by children (37.5% “very” well and 30% “moderately” well). When asked if the consequences relating to behaviour management are used consistently in the schools, 42.5% of participants answered “moderately”, while 32.5% answered “very”. Participants reported that the existing school behaviour management programme practices are effective in reducing children’s challenging behaviours to a “moderately” (35%) and “very” extent way (32.5%). These practices are also effective in supporting children’s socioemotional and behavioural needs in a “moderately” (42.5%) and “very” extent way (30%).

#### SCHOOL'S CURRENT NEEDS IN PROMOTING POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AND TO FURTHER SUPPORT CHILDREN'S SOCIOEMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL COMPETENCE

Regarding school's needs in promoting positive learning environments and to further support children’s socioemotional and behavioural competence, the most prevalent answers of the Portuguese sample were: the lack of or the inadequate number of personnel with expertise in schoolwide prevention (e.g., school counsellors, psychologists) (27.5% “strongly agree”, 27.5% “agree”, 35% answered “somehow agree”), and the lack of or the inadequate supports within the school to help specific children with socioemotional and behavioural needs (20% answered “strongly agree”, 37.5% answered “agree” and 30% “somehow agree”).

In the other indicators, lower percentages were obtained in the highest levels of the agreement scale, though high percentages of participants still answered “somehow agree”. That’s the case of lack or the inadequate teacher education/ training in preventative positive-based classroom practices in which 32.5% answered “strongly agree” and 45% “agree” or “somehow agree” or and lack of families’ participation in school/preschool daily life, in which 42.5% answered “somehow agree”, and 32.5% “strongly agree” or “agree”. Lack of or inadequate ECEC settings (inappropriate buildings, overpopulated classrooms, etc.) was the item that seemed less problematic in preschools, as only 25% answered agree or strongly disagree and 25% answered somehow agree. Anyway, note that only 50% answered that either “strongly disagree” or “disagree”.

#### CONCLUSION

The results of the Portuguese needs analysis survey allow drawing some preliminary remarks. Thus, a significant part of the participants reported that preschool children experience difficulties in managing and expressing their emotions. Equally relevant is the percentage of professionals that report children’s difficulties in social interactions. Results also indicated that children are more demotivated, more prone to boredom and they misbehave occasionally. Participants tended to agree that the behaviour problems and socioemotional difficulties of preschool children have increased after the COVID-19 pandemic. Results regarding the contributing factors to children’s behavioural and socioemotional difficulties emphasized that family characteristics and children’s personal characteristics were perceived as the most prevalent contributing factors. To a lesser extent, the ECEC setting characteristics or conditions and preschool teachers’ practices were also identified as a relevant contributing factor.

The vast majority of the participants’ institutions did not have an explicit set of written guidelines or follow a specific programme to handle behaviour difficulties. However, in the cases in which specific programmes were in place, participants tended to report a positive impact in reducing children’s challenging behaviour and in supporting children’s socioemotional and behavioural needs. Despite the mixed results on the existence of an agreed philosophy on behaviour management, results showed a tendency for rules and consequences to be understood by the staff and by children.

The lack or the inadequate number of personnel with expertise in schoolwide prevention (e.g., school counsellors, psychologists) and the lack or inadequate supports within the school to help specific children were the most prevalent identified needs of schools in promoting positive learning environments and to further support children's socioemotional and behavioural competence. Note however that a relevant percentage of participants also identified the lack or inadequacy of teacher education/training and the lack of families' participation in preschool settings as critical circumstances on this matter.

### 3. CONCLUSION

KATERINA KROUSORATI & VASILIS GRAMMATIKOPOULOS (IHU)

Educating children in ECEC is a continuous challenge for many educators due to the growing inclusion of children with diverse educational and behavioural needs (e.g., children with disabilities, in poverty, and migrant). Research suggests an association between behaviour problems and student low achievement (McLeskey et al., 2014), with its foundations in the early years (Kohen et al., 2008). In addition, the frequency and intensity of behaviour problems in ECEC settings have been increased (Hutchings et al., 2013). The Teaching and Learning International Survey (OECD, 2018) highlighted educator concerns regarding children's behaviours and working conditions. Educators reported to spend great time managing and maintaining classroom order while students' frequent disruptive behaviours hinder classroom instruction and learning.

To address these needs, the EC (2022), in the Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for ECEC, acknowledges the importance of professional development, as it contributes to child cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes. Furthermore, the EU 2030 strategy gives high priority to prevent early school leaving and social inclusion.

The success of ECEC as an effective inclusive learning environment depends on establishing a social context that promotes and supports positive educator-child relationships, child socioemotional competence, well-being, engagement and participation (Sugai & Horner, 2008). Within this context, the PBS-ECEC project aims to promote the Program-wide Positive Behaviour Support (PW-PBS), a whole school approach across Europe in ECEC settings. To achieve this, four results will be implemented during the lifespan of the PBS-ECEC project. Result 1 aims to create a planning tool for educators in early childhood settings to establish a proactive program-wide and classroom high-quality environment, where positive behaviour support (PBS) is promoted. Specifically, the purpose of result 1 is to develop the **Guide on Positive Behaviour Support in Early Childhood and Care (<https://pbs-ecec.eu/about/>)**, a guide especially designed for preschool educators for implementing the first level of PW-PBS.

The PBS-ECEC Guide with this Consolidated Report are expected to constitute effective tools that provide useful information for ECEC teams on how to implement the first level of a PW-PBS, across early childhood settings in Europe. They also aim to help preschool educators to promote the social and emotional competence of all children and restructure the ECEC environments in order to make them more predictable, positive and safe for preschool children.

There are considerable differences in educational context and cultures in partner countries. Therefore, extensive preliminary research was necessary before development of the ECEC Guide in order to gain a better understanding of the current situation in each partner country. Table 1 summarises selected

structural features of the ECEC Systems and Early Childhood Educators' careers and professional development of the project's participating countries.

**Table 1. Features of the ECEC Systems and Early Childhood Educators' careers and professional development of Participating Countries.**

<b>Structural features</b>	<b>Cyprus</b>	<b>Greece</b>	<b>Portugal</b>	<b>Ireland</b>
<b>Degree of system and policy integration (0 – 6 years old)</b>	Somewhat split	Somewhat split	Split (exception: Madeira)	Somewhat split
<b>Educational Guidelines (age groups)</b>	> age 3	> age 4	> age 3	from birth to age of 6
<b>Continuous Professional Development (CPD)</b>	Mandatory	Mandatory	Mandatory	Mandatory

A desk and field research was conducted by the project partners in order to establish the theoretical framework, which will serve as the basis for the development of the PBS-ECEC Guide and the following results. Findings showed commonalities and discrepancies among the four countries regarding the behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in young children and the current efforts implemented in each partner country at the level of policy and practice in ECEC settings.

Implementation efforts to address children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties are differed across the four countries. As presented in Table 2 at the ECEC policy level there are significant discrepancies among the four countries for addressing children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties. For instance, in Ireland there are specific directions regarding children's behavioural and socioemotional competence. The policy must enhance children's positive behaviour and ensure that the children's social, emotional and general well-being is supported in a happy, safe and controlled environment. In Greece and Portugal the official educational guidelines focus on the general support of children's socioemotional development with limited references on managing children's behavioural difficulties.

In addition, in Cyprus, Greece and Portugal the related practices have been made during some specific programmes, mostly authored by researchers from higher education institutions, in partnership with ECEC professionals and local authorities. These programmes have been funded by foundations or the Erasmus+ funding mechanism of the European Commission. Specifically, in Portugal, the literature review and the analyses of official documents and reports showed that the systematic evaluation of interventions and public policies for enhancing socioemotional competencies and reducing behaviour problems in ECEC is not a usual practice. The Greek National Curriculum for early childhood education includes the support of children's socioemotional development and promotes values and positive behaviours at schools. However, in Greece there are few programmes aiming to prevent or resolve behaviour difficulties in ECEC (for instance, in contrast to the CASEL Guide (2013) or Guide to social competence (<https://earlychildhood.qld.gov.au/aboutUs/Documents/aedc-social-competance.pdf>)).

Similarly, in the Cypriot educational system, the promotion of the SWPBS system is fairly new, while the related implementation efforts have been made by various research groups with the support of the EU.

**Table 2. Implementation efforts have been made at the policy and ECEC settings' levels to address children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties**

<b>Implementation efforts to address children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties</b>	
<b>Cyprus</b>	A few governmental initiatives (taken by the Ministry of Education, Sport & Youth and the Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus (2021) such as the New Curriculum (2016, 2020), and professional development training on Curriculum implementations) and a few initiatives by the private sector (mainly in the form of EU-funded actions and activities).
<b>Greece</b>	Governmental actions (as stated in the national curriculum for kindergarten focusing on supporting children's socioemotional development).
<b>Portugal</b>	At policy level several official documents acknowledge the importance of promoting children's socioemotional competence.
<b>Ireland</b>	Several implementation efforts at policy level on managing children's behaviour and socioemotional difficulties at preschool and primary settings.

Note. For more information, see pages 8, 15, 24 and 33

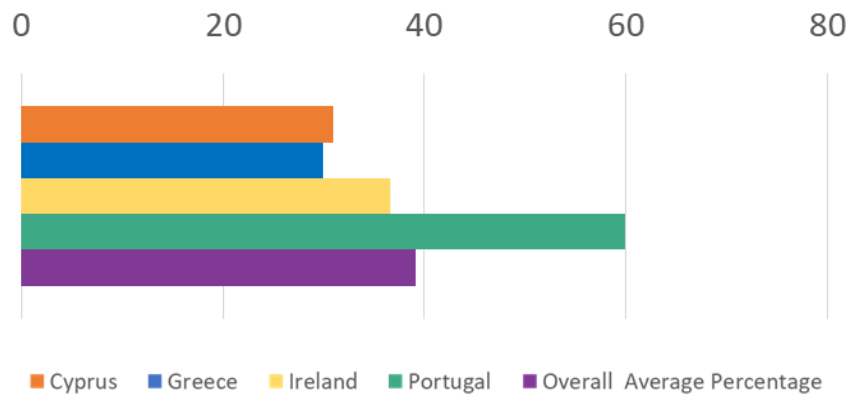
In addition to the policy efforts to enhance children's socioemotional competences and promote positive behaviour in ECEC settings, several educational practices, programmes and interventions have been identified among the four partner countries aiming to promote children's socioemotional competence and prevent challenging behaviours. A detailed examination of these programs showed that most of them (e.g., ABC Programme, Resilient Preschools, RESCUR, Zippy's Friends / *Amigos do Ziki*, Connecting For Caring, The Friends Programmes) are focusing on the support of children's socioemotional competence, while several programmes (e.g., PAX GBG, Roots of Empathy, CW-FIT, The Incredible Years) aim to prevent challenging behaviours have also been implemented . However, the programmes for supporting positive behaviours at schools are fewer (e.g., TaSDi-PBS, SWPBS, ProW). Overall, we can identify a tendency, for intervention programmes, to focus on the promotion of social skills and socioemotional competencies and less on the reduction of behaviour difficulties or on the support of positive behaviours in schools. Also, the program-wide / system-wide interventions in ECEC are limited across the four partner countries. The implementation of the PBS system is relatively recent in partner countries, while the available programmes related to PBS (e.g., TaSDi-PBS and SWPBS) have been focused on primary school settings.

Regarding the status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of young children in ECEC settings, Portuguese studies showed that children's social competencies/ behaviour tend to be positive, with children being characterized as relatively well-adjusted. A low prevalence of internalizing and externalizing behaviour problems has been reported too, while an exception has been identified in children with disabilities. These results are in line with the results of the needs assessment survey (Graphic 1, 2 and 3). In Ireland, there are also several studies investigating the status of children's behavioural and socioemotional competencies and difficulties. Overall, these studies showed that the status of Irish children's socioemotional and behavioural competencies has been described as positive. However, a small but significant percentage of children display difficulties; finding that was confirmed from the PBS ECEC needs assessment study as well (Graphic 1, 2 and 3). In Cyprus and Greece, although there are several research studies and interventions regarding the socioemotional development in early

childhood, there are only a few available research data regarding the behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of preschool children in ECEC settings. However, Greek and Cypriot participants of the needs assessment survey reported that nowadays, preschool children experience moderately difficulty in managing and expressing their emotions and in social interactions with others (Graphic 1, 2 and 3) (for more information see Barros et al., 2023a; Barros et al., 2023b).

**Graphic 1. Item from the needs assessment survey “At this point in the preschool year, how would you rate the behaviour of children in your class?”**

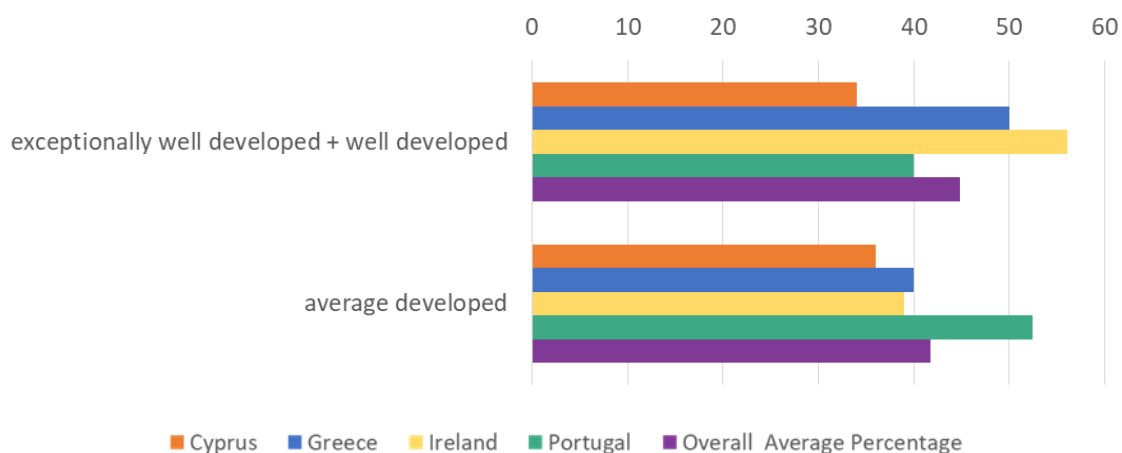
(% behave exceptionally well to behave well)



Options: behave exceptionally well; behave well; misbehave occasionally; misbehave frequently; misbehave very frequently

**Graphic 2. Item from the needs assessment survey “At this point in the preschool year, how would you rate the status of socioemotional competences of children in your class?”**

(% poorly developed to exceptionally well developed)

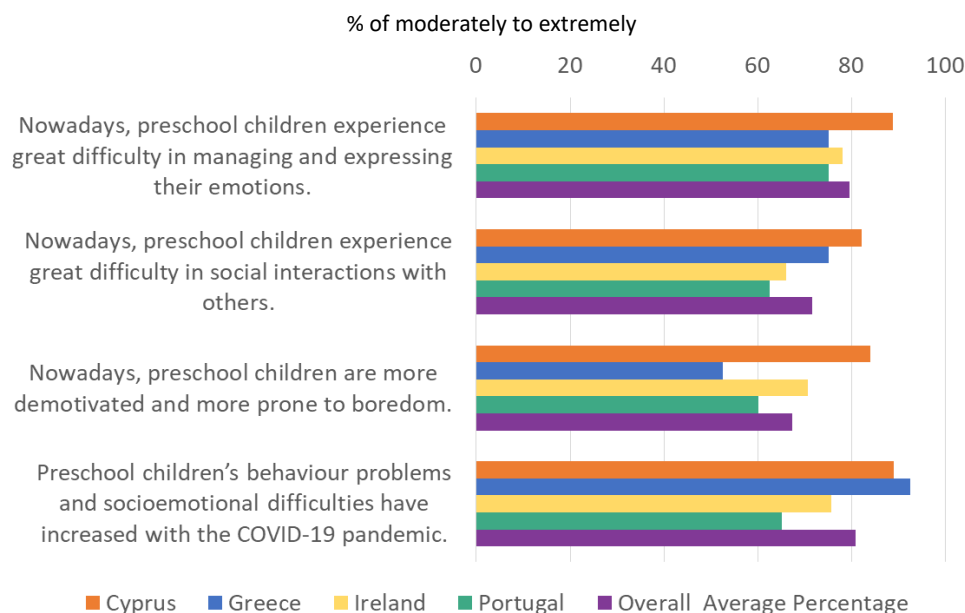


Options: exceptionally well developed; developed well; average developed; lower developed; poorly developed

Finally, overall results from the needs assessment survey showed that, in the four countries, it was common that preschool children experience difficulties in social interactions and in managing and expressing their emotions; they also tend to be more demotivated and more prone to boredom. In

addition, preschool educators tended to agree that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative effect on preschool children’s development, especially in the cases of Cyprus and Greece (Graphic 3).

**Graphic 3. Items from the needs assessment survey investigating the status of children’s behavioural and socioemotional difficulties”**



*Options: not at all; slightly; moderately; very; extremely*

The most common possible contributing factors to children’s socioemotional difficulties that were reported among the four partner countries were the following: a) family factors (e.g., quality of the parent-child relationship, parenting style, attachment security, type of family, parent’s mental health, social risk factors, for instance, unemployment, low parental education, poverty, physical abuse, parental substance abuse, family violence, mothers’ age), b) child’s characteristics (e.g., age, temperament, gender, developmental delay, migration background, language spoken), c) process features of ECEC settings (e.g., quality of teacher-child relationships, family-schools partnerships) and teachers’ social and emotional skills, d) structural characteristics of schools (e.g., class size, low-quality childcare settings) and e) the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic and all the restricted measures that followed in order to protect health and safety worldwide had a tremendous effect in all aspects. The majority of the participants in the field research among the four partner countries mentioned that the behaviour problems and socioemotional difficulties of preschool children have increased after the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the focus groups among the four countries, participants referred to several practices and strategies that they implement in their ECEC settings aiming to address children’s socioemotional difficulties and prevent problem behaviours or challenging behaviours. However, there are still barriers in ECEC that prevent or make it difficult to implement preschool-wide practices for preventing



challenging behaviours and supporting children’s socioemotional competences. These barriers, that were common in the four countries, are a) the lack of teacher training in managing challenging behaviours and supporting children’s socioemotional development, b) the lack of a common and evidence-based policy and strategy at the institutional level to deal with socioemotional difficulties and prevent inappropriate behaviours of children in ECEC settings, c) the insufficient support of specialized professionals, due to the low number of professionals proportionally to the high number of children with additional needs of support, d) the neglect of socioemotional and behavioural matters in preschool education, e) the high teacher: child ratios in ECEC classrooms, and f) the partnership between teachers and parents and their efficient communication, which is often a challenge for the two parties.

Furthermore, the vast majority of the participants from Cyprus, Greece and Portugal reported that their institutions did not have an explicit set of written guidelines or follow a specific programme to manage behaviour difficulties. However, in the cases in which specific programmes were in place, participants tended to report a positive impact in reducing children’s challenging behaviour and in supporting children’s socioemotional and behavioural needs. More specifically, the percentage of participants in Table 3 from each country who answered that their institutions had an explicit set of written guidelines to handle behaviour difficulties show that except for Ireland (which had a high proportion of yes answers), less than one-third of the participants reported the existence of a set of written guidelines. For those who answered that they had written guidelines, the most prevalent process for their development was based on top-level guidelines in Cyprus, Greece and Ireland and participatory practices in Portugal. In addition, in the four countries, it was common that no specific behaviour management programme was followed, with a higher percentage of positive answers found in Ireland (34.1%). In all countries, the majority of the participants whose school follow a behaviour management programme were confident that the implemented programmes were effective in reducing behavioural challenges.

**Table 3. Implementation Efforts. Results from the Needs Assessment Survey**

Implementation efforts to promote children’s behavioural and socioemotional needs	% of Yes			
	Cyprus	Greece	Ireland	Portugal
Does your institution have an explicit set of written guidelines to handle behaviour difficulties?	29.5	22.5	82.9	30.0
If yes, how were they developed?	58.0 top-level guidelines	70.0 top-level guidelines	31.4 top-level guidelines	50.0 participat ory practices
Does the school follow any specific behaviour management programme?	18.2	12.5	34.1	10.0

Note. For more information, see pages 55, 61, 68 and 78

Overall, findings showed that all parties involved (Educators, Parents, School Administration and Management) and responsible authorities (Ministries, Stakeholders and Governmental Authorities) show an interest in finding ways to support the efficient functioning of preschools and safeguard the proper education of preschool children. However, several barriers and additional needs in preschool settings result in an immediate and imperative need to create effective European schoolwide

frameworks and promote social inclusion. PBS-ECEC project aspires to apply a program-wide approach to promote children's socioemotional competence across Europe in ECEC. The project will respond to the basic needs of all partners and their respective target groups to effectively address behaviour problems from the very early years of children's education, by building socioemotional competence in a socially inclusive environment.

The preliminary research conducted during Result 1 by the PBS-ECEC Consortium was the first step in providing interesting insights into the situation in each country. This research will be utilized as the theoretical basis to proceed with the creation of the **Result 1. A4 Guide on Positive Behaviour Support in Early Childhood and Care** will guide partners in the further development of intellectual outputs and learning material. Furthermore, the outputs from project's output 1 (the current Consolidated Report and the PBS-ECEC Guide) will be used as supportive tools for the future project's Results by providing useful information for ECEC teams on how to implement the first level of a PW-PBS, across early childhood settings in Europe.

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# ANNEX I

## PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM FOR PBS-ECEC FOCUS GROUPS (ADAPTED AND TRANSLATED IN EACH COUNTRY)

I hereby declare that:

I consent to participate in the Focus Group, organized by NAME OF ORGANISATION / CITY / COUNTRY (DATE), in the context of the Result 1 of the European project “PBS-ECEC: Implementing Positive Behaviour Support in Early Childhood Education and Care.”

I have been informed about the project and I have understood what the project is about and what it aims to achieve.

I have been informed that in case any photos will be taken, will be solely for internal use by the facilitators and organizers and for dissemination activities.

I may choose not to answer any of the questions that I will be asked and may stop participating in the Focus Group at any time I wish. During the Focus Groups, or at its end, I can ask to modify or remove some of my remarks.

My name and demographic information will not be published or communicated to anyone outside of the project team.

The information I will provide will only be used for this project and for the exploitation of its results. Each participant should respect the personal data of the other team members. I fully understand that any information provided by me or the other members of the group should be kept confidential.

My participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I have received the invitation with the information, I have read it and I understand clearly the process that I will follow.

This document will be archived by the local coordinator of the project, in a locked place or password protected, for 5 years.

Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## ANNEX II

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM FOR PBS-ECEC NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY (ADAPTED AND TRANSLATED IN EACH COUNTRY)

The purpose of this survey is to examine the concerns and needs of early childhood educators, regarding preschool children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties.

The present survey is part of the project "Implementing Positive Behaviour Support in Early Childhood Education and Care" (PBS-ECEC), funded by the European Union (2021-1-PT01-KA220-SCH-000034367).

The Research Team is constituted of 5 partner organizations from 4 different EU countries (Cyprus, Greece, Ireland and Portugal). The project in XXXXX (add country) is coordinated by the XXXXXX (Here each partner organization puts own data).

Through this survey, the Research Team aims to investigate the status of behavioural and socioemotional difficulties of preschool children and the possible contributing factors, as well as the efforts made to address these issues.

All collected data will be used to create a free resource for early childhood educators, specially designed to promote a safe, positive and engaging environment where preschool children's behaviour and socioemotional competence will be supported.

The estimated time to complete this survey is 10 minutes.

GDPR: All data gathered through this survey will be strictly used for this research. The responses are completely anonymous and will be handled in a discreet manner. The answers will be saved in a properly secured place, with no authorization to anyone apart from the Research Team. Our consortium complies with the GDPR regulation and the protection and processing of personal data.

You can withdraw from this study and/or stop responding to this survey at any time.

Visit & Like our Page to find out more about PBS-ECEC Project: <https://www.facebook.com/pbsecec>

You can contact the Research Team using the email provided below for any assistance and further information.

Contact email: [krousoratik@bc.teithe.gr](mailto:krousoratik@bc.teithe.gr)

The PBS-ECEC Consortium

#### **Consent**

By clicking the "Agree" button, you indicate that: you are at least 18 years old, you have read all the information above, you understand the privacy policy and you agree to participate voluntarily. If you do not wish to participate in this survey, please click the "disagree" button.

## ANNEX III

### QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PBS-ECEC NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY (ADAPTED AND TRANSLATED IN EACH COUNTRY)

#### 1. Consent

1.1. By clicking the "Agree" button, you indicate that: you are at least 18 years old, you have read all the information above, you understand the privacy policy and you agree to participate voluntarily. If you do not wish to participate in this survey, please click the "disagree" button.

Agree

Disagree

#### 2. Demographic information

2.1. Please, state your gender.

Female

Male

Other

Prefer not to say

2.2. How old are you?

..... Years

2.3. What is the highest level of formal education you have completed?

Primary education (ISCED 1)

Lower secondary education (ISCED 2)

Upper secondary education (ISCED 3)

Post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED 4)

Short-cycle tertiary level (ISCED 5)

Bachelor (ISCED 6)

Master (ISCED 7)

Doctoral (ISCED 8)

2.4. What is your professional background?

Assistant teacher

Early childhood educator

School leader

Other            Please, specify: \_\_\_\_\_

2.5. How long have you been working in your current position (for example, as an assistant teacher, lead teacher, etc)?

..... years

2.6. How many years have you worked at your current setting or school?

..... years

2.7. How many children there are in your classroom?

..... number of children

2.8. What age group(s) do you primarily work with? (Check all that apply.)

Infants (approximately birth to 1 year)

Toddlers (approximately 1–3 years)

Preschoolers with approximately 3 years of age (3-4)

Preschoolers with approximately 4 years of age (4-5)

Kindergarteners (approximately 5–6-years)

Other Please, specify: \_\_\_\_\_

2.9. In what type of setting do you work?

Public setting (with ECEC and other educational levels);

Public setting with only ECEC;

Non-profit private setting;

Self-financing private setting (i.e., Private for-profit)

Other Please, specify: \_\_\_\_\_

2.10. Which of the following best describes the community in which your job is located?

Village or rural area (fewer than 3 000 people)

Small town (3 000 to about 15 000 people)

Town (15 000 to about 100 000 people)

City (100 000 to about 1 000 000 people)

Large city with over 1 000 000 people

2.11. How many hours of professional development related to early childhood education do you attend each year, on average?

..... hours

2.12. Where do you seek opportunities for your professional development? (Check all that apply)

Public Sector (Ministry, School – Education Sector, State)

Private Providers

Free resources online

Other (please clarify):

### 3. Questions

	Item	Scale
	Please, read each statement carefully and indicate the extent to which the statement currently applies to your institution.	
	<b>The status of children’s behavioural and socio-emotional difficulties</b>	
3.1.	Nowadays, preschool children experience great difficulty in managing and expressing their emotions.	1 = Not at all 2 = Slightly

		3 = Moderately 4 = Very 5 = Extremely
3.2.	Nowadays, preschool children experience great difficulty in social interactions with others.	1 = Not at all 2 = Slightly 3 = Moderately 4 = Very 5 = Extremely
3.3.	Nowadays, preschool children are more demotivated and more prone to boredom.	1 = Not at all 2 = Slightly 3 = Moderately 4 = Very 5 = Extremely
3.4.	Preschool children's behaviour problems and socioemotional difficulties have increased with the COVID-19 pandemic.	1 = Not at all 2 = Slightly 3 = Moderately 4 = Very 5 = Extremely
3.5.	At this point in the preschool year, how would you rate the behaviour of children in your class?	1= Behave exceptionally well; 2 = Behave well; 3 = Misbehave occasionally; 4= Misbehave frequently; 5 = Misbehave very frequently
3.6.	At this point in the preschool year, how would you rate the status of socioemotional competencies of children in your class?	1 = exceptionally well developed 2 = developed well 3 = average developed 4 = lower developed 5 = poorly developed
	<b>Contributing factors to children's behavioural and socioemotional difficulties</b>	
3.7.	Children's personal characteristics contribute to increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties.	1 = Not at all 2 = Slightly 3 = Moderately 4 = Very 5 = Extremely
3.8.	Family characteristics contribute to increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in children.	1 = Not at all 2 = Slightly 3 = Moderately 4 = Very 5 = Extremely
3.9.	Early Childhood Education and Care setting characteristics or conditions contribute to increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in children.	1 = Not at all 2 = Slightly 3 = Moderately 4 = Very 5 = Extremely
3.10.	Preschool teachers' characteristics and/or behaviours contribute to increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in children.	1 = Not at all 2 = Slightly 3 = Moderately

		4 = Very 5 = Extremely
3.11.	Preschool teachers' practices contribute to increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in children.	1 = Not at all 2 = Slightly 3 = Moderately 4 = Very 5 = Extremely
3.12.	The COVID-19 pandemic and relevant safety measures in schools contribute to increased behavioural and socioemotional difficulties in children.	1 = Not at all 2 = Slightly 3 = Moderately 4 = Very 5 = Extremely
	<b>Implementation efforts to promote children's behavioural and socioemotional needs</b>	
3.13.	Does your institution have an explicit set of written guidelines to handle behaviour difficulties?	yes, no
3.14.	If yes, how were they developed?	Based on top-level guidelines; Based on a participatory process; Based on research-based evidence; Based on other sources. Please explain/please provide details_____
3.15.	Does the school follow any specific behaviour management programme? If yes, what is it (e.g., Triple-P; PBS)?_____	yes, no
	(If yes) to what extent are guidelines/programs effective in reducing children's challenging behaviours?	1 = Not at all 2 = Slightly 3 = Moderately 4 = Very 5 = Extremely
	<b>Impact of current practices</b>	
3.16.	There is an agreed philosophy on behaviour management programme in my school/preschool.	1 = Not at all 2 = Slightly 3 = Moderately 4 = Very 5 = Extremely
3.17.	The rules relating to behaviour management programme in my school are well understood by the staff.	1 = Not at all 2 = Slightly 3 = Moderately 4 = Very 5 = Extremely
3.18.	The consequences relating to behaviour management programme in my school are well understood by the staff.	1 = Not at all 2 = Slightly 3 = Moderately 4 = Very 5 = Extremely
3.19.	The rules relating to behaviour management	1 = Not at all

	programme in my school are well understood by children.	2 = Slightly 3 = Moderately 4 = Very 5 = Extremely
3.20.	The consequences relating to behaviour management programme in my school are well understood by children.	1 = Not at all
3.21.	The consequences relating to behaviour management programme are enforced consistently in my school.	1 = Not at all 2 = Slightly 3 = Moderately 4 = Very 5 = Extremely
3.22.	To what extent are existing school behaviour management programme practices effective in reducing children's challenging behaviours?	1 = Not at all 2 = Slightly 3 = Moderately 4 = Very 5 = Extremely
3.23.	To what extent are existing school behaviour management programme practices effective in supporting children's socio-emotional and behavioural needs?	1 = Not at all 2 = Slightly 3 = Moderately 4 = Very 5 = Extremely
	<b>What are your school's current needs in promoting positive learning environments and to further support children's socioemotional and behavioural competence?</b>	
3.24.	Lack of or inadequate number of personnel with expertise in schoolwide prevention (e.g., school counsellors, psychologists)	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Somehow agree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree
3.25.	Lack of or inadequate teacher education/ training in preventative positive-based classroom practices	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Somehow agree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree
3.26.	Lack of or inadequate supports within the school to help specific children with socioemotional and behavioural needs	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Somehow agree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree
3.27.	Lack of families' participation in school/preschool daily life	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Somehow agree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree
3.28.	Lack of or inadequate ECEC settings (inappropriate buildings, overpopulated classrooms, etc.)	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree



		3 = Somehow agree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree
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Thank you for completing this survey!

We want to thank you for taking the time to complete the survey and helping us to create a pool of knowledge, that will be available to all Preschool Teachers.

Visit & Like our Page to find out more about PBS-ECEC Project:  
<https://www.facebook.com/pbsecec>

We remain at your disposal for any further communication.

PBS-ECEC Consortium