



## Equity, diversity and inclusion in early childhood education and care

This Policy Brief builds on results from the OECD Starting Strong Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS Starting Strong 2018) to provide an overview of diversity, equity and inclusion issues in early childhood education and care (ECEC). The brief distils key findings from the analyses presented in the companion OECD Education Working Paper *Levelling the playing field in Early Childhood Education and Care: Results from TALIS Starting Strong 2018*. In this work, the diversity profiles of ECEC centres in the nine participating countries are identified according to the share of children to whom four dimensions of diversity may apply: socio-economic disadvantage, special education needs, different first language, and refugee status. ECEC centres where several dimensions of diversity accumulate (i.e., apply to high shares of children) are also identified. Promoting equity and inclusion in ECEC may require allocating resources and implementing practices in response to those diversity profiles. Variation in indicators of quality of ECEC, including both structural and process quality factors, is then analysed between more and less diverse ECEC centres within each country. Results indicate that countries face distinct challenges in promoting equity and inclusion in ECEC. Policy considerations for countries include investigating directions to reduce the concentration of diverse children in ECEC centres; allocating additional material and human resources to more diverse ECEC centres; and providing further training for ECEC staff and centre leaders to respond to the needs of children and families from diverse backgrounds.

# Table of contents

Equity, diversity and inclusion in early childhood education and care	1
Introduction	3
An overview of the diversity of children in ECEC centres	4
An overview of the association between the diversity of ECEC centres and indicators of quality of ECEC	9
Policy pointers	13
References	16

## FIGURES

Figure 1. Country profiles regarding prevailing dimensions of diversity in early childhood education and care centres	5
Figure 2. Accumulation of dimensions of diversity in early childhood education and care centres	7
Figure 3. Areas of quality and the diversity of early childhood education and care centres	10

## Introduction

High-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) adapted to children’s needs can help create strong opportunities for all children to develop and learn regardless of their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Results from the TALIS Starting Strong 2018 survey can advance our understanding of how the quality of ECEC varies across centres serving different groups of children and of the capacity of the ECEC sector to respond to a diverse set of children’s needs in the nine countries participating in the survey.

As participation in ECEC has expanded and the profile of enrolled children has diversified in recent years, policy makers across the OECD have been shifting their focus to the quality of ECEC services as well as to strategies to enhance equity and inclusion. Such developments are informed by growing evidence that high-quality ECEC can be particularly beneficial for children from vulnerable and minority backgrounds (OECD, 2018<sup>[1]</sup>; OECD, 2021<sup>[2]</sup>). These benefits hinge on the capacity of ECEC to provide interactions that extend and enrich the learning and development experiences in home environments, for instance by offering resources unavailable to children living in deprivation, or by giving children from immigrant backgrounds the opportunity to learn the country’s language and culture. However, despite participation in ECEC having increased and diversified in most OECD countries over the last decades, at least for pre-primary education (with 95% of children enrolled at age 5 on average in OECD countries) (OECD, 2023<sup>[3]</sup>), a recurrent finding in the research literature is that children from vulnerable or minority backgrounds are less likely to be enrolled in ECEC or tend to be exposed to lower-quality ECEC (Sim et al., 2019<sup>[4]</sup>). Further, individuals and settings that embody multiple dimensions of diversity are of increasing interest to policymakers because they can be – and often are – exposed to different types of discrimination or disadvantages that occur as a consequence of that accumulation (Cerna et al., 2021<sup>[5]</sup>; OECD, 2023<sup>[6]</sup>). It is therefore important to assess whether children from diverse backgrounds find themselves concentrated in the ECEC centres, and whether more diverse centres have the same capacity as less diverse centres to provide rich early learning and development environments.

As education systems across the OECD and beyond look to build the foundations for stronger, fairer and more prosperous societies, improving access to high-quality ECEC for all becomes increasingly important. Results from the OECD Starting Strong Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS Starting Strong) can provide relevant insights to assist policymakers in their efforts to strengthen equity and inclusion in ECEC. This brief presents key findings and policy considerations to move in this direction, building on more extensive analyses discussed in a companion document (OECD, 2023<sup>[7]</sup>) and in previous reporting from TALIS Starting Strong 2018 (OECD, 2019<sup>[8]</sup>; OECD, 2020<sup>[9]</sup>).

## What is TALIS Starting Strong?

The OECD Starting Strong Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS Starting Strong) is an international, large-scale survey of staff and leaders in early childhood education and care (ECEC). TALIS Starting Strong uses questionnaires administered to staff and leaders to gather data. Its main goal is to develop robust international information relevant to developing and implementing policies focused on ECEC staff and leaders and their pedagogical and professional practices, with an emphasis on those aspects that promote conditions for children’s development, learning and well-being.

TALIS Starting Strong 2018 included nine countries: Chile, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Japan, Korea, Norway, and Republic of Türkiye. All of these countries collected data from staff and leaders in pre-primary education (ISCED level 02) settings. In addition, four of the nine countries (Denmark, Germany, Israel and Norway) collected data from staff and leaders in settings serving children under age 3. The objective of the survey was to obtain a representative sample in each participating country of staff and leaders providing ECEC for each level of ECEC in which the country participated.

The international sampling plan for TALIS Starting Strong used a two-stage probability sampling design: staff were randomly selected from the list of in-scope staff in each of the randomly selected ECEC settings. The leader of each setting (i.e., the person with the most responsibility for administrative, managerial and/or pedagogical leadership) was automatically selected for participation as well. Denmark did not meet technical standards on response rates; its results are therefore not shown in figures presenting international comparisons but are discussed in the text.

Note: The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is an instrument for compiling statistics on education internationally. Source: OECD (2019<sup>[10]</sup>), *TALIS Starting Strong Survey 2018 Technical Report*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://www.oecd.org/education/talis/TALIS-Starting-Strong-2018-Technical-Report.pdf> (accessed on October 13 2023) and Sim et al. (2019<sup>[4]</sup>), “Starting Strong Teaching and Learning International Survey 2018 Conceptual Framework”, *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 197, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/106b1c42-en>.

### An overview of the diversity of children in ECEC centres

TALIS Starting Strong gathers information on the characteristics of children enrolled in ECEC, thus providing an opportunity to examine the distribution of children from diverse backgrounds across ECEC centres. It is however important to note that data from TALIS Starting Strong can only address questions regarding children who are attending ECEC settings. Differences in enrolment rates between children from different backgrounds affect the observed levels of diversity in ECEC settings across participating countries. Measures of diversity presented in this brief aim to better understand: i) the extent to which ECEC settings serve children from diverse backgrounds; ii) whether children from diverse backgrounds are concentrated in some ECEC settings; and iii) how the quality of ECEC might be related to the characteristics of enrolled children. This brief does not address the question of whether the ECEC enrolment rates of diverse children differ among participating countries. Another limitation of the analysis is that the information on the characteristics of children comes from ECEC staff and centre leaders, rather than from parents/guardians or administrative sources.

As part of the TALIS Starting Strong 2018 data collection, ECEC centre leaders were asked to estimate the percentage of children enrolled in their centre (“None”; “1% to 10%”; “11% to 30%”; “31% to 60%”; or “More than 60%”) who had the following backgrounds:

- **Socio-economically disadvantaged children:** children from homes lacking the basic necessities or advantages of life, such as adequate housing, nutrition or medical care.
- **Children with special education needs:** children for whom a special learning need has been formally identified because they are cognitively, physically or emotionally disadvantaged.
- **Children with a different first language:** children whose first language is different from the language(s) used in the ECEC centre.
- **Children who are refugees:** children who, regardless of legal status, have fled to another country in order to seek refuge from war, political oppression, persecution, or a natural disaster, or who were born while their parents were travelling to the destination or shortly after the parents’ arrival.

These represent four distinct dimensions of diversity, and this brief uses the term “diverse children” to refer to children from these backgrounds. This information can then be used to classify ECEC centres according to the share of children within the centre to whom each of these dimensions of diversity applies.

### Countries’ diversity profiles

The countries participating in TALIS Starting Strong 2018 face different challenges related to the dimensions of diversity that prevail in their ECEC centres, since particular aspects of social, economic and cultural diversity are more or less salient in each country-specific context. Figure 1 shows the dimension(s)

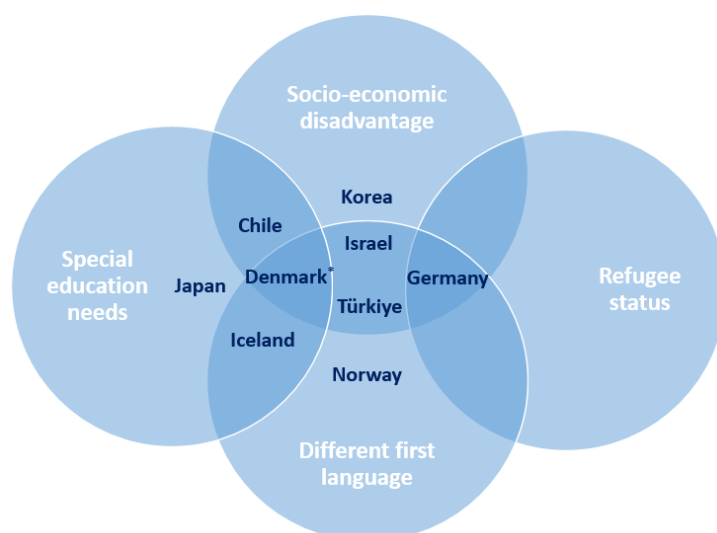
of diversity that characterise the ECEC landscape in each of these nine countries, as indicated by whether at least one in ten of their pre-primary ECEC centres have a “high share” of diverse children (defined as more than 10% of children within the centre). Countries where this holds regarding children with special education needs are Chile, Denmark (with low response rates), Iceland and Japan, and countries where at least a tenth of pre-primary centres have a high share of children from socio-economically disadvantaged homes are Chile, Denmark (with low response rates), Germany, Israel, Korea and Türkiye. Further, at least one in ten pre-primary centres in Denmark (with low response rates), Germany, Iceland, Israel, Norway and Türkiye have a high share of children with a different first language. By contrast, pre-primary centres with high shares of children who are refugees are less commonly found in participating countries: it is only in Germany that they represent at least a tenth of centres, while in Denmark (with low response rates) and Norway they account for over one in twenty centres.

However, these profiles mask substantial variation between countries. For instance, the percentage of pre-primary centres with high shares of socio-economically disadvantaged children is 65% in Chile but 14% in Israel or 11% in Korea. Similarly, more than 40% of pre-primary centres have high shares of children with a different first language in Denmark (with low response rates), Germany, Iceland or Norway, while this is the case for less than 20% of centres in Israel and Türkiye.

According to these profiles, Denmark (with low response rates) and Germany are the countries with relatively more diverse populations of children in ECEC, with three dimensions of diversity each applying to at least one in ten of their pre-primary centres. In Israel and Türkiye, this is the case for two dimensions of diversity.

**Figure 1. Country profiles regarding prevailing dimensions of diversity in early childhood education and care centres**

Dimensions of diversity where countries have at least 10% of pre-primary ECEC centres with more than 10% of diverse children



Notes:

A country’s placement within a circle indicates that in at least 10% of its ECEC centres the corresponding dimension of diversity applies to more than 10% of children in the centres. When countries are placed in circles’ overlapping areas, the corresponding dimensions of diversity may apply to the same or to different ECEC centres within the country. \*Low response rates may limit comparability of results.

Source: OECD (2019<sup>[11]</sup>), TALIS Starting Strong 2018 Database; for more information, see (OECD, 2023<sup>[7]</sup>).

Country diversity profiles at the level of centres for children under age 3<sup>1</sup> are somewhat more pronounced. In all four countries that collected data at this level (Denmark [with low response rates], Germany, Israel and Norway), at least one in ten of centres reported having high shares of children from socio-economically disadvantaged homes as well as high shares of children with a different first language. The same holds regarding children with special education needs in Denmark (with low response rates) and Germany, and regarding children who are refugees in Denmark (with low response rates).

### ***Concentration of children with a similar background in ECEC centres***

More fine-grained distinctions among diverse ECEC centres provide complementary insights into the degree of concentration of children from different diverse backgrounds within countries. Diverse centres can be distinguished according to their specific share of diverse children, leading to comparisons between centres with relatively modest levels of concentration (“11% to 30%” of diverse children) and centres with high (“31% to 60%” of diverse children) or very high levels of concentration (“More than 60%” of diverse children).

In most participating countries, centres with modest concentrations of children from socio-economically disadvantaged homes account for the majority of diverse centres on this dimension. At the pre-primary level, virtually all socio-economically diverse centres in Iceland, Japan, Korea and Norway are in this category, as do between half and two thirds of centres in Germany and Israel. As for centres serving children under age 3, in all four countries more than two thirds of socio-economically diverse centres are centres with modest concentrations of disadvantaged children.

Similarly, centres with modest concentrations of children with special education needs prevail among diverse centres on this dimension. However, in Chile, Denmark (at both levels, with low response rates), Korea and Türkiye, between a quarter and a half of these diverse centres have high or very high concentrations of children with special education needs.

By contrast, in most participating countries, ECEC centres with high concentrations of children with a different first language represent a substantial proportion of linguistically diverse centres. In Türkiye, centres where more than 30% of children have a first language different from the language(s) used in the centre account for 80% of linguistically diverse pre-primary centres, and in Israel they represent 67% of such centres. Concentration patterns are also high in Chile and Korea, two countries where the overall share of linguistically diverse centres is much lower. In Germany, where the overall prevalence of linguistically diverse centres is highest at 47% of all ECEC centres, around half of those centres at both levels of education have over 30% of children with a different first language. By contrast, concentration is lower in Iceland and Norway (at both levels), despite a high overall prevalence of this form of diversity.

### ***Accumulation of dimensions of diversity in ECEC centres***

TALIS Starting Strong can also be used to examine whether dimensions of diversity accumulate at the centre level. Three categories of ECEC centres can be distinguished based on how many dimensions of diversity apply to their children’s populations (i.e., to more than 10% of the children in the centre): a) “diverse” centres where one or more dimensions apply; b) “highly diverse” centres where two or more dimensions apply; and c) “extremely diverse” centres where three or four dimensions of diversity apply (Figure 2). However, TALIS Starting Strong data cannot tell whether this accumulation applies to the same individual children or to different groups of children within an ECEC centre.

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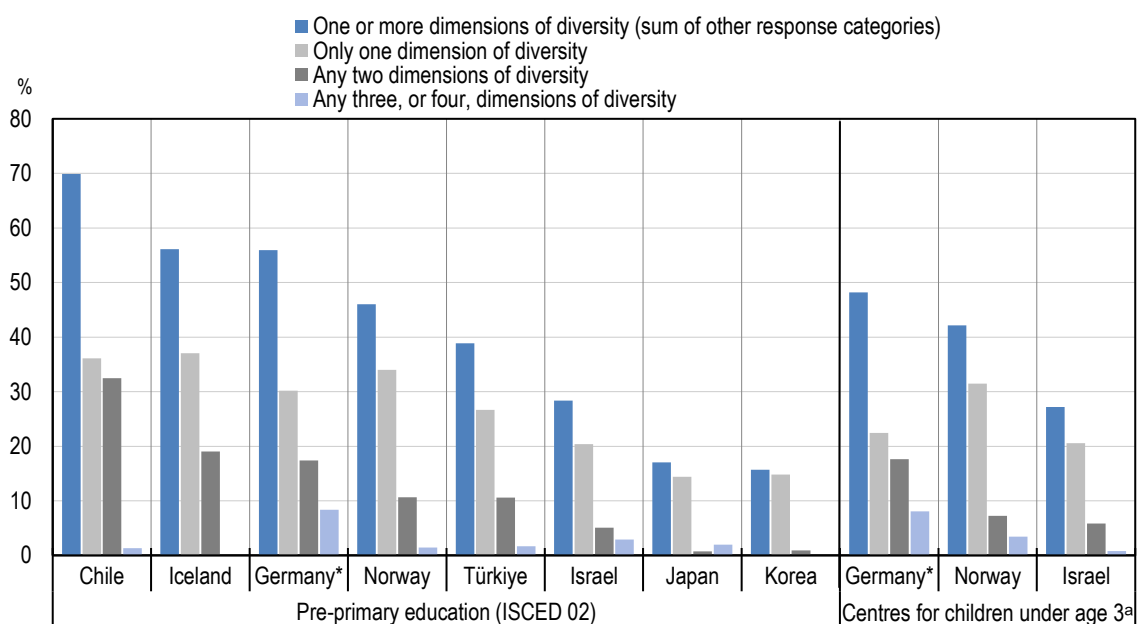
<sup>1</sup> Although data were collected in home-based settings for children under age 3 in Denmark, Germany and Israel, this policy brief focuses only on centre-based settings to facilitate comparability with findings from the pre-primary sector (ISCED level 02) and across countries. For detailed information on data collection procedures, please refer to the *TALIS Starting Strong 2018 Technical Report* (OECD, 2019<sub>[10]</sub>).

Across participating countries, much variation exists in the overall level of diversity of their ECEC centres. In Japan and Korea, 17% and 16% of centre leaders, respectively, report that at least one of the four dimensions of diversity captured by the survey applies to more than 10% of the children in their ECEC centre. In Israel, this is the case for leaders of 28% of pre-primary centres and 27% of centres for children under age 3. And a high share of children on (any) one dimension of diversity is reported by 39% of centre leaders in Türkiye, by between 40% and 50% of centre leaders in Norway and Denmark (with low response rates) at both levels and in Germany in centres for children under age 3, by 56% of centre leaders in Iceland and in Germany at the pre-primary level, and by 70% of centre leaders in Chile.

In all countries but Denmark (with low responses), a majority of leaders report that it is only one of the four dimensions of diversity that applies to more than 10% of the children enrolled in their centres, rather than two or more dimensions (Figure 2). This means that, in the majority of cases, the diversity of the children’s populations in ECEC centres is single- rather than multi-dimensional. This ranges from 84% and 94% of the diverse ECEC centres in Japan and Korea, respectively, to around 70% of the diverse ECEC centres in Iceland, Israel (at both levels), Norway (at both levels) and Türkiye.

**Figure 2. Accumulation of dimensions of diversity in early childhood education and care centres**

Percentage of ECEC centres by number of dimensions of diversity that apply to more than 10% of the children in the centre, based on reports from centre leaders<sup>1,2</sup>



Notes:

a. Data for early learning settings with children under age 3 are limited to centre-based settings to ensure comparability with ISCED Level 02. Data from home-based settings are excluded. \* Estimates for sub-groups and estimated differences between sub-groups need to be interpreted with care. For more information, see Annex B in (OECD, 2019<sup>[8]</sup>). <sup>1</sup> Dimensions of diversity refers to children from socio-economically disadvantaged homes, children with special education needs, children with a different first language, and children who are refugees. For full definitions, see previous figures in the publication. <sup>2</sup> Several dimensions of diversity may accumulate within an ECEC centre when each of these dimensions, considered separately, applies to more than 10% of the children in the centre.

Results are not reported when countries have too few or no observations in a given response category to provide reliable estimates and/or to ensure the confidentiality of respondents.

Countries are sorted in descending order by the percentage of ECEC centres where one or more dimensions of diversity apply to more than 10% of children in the centre (sum of other response categories).

Source: OECD (2019<sup>[11]</sup>), TALIS Starting Strong 2018 Database, for more information, see (OECD, 2023<sup>[7]</sup>).

## 8 | No. 83 – Equity, diversity and inclusion in early childhood education and care

ECEC centres where two dimensions of diversity apply to more than 10% of the children exist in all the participating countries, albeit to a varying degree. Most notably, in Chile these highly diverse centres represent 46% of the diverse centres (and 32% of all centres), thus making two-dimensionality almost as common as single-dimensionality. In Germany (at both levels) and in Iceland, centres where two dimensions of diversity apply to a high share of children represent about a third of the diverse centres, and almost a fifth of all centres. Two-dimensionality is less common in Norway and Türkiye (about 10% of all centres), in Israel (about 5% of all centres, at both levels) and in Japan and Korea (below 1% of all centres).

More detailed analyses in the companion document (OECD, 2023<sup>[7]</sup>) zoom into the specific two-way combinations of dimensions of diversity most common in each country, which sheds light on the particular challenges that they can confront in their policy efforts to promote equity and inclusion in ECEC. In Chile and Japan, a very large majority of the highly diverse centres serve children from socio-economically disadvantaged homes and children with special education needs. In Germany at both levels, in Israel in centres for children under age 3 and in Türkiye at the pre-primary level, the most frequent combination is that of socio-economic disadvantage and different first language. In Iceland, the most common form of two-dimensionality concerns children with a different first language and children with special needs. In Norway, the presence of children with a different first language drives two-dimensionality, in combination with socio-economic disadvantage or refugee status at the primary level, and with socio-economic disadvantage in centres for children under age 3. In Denmark (with low response rates), at both levels, and in Israel, at the pre-primary levels, various pairs of dimensions are observed in similar shares of centres.

Further, ECEC centres where three or four dimensions of diversity apply to more than 10% of children are rare in most participating countries, representing less than 4% of centres. However, at both levels of education, centres meeting the criteria to be classified as extremely diverse centres account for 8% of centres in Germany, and for almost 20% of centres in Denmark (with low response rates).

### **Summary**

Socio-economic disadvantage and different first language are the most common dimensions of diversity of children's populations enrolled in ECEC centres in the countries that participated in TALIS Starting Strong 2018. At the pre-primary level, at least one of these two dimensions of diversity applies to a high share of children in at least one out of ten centres in Chile, Denmark (with low response rates), Germany, Iceland, Israel, Korea, Norway, and Türkiye. In turn, more than one in ten pre-primary centres was reported to have a high share of children with special education needs in Chile, Denmark (with low response rates), Iceland and Japan.

Across countries, ECEC centres with relatively modest levels of concentration of children from socio-economically disadvantaged homes and with special education needs account for the majority of diverse centres on these two dimensions of diversity, but higher levels of concentration tend to be reported in many linguistically diverse centres.

Further, in the majority of diverse ECEC centres across countries the diversity of children's populations is single- rather than multi-dimensional. At the pre-primary level, the percentage of ECEC centres where two or more dimensions of diversity accumulate (i.e., apply to high shares of children) ranges from less than one in twenty centres in Japan and Korea, to between a fourth and a third of all centres in Chile, Denmark (with low response rates) and Germany.



## An overview of the association between the diversity of ECEC centres and indicators of quality of ECEC

TALIS Starting Strong considers a wide range of aspects of quality in ECEC settings that are expected to contribute to the learning, development and well-being of young children. Whereas process quality, the quality of children's interactions with others, concerns the more proximal processes of children's everyday experiences, structural quality factors are understood as more distal indicators of quality. The survey offers a unique opportunity to examine the associations between the diversity of children's populations in ECEC centres and these interconnected drivers of quality in ECEC.

This section summarises the analyses discussed with greater detail in a companion document (see Working paper) regarding the associations between the diversity profiles of ECEC centres and a selection of indicators of quality (Figure 3). These indicators are grouped in four categories. Structural areas of quality include the adequacy of centre-level material and human resources, and the composition, experience and training of staff in ECEC centres. In turn, process quality areas relate to staff's attitudes and practices with children, and to centre-level practices for engaging with families, communities and other services (Box 1).

Looking at how these areas of quality vary between more and less diverse ECEC centres serves to address several questions about equity and inclusion in ECEC. Positive and negative associations between drivers of quality and the diversity of children's populations in ECEC centres can give an indication of whether different groups of children have greater or fewer opportunities to experience high-quality ECEC. In addition, the strength of these associations as well as the lack thereof can speak to whether ECEC systems appear to compensate for the disadvantages that children from diverse backgrounds often experience.

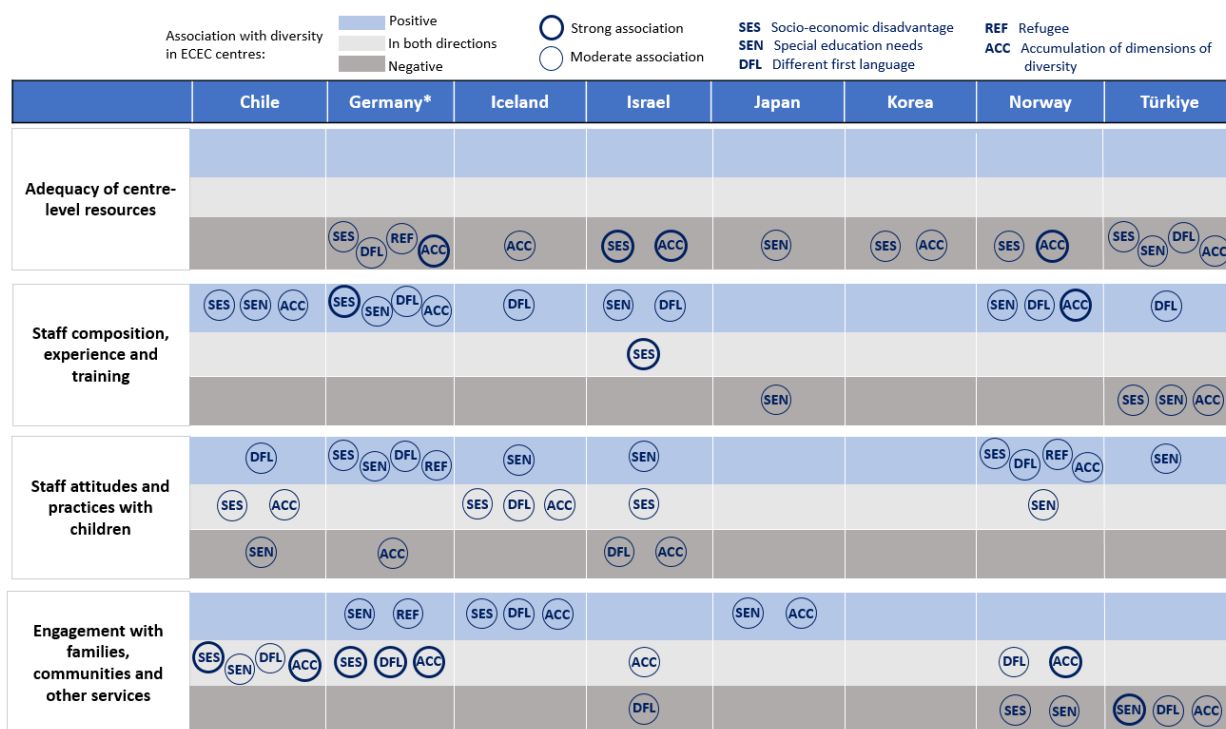
### *Adequacy of centre-level resources*

A consistent pattern of association emerges between this area of structural quality and different dimensions of diversity in ECEC centres. In all participating countries but Chile, centres with higher shares of children from diverse backgrounds are more likely than centres where these children are less numerous to report that shortages or inadequacy of resources hinder their capacity to provide quality environments for learning, development and well-being (top horizontal panel in Figure 3). This concerns primarily the overall material resources available to centres, and to a lesser extent human resources as well. While across countries all significant associations with the diversity of children populations exhibit a negative sign, some differences exist between countries. In the cases of Denmark (with low response rates), Germany and Türkiye, these negative associations hold with respect to three different dimensions of diversity, whereas in Israel, Japan, Korea or Norway, the association is limited to a single dimension of diversity.

Generally, differences in the adequacy of resources are most often observed in comparisons between centres with high and low shares of socio-economically disadvantaged children: this applies to Denmark (with low response rates), Germany, Korea, Norway and Türkiye, and in particular to Israel. Another consistent result is that greater shortages of resources are reported by ECEC centres where several dimensions of diversity apply to high shares of children, relative to less diverse centres: this holds in all participating countries but Chile and Japan, and to a greater extent in Denmark (with low response rates), Germany, Israel and Norway.

**Figure 3. Areas of quality and the diversity of early childhood education and care centres**

Direction and strength of statistically significant associations between indicators of structural and process quality in ECEC and high shares of children from diverse backgrounds in ECEC centres



**Notes:**

A circle indicates that one or more statistically significant differences exist between more and less diverse ECEC centres in the quality indicators included in each area. A “moderate” association implies that significant differences are found for at most half of the indicators included in the area, and a “strong” association implies differences exist for more than half of the indicators. In countries where data was collected for both pre-primary centres and centres for children under age 3, associations are reported at either level. For each area, positive associations (i.e., higher quality in more diverse ECEC centres) are displayed on the upper (blue) row and negative associations (i.e., lower quality in more diverse ECEC centres) are displayed on the bottom (dark grey) row. The middle row displays dimensions of diversity with which both positive and negative associations are found within an area. See Box 1 for more information.

\*Estimates for sub-groups and estimated differences between sub-groups need to be interpreted with care. See (OECD, 2019<sup>[6]</sup>) for more information.

Source: OECD (2019<sup>[11]</sup>), TALIS Starting Strong 2018 Database, for more information, see (OECD, 2023<sup>[7]</sup>).

While this analysis relates to differences in the perceived adequacy of resources (by centre leaders), rather than in the actual amounts of resources, the dominant negative relationship hints that available resources may fall short of meeting the needs of more diverse ECEC centres in many countries. The lack of positive associations and significant results for various dimensions of diversity in several countries also suggests that compensatory resource allocation mechanisms for ECEC centres serving more diverse populations of children may not be in place or may have limited effectiveness in the participating countries.

*Staff composition, experience and training*

Another relevant area of structural quality concerns the profiles of staff, including their roles in ECEC centres, their years of experience and their training to work specifically with children from diverse backgrounds. In contrast to results concerning the perceived adequacy of resources, in most participating countries the indicators of quality in this area tend to be positively associated with higher rather than lower

levels of diversity in ECEC centres (second horizontal panel in Figure 3). This applies most consistently to comparisons between centres with high and low shares of children with special education needs or of children with a different first language in Chile, Denmark (with low response rates), Germany, Israel and Norway, and in particular to indicators concerning the share of specialised staff in ECEC centres (i.e., staff whose role is to support individual children or offer specialised activities) and the share of staff having covered diversity topics as part of both their initial preparation and their recent in-service training.

Similarly, though, variation exists in country-specific results. For instance, in Chile, Denmark (with low response rates), Germany and Norway, staff composition and profiles tend to be more favourable in centres where several dimensions of diversity accumulate, whereas hardly any relevant associations with diversity are observed in Japan and Korea. Results for Türkiye differ from those in other countries and suggest lower quality in this area in ECEC centres with high shares of socio-economically disadvantaged children or children with special education needs, as well as in centres where several dimensions of diversity accumulate.

Overall, the pattern of results suggests that staff roles as well as staff training profiles respond positively to the more significant presence of children from diverse backgrounds in some ECEC centres. In many participating countries, more staff in special roles tend to work in these centres, which indicates a greater capacity to provide the specific types of support that, for instance, children with special needs or with a difference first language may require to fully take part in the wide set of interactions that may occur in ECEC settings. Likewise, results suggest that a greater share of staff working in more diverse centres engage in training activities with a focus on interacting with diverse children. These findings point to staffing and professional developments strategies with the potential to promote equity and inclusion in ECEC. However, the absence of significant associations for several dimensions of diversity in many countries implies that these strategies may not be supporting all groups of diverse children.

#### *Staff attitudes to diversity and practices with children*

The beliefs and practices of staff are at the core of process quality as they crucially shape the interactions that children experience in ECEC settings. Associations between the diversity of children populations and this area of quality paint a complex picture, with substantial variation across participating countries (third horizontal panel in Figure 3). Overall, positive associations are mainly driven by the higher propensity of staff working with more diverse groups of children to make greater use of adaptive pedagogical practices than staff working with less diverse groups. Significant differences in this direction are observed in seven out of nine participating countries, all but Japan and Korea, and most often in comparisons between groups with high and low shares of children with special education needs or with a different first language, but also in relation to other dimensions of diversity in Germany and Norway, the two countries where the association is most consistent. Generally, this result points to a responsiveness to diversity in the crucial aspect of process quality which is the capacity of staff to adapt their practices to the specific needs of the children they work with, an important determinant of which can be their diverse backgrounds. Results regarding the views of staff on the importance of responding to these differences are however less pronounced and go in different directions across countries.

By contrast, associations between the diversity profiles of ECEC centres and staff practices for facilitating children's early literacy are non-significant in most countries, whereas associations with practices for facilitating prosocial behaviour are negative in some participating countries, particularly when staff work in centres with high shares of socio-economically disadvantaged children, or in centres where several dimensions of diversity accumulate. These results suggest less responsiveness or in some cases less emphasis on these learning and developmental areas, particularly prosocial behaviour, in more diverse ECEC centres, especially in Chile and Israel.

### *Engagement with families, communities and other services*

A second key area of process quality bears on the interactions that ECEC centres have with families and communities, as well as their cooperation with other services with the capacity to support children, in particular those in vulnerable circumstances.

Analyses of the relationship between ECEC centres' diversity profiles and indicators in this area yield mixed results (bottom horizontal panel in Figure 3). On the one hand, a strong negative association is observed with levels of parental involvement in ECEC activities in centres with high shares of socio-economically disadvantaged children and of children with a different first language, and in centres where several dimensions of diversity accumulate: this applies to the majority of participating countries, and in particular to Chile, Germany, Norway and Türkiye. Further, in some of these countries less extensive centre-level practices to facilitate parental engagement are reported by staff working in more diverse centres. On the other hand, in all participating countries but Korea, and in particular in Chile, Germany and Iceland, ECEC centres where different dimensions of diversity apply to high shares of children, and especially those where several dimensions accumulate, report more frequent cooperation with child, family or social services, for instance with child protection agencies or family support services. Comparisons between more and less diverse ECEC centres on the extent to which they work with local neighbourhoods reveal both positive and negative associations depending on the countries and dimensions of diversity.

Overall, results suggests that higher levels of diversity in ECEC centres are associated with lower levels of parental involvement, possibly in connection to less effective centre-level practices to engage families. Barriers for family engagement in more diverse centres may relate to multiple factors, including difficulties for communication and cultural understanding, work and family circumstances making it difficult for parents to participate in centre activities, or limited resources and competences from staff and centre leaders for engaging with families from diverse backgrounds. At the same time, the consistent finding of a higher frequency of inter-service cooperation in more diverse centres suggests that more integrated support systems involving agencies in multiple sectors are often activated to address the needs of diverse children, especially when several dimensions of diversity are present within ECEC centres.

### **Summary**

Many of the aspects that define quality in ECEC vary between ECEC centres with higher and lower shares of children from diverse backgrounds in the majority of countries that participated in TALIS Starting Strong 2018. The associations between the diversity of children's populations in ECEC and multiple indicators of structural and process quality are however complex and differ from country to country (Figure 3).

Quality responds positively to diversity regarding staff special roles and training profiles, the use of adaptive pedagogical practices with children, and the frequency of centres' cooperation with support services. Across countries, these indicators point towards generally higher quality in centres or groups with higher shares of diverse children. By contrast, in the majority of countries other drivers of quality such as the adequacy of material resources and levels of family engagement are lower in more diverse centres.

The shares in ECEC centres of children from socio-economically disadvantaged homes, children with special education needs and children with a different first language are all associated with variations in quality, albeit in different ways across countries and indicators. Variation in quality according to the profiles of ECEC centres is higher in countries where dimensions of diversity are more prevalent in children's populations, particularly in Denmark (with low response rates), Germany, Israel, Norway and Türkiye, and lower in countries with less diverse populations of children in ECEC, particularly Japan and Korea.

### Box 1. Methodology of summary results

Figure 3 presents an overview of the associations between the diversity profiles of ECEC centres and indicators of quality of ECEC in the countries participating in TALIS Starting Strong 2018.

#### **Selection of indicators**

Four quality areas group 14 out of the 22 indicators analysed in the companion document (see Working paper). The indicators were selected to cover both structural and process quality aspects, and to sustain comparisons across the same dimensions and levels of diversity in ECEC centres.

- *Adequacy of centre-level resources*: two indicators including centre leaders' reports about perceived shortages or inadequacy of material and human resources in their centres.
- *Staff composition, experience and training*: four indicators including the percentage, within ECEC centres, of specialised staff, of novice staff and novice centre leaders, and of staff having received both pre-service and in-service training for working with diverse children.
- *Staff attitudes and practices with children*: four indicators including centre leaders' reports about staff's views on responsiveness to differences in children's cultural backgrounds, and scales of staff's adaptive practices with children, staff's practices for facilitating children's early literacy, and staff's practices for facilitating children's prosocial behaviour.
- *Engagement with families, communities and other services*: four indicators including a scale of practices for facilitating family engagement in ECEC centres and centre leaders' reports about the extent of parental involvement in ECEC centres' activities, the frequency of cooperation with child, family or social services, and the extend of work with the local neighbourhood.

#### **Reporting of statistical associations**

Relevant dimensions and levels of diversity are displayed in Figure 3 when statistically significant differences in quality indicators are found between more and less diverse ECEC centres within countries. For each category of indicators, the association with diversity is considered “moderate” when significant for at most half of the corresponding indicators, and “strong” when significant for more than half of the corresponding indicators. For countries where data was collected at both the pre-primary level and in centres for children under age 3, significant differences are reported at either level. A “positive” association implies higher quality in more diverse ECEC centres, and a “negative” association denotes lower quality in more diverse centres, in both cases as compared to less diverse centres. When both positive and negative associations are found within a category, these are reported in both directions. Non-statistically significant differences are not shown in the figure.

Source: OECD (2023<sup>[7]</sup>), “Levelling the playing field in ECEC: Results from TALIS Starting Strong 2018”, *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 305, <https://doi.org/10.1787/757e4fea-en>

### Policy pointers

ECEC can help give all children, and particularly those from less favourable backgrounds, a strong start in life. But to fulfil this promise, children from all backgrounds must have equal access to high-quality learning and development opportunities. Furthermore, building on ECEC to compensate for the disadvantages or

greater educational needs that some children have because of their backgrounds involves allocating more resources to some children or ECEC centres.

TALIS Starting Strong 2018 provides insights into the extent to which participating countries promote equity and inclusion goals in ECEC. While countries face very different circumstances and challenges, the results reported in this Policy Brief and its companion Working paper point to some areas that policymakers can address to ensure high-quality early childhood education and care opportunities for all. Policy considerations for countries can include:

- **Identify the factors behind the concentration of diverse children in ECEC centres and explore policies to reduce it.** While, across participating countries, diverse ECEC centres tend to have modest levels of concentration of diverse children and to be characterised by a single dimension of diversity, ECEC centres with higher concentrations (30% or more) of diverse children and/or where several dimensions of diversity apply are also common in several countries. Different mechanisms may drive these patterns. Diverse children may concentrate in certain ECEC centres due to factors such as residential segregation or centres' admissions policies, but also in response to some centres being better prepared to work with diverse children by virtue of having more or better adapted resources, for instance specialised staff. Further, these two forms of concentration (i.e., centres with high shares of children with similar backgrounds, and centres where several dimensions of diversity apply) may also require different responses for ensuring equity and inclusion. Countries can explore policies to reduce concentration when not driven by centres' capacity to respond to children's needs, bearing in mind that changing the distribution of children's populations in ECEC centres may require coordination with other policy areas. When concentration is driven by an explicit policy to group diverse children and allocate more resources to the centres they attend, care is needed to ensure that these policies do not lead to unintended consequences such as the stigmatisation of ECEC centres. An alternative policy direction would consist in reducing the concentration of children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special education needs within ECEC centres and attaching resources to individual children rather than ECEC centres as a whole (e.g., a centre receives a share of the working time of a specialised staff member, who works in different centres, to support a particular child or group of children in the centre), so as to avoid stigmatisation effects as well as placing excessive demands on some centres or staff. In addition, efforts to increase the participation in ECEC of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially at the youngest ages, should continue.
- **Ensure that more diverse ECEC centres are adequately resourced according to their specific needs.** Across participating countries, ECEC centres serving more diverse children's populations report greater shortages of resources, in particular with respect to material resources. The accumulation of dimensions of diversity within centres is also associated with a stronger perception of inadequate resourcing. This finding suggests that diverse ECEC centres might require a greater amount of resources than those they are currently allocated to be able to provide high-quality ECEC for the children that attend them. In parallel to investigating directions to lower the concentration of diverse children in some centres, policies should reduce any mismatch between required and allocated resources considering the particular needs of the most diverse centres, which can vary according to the profiles of their populations of children.
- **Ensure that ECEC centre staff composition, experience and training support the provision of high-quality experiences to all children.** Specialised staff and staff with training on working with diverse children are more often present in centres with high shares of diverse children, which points towards policies that are responsive to the diversity of children's needs. In contrast, no relationship was found between the concentration of diverse children in ECEC centres and the number of staff per ten children or the experience and initial qualification of staff working in those centres. Ensuring that ECEC centres serving highly diverse populations of children have more experienced or better qualified staff than less diverse centres aligns with the goal of building on

ECEC to compensate for the disadvantages or greater needs that some children can have in relation of their backgrounds. These efforts can be furthered by setting up teams of staff with highly specialised profiles and the responsibility to support children with particularly challenging needs across multiple centres, independently of whether these are centres with high or low concentrations of diverse children.

- **Encourage practices with children that adapt to their needs and recognise the value of diversity in all centres.** In many participating countries, ECEC staff make greater use of adaptive practices when working with diverse groups of children. At the same time, previous reporting on TALIS Starting Strong 2018 indicated that, in most participating countries, training on working with children with special education needs and with dual language learners are areas for which the largest percentages of staff reported needing more professional development. Countries can provide additional support and training to ECEC centres and staff to strengthen the responsiveness of practices to children's needs. Concerning practices that raise children's awareness of diversity and value diversity, it is important that these practices are used in all centres and not only in those with high concentrations of diverse children.
- **Support the engagement with families and communities and cooperation with other services, especially in centres with high concentration of diverse children.** Levels of family involvement tend to be lower in ECEC centres serving more diverse populations of children. ECEC systems can promote equity and inclusion by strengthening engagement with families from diverse backgrounds, including by building on the higher frequency of cooperation with child, family and social services that tends to characterise more diverse ECEC centres. In all centres, the importance of involving families, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, should be recognised and supported. In centres with high concentration of diverse children, higher resources and training of teams could support staff parental engagement practices.
- **Maintain high-quality ECEC for all children as the overarching goal of equity and inclusion policies.** Policies aimed at equalising opportunities and promoting inclusion in ECEC should be driven by the ambition to strengthen quality drivers in areas or centres where they are less solidly grounded, rather than by merely reducing differences in quality across centres that serve different populations of children.

## The bottom line: some quality aspects of ECEC vary between centres with more and less diverse populations of children

ECEC can have a major role in levelling the playing field in education and society, but this requires extending enrolment and providing high-quality learning and development opportunities for all children, and especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the majority of countries participating in TALIS Starting Strong 2018, some of the aspects that define quality in ECEC vary between ECEC centres with high and low shares of children from diverse backgrounds. The associations between the diversity of children's populations in ECEC centres and indicators of structural and process quality are however complex and differ from country to country. Furthermore, in many of the participating countries, a sizeable proportion of ECEC centres have relatively high concentrations (30% or more) of children from diverse backgrounds. In most countries there is also a sizeable proportion of centres where two or more dimensions of diversity apply to more than 10% of the children.

## TALIS Starting Strong

This document was prepared by the TALIS Starting Strong team at the OECD.

The Starting Strong Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS Starting Strong) provides early childhood staff and centre leaders with an opportunity to share insights on their professional development; pedagogical beliefs and practices; and working conditions, as well as various other leadership, management and workplace issues. TALIS Starting Strong is the first international survey of the ECEC workforce.



### For more information

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See: [OECD TALIS Starting Strong](#)

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This Education Policy Perspective has been authorised by Andreas Schleicher, Director of the Directorate for Education and Skills, OECD.

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