

Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care

Summary in English

The provision of quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) has remained firmly on government agendas in recent years. Public awareness of gaps in provision and of insufficient quality in services has moved the issue of child care and after-school care onto electoral agendas in many countries. There is a growing recognition that early access to ECEC provides young children, particularly from low-income and second-language groups, with a good start in life.

Twelve countries volunteered to participate in the first round of the review between 1998 and 2000. Recognising the value of the review and the quality of the recommendations produced in the first report, the OECD Education Committee authorised a second review in which eight countries participated. Both rounds of the review have taken a broad and holistic approach that considers how policies, services, families, and communities can support young children's early development and learning.

Chapter 1 – Why countries invest in ECEC

Among the immediate factors turning governmental attention to ECEC issues are: the wish to increase women's labour market participation; to reconcile work and family responsibilities on a basis more equitable for women; to confront the demographic challenges faced by OECD countries (in particular falling fertility rates and the general ageing of populations); and the need to address issues of child poverty and educational disadvantage. Because economic prosperity depends on maintaining a high employment/population ratio, the wish to bring more women into the labour market has been a key driver of government interest in expanding ECEC services. European governments, in particular, have put into place family and child care policies to help couples to have children and assist parents to combine work and family responsibilities. Another factor driving government interest in ECEC is immigration. Immigration makes a strong contribution to economies but can also raise challenges in the labour, social and education fields. Immigrant parents may not easily find work, child and family poverty rates may rise (between 1995 and 2001, child poverty rates increased or remained stationary in 17 out of 24 OECD countries for which data are available), and immigrant children can encounter difficulties in education. Comprehensive ECEC services help to integrate families with young children. They provide child health, referral and other services, and contribute greatly to preparing young children for school. Support for the view that early

childhood education and care should be seen as *a public good* is growing, and has received a strong impetus from the research of education economists.

Chapter 2 – A systemic and integrated approach to ECEC policy

Chapter 2 examines five challenges in the domain of ECEC policy-making and service co-ordination: ensuring co-ordinated policy development at central level; appointing a lead ministry; the co-ordination of central and decentralised levels; the adoption of a collaborative and participatory approach to reform; and forging links across services, professionals, and parents at local level. Where co-ordination at central level is concerned, the chapter notes the complexity of policy-making in the early childhood field. ECEC policy is concerned not only with providing education and care to young children but it is also linked with issues of women's employment and equality of opportunity; child development and child poverty issues; labour market supply; health, social welfare and later education.

Two co-ordination strategies examined in *Starting Strong II* are the creation of *interdepartmental co-ordination bodies* and/or the appointment of a *lead government ministry or agency*. The study notes that co-ordinating mechanisms can work well when they are established for a specific purpose. ECEC policy-making has become a shared responsibility in many OECD countries between national and local governments. A positive consequence of decentralisation has been the integration of early education and care services at local level, along with greater sensitivity to local needs. Decentralisation can also raise challenges. Experience from the OECD reviews suggests that devolution of powers and responsibilities may widen differences of access and quality between regions. In the devolution process, it seems important to ensure that early childhood services are part of a well-conceptualised national policy, with, on the one hand, devolved powers to local authorities and, on the other, a national approach to goal setting, legislation and regulation, financing, staffing criteria, and programme standards.

Chapter 3 – A strong and equal partnership with the education system

Research suggests that a more unified approach to learning should be adopted in both the early childhood education and the primary school systems, and that attention should be given to transition challenges faced by young children as they enter school. The search for a more unified approach has generated different policy options. France and the Englishspeaking world have adopted a “readiness for school” approach, which although defined broadly focuses in practice on cognitive development in the early years, and the acquisition of a range of knowledge, skills and dispositions. A disadvantage inherent in this approach is the use of programmes and approaches that are poorly suited to the psychology and natural learning strategies of young children. In countries inheriting a social pedagogy tradition (Nordic and Central European countries), the kindergarten years are seen as a broad preparation for life and the foundation stage of lifelong learning. Facilitating transitions for children is a policy challenge in all systems.¹ Transitions for children are generally a stimulus to growth and development, but if too abrupt and

handled without care, they carry – particularly for young children – the risk of regression and failure.

Chapter 4 – A universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support

Universal access does not necessarily entail achieving full coverage, as there are variations in demand for ECEC at different ages and in different family circumstances. Rather, it implies making access available to all children whose parents wish them to participate. A universal approach to access is contrasted with a targeted approach to ECEC, whereby a government provides public funding primarily to programmes for chosen groups of children. Chapter 4 outlines the complexity of the notion of access and provides a rationale for universal *and* appropriate access. The chapter also addresses the field of out-of-school care, and the efforts being made by countries to increase provision. Some of the major tables and figures in the report are provided in this chapter: main institutional forms of ECEC; enrolment rates of 3- to 6-year-olds in ECEC services; entitlements to ECEC provision across OECD countries; percentage of 0- to 3-year-olds using licensed services; maternity, paternity and parental leave policies.

Chapter 5 – Substantial public investment in services and the infrastructure

Chapter 5 explores the critical issue of public investment in services for young children. A few countries with comparatively low public expenditure on children's services in the past have increased spending significantly over the past years. Yet, according to expert evidence indicating what should be spent per child in a quality programme, OECD countries – with the exception of the Nordic countries – are under-spending on ECEC services.² The chapter further examines how countries fund ECEC services, discussing whether the modality of funding used – in particular, direct funding to services versus subsidies to parents – has an impact on overall quality. The evidence suggests that direct public funding of services brings more effective governmental steering of early childhood services, advantages of scale, better national quality, more effective training for educators and a higher degree of equity in access compared with parent subsidy models.

Chapter 6 – A participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance

Chapter 6 examines both regulation and approaches to quality. In many OECD countries, the level of regulation of services for children under 3 gives rise for concern: much of the child care sector is private and unregulated, with staff training and pedagogical programming being particularly weak. In the early education sector, the basic structural standards, such as adequate premises and space for children; child-staff ratios; curriculum frameworks; adequate professional education and certification of staff, etc.,

are generally respected, but with variations in practice, in particular in regard to child-staff ratios.

Parental involvement is generally organised but at different levels of engagement. The chapter also examines the issue of pedagogical frameworks and curriculum development.

Two different approaches to curriculum can be identified: the early education approach and the social pedagogy approach. Features of both approaches are compared with respect to a number of criteria. In summary, the early education tradition generally results in a more centralising and academic approach to curriculum content and methodology, while pedagogical frameworks in the social pedagogy tradition remain more local, child-centred and holistic.

Chapter 7 – Appropriate training and working conditions for ECEC staff

Chapter 7 reviews the situation of staff and levels of training in ECEC across the countries covered, and highlights new thinking about the types of skills that are most appropriate in early childhood education. The picture is mixed, with acceptable professional education standards being recorded in the Nordic countries but only in early education in most other countries. In all countries, considerable gender and diversity imbalances exist within the profession. The report also notes that levels of in-service training vary greatly across countries and between the education and child care sectors. Because of under-funding, many of the private, community or voluntary bodies that are part of mixed market systems are unable to provide regular in-service training and/or non-contact time for staff to improve their pedagogical practice.

Figures from various countries reveal a wide pay gap between child care staff and teachers, with child care staff in most countries being poorly trained and paid around minimum wage levels. Not surprisingly, staff turnover in the child care sector is high. Strategies to recruit a mixed-gender, diverse workforce are discussed. Despite good intentions, most countries fail to recruit either sufficient numbers of men or staff from minority communities into ECEC services. Some excellent inclusive programmes exist in the countries reviewed but programmes tend to remain isolated and seldom go to scale across the system.

Chapter 8 – Systematic attention to data collection and monitoring

For ECEC policy to be well informed and realistic, administrations need to organise data collection and monitoring in the ECEC field more energetically. More rational policy-making can be ensured if core early childhood fields are covered annually, *e.g.* the demand, supply and utilisation of ECEC places; the volume and allocation of public financing; the socio-economic status of the children in and outside services; the recruitment and training levels of staff; the quality standards in place; and other aspects of service delivery that periodically need analysis.

The difficulties of data collection in the ECEC field stem to some extent from the newness of the field. The large scale information systems on population, households, social policy or education that are routinely managed by national statistical bureaus were not initially set up to deliver the kinds of data needed to advance ECEC policy and provision.

Chapter 9 – A stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation

Starting Strong recommended that governments should provide sustained support to research on key policy goals. National research agendas should also be expanded to include disciplines and methods that are currently under-represented. A range of strategies to disseminate research findings to diverse audiences should also be explored. In all these areas, progress has been made. Areas of research are also expanding, and Chapter 9 notes renewed interest in qualitative research, *e.g.* in gender and socio-cultural investigations, diversity studies, gender and post-modernist analyses, participant observation and child research. Chapter 9 also outlines some of the more common types of research undertaken, although the research methodologies and themes can vary greatly from country to country and within each type of research.

Chapter 10 – Concluding policy observations

The final chapter proposes ten policy options areas for consideration by governments and the major ECEC stakeholders:

- *To attend to the social context of early childhood development:* Early childhood policy makers can organise children's services in a manner that serves important social and economic objectives, such as, ensuring labour supply, equality of opportunity for women, family well-being and social inclusion. Well-organised services will support parents in childrearing, provide opportunity to women to work and help to include low-income and immigrant families in the community and society. The ministry-in-charge should forge a broad but realistic vision of early childhood services to which all relevant ministries, local authorities and parents can subscribe.

- *To place well-being, early development and learning at the core of ECEC work, while respecting the child's agency and natural learning strategies:* Children's well-being and learning are core goals of early childhood services, but services for children under 3 have often been seen as an adjunct to labour market policies, with infants and toddlers assigned to services with weak developmental agendas. In parallel, early education services have often placed children 3 to 6 years old in pre-primary classes, characterised by high child-staff ratios, teachers without early childhood certification, poor learning environments, and the quasi-absence of care personnel. A challenge exists in many countries to focus more on the child, and to show greater understanding of the specific developmental tasks and learning strategies of young children.

- *To create the governance structures necessary for system accountability and quality assurance:* Examples of necessary governance structures are: strong policy units

with wide expertise; a data collection and monitoring office; an evaluation agency; a training authority; an inspection or pedagogical advisory corps, etc. Some of these structures tend to be absent in ECEC systems, including, in many countries, a national ECEC research council. Strong investment in research, data collection and monitoring is needed to ensure well-informed policy making, system reform and the development of a comprehensive provision structure.

- *To develop with the stakeholders broad guidelines and curricular standards for all ECEC services:* Guiding frameworks help to promote a more even level of quality across age groups and provision; to guide and support professional staff; and to facilitate communication between staff and parents. Frameworks gain in effectiveness when co-constructed with the main stakeholders. In general, they propose broad pedagogical orientations rather than detailing what should be taught; and identify goals in all areas of development. Two pedagogical approaches seem particularly important for the well-being and learning of children: a focus on the agency of the child, including respect for the child's natural learning strategies; and the extensive use of listening, project work and documentation in work with young children.

- *To base public funding estimates on achieving quality pedagogical goals:* Public investment per child in early education ranges from significantly less to roughly equal the investment per child in primary school, although young children need more staff than older children, and generally spend longer hours in services. According to reliable cost estimates, most countries need to double annual investment per child to ensure acceptable child-staff ratios and highly qualified staff. In well-functioning systems, governments develop clear and consistent strategies for efficiently allocating resources, including investment in longterm planning and quality initiatives. Investment should be directed towards achieving high quality pedagogical goals, rather than the simple creation of places.

- *To reduce child poverty and exclusion through upstream fiscal, social and labour policies, and to increase resources within universal programmes for children with diverse learning rights:* Early childhood services are particularly important for children with diverse learning rights, whether these stem from physical, mental or sensory disabilities or from socioeconomic disadvantage. However, programmes for their benefit are often irregular, under-funded and non-inclusive. Research suggests that inclusion in universal programmes may be the most effective approach to these children and their families, and that successful inclusion requires enhanced funding, low child-staff ratios, specialist staff and well-planned pedagogies. Targeted programmes segregate, may stigmatise and generally fail to provide for many of the children eligible for special programmes. International data show that child poverty is growing in several OECD countries. For governments to put much effort and investment into targeted early childhood programming – dedicated to assisting young children from disadvantaged backgrounds – while at the same time, doing little to stem the reproduction of family poverty indicates a failure of integrated policy-making.

- *To encourage family and community involvement in early childhood services:* Families play a central nurturing and educational role in their children's lives, particularly in the early childhood period. They should be assisted by early childhood centres and staff to support their children's development and learning. The continuity of children's

experience across environments is greatly enhanced when parents and staff members exchange information regularly and adopt consistent approaches to socialisation, daily routines, child development and learning. Community involvement in the pre-school is important, not only for providing expanded services and referrals where necessary, but also as a space for partnership and the participation of parents.

- *To improve the working conditions and professional education of ECEC staff:* Attention to the level of recruitment of early childhood workers, their professional education and work conditions is key to quality services. In several countries, such attention is also critical for workforce development and the long-term sustainability of recruitment into early childhood services. A number of weaknesses in staff policies emerged from the OECD reviews: low recruitment and pay levels, particularly in child care services; a lack of certification in early childhood pedagogy in pre-primary education systems; the feminisation of the workforce; and the failure of pedagogical teams to reflect the diversity of the neighbourhoods they serve.

- *To provide autonomy, funding and support to early childhood services:* Once goals and

programme standards for early childhood services have been decided in the national framework documents, educators and services should have the autonomy to plan, and to choose or create curricula that they find appropriate for the children in their care. An independent budget and freedom to achieve national outcomes allow well-trained staff to take responsibility for the pedagogical choices that appropriately serve the children in their care. Ministry support of participatory approaches to quality development, such as documentation, can raise staff understanding and motivation.

- *To aspire to ECEC systems that support broad learning, participation and democracy:* It is important that wider societal interests are reflected in early childhood systems, including respect for children's rights, diversity and enhanced access for children with special and additional learning needs. At centre level, touchstones of a democratic approach will be to extend the agency of the child and to support the basic right of parents to be involved in the education of their children. In this approach, the early childhood centre becomes a space where the intrinsic value of each person is

recognised, where democratic participation is promoted, as well as respect for our shared environment. *Learning to be, learning to do, learning to learn and learning to live together* should be considered as critical elements in the journey of each child toward human and social development.

Notes

1. For a review of approaches to transition in different countries see Petriwskyj, Thorpe and Tayler, 2005, "Trends in the Construction of Transition to School in Three Western Regions, 1990-2004", *International Journal of Early Years Education*, Vol. 13(1), pp. 55-69.

2. Estimates by Kagan and Rigby ("Policy Matters: Setting and Measuring Benchmarks for State Policies. Improving the Readiness of Children for School. A Discussion Paper", Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2003, Washington DC), Head

Start, the New York Committee for Economic Development; and evidence from Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden place expenditure per child in a quality programme from about USD 5 000 per child in a half-day, academic year programme, and between USD 10,000 to USD 15,000 per infant/toddler in a full-day, full year (11 months) programme.

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