Article

Cross-cultural Comparison of Greece's and Quebec's ECEC Systems

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Abstract

This study examines the historical, structural, pedagogical, and process-related factors that shape early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems in Greece and Quebec. Using a comparative approach grounded in the *science of difference*, we analyze how systemic influences translate into everyday practices and outcomes. The results indicate that, although both regions share an holistic child development objective, they differ markedly in terms of structural coherence, the roles assigned to educators, pedagogical orientations, and process quality. Greece is characterized by fragmented structures and uneven quality, particularly in childcare services, whereas Quebec benefits from centralized regulation but faces challenges related to workforce instability. The study highlights that quality in ECEC is a cultural and contextual construct and provides insights for policy development, curriculum design, and international debates on early education.

Keywords: Early childhood education and care systems, ECEC quality, Cross-cultural comparison, Science of difference, Greece, Quebec

Introduction

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC[1]) systems are highly diverse, often characterized by inconsistencies and discontinuities, both between and within countries. Although nations generally adhere to the principle of holistic child development (UNESCO, 2016), operationalization varies considerably depending on cultural, social, and political contexts (Edwards, 2021). These systems are also shaped by historically embedded values concerning the role of families and ECEC institutions, resulting in diverse structural configurations. Culture shapes societal conceptions of childhood and ECEC (Eliason, 2018). It also influences how quality is conceptualized and assessed, with quality itself being a cultural construct (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Lachapelle, Roy Vallieres et al., 2025). Widely used tools such as the ECERS-R (Harms et al., 2014) may fail to capture these cultural specificities, limiting their interpretive scope (Ball & Macasaquit, 2023). Cross-cultural comparisons thus offer unique opportunities to examine both universal and contextual dimensions of quality in ECEC (Ball & Macasaquit, 2023; Carlson & Stenmalm, 1989).

This study compares the ECEC systems **in Greece and Quebec (Canada)** two regions with dichotomous structures separating care for younger children and preschool education **for older ones**. Despite structural similarities, educational outcomes differ **significantly**: Canada consistently outperforms Greece in international rankings such as the International Education Database and PISA 2022 (OECD, 2023; UNICEF Canada, 2020). This **raises questions** about the influence of broader contextual factors. Drawing on Foucault's (1982) perspective on discourse and power, this study explores how ideological, historical, and policy frameworks shape these systems with the aim of identifying avenues that could inform the development of culturally sensitive and effective ECEC policies at the international level, with a more specific focus for the Nordic countries.

ECEC Systems in Greece and Quebec

History of Greece's ECEC System

The first significant steps towards organized early childhood education in Greece date back the early 20th century. In 1917, the Ministry of Nursing was established with responsibilities that included the protection and support of families. Over time, this Ministry evolved and, in 1922, became the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, within which a sector dedicated to Early Childhood was created. As the State assumed more

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[1] Given the dichotomous system adopted in both regions, it should be noted that Greece uses the ECEC term to refer to infant and infant/child centers enrolling children aged 6 months to 4 years, whereas the term preschool education is generally used to refer to kindergarten school which enrolls children aged 4-6 years. For Quebec the ECEC term refers to childcare services enrolling children up to 5 years old, whereas the term preschool education is used for kindergarten classrooms that enroll children aged 3 to 6 years old.

responsibilities, Greek child (*Paidikoi Stathmoi*) and infant/childcare centres (*Vrefonipiakoi Stathmoi*) developed a dual role, combining social welfare with educational functions. Socially, child centers aimed at meeting the needs of working mothers (families), orphaned children and families who faced other social problems that hindered their capacity to support and care for their children. They provided nursing, accommodation, daily sustenance, and care. In addition to this social role, child centers have had an educational mission since their inception, aiming to provide education and 'agoge', promote children's holistic development and ensure a smooth transition from family to school. This educational role is now reaffirmed in the operating regulation for child and infant/child centers (Joint Ministerial Decision 41087, 2017), which states that these settings should provide early childhood education and care coherent with the latest scientific standards.

Kindergartens (*Nipiagogia*) in Greece have a similarly complex history. Although the first references to kindergartens in Greece date back to 1895, they were not officially recognized until 1929. Prior to this, kindergartens were largely private and were not subject to any state regulation. The establishment of the 1929 law marked the beginning of the state's involvement in kindergartens (Law 4397/1929). Early legal texts emphasized fostering good habits, obedience, and national identity, along with introducing children to cognitive skills such as language and arithmetic. From 1976 onwards, kindergartens were recognized as the first level of general education, and shift from part-time to full-time kindergarten programs occurred in the late 20th century, culminating in compulsory attendance for children aged 4 to 6 in 2018. Kindergartens in Greece have always aimed at promoting not only academic skills but also moral, religious, physical, and social development, while also striving to prepare children for primary school.

Today, ECEC attendance rates in Greece are relatively low. In 2023, 12% of children under the age of 3 and 37.3% of children aged 3 to 6 attended settings between 1 and 29 hours per week. For attendance of 30 hours or more, the rates were 17.6% for children under 3 and 49.7% for those aged 3-6. According to the recently published Eurydice report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2025), although participation among children under 3 rose between 2013 and 2023, participation rates for children aged 3-6 have decreased.

History of Quebec's ECEC System

In Quebec, ECEC is divided between early childcare settings and preschool education for 4- and 5-year-olds. The development of organized childcare began after World War II, in response to growing female participation in the workforce.

The first signs of childcare date back to the late 19th century, with the creation of children's asylums in 1859 to accommodate large groups of children. These institutions gradually disappeared by the 1920s due

to financial constraints and the idea that women should only work at home (Lalonde-Graton, 2002). The mid-20th century, particularly during and after World War II, was a turning point. The war effort and changes in the economy led to state-supported childcare programs, such as subsidies for childcare centers (Auger & Lamothe, 1981). However, government commitment remained limited until the 1970s.

The "Quiet Revolution" marked a period of profound reform, during which ECEC became part of broader efforts to modernize public services. From 1971 to 1996, citizens' mobilisation led to major political changes: standardization of childcare services, legal recognition of children's educational needs, and formal introduction of preschool education with kindergarten (Lalonde-Graton, 2002).

A transformative moment came in 1996, when the Quebec government adopted a new family policy focused on universal access to affordable, high-quality childcare (Mathieu & Tremblay, 2020). This included the creation of Early Childhood Centres (Centres de la petite enfance or CPEs), which consolidated existing services and affirmed a mission that was both educational and care oriented. Full-time kindergarten for 5-year-olds became widespread, and coverage expanded steadily. In 2022, 72% of children aged 0–5 attended some form of ECEC service (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2022), while kindergarten attendance rates reached 29.1% at age 4 and 93.8% at age 5 in 2023 (Gouvernement du Québec, 2024; Roy-Vallières et al., in press).

The evolution of Quebec's ECEC system illustrates how political, social, and cultural transformations—particularly those related to gender roles and family policies - shape public investment in early education. As in Greece, ECEC has transitioned from informal and charitable care to structured, state-supported services. These trajectories highlight how societal needs and ideologies guide the design and priorities of ECEC systems. To analyze these dynamics more closely, we now turn to Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic framework.

Conceptualizing Quality in ECEC

While there is a shared understanding of what constitutes quality in ECEC, its practical implementation varies across social, cultural, and political contexts. To account for these variations, this study adopts a widely used framework (Kluczniok & Roßbach, 2014; NICHD, 2002), which conceptualizes ECEC quality in three components: input (structural and orientation quality), output (process quality, educational interactions), and outcome (child development and well-being). In this framework, educational quality is perceived as a measurable, multidimensional concept, integrating interconnected dimensions:

1. *Structural quality*, the most established dimension in research, focuses on regulated elements within ECEC services, such as the physical environment, group size or adult-to-child ratio, and educators' qualifications and training. Ruopp's (1979) "golden triangle" highlights these elements as foundational to supportive

learning environments. While research has linked ongoing educator training to consistent positive developmental outcomes (Egert et al., 2018), inconsistent findings for other aspects of structural quality suggest its impact varies across contexts, possibly indirectly influencing other dimensions like process quality (Slot, 2018).

2. *Process quality*, on the other hand, pertains to children's daily experiences, including educator-child interactions, engagement in activities, and relationships with parents, emphasizing responsive and stimulating interactions (Slot et al., 2015). Research demonstrates strong links between process quality and child development, with some influence from structural quality (NICHD, 2002; Slot, 2018).

3. *Pedagogical orientations quality* reflects underlying values and educational approaches, shaping educators' professional actions (Engel et al., 2015). These pedagogical orientations influence decision-making and interactions (Kluczniok & Roßbach, 2014). Studies suggest this aspect of quality interacts bidirectionally with structural quality, affecting processes and outcomes for children (Eckhardt & Egert, 2020).

Together, these dimensions offer a comprehensive view of quality in ECEC, as proposed by Rossbach et al. (2024) in their Heuristic Framework for the Educational Quality of Learning Environments. Consistent with an ecosystemic perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the present study places this shared understanding of educational quality within a broader social, cultural, and political context and posits that this context influences how quality is conceptualized in ECEC (Anders & Opperman, 2024). This theoretical framework helps define and understand changes in ECEC systems through historical events, in addition to offer a common basis for comparing quality between countries. In this case, it allows us to analyze similarities and differences between Greece and Quebec to reflect on the most promising elements and those that pose greater challenges, to propose avenues for reflection and improvement that are relevant to both contexts as well as to other interested international parties.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative approach to explore similarities and differences in ECEC quality between Greece and Quebec. Anchored in a science of difference perspective (Sousa & Moss, 2022), the research seeks to understand how cultural, historical, and societal factors shape local ECEC realities. This approach values contextualized insights, aligning with an interpretative epistemology that prioritizes meaning making over standardization (Sousa & Moss, 2022).

Two researchers collected data, each analyzing materials from their own cultural context, in line with comparative education research principles (Bray & Thomas, 1995). In line with Broadfoot (1999) and Cowen (2006), a variety of sources were consulted: official policy documents (e.g., laws, curricula, regulations), international databases (e.g., Eurostat), scientific publications, and national reports relevant to ECEC. Documents were selected based on their relevance to the study's three analytical categories: structural quality, process quality, and pedagogical orientations.

The analysis followed a deductive comparative procedure informed by Bereday's (1964) four-stage model

(description, interpretation, juxtaposition, and comparison) and further elaborated by Bray and Thomas (1995). First, each researcher conducted a systematic reading of the selected documents from her own context to describe key features of the ECEC system. During this stage, information relevant to the three predefined analytical categories was identified and organized. In the second stage, the researchers interpreted the identified features within their respective cultural, historical, and policy contexts. Structural quality was examined through indicators such as regulatory frameworks, adult-to-child ratios, educator qualifications, training requirements, and infrastructure. Process quality was analyzed through descriptions of everyday educational practices, including adult-to-child interactions, drawing where applicable on findings from studies using standardized observation tools. Pedagogical orientations were explored by examining representations of the child, professional roles attributed to educators, and curriculum frameworks. In the third stage, the findings from Greece and Quebec were juxtaposed using a shared analytical matrix based on the three categories. This enabled the researchers to systematically compare similarities and differences across contexts. Finally, joint analytical discussions were held to refine interpretations, question assumptions, and ensure conceptual coherence across cases. This collaborative process supported reflexivity, reduced cultural bias, and strengthened the validity of the comparative interpretations (Schriewer, 2000).

Results

Process quality in Greece and Quebec

Greece and Quebec have both invested in assessing the process quality in ECEC. However, the ways in wich quality is conceptualized, measured, and interpreted differ substantially across contexts. These differences are not merely technical in nature; they reflect deeper assumptions about pedagogy, the role of educators, and the purpose of early education. From a "science of difference" perspective, the use of different measurement tools signals divergent conceptions of what constitutes quality interactions and learning processes. This situation complicates direct comparison, while offering valuable insight into how quality is culturally constructed.

In Greece, studies assessing ECEC quality in infant/child centers and kindergarten schools have found generally low levels of process quality. Key studies (e.g., Megalonidou, 2020; Petrogiannis, 2002; Rentzou, 2010; 2012) have used the CIS (Arnett, 1989), ITERS-R (Harms et al., 2003) and ECERS-R (Harms et al., 2005) to measure the quality of interactions and other aspects such as program structure, learning activities, and adult needs. Research conducted in infant and toddler centers has indicated minimal quality, with ITERS-R scores ranging from 3.00 to 3.88 on a 7-point scale, revealing weaknesses particularly in learning activities and adult needs. Interactions were generally positive, with educators showing sensitivity and

permissiveness, but with occasional detachment, as evidenced by CIS with scores ranging from 1.38 to 2.92 on the 4-point scale. Comparatively, studies in child centers showed slightly lower scores than those observed in infant/child centers, with ECERS-R scores ranging from 2.52 to 3.92 out of a possibility of seven points. The process quality in preschool varied widely, with ECERS-R scores ranging from 2.46 to 4.69. These results point to shortcomings in program structure, interaction, and learning activities, although interaction quality was still relatively better. In addition, exploring differences among different types of settings, Rentzou (2010; 2012) found that classes run by organizations were of higher quality (3.63; .90), as measured with ITERS-R, compared to private (3.13; .30) and public (3.00; .99) classrooms. Turning to child centres, the same authors, using the ECERS-R, found they offered lower quality than to infant centres and that child centres run by organisations offered higher quality than private and public centres. These consistently low ERS scores suggest not only resource constraints, but also a regulatory and educational environment in which process quality is weakly institutionalized, particularly in childcare settings that operate without a national pedagogical framework.

Quebec has a longer history of measuring ECEC process quality, with more than 20 studies conducted over the past two decades. Several tools have been used, including ERS scales, CLASS, inCLASS (Downer et al., 2012), and EQOS (Bourgon & Lavallée, 2013). Like Greece, the findings in Quebec show that process quality is generally considered minimal or adequate, depending on the type of settings. Studies conducted in public childcare centers reported scores of 3.61 for ITERS-R and 4.58 for ECERS-R, (7-point scale), as well as scores ranging from 2.85 to 3.09 on the EQOS (4-point scale), with slightly higher scores for infant groups. Family childcare settings scored slightly higher on the ERS scales (FCCERS, 4.41; Harms et al., 2007), but slightly lower on the EQOS scale (from 2.57 to 2.75), while for-profit centers scored generally lower (3.69 on the ECERS-R scale; from 2.58 to 2.2 on the EQOS). Regarding interaction quality, adult-to-child interactions were mostly rated as good in public childcare centers, with scores ranging from 2.75 to 5.85 on CLASS (7-points), and slightly higher in subsidized settings (from 2.64 to 6.01). In public childcare centers, interactions between children were rated as average in quality, with scores ranging from 3.61 to 4.23 on the inCLASS scale (7-points). For preschool services, ECERS scores were mostly low, spanning from 2.15 to 2.68 points for 4-year-olds. However, interaction quality was higher, with adult-to-child interaction scores ranging from 2.34 to 6.22 for 4-year-olds and from 2.44 to 6.90 for 5-year-olds, while child-child interactions score lower at 3.66 for 5-year-olds on the inCLASS scale.

Compared to Greece, the generally higher interaction scores observed in Quebec, particularly in public and subsidized settings, reflect a system where process quality is explicitly linked to state regulation, educator training, and pedagogical guidance, even as recent workforce instability threatens these gains.

From a comparative perspective it appears that Quebec benefits from strong regulation and structured

professional guidance, supporting higher quality interactions, whereas Greece shows weaker institutionalization of process quality, particularly in early childcare settings. Thus, in both systems, scores are generally higher in Emotional Support and Classroom Organization than in Instructional Support.

Structural quality in Greece and Quebec

Structural quality in Greece and Quebec, which is regulated by steering documents, shows notable contrasts in terms of curriculum guidelines, adult-to-child ratios, educators' initial training and in-service training, as well as staffing requirements. Table 1 presents a synthesis of key structural quality indicators in both contexts. As seen in this table, except for public childcare centers in Greece, the regulatory and educational documents governing ECEC services exhibit considerable similarities between the two regions. Both Quebec and Greece have a national curriculum for preschool education, applicable to both public and private institutions (Joint Ministerial Decision 13646/Δ1., 2023; Ministère de l'éducation du Québec [MEQ], 2023; Penderi et al., 2022). However, when considering ECEC services, Quebec has a law defining guiding principles as well as a national educational program applicable to all ECEC services. (Ministère de la Famille, 2019), while Greece relies mainly on a set of operational regulations[2] (Joint Ministerial Decision 41087, 2017).

In addition, the adult-to-child ratio is higher in Greece than in Quebec. Regarding initial training, although the qualification requirements are similar for preschool services in both regions, they are higher in Greece for ECEC services, where a bachelor's degree is mandated, in contrast to Quebec's requirement for a collegial degree (Joint Ministerial Decision 41087, 2017; Law 4264, 2014; Règlement sur les services de garde éducatifs à l'enfance, 2024). It is also important to note that, in the Greek ECEC sector, the adult-to-child ratio includes both university-trained educators and staff with post-secondary vocational training, which work as helpers (Joint Ministerial Decision 41087, 2017). For instance, in infant/toddler centers, the ratio of three adults to twelve children typically includes one educator with a university degree and two staff members who have completed 1.5 to 2 years of post-secondary vocational training. In child centers, the ratio is one university-trained educator and one vocationally trained assistant, for a total of two adults to twenty-five children. In Quebec, a related issue is the growing concern over a labor shortage in the ECEC sector. As a result, both childcare services and schools are increasingly employing individuals who have not completed the required formal training (Rivard et al., 2024). Although these individuals are subject to limitations in wages and the types of contracts they can accept, the lack of formal training among early childhood educators and preschool teachers in Quebec remains a major concern.

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[2] Upon the writing of the present study, a pedagogical framework is prepared for the first time for Greek child and infant/child centers.

Table 1. Structural quality indicators in Greece and Quebec

Type of ECEC	Greece				Quebec			
	Public ECEC	Private ECEC	Public Preschool	Private Preschool	Public ECEC	Private ECEC	Public Preschool	Private Preschool
Curriculum guidelines	Not available (operate with operational regulations)	Not available	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available
Adult-to-child ratio	3:12 for infant/toddler centers 2:25 for child centers	1:8 or 2:12 for infant/toddler centers 1:25 for child centers	1:25	1:25	1:5 for infant groups 1:8 for toddler groups 1:10 for preschool groups	1:5 for infant groups 1:8 for toddler groups 1:10 for preschool groups	1:17 for 4-year-olds 1:20 for 5-year-olds	Determined by ministry license
Initial training	4-year bachelor (university) degree	4-year bachelor (university) degree or post-secondary education	4-year bachelor (university) degree	4-year bachelor (university) degree	3-year college degree or 1260h of college study + 3 years of relevant professional work	3-year college degree or 1260h of college study + 3 years of relevant professional work	4-year bachelor (university) degree	4-year bachelor (university) degree
In-service training	Mandatory but not monitored or regulated	Mandatory but not monitored or regulated	Optional 15h per year, training seminars are delivered in schools according to their identified needs	Optional 15h per year, training seminars are delivered in schools according to their identified needs	6h per year for home-based educators only	No requirement	Mandatory 30h per 2 years, training seminars are chosen by teachers depending on their individual needs	Mandatory 30h per 2 years, training seminars are chosen by teachers depending on their individual needs

Note. Data on structural characteristics of ECEC quality in both regions are based on national regulations for ECEC (Joint Ministerial Decision 41087, 2017; Joint Ministerial Decision 13646/Δ1., 2023; Law 4264, 2014; Loi sur l'instruction publique, 2023; Ministère de l'éducation du Québec [MEQ], 2023; Ministère de la Famille, 2019; Règlement sur les services de garde éducatifs à l'enfance, 2024)

In terms of in-service training expectations, both Quebec and Greece exhibit similar practices. While in-service training is considered a professional responsibility, it is neither regulated nor monitored for public and private ECEC services in both regions (Joint Ministerial Decision 41087, 2017; Règlement sur les services de garde éducatifs à l'enfance, 2024). For preschool education, in-service training is regulated and

monitored, with Greece requiring slightly more hours per year than Quebec (15 hours compared to 10 hours) (Loi sur l'instruction publique, 2023). However, in Greece, teacher's ongoing training is optional rather than mandatory. Finally, regarding the physical environment, both regions have regulations governing health and safety across educational settings (Joint Ministerial Decision 41087, 2017; Joint Ministerial Decision 13646/Δ1., 2023; Loi sur l'instruction publique, 2023; Règlement sur les services de garde éducatifs à l'enfance, 2024). However, unlike Quebec, Greece does not have specific guidelines on how the environment should be used for educational purposes, including the use of materials, designated learning areas, and pedagogical approaches in public ECEC. This lack of guidelines is also noted in private ECEC in both regions.

From a comparative perspective, these structural differences reflect contrasting governance logics. Quebec's integrated regulatory framework positions ECEC as a public responsibility, supported by standardized curricula and legally binding adult-to-child ratio. In Greece, by contrast, the separation between childcare and preschool education creates unequal structural conditions, reinforcing a long-standing hierarchy in which the care for younger children is conceived as a custodial function rather than as an educational mission. This bifurcation helps to understand why higher qualification requirements in Greek childcare do not translate into higher observed process quality.

Pedagogical orientations quality in Greece and Quebec

In the context of this study, pedagogical orientation quality is addressed along three lines, as proposed by the Eurydice network (2024): the image of the child, the understanding of educators' role and principles for the design of educational processes. The following analysis draws explicitly on national curricula, regulatory frameworks, and guiding pedagogical documents (Table 2), which articulate official representations of the child, the educator, and educational processes. Table 2 synthesizes results of the comparative analysis on pedagogical orientations quality in Greece and Quebec, along these three lines.

Table 2. Results on pedagogical orientations quality in Greece and Quebec

Dimension	Greece	Quebec
Image of the child	Dependent in infant/toddler centers; social agent in kindergarten	Competent child with dual deficit-based approach
Role of educator	Caregiver and pedagogue; facilitator, mediator, researcher in kindergarten	Facilitator, model, and transition guide; structured guidance supporting children's global development and educational success

Dimension	Greece	Quebec
Educational processes	Holistic, play-based, sociocultural	Structured, inclusive, play-based with developmental goals

As seen in Table 2, underlying values and educational approaches differ between regions. The following sections present in more detail pedagogical orientations quality in the two regions.

The image of the child

In Greece, the image of the child varies depending on the type of service, particularly between infant/child programs and kindergarten. In ECE settings, children are predominantly viewed as dependent on adults, with limited recognition of their agency. The regulatory framework (Joint Ministerial Decision 41087, 2017) does not explicitly acknowledge children as active participants in shaping their educational experiences, despite an emphasis on holistic development. This orientation suggests an implicit socialization model, where education primarily aims to guide children through developmental stages rather than supporting their autonomy. In contrast, the kindergarten curriculum (Joint Ministerial Decision 13646/Δ1., 2023; Penderi et al., 2022) adopts a more progressive stance, portraying children as social agents and active citizens. Here, learning is understood as a relational and co-constructed process, deeply embedded in cultural and environmental interactions. The curriculum positions the child as an agent of their own learning, valuing play, metacognition, and the recognition of individual learning trajectories. This orientation reflects a shift towards a sociocultural model, aligning with inclusive education principles and the acknowledgement of children's competencies in shaping their own development.

Quebec's perspective on the image of the child appears to be evolving yet remains marked by an inherent duality. Historically rooted in a compensatory model, early childhood education initially focused on identifying and addressing children's deficits to prepare them for formal schooling (Paquette et al., 2016). However, contemporary frameworks incorporate elements of humanistic education, emphasizing the child's competencies, autonomy, and intrinsic motivation (Proulx, 2024). This tension is particularly evident in the preschool curriculum, which, while valuing exploration, discovery, and holistic development, maintains preventive interventions targeting children perceived as "weaker" (MEQ, 2023). The presence of both child-centered and deficit-based approaches suggests a hybrid model influenced by North American developmental psychology (with its emphasis on early interventions and readiness for school) and European humanistic perspectives (which recognize the child as an active and competent learner).

Thus, while Greek kindergarten policy adopts a sociocultural image of the child, this position is

institutionally discontinuous with childcare settings, where dependency remains the dominant representation. Quebec's hybrid model, by contrast, institutionalizes this tension within a single system, combining competency-based discourse with preventive interventions.

The role of the educator

In Greek early childhood education settings, the educators assume a comprehensive caregiving role, aiming for children's holistic development while prioritizing their psychosomatic well-being (Joint Ministerial Decision 41087, 2017). Their responsibilities extend beyond education to include health monitoring, hygiene, and diet, reflecting an approach in which care and education are closely intertwined. This model aligns with a traditional European perspective on ECEC, where care and education are not separate domains but integrated components of child development. In Greek preschools, the teacher's role expands significantly (Joint Ministerial Decision 13646/Δ1., 2023; Penderi et al., 2022). Kindergarten teachers are seen as orchestrators of learning, adapting curricular guidelines to children's needs while integrating values of cooperation, respect, and empathy. They are also positioned as researchers, engaging in professional development and reflective practices to improve educational quality. Their role as mediators between children, families, and the wider community is also highlighted, as well as their responsibility in advocating for children's rights and well-being. Their leadership role within the school is emphasized, promoting collaboration among educators and participation in decision-making processes. This multifaceted professional identity suggests a conceptualization of educators as both facilitators of learning and active contributors to the evolution of the educational system. The emphasis on adaptability, advocacy, and leadership reflects the influence of sociocultural perspectives on education, where learning is embedded in community and relational contexts.

In Quebec's ECEC services, educators are primarily seen as facilitators of development, with a strong emphasis on creating conditions that foster autonomy, emotional security, and active learning (Ministère de la Famille, 2019). The democratic approach prescribed in Quebec's framework emphasizes a child-centered philosophy, in which educators are encouraged to foster children's self-confidence, respond to their emotional needs, and value their perspectives. Educators are also called upon to act as role models, embodying attitudes and relational dispositions that children are encouraged to internalize. This dual role, which combines relational care, facilitation, and modeling, suggests a pedagogical approach influenced by developmental psychology, in which structured guidance and emotional support are seen as complementary and interdependent dimensions of educational practices. In preschool education in Quebec, the teacher's role is primarily to create a secure and structured learning environment, guiding children in developing social competencies such as conflict resolution and cooperation (MEQ, 2023). Planning activities adapted to children's developmental levels, promoting peer relationships, symbolic play,

and exploration, as well as collaborating with families and other professionals are integral parts of this role. A distinctive feature of Quebec preschools is the importance placed on the transition to school, positioning teachers as key relational figures in supporting children's emotional and social adaptation to the formal school context (MEQ, 2023). This depiction corresponds with a North American viewpoint on ECEC, which prioritizes structured interventions and facilitated transitions to enhance children's success in school. The educator's role is thus both instructional and relational, ensuring that children acquire the necessary social and cognitive skills for their continued education.

From a comparative perspective, these constructions of the role of educator reflect different assumptions about ways of personal autonomy, institutionalizing care and relational responsibility. In Greece, the expansive and morally charged role attributed to educators—particularly in preschool—signals a rights-based and sociocultural vision of education, yet this professional identity is not consistently supported by structural conditions in childcare settings. In Quebec, conversely, relational care is integrated into a more regulated and development-oriented professional framework, with an emphasis on facilitation, modeling, and transition management. While this clarity promotes a certain consistency across settings, it can also constrain pedagogical experimentation, particularly in contexts of workforce shortages. Viewed through the science of difference lens, these cases illustrate how educator professionalism is shaped not only by training and curricula, but also by governance regimes that define the ways in which care, learning and evaluation are articulated in practices and thus what educators are expected—and enabled—to do.

Principles for the design of educational processes

In Greece, ECEC centers operate based on general guidelines that prioritize individualized and group-based activities aligned with children's social, emotional, cognitive, and motor development. Although the absence of formal curricular frameworks for childcare services leads to variability in implementation, there is a strong emphasis on cultural and social diversity (Joint Ministerial Decision 41087, 2017). Educational practices include a mix of structured activities (e.g., music, movement, art, and ecological experiments) and free exploration, reflecting an experiential approach to learning.

Greek kindergarten curricula structure this approach to learning around four interdisciplinary thematic areas (Joint Ministerial Decision 13646/Δ1., 2023; Penderi et al., 2022):

- Communication (language development, expression)
- Self and society (identity, citizenship, democracy, intercultural awareness)
- Sciences (problem-solving, inquiry-based learning)
- Body, creativity, and expression (artistic and physical development)

These areas articulate theory and practice, encouraging critical and creative thinking while promoting human rights, social justice, and democratic values. Play, inquiry, real-life situations, and transitions are

integrated to ensure continuity in learning, support social interaction, and strengthen community engagement. This sociocultural and constructivist model views learning as a collaborative and contextualized process, in which children's backgrounds and experiences actively shape their educational journey.

In Quebec, educational guidelines for ECEC services are more standardized, particularly in accredited settings. The national program, inspired by North American and Scandinavian approaches, outlines a structured balance between routines (meals, naps, personal care) and play-based activities, including two daily outdoor periods (Ministère de la Famille, 2019). Quebec's ECEC framework explicitly encourages well-planned transitions and routines to promote emotional security, minimize restlessness, and to support autonomy and social skills. Play is the central tool for learning, with activities ranging from free and guided play to semi-directed projects, to interactive reading and workshops. Importantly, developmental expectations are not fixed nor normative; they rather aim for a comprehensive stimulation of social, emotional, motor, cognitive, and linguistic domains.

Quebec's preschool curriculum also mirrors this structured flexibility, integrating five core developmental areas (MEQ, 2023):

- Physical development (motor skills, coordination)
- Emotional development (self-regulation, self-confidence)
- Social development (cooperation, conflict resolution)
- Language development (communication, literacy foundations)
- Cognitive development (problem-solving, creativity)

A distinctive feature of Quebec's preschool approach is its emphasis on preventive interventions (MEQ, 2023). Teachers are expected to observe children and adjust activities, accordingly, in order to ensure a differentiated and inclusive approach (MEQ, 2023). The curriculum prescribes two daily periods of free play lasting 45- to 60-minute, reinforcing a belief in play as a foundation for development and learning. Additionally, structured routines aim to develop time management, autonomy and participation, in connection with educational success and the transition to school.

When placed in comparative dialogue, the design of educational processes in Greece and Quebec reveals contrasting temporal and pedagogical logics. Greek curricula prioritize emergent learning, based on inquiry and embedded in social relations and democratic values, leaving ample room for interpretation by educators and children. Quebec's model, while also play-based, is more structured in time, planned and oriented toward holistic development, reflecting a stronger alignment with developmental psychology and educational success discourses. These differences suggest that "play-based learning" functions as a shared global vocabulary that is locally reinterpreted: as a vehicle for democratic participation in Greece and as a structured pathway toward educational continuity in Quebec. This finding underscores the importance of

analyzing how pedagogical principles circulating on an international scale are translated within specific political and cultural contexts.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the historical, ideological, and discursive factors that shape ECEC systems in Greece and Quebec, with the objective of identifying convergences and divergences that could inform international ECEC practices. By applying a comparative approach rooted in contextual and cultural analysis, the research explored how broader systemic influences translate into daily practices and outcomes in ECEC systems. Beyond simply listing similarities and differences, this comparison highlights that quality in ECEC is not a universal construct but rather a negotiated outcome, stemming from governance traditions, cultural expectations, and historical trajectories. The Greece–Quebec comparison thus illustrates that strong pedagogical visions cannot compensate for weak structural coherence (as in Greece), while robust regulatory frameworks may lack the flexibility necessary to maintain quality under workforce pressures (as in Quebec). These insights contribute to international debates by challenging linear assumptions that financial investment alone would guarantee quality, and by reinforcing theoretical frameworks on the interdependence of structural, process, and cultural dimensions of quality (OECD, 2012; Slot, 2018).

The results indicate that Greece and Quebec, despite sharing common goals such as promoting children's holistic development, show differences in structural frameworks, educator roles, pedagogical orientations, and interpretations of children's agency. Notably, both systems face persistent challenges in achieving high process quality, though Quebec generally reports stronger adult-to-child interactions, especially in settings that are publicly funded. The domains of Emotional Support and Classroom Organization typically score medium-high in both contexts, but Instructional Support remains lower, consistent with international research (Hu et al., 2021; Levickis et al., 2023). In Quebec's 4-year-old preschools, higher Instructional Support scores align with evidence-based professional development and coaching interventions (Author, 2024), reflecting policy commitments to continuous educator training as outlined in Quebec's *Ministère de la Famille* guidelines (Quebec's Ministère de l'Éducation, 2023).

In Greece, structural quality is weakened by a fragmented and underfunded system, shaped by a historical prioritization of formal schooling and higher education. The absence of a national curriculum for children aged 0 to 4, coupled with austerity measures implemented following the 2009 financial crisis and the lower social status of early childhood education (Rentzou, 2015), limits professional development, qualifications requirements, and favorable adult-to-child ratio. These structural weaknesses tend to reinforce teacher-directed approaches, consistent with long-standing cultural expectations that early childhood education

primarily serves a welfare function, while preschool prepares children for formal schooling. Policy documents, including the Greek Ministry of Education's framework for preschool education (Joint Ministerial Decision 13646/Δ1. (2023), reflect these priorities, placing more emphasis on preparation for formal schooling over pedagogical innovation. As a result, interactional warmth is present but constrained by large groups, rigid routines, and limited opportunities for child autonomy.

In Quebec, state involvement has led to substantial public investment in ECEC since the introduction of universal, subsidized services in 1997 (Mathieu & Tremblay, 2020). Structural regulations, such as lower adult-to-child ratio and the existence of national curricula, support higher structural quality, as articulated in provincial ECEC policy documents (Loi Sur Les Services de Garde Éducatifs à l'enfance, 2022). However, recent funding cuts (Couturier & Hurteau, 2016) have triggered a labor shortage and a decrease in qualification standards, which could affect interaction quality and instructional support (Slot, 2018). Despite these pressures, Quebec's pedagogical strengths lie in child-centered and play-based learning, grounded in developmental psychology and informed by North American and Scandinavian models (Proulx, 2024). The alignment of pedagogical vision and political frameworks reflect Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), according to which interactions at the mesosystem level, that is between policy, institutional structure, and educator practices, shape child outcomes.

The science of difference framework (Sousa & Moss, 2022) highlights how national discourses and institutional structures shape dominant images of the child. In Greece, these images are marked by discontinuity: children are mainly perceived dependent in infant and toddler programs, while they are seen as active participants in kindergarten, reflecting a transitional and fragmented pedagogical thinking. In Quebec, the dominant image of children is shaped by a tension between compensatory and competency-based perspectives, resulting in a hybrid representation of children as both autonomous and subject to prevention to address social inequalities. These differentiated conceptualizations of the child influence the continuity of educational experiences across setting and age group, supporting Fritani's (2022) argument that a coherent, rights-based view of the child enhances educational quality and equity.

The educator's role is pivotal for both pedagogical and process quality. In Greece, this role is defined in broad and holistic terms: educators are caregivers, leaders, and social agents, reflecting a holistic, relational conception of education rooted in social justice and community engagement. In Quebec, educators and teachers are positioned as facilitators and guides for children's development, within a professional framework that explicitly integrates relational responsibility, emotional security, and emotional support as fundamental conditions for educational practices, complementing structured developmental support. Recent scholarship, including the PPCT ecological model (Lachapelle, Brunson et al., 2025), foregrounds educators' intrinsic motivation, training, and well-being as crucial determinants of quality. Policy

documents in Quebec (Ministère de la Famille, 2019) explicitly connect educator preparation and support to expected pedagogical outcomes, illustrating the direct influence of policy on classroom practice.

Educational process design further reflects philosophical underpinnings. Greece favors flexible, interdisciplinary, socioculturally embedded approaches rooted in democratic values and emergent learning, whereas Quebec implements structured, play-based curricula with clearly articulated developmental goals. Both prioritize holistic development, but Greece emphasizes learning within social contexts, while Quebec focuses on individual developmental trajectories. Aligning pedagogy with contemporary, child-centered models—supported by international frameworks such as the *OECD Starting Strong* reports (OECD, 2012)— improves consistency and quality.

The interplay between structural quality, pedagogy, and process quality demonstrates how policy decisions, economic constraints, and cultural values shape ECEC strengths and weaknesses. Greece's limited structural coherence and fragmented research on process quality hinder pedagogical evolution, whereas Quebec's strong regulatory base enables progressive pedagogy but is challenged by workforce instability. By linking findings to the science of difference framework (Sousa & Moss, 2022) and to established policy and theoretical models (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; OECD, 2012), this study underscores the value of a context-sensitive, historically informed approach for guiding research, practice, and policy.

For Nordic and European contexts, characterized by integrated systems and strong public investment, these findings offer a cautionary perspective: sustaining structural coherence and educator professionalism during economic or demographic pressures is essential. The study speaks to broader debates on sustainability, equity, and limits of policy transfer, highlighting the importance of linking theory, research evidence, and policy frameworks when designing ECEC systems.

Study limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the comparative analysis relied exclusively on policy documents and peer-reviewed literature, offering a historically and politically grounded perspective on ECEC systems in Greece and Quebec but excluding the lived experiences of practitioners, children, and families. As policy texts reflect aspirational goals, the analysis captures institutional constructions of quality rather than its enactment in practice. Future research would benefit from primary data collection using comparable methods, such as observations or interviews. Second, the use of different quality assessment tools (ERS in Greece and CLASS in Quebec) constrains comparability due to their distinct emphases. Finally, some service types, including home-based childcare, are underrepresented, and language-based division of analysis may have limited cross-contextual interpretation. Despite these constraints, the shared theoretical framework ensured coherence across contexts.

Conclusions

This study examined the historical, ideological, and discursive factors shaping ECEC systems in Greece and Quebec, highlighting how structural, pedagogical, and cultural elements interact to shape educational quality. By comparing these two contexts, the research goes beyond documenting common challenges—such as ratios, qualifications, and underfunding—and instead illustrates how systemic coherence, pedagogical alignment, and policy design interact to influence outcomes, offering insights for global debates on ECEC quality.

For Greece, the comparison with Quebec highlights the importance of consistency between curricular frameworks, structural conditions, and institutional recognition of the educational role, without suggesting a direct transfer of models. Quebec's experience demonstrates that sustained public investment, clear curricula, and regulated child-to-educator ratios support higher structural quality and allow child-centered pedagogy to flourish. Thus, Greece could benefit from integrating a national early year's curriculum, strengthening educator preparation, and clarifying the social role of ECEC across age groups, while maintaining its emphasis on social-emotional development and community engagement. For Quebec and other high-investment systems, the study highlights the vulnerability of process quality to workforce instability, suggesting that policy must balance investment with support for educator recruitment, retention, and professional development. The Greek system's relational, flexible, and socioculturally embedded approach underscores the importance of holistic, contextually grounded pedagogy. Quebec, despite stronger structural support, could strengthen educational quality by further embedding curricula in children's social and cultural contexts and by emphasizing relational practices that foster community and social justice. The study also highlights different ways of institutionalizing care and relational responsibility, as well as distinct conceptions of educational success, understood sometimes as overall development and social participation, and sometimes as preparation for formal educational pathways.

From a global perspective, the Greece–Quebec comparison contributes to ECEC debates by showing that:

1. Investment must be strategically aligned with pedagogy and structural support to produce quality outcomes.

2. Policy coherence across age groups and settings is critical, as fragmented systems risk undermining pedagogical innovation.

3. Educator support, preparation, and well-being are central, not secondary to maintaining process quality under economic or demographic pressures.

Overall, by drawing on the science of difference framework (Sousa & Moss, 2022) and linking findings to contemporary ECEC theories—such as ecological models of quality and the PPCT framework—this study demonstrates that quality in ECEC cannot be reduced to a set of universal standards or transferable

solutions. Rather, it emerges from historically situated configurations, where governance, pedagogical visions, educational professionalism, and culturally constructed images of the child come together. This perspective invites us, even in highly integrated systems widely recognized for their quality, to maintain a reflective stance on the effects of standardization, regulation, and contemporary tensions on educational and relational work.

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