

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) can bring a wide range of benefits – for children, parents and society at large. But the magnitude of the benefits is conditional on “quality”.

A growing body of research recognises that early childhood education and care (ECEC) brings a wide range of benefits, for example, better child well-being and learning outcomes as a foundation for lifelong learning; more equitable child outcomes and reduction of poverty; increased intergenerational social mobility; more female labour market participation; increased fertility rates; and better social and economic development for the society at large.

But all these benefits are conditional on “quality”. Expanding access to services without attention to quality will not deliver good outcomes for children or the long-term productivity benefits for society. Furthermore, research has shown that if quality is low, it can have long-lasting detrimental effects on child development, instead of bringing positive effects.

There is a general agreement that quality matters to gain significant pay-offs. In recent years, a growing number of OECD countries have made considerable efforts to encourage quality in ECEC; countries are at different stages of policy development and implementation. Regardless of which stage countries are at, research has suggested five key levers to be effective in encouraging quality in ECEC:

- Policy Lever 1: Setting out quality goals and regulations
- Policy Lever 2: Designing and implementing curriculum and standards
- Policy Lever 3: Improving qualifications, training and working conditions
- Policy Lever 4: Engaging families and communities
- Policy Lever 5: Advancing data collection, research and monitoring

Setting out explicit quality goals and regulations can help align resources with prioritised areas, promote more co-ordinated child-centred services, level the playing field for providers and help parents make informed choices.

Setting out explicit quality goals and minimum standards will help enhance quality in ECEC. Research has shown that setting out clear quality goals can help consolidate

political will and strategically align resources with prioritised areas; anchor discussions between ministries for better government leadership in ECEC; promote more consistent, co-ordinated and child-centred services with shared social and pedagogical objectives; and provide guidance for providers, direction for practitioners and clarity for parents. In fact, many OECD countries set out specific quality-focused goals (such as improving qualifications of the workforce and setting out a child-centred curriculum).

Research has also shown that minimum standards can ensure conditions for better child development, support transparent regulation of the private sector, level the playing field for providers and help parents make informed choices. Many countries set minimum standards on structural indicators, such as staff-child ratios, indoor/outdoor space, staff qualification levels, and the frequency of contacts between staff and children or parents. In countries where the remit for early education and child care is “split” between different ministries, different standards are often set for different ECEC settings or for different age groups of children. In countries aiming to deliver “integrated” services, the same standards are applied in any ECEC settings.

In setting out quality goals, countries face such challenges as: i) building consensus on the goals; ii) aligning ECEC goals with goals of other levels of education or other child-focused services; and iii) translating the goals into action. With respect to minimum standards, common challenges include: i) securing financial resources for services to meet the quality standards; ii) lack of transparency among different providers under different regulations; iii) adapting to local needs and constraints; iv) implementation; and v) managing the regulation of private provision. To address these challenges, various strategies have been undertaken by countries that fit their country-specific contexts in terms of their financial viability as well as technical and political feasibility.

Curriculum or learning standards can ensure even quality for ECEC provision across different settings, help staff to enhance pedagogical strategies and help parents to better understand child development.

Curriculum and learning standards can have a positive impact on children’s learning and development. They are of particular importance in ensuring even quality across different ECEC settings, supporting staff by giving them guidance on how to enhance children’s learning and well-being, and informing parents about what the ECEC centres do and what they as parents can do at home.

Countries take different approaches in designing curriculum. There is a need to think beyond curriculum dichotomies (such as academic-oriented vs. comprehensive approaches, and staff-initiated instruction vs. child-initiated activities) and consolidate the “added value” of individual approaches. A focus on critical learning areas can facilitate customised curricula; and local adaptations of curricula in partnership with staff, families, children and communities can reinforce the relevance of ECEC services to local children and communities.

Almost all OECD countries have a curriculum or learning standards from age three up until compulsory schooling. In recent years, curricula or learning standards are often embedded within a life-cycle or lifelong learning approach, and a growing number of countries and regions have started to frame continuous child development from early childhood up to age eight, ten or eighteen. On the content, Nordic countries specify what is expected from staff rather than expected child outcomes, while Anglo-Saxon countries tend to take an outcome-based approach. Many OECD countries focus on literacy and numeracy in their learning framework. A growing body of recent research highlights the importance of “play”; some incorporate it as a separate subject area, while others embed it in other content areas. A few countries have included newly emerging elements, aligned with school curriculum, such as ICT.

Key challenges with respect to curriculum or standards include: i) defining goals and content; ii) aligning them with the school-level framework; iii) communicating it to relevant staff when it is created or revised; iv) implementing it effectively; and v) evaluating its contents and its implementation. To address these challenges, countries have undertaken strategies focusing on well-planned implementation, which includes stakeholder engagement, targeted outreach and professional staff development.

ECEC staff play the key role in ensuring healthy child development and learning. Areas for reform include qualifications, initial education, professional development and working conditions.

Higher qualifications are found to be strongly associated with better child outcomes. It is not the qualification *per se* that has an impact on child outcomes. What matters on the ground is the ability of the staff to create a high-quality pedagogic environment that makes the difference for children; that is, the critical element is the way in which staff involve children, stimulate interactions with and between children and use diverse scaffolding strategies. More specialised education and training of staff is found to be strongly associated with stable, sensitive and stimulating interactions in ECEC settings.

Countries have shown a wide range of qualifications for staff working in the ECEC sector. Kindergarten/preschool teachers generally have higher initial education requirements than care centre staff or family care staff, while some countries have a unified qualification for all workers. Initial education for kindergarten/preschool teachers is often integrated with that of primary school teachers to ensure smooth transition for child development. More professional development opportunities are available for kindergarten/preschool staff than for care centre staff, with only limited opportunities for family day care staff. Professional development tends to focus on: i) pedagogies and instructional practices; ii) curriculum implementation; iii) language and subject matters; iv) monitoring and assessment; and v) communication and management.

Working conditions can also improve the quality of ECEC services. Research has indicated that staff job satisfaction and retention – and therefore the quality of ECEC – can be improved by: i) high staff-child ratios and low group size; ii) competitive

wages and other benefits; iii) reasonable schedule/workload; iv) low staff turnover; v) good physical environment; and vi) a competent and supportive centre manager.

Common challenges that countries face in encouraging a high-quality workforce include: i) raising staff qualification levels; ii) recruiting, retaining and diversifying a qualified workforce; iii) continuously up-skilling the workforce; and iv) ensuring the quality of the workforce in the private sector. Various strategies are undertaken to address these challenges using legal instruments, institutional rearrangements, financial incentives and data to inform policy and the public.

Parents and communities should be regarded as “partners” working towards the same goal. Home learning environments and neighbourhood matter for healthy child development and learning.

Parental and community engagement is increasingly seen as an important policy lever to enhance healthy child development and learning. Parental partnership is critical in enhancing ECEC staff knowledge about the children. Parental engagement – especially in ensuring high-quality children’s learning at home and communicating with ECEC staff – is strongly associated with children’s later academic success, high school completion, socio-emotional development and adaptation in society. Countries face such challenges as: i) lack of awareness and motivation on the parents’ side; ii) communication and outreach of ECEC services with parents; iii) time constraints on the parents’ side to be engaged; and iv) the increasing inequity and diversity among parents. Particular challenges are also associated with engaging ethnic minority parents. Countries take various strategies to tackle these challenges, using legal instruments, financial and non-financial incentives, as well as other support mechanisms.

Community engagement is also increasingly seen as an important policy lever. It can act as a “connector” between families and ECEC services as well as other services for children; a “social network” to support parents in reducing stress and making smart choices, especially for disadvantaged families; an “environment” to promote social cohesion and public order; and a “source of resources”. Similar challenges are reported for community engagement as for parents, such as lack of awareness and motivation on the community’s side as well as communication among communities and with ECEC services. There are also some unique challenges in community engagement, such as the challenges of managing dysfunctional communities and facilitating co-operation between ECEC services and other services as well as between ECEC and other levels of education. Various strategies are used to tackle these challenges. One element that is particularly helpful is taking a comprehensive view of community, *i.e.*, not simply seeing it as a “neighbourhood” or “municipality” but inclusive of non-governmental organisations, private foundations, religious organisations, libraries and museums, sports centres, police and other social services.

Data, research and monitoring are powerful tools for improving children's outcomes and driving continuous improvement in service delivery.

Data and monitoring can help establish facts, trends and evidence about whether children have equitable access to high-quality ECEC and are benefiting from it. They are essential for accountability and/or programme improvement. They can also help parents make informed decisions about their choice of services. Research suggests that better data systems and monitoring can improve child outcomes if they are developed and aligned with quality goals and if there are links between child-level data, practitioner-level data and programme-level data.

Country experiences have shown seven targets or purposes of monitoring: i) child development; ii) staff performance; iii) service quality; iv) regulation compliance; v) curriculum implementation; vi) parent satisfaction; and vii) workforce supply and working conditions. Various monitoring tools are used – depending on the purpose – such as interviews, observations, standardised testing and service quality ratings. The most commonly reported targets with difficulty in monitoring include: i) demand and supply of ECEC places; ii) workforce quality and working conditions; iii) financing and costs; iv) child development; and v) the quality of ECEC services. Countries also report challenges, such as ensuring that the data is consistent across services and regions as well as ensuring that the collected data is used to the full extent to enhance the quality of ECEC services. More and more countries and regions are making efforts to develop effective data systems – not simply for the sake of data collection or monitoring but by first defining a purpose.

Research can also be an influential tool to inform policy and practice. In ECEC, research has played a key role in explaining the success or failure of programmes; prioritising important areas for ECEC investment; and informing practices through evidence. Commonly used research types in ECEC include: country-specific policy research; large-scale programme evaluations; longitudinal studies; research on practice and process; participant-observation research; comparative, cross-national research; policy reviews; socio-cultural analysis; and neuroscience and brain research. There is a growing trend to use quantitative research methods, such as comparing the effectiveness of different programme types or different pedagogical strategies. However, there is also a growing recognition that qualitative research plays an essential role in informing practices with local values and democracy. Both quantitative and qualitative research are needed to advance research in ECEC.

Countries report challenges in advancing research, such as: i) a need for more evidence on the effects of ECEC and cost-benefit analysis; ii) under-researched areas or areas with newly growing interest; and iii) dissemination. In recent years, countries have focused their efforts so as to link research to policy and practice; to improve the quality and quantity of ECEC research; and to disseminate findings internationally.