

Portugal

Auspices

The national ECEC network in Portugal is public and private, and overall policy responsibility for both networks is shared between two ministries. The Ministry of Education is responsible for pedagogical quality in all settings, and for the funding of kindergarten educational contexts for the age group 3-6 years. The Ministry of Labour and Solidarity has charge of family support, provision of socio-educational activities and the funding and supervision of out-of-home childcare, for children aged 3 months and older. A move toward decentralisation has recently taken place, and several policy and organisation matters are now being decided by municipalities, the Regional Directorates of Education and the Regional Social Security Centres, which have the responsibility of enabling the implementation of national ECEC policies in their regions. To ensure co-ordination, a *Bureau for the Expansion and Development of Pre-school Education* was established in 1996, bringing together the major ECEC stakeholders, including the National Association of Municipalities and the larger non-profit or voluntary providers, such as the Private Institutions of Social Solidarity (IPSS). The 1997 National Framework Law provides the definitions, major policy aims, orientations and implementation strategies for pre-school (kindergarten) education. Although the Law perceives pre-school as the first stage of lifelong learning, co-operation with families is emphasised.

Developments

In recent years, Portugal has made notable progress in ECEC policy formulation and implementation. The whole sector has effectively been reformed, and the pre-school budget has more than doubled. A government *Programme for the Expansion and Development of Pre-school Education* was drafted in 1996, followed one year later by the 1997 *Framework Law* which co-ordinates the hitherto diverse provision for young children, and includes for the first time the 3- to 6-year-olds within the realm of Basic Education. The government programme intends that the expansion and development of pre-school provision should take place in co-ordination with municipal, private and social welfare institutions, with central government assuming a guiding and regulatory role. The increase in coverage has been remarkable, going in the pre-school sector from 57.5% coverage in 1995 to over 72% in 1999. Free access to a 5-hour session has now been accorded to 5-year olds, and is planned for 4-year olds in the near future. Much attention has been devoted to staff training and status, and Portuguese *educadores* are now required to have a four-year, higher education degree. Curriculum guidelines have been formulated and issued, and there is growing public interest in provision for 0-3 year old children.

Context

Expenditure on ISCED Level 0 institutions as a percentage of GDP: 0.2%.

Labour force rates: in 1999, 80.3% of women aged 25-34 years participated in the labour force. 7.8% worked part-time.

Parental leave: universal 18 weeks maternity leave paid 100% of earnings + 6 months unpaid parental leave for each parent.

Attention to children with special educational needs, before they enter compulsory school: a) *Children with disabilities:* in Portugal, there is growing inclusion of children with disabilities in all branches of education; b) *Child poverty rates* reach 24% after redistribution (OECD average is 11.9%); c) *Ethnic and bilingual children:* there are sizeable immigrant minorities, centred especially around Lisbon, Setúbal and Porto. Several social integration programmes with an educational component have been sponsored by the High Commission for Ethnic Minorities, government ministries and municipalities. Children at risk are given priority entrance into some services. Recent legislation has called attention to these children and provides for early intervention strategies to meet their needs.

Provision

Children from 3 months to 3 years can attend crèches (11% of children) or family day-care (either nannies or family crèches – together 1.5% of children). Children from 3-6 years generally attend kindergarten or *jardins de infância*. Average costs to parents for childcare amount to about 11% of an average aggregate family salary. In addition, the State through the Ministry of Labour heavily subsidises family support components such as meals, medical supervision, socio-cultural activities. Families also receive tax exemption for various educational expenses. Pre-school education is free for 5-year olds and will become free to 4-year olds in the coming year.

0-3 years: almost 90% of children cared for by their families or in informal care arrangements; 12% in some form of full-day crèche or family day-care.

For the age group 3-6 years, enrolment rates in *jardins de infância* are as follows: 3-4 years: 60% enrolled. 4-5 years: 75% and from 5-6 years: 90% are enrolled. Community centres and itinerant provision are available on a small scale in areas where it is difficult to maintain a *jardim de infância*. Children can also attend socio-educational activities when pre-school activities are over, if working parents need this extra time. *Jardins de infância* open from 5-6 hours daily (depending on auspices). The Ministry of Education has introduced curriculum guidelines to improve pedagogical method and content.

Child-staff ratios: child-staff ratios in *jardins* are: 15:1 for 3-year olds, with 20-25 children to one trained teacher. In the crèches, ratios of up to 10 children per adult professional are practised.

Staffing and training

All settings should have a pedagogical director, and each class a qualified kindergarten teacher (*educador*). Crèches are staffed by *educadores* (see below), nurses and social workers, all of whom have tertiary-level, professional qualifications. They are assisted by auxiliary workers who are not required to have a particular qualification. In the *jardim de infância*, the *educadores* or kindergarten teachers are the lead staff. They are required to complete a four-year university degree as polyvalent educators. *Educadores* have the same pay conditions as primary school teachers, but their pay levels and conditions of work may be considerably reduced when they work in IPSS crèches in the social sector.

OECD policy issues

Among the issues for policy attention identified by the OECD Review team for Portugal were:

More attention to children from 0-3 years is needed: in a context where family networks are weakening, and informal care by neighbours coming under scrutiny, public intervention to support child-rearing needs to be organised, and seen as an education and social service of public interest. The necessary government support to the future expansion of crèche and family centres can include educational, family support and social integration components as well as labour market and gender equity objectives.

Coherence and co-ordination of services: in the early childhood field in Portugal, a tradition of multiple and overlapping levels of decision-making has tended to diffuse accountability, and render national policy less effective. In recent years, the ministries have established clearer policy frameworks for the entire field. Agreement about the structural requirements of services, the interfaces between different services, and the strengthening of monitoring processes could further help to improve the coherence of the system.

The educational quality of early childhood services: in many instances, early childhood services in Portugal have tended to be loosely structured, play oriented and geared toward care and social aims, often according to the preferred aims of the providers. The new curriculum guidelines, new inspection approaches, and the improved training of staff are expected to improve learning focus and outcomes. The organisation of in-service training between the sectors and the different providers may also be helpful.

Accountability, self-evaluation and inspection: greater emphasis needs to be placed by ministries and local authorities on the contractual obligations that receiving subsidies brings, such as the presentation of verifiable evidence of value for money, target achievement, impact or outcome measures. Likewise, quality could be improved with more systematic and effective self-evaluation procedures for settings and staff, with the necessary external moderation, support and validation.

Children with special educational needs: although it has been part of the traditional role of the kindergarten in Portugal to support children with learning difficulties, their limited access to services has sometimes prevented the detection of special needs in children until their enrolment in primary school. The high rate of child poverty tends also to increase the incidence of special educational needs. The recently passed legislation on early intervention, and the trend toward universalisation of access will do much to remedy these weakness and strengthen preventive child welfare.