Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

STRATEGIES TO TACKLE CHALLENGES IN DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING CURRICULUM

Challenge 2: Curriculum alignment for continuous child development

Ensuring continuous child development from birth to primary education is a key challenge in countries with a "split system" where child care and early education are administered by different ministries. In these countries, a lack of a curriculum framework for children ages zero to three is often non-existent; or, if it exists, is not aligned with the curriculum for children ages three to six. The rationale of the split system is often attributed to differences between the two sectors, such as historical roots, different goals and focus on contents.

Ensuring smooth transition from ECEC to primary education is also a challenge. Teaching approaches and practices that children experience are often disconnected in ECEC settings and compulsory schooling.

Aligning curriculum with broader quality goals and assessment practices

- In Australia, educational programmes and practice in ECEC, including the implementation of the *Early Years Learning Framework*, is one of the *National Quality Standards in the National Quality Framework*. ECEC provisions are assessed on their curriculum practices, which should be in line with the broader quality goals of the National Quality Framework. This ensures delivery of nationally consistent and quality early childhood education programmes and practice across sectors and jurisdictions.

- In Flanders (Belgium), the developmental objectives set out for nursery education are used by the authorities as a tool for quality assurance. When conducting a school audit, the education inspectorate balances the pursuit of these objectives against school context and the characteristics of the pupil population.

- In Norway, Sweden and Scotland (United Kingdom), the curricula are aligned with international conventions, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). In Scotland, these rights are one of the four key principles of the National Pre-Birth to Three Guidance. The legislative framework of Norway (the Kindergarten Act and the Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens) states the expectations concerning the quality of kindergartens, including conditions for learning and well-being. Norway introduced a section in the Act giving “Children in kindergarten (...) the right to express their views on the day to day activities of the kindergarten”. This is followed up in the Framework Plan for kindergarten. Children are seen as subjects or
agents in their own right who should be met with respect in their diverse forms of communication.

- **In England (United Kingdom),** the *Early Years Foundation Stage* is part of a broader child care strategy, which includes effective earlier intervention where developmental problems become evident and support for parents who need it most.

- **In Ireland,** the *National Quality Framework for Early Education (Siolta)* consists of three distinct but independent elements. The first aspect of the framework is the national standards for quality in ECEC services; the second, the *Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Aistear)*; the third, assessment to provide information, which will allow for the dynamic development of *Siolta* so that it adequately meets the needs of ECEC services, children and families.

**Adopting a unified curriculum for care and early education**

- **In Korea,** the Common Curriculum for age five, called *Nuri Curriculum,* will be implemented in February 2012. The *Nuri Curriculum* focuses on integrating two separate curricula from kindergarten and child care, so that it ensures fair quality of ECEC services for children in both provisions. The curriculum will emphasise children’s well-being, safety, play activities and citizenship rather than cognitive, academic activities and will include five development areas: motor skills and health, communication, social relationships, art and science. Also, it aims to foster children’s creativity through holistic development and will be aligned with the curriculum in primary school (grades one and two). A contest in which the public could come up with a title for the curriculum raised public awareness for the new curriculum.

- **Australia’s** Early Years Learning Framework *Belonging, Being, and Becoming* is developed for children from birth to age five and transition to compulsory schooling.

- The curriculum, *Te Whāriki,* in **New Zealand** has been developed for children from birth to school entry. However, to ensure the framework is age-appropriate, the content is made for three different age groups within ECEC: infants (birth to eighteen months), toddlers (one to three years), and young children (two-and-a-half years to school entry age).

- **England (United Kingdom)** developed the *Early Years Foundations Stage* for children from birth to five years, replacing three earlier frameworks for different age groups (*Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage; Birth to Three Matters;* and *National Standards for Under 8 year-olds*).

- **Spain** has a curriculum framework for ages zero to six, but has split the framework into two development cycles for ages zero to three and three to six to make it age-appropriate. The curriculum for both cycles is organised around the same areas: 1) knowledge of self and personal autonomy; 2) knowledge of the environment; and 3) language development: communication and representation. These areas are adapted to the age and development level of the child.

- **Japan** is aligning the content and goals of its *National Curriculum of Day Care Centres* to its *Course of Study for Kindergartens.* Both frameworks will be made more consistent with one another to streamline transition from care to kindergarten.
- **Portugal** aims to design curriculum guidelines for ages zero to three, in alignment with the existing framework for ages three to six, to ensure continuous child development.

---

**Aligning ECEC curriculum with other levels of education**

- The government of **South Australia** *(Australia)* has set up a framework for ages zero to eighteen. The Länder of **Baden-Württemberg**, **Bavaria**, **Hessen**, **Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania**, **North Rhine-Westphalia**, **Sachsen**, and **Thuringia** *(Germany)* have developed a framework for ages zero to ten, and Hessen is now considering extending the framework to age eighteen. The Länder of **Hamburg**, **Rheinland-Pfalz**, and **Schleswig-Holstein** *(Germany)* have aligned their ECEC curriculum with primary and lower secondary education: their curricula cover ages zero to fifteen.

- **Sweden** aims to promote continuity of learning from birth to age 20 guided by the same principles and values: democracy, inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, equal value of all people, gender equality, solidarity with the vulnerable and respect for the environment.

- **Curriculum for Excellence** is **Scotland**’s *(United Kingdom)* curriculum for children and young people ages three to eighteen. It replaces the curricula for children ages 3-5 and 5-14 to ensure continuous development. Additionally, **Curriculum for Excellence** builds on the foundations developed in the critical years of pre-birth to three which is supported by the new **Pre-Birth to Three national guidance**.

- In the **United States**, there are neither national standards nor curriculum, but both exist at the state level. All 50 states plus the District of Columbia have their own **Early Learning and Development Standards** (ELDSs) for preschool children (ages three to five), and 24 states have developed or are developing ELDSs to support the development of infants and toddlers (ages birth to three). States can use ELDSs to ensure continuity between the skills children are building in preschool and the expectations for their further development as they transition to kindergarten, first grade and beyond, by aligning them with K-12 Common Core Standards.

- The **Te Whāriki** curriculum in **New Zealand** is linked to the country’s Curriculum Framework for schools. The principles in the school curriculum are integrated into **Te Whāriki** as well. For each of the strands of the ECEC curriculum (well-being, belonging, contributions of children, and communication and exploration), links have been made with the learning areas and skills in the school curriculum to smoothen the transition from preschool to primary school.

- **Luxembourg** implemented a new competency-based curriculum approach in 2009 for its cycles of basic education. The curriculum defines the core skills for preschool education for three-to-four-year-olds, primary and secondary education. The curriculum includes the competencies to be developed during the four learning cycles and includes examples on how to achieve the skills.

- The Ministry of Education in **Portugal** is setting **Learning Outcomes for all education levels**, aiming at aligning the outcomes for different education levels. Although the implementation of the outcomes will not be mandatory, it is expected that teachers, children, students and families will start using the outcomes and regard them as a useful tool in curriculum implementation and early development.
• **Norway**'s new purpose clauses for kindergarten, schools and vocational training have the same structure and express the same value base. This is done to contribute to greater coherence between kindergartens, schools and training establishments. The purpose clause still reflects the uniqueness of kindergartens. Norway has also made a clear connection between the Framework Plan for ECEC and the Curricula for Norwegian Primary Schools. The learning areas are, to a great extent, the same since the subjects are similar in ECEC and primary school.

• In **Flanders** (*Belgium*), the aims of the different subjects in nursery and primary education are interrelated with one another, and the five subjects are the same for nursery and primary education. This enhances transparency and underpins continuous development across nursery and primary school.

• In **Ireland**, the **Netherlands** and **Sweden**, early education is often included as part of primary schooling. Preschool in the Netherlands is free of charge for four-year-olds, while compulsory education in kindergarten starts at age five. In Sweden, preschool is free from age three for 525 hours per year, although compulsory schooling does not start until age seven.