

# Executive Summary

## 1. Introduction

Early childhood education and care has experienced a surge of policy attention in OECD countries over the past decade. Policy makers have recognised that equitable access to quality early childhood education and care can strengthen the foundations of lifelong learning for all children and support the broad educational and social needs of families. There is a need to strengthen knowledge of the range of approaches adopted by different countries, along with the successes and challenges encountered. Recognising that this cross-national information and analysis can contribute to the improvement of policy development, the OECD Education Committee launched the Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in 1998.

Twelve countries volunteered to participate in the review: Australia, Belgium (Flemish and French Communities), the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. The review has taken a broad and holistic approach that considers how policies, services, families, and communities can support young children's early development and learning. The term *early childhood education and care* (ECEC) includes all arrangements providing care and education for children under compulsory school age, regardless of setting, funding, opening hours, or programme content. The methodology of the study has consisted of four elements: 1) preparation by participating countries of the background report; 2) review team visits to participating countries; 3) preparation of the country note; and 4) preparation of the comparative report.

## 2. Contextual issues shaping ECEC policy

The first part of this chapter reviews the main contextual trends and developments that have shaped ECEC policy and provision. The second part of the chapter explores how these contextual issues have shaped different views of early childhood, the roles of families, and the purposes of ECEC, and in turn, how these views have shaped policy and practice.

### 2.1. Demographic, economic, and social trends

- Ageing populations, declining fertility rates, and a greater proportion of children living in lone-parent families are part of the changing demographic landscape. Countries with the highest female employment rates are those with higher competed fertility rates, which suggests that female employment and childrearing are complementary activities.
- The sharp rise in dual-earner households, spurred by increased female employment, makes ECEC and parental leave policies more important for the well-being of families. Women are more likely than men to work in non-standard employment which carries lower economic and social status.

- Paid and job protected maternity and family leave policies are widely accepted in almost all participating countries as an essential strategy to help working parents reconcile work and family life and to promote gender equity. The length, flexibility, level of payment and take-up by men and women vary across countries.
- While taxes and transfers can help redistribute income to families with young children, in a few countries more than 20% of children still live in relative poverty. Income support, measures to improve parent employability and targeted early interventions may improve children's life-course chances and promote social cohesion.

## **2.2. *Recognising diverse views of children and the purposes of ECEC***

- The reasons for investing in ECEC policy and provision are embedded in cultural and social beliefs about young children, the roles of families and government, and the purposes of ECEC in within and across countries.
- In many countries, the education and care of young children is shifting from the private to the public domain, with much attention to the complementary roles of families and ECEC institutions in young children's early development and learning.
- Many countries are seeking to balance views of childhood in the "here and now" with views of childhood as an investment with the future adult in mind. These diverse views have important implications for the organisation of policy and provision in different countries.

## **3. Main policy developments and issues**

Drawing on the background reports, country notes, and other materials collected during the review process, this chapter explores seven current cross-national policy trends: 1) expanding provision toward universal access; 2) raising the quality of provision; 3) promoting coherence and co-ordination of policy and services; 4) exploring strategies to ensure adequate investment in the system; 5) improving staff training and work conditions; 6) developing appropriate pedagogical frameworks for young children; and 7) engaging parents, families and communities.

### **3.1. *Expanding provision toward universal access***

- The age at which children typically make the transition to primary education ranges from 4 to 7. School starting age influences the duration and nature of children's ECEC experiences.
- In several countries, access to ECEC is a statutory right from age 3 (or even younger). The trend in all countries is toward full coverage of the 3- to 6-year-old age group, aiming to give all children at least two years of free publicly-funded provision before beginning compulsory schooling.
- Out-of-school provision for children of working parents has not been a policy priority in most countries in the review. Yet, demand is high, which suggests the need for attention to the concept, organisation, funding, and staffing of this form of provision.
- Policy for the under 3s is closely linked with the nature of available parental leave arrangements and social views about caring. While there have been government efforts toward expanding provision and increasing the educational focus, there is still differential access and quality for this age group.
- Countries are trying to develop a) more flexible and diverse arrangements while addressing the regional and local variation in access and b) strategies to include children in need of special support (i.e., children from low-income families, children with special educational needs, children from ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minorities).

### 3.2. Raising the quality of provision

- Definitions of quality differ considerably among stakeholder groups and across countries. Although national quality guidelines are necessary, they need to be broad enough to allow individual settings to respond to the developmental needs and learning capacities of children.
- Many common elements in definitions of quality exist, especially for provision for children from the age of 3. Most countries focus on similar structural aspects of quality (e.g., staff-child ratios, group size, facility conditions, staff training), which tend to be weaker for infant/toddler provision.
- To measure quality, some countries use standardised observation scales and child assessment measures. Other countries favour co-constructing the programme aims and objectives at local level, engaging a range of stakeholders in the process.
- The responsibility for quality assurance tends to be shared by external inspectors, pedagogical advisors, staff, and parents (and occasionally children). There is a trend toward externally-validated self-evaluation to promote ongoing reflection and quality improvement.
- Major quality concerns that emerged during the review include: lack of coherence and co-ordination of ECEC policy and provision; the low status and training of staff in the social welfare sector; the lower standards of provision for children under 3; and the tendency for children from low-income families to receive inferior services.
- Governments promote quality improvement through: framework documents and goals-led steering; voluntary standards and accreditation; dissemination of research and information; judicious use of special funding; technical support to local management; raising the training and status of staff; encouraging self-evaluation and action-practitioner research; and establishing a system of democratic checks and balances which includes parents.

### 3.3. Promoting coherence and co-ordination of policy and services

- Unified administrative auspices can help promote coherence for children, as can co-ordination mechanisms across departments and sectors. In particular, there is increasing trend toward co-ordination with the educational sector to facilitate children's transition from ECEC to primary school.
- The trend toward decentralisation of responsibility for ECEC has brought diversification of services to meet local needs and preferences. The challenge is for central government to balance local decisionmaking with the need to limit variation in access and quality.
- At the local level, many countries have recognised the importance of integrating services to meet the needs of children and families in a holistic manner. Services integration has taken many forms, including teamwork among staff with different professional backgrounds.

### 3.4. Exploring strategies to ensure adequate investment in the system

- In almost all countries in the review, governments pay the largest share of costs, with parents covering about 25%-30%. The two or three years of ECEC prior to compulsory schooling are often free.
- Direct provision through services and schools makes up the bulk of government assistance in most countries. Even when the mix of public and private providers is great, a high percentage of services receive direct or indirect public funding.
- Countries have adopted a range of financing mechanisms to improve affordability including: direct funding, fee subsidies, tax relief, and employer contributions. Affordability remains a barrier to equitable access, particularly in systems where the cost burden falls on parents.
- While most countries seek to expand supply and raise quality through direct subsidies to providers, a few countries favour indirect demand-driven subsidies – fee subsidies and tax relief to parents. In both cases, there are equity concerns about access to and quality of provision.
- Regardless of the financing strategy adopted, it is clear that substantial *public* investment is necessary for the development of an equitable and well-resourced *system* of quality ECEC.

### **3.5. Improving staff training and work conditions**

- Countries have adopted two main approaches to staffing: a split regime with a group of teachers working with children over 3 and lower-trained workers in other services; or a pedagogue working with children from birth to 6, and sometimes older in a range of settings. There is a cross-national trend toward at least a three-year tertiary degree for ECEC staff with the main responsibility for pre-school children.
- While the degree of early childhood specialisation and the balance between theory and practice vary across countries, there appear to be common training gaps in the following areas: work with parents, work with infants and toddlers, bilingual/multi-cultural and special education, and research and evaluation.
- Opportunities to participate in in-service training and professional development are uneven. Staff with the lowest levels of initial training tend to have the least access.
- Low pay, status, poor working conditions, limited access to in-service training and limited career mobility are a concern, particularly for staff working with young children in infant-toddler, out-of-school, and family day care settings.
- As ECEC provision expands, recruitment and retention are major challenges for the field. Many countries are seeking to attract a diverse workforce to reflect the diversity of children in ECEC. Another major issue is whether a more gender-mixed workforce is desirable, and if so how it can be achieved.

### **3.6. Developing appropriate pedagogical frameworks for young children**

- Most countries in the review have developed national pedagogical frameworks to promote an even level of quality across age groups and provision, help guide and support professional staff in their practice, and facilitate communication between staff, parents, and children.
- There is a trend toward frameworks which cover a broad age span and diverse forms of settings to support continuity in children's learning.
- For the most part, these frameworks focus broadly on children's holistic development and well-being, rather than on narrow literacy and numeracy objectives.
- Flexible curricula developed in co-operation with staff, parents, and children, allow practitioners to experiment with different methodological and pedagogical approaches and adapt overall goals for ECEC to local needs and circumstances.
- Successful implementation of frameworks requires investment for staff support, including in-service training and pedagogical guidance, as well as favourable structural conditions (*e.g.*, ratios, group size, etc.).

### **3.7. Engaging parents, families and communities**

- Parent engagement seeks to: a) build on parents' unique knowledge about their children, fostering continuity with learning in the home; b) promote positive attitudes and behaviour toward children's learning; c) provide parents with information and referrals to other services; d) support parent and community empowerment.
- Patterns of parent, family, and community engagement in ECEC differ from country to country. Several formal and informal mechanisms may be used to foster full participatory and managerial engagement.
- Some of the challenges to active engagement of parents include, cultural, attitudinal, linguistic, and logistical barriers (*i.e.*, lack of time). It is particularly difficult to ensure equitable representation and participation across families from diverse backgrounds.

#### 4. Policy lessons from the thematic review

The report identifies eight key elements of policy that are likely to promote equitable access to quality ECEC. The elements presented are intended to be broad and inclusive so that they can be considered in the light of diverse country contexts and circumstances, values and beliefs. They should form a part of a wider multi-stakeholder effort to reduce child poverty, promote gender equity, improve education systems, value diversity, and increase the quality of life for parents and children. The eight key elements are:

- *A systemic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation* calls for a clear vision for children, from birth to 8, underlying ECEC policy, and co-ordinated policy frameworks at centralised and decentralised levels. A lead ministry that works in co-operation with other departments and sectors can foster coherent and participatory policy development to cater for the needs of diverse children and families. Strong links across services, professionals, and parents also promote coherence for children.
- *A strong and equal partnership with the education system* supports a lifelong learning approach from birth, encourages smooth transitions for children, and recognises ECEC as an important part of the education process. Strong partnerships with the education system provide the opportunity to bring together the diverse perspectives and methods of both ECEC and schools, focusing on the strengths of both approaches.
- *A universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support*: while access to ECEC is close to universal for children from age 3, more attention to policy (including parental leave) and provision for infants and toddlers is necessary. It is important to ensure equitable access, such that all children have equal opportunities to attend quality ECEC, regardless of family income, parental employment status, special educational needs or ethnic/language background.
- *Substantial public investment in services and the infrastructure*: while ECEC may be funded by a combination of sources, there is a need for substantial government investment to support a sustainable system of quality, accessible services. Governments need to develop clear and consistent strategies for efficiently allocating scarce resources, including investment in an infrastructure for long-term planning and quality enhancement efforts.
- *A participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance*: defining, ensuring, and monitoring quality should be a participatory and democratic process that engages staff, parents, and children. There is a need for regulatory standards for all forms of provision supported by co-ordinated investment. Pedagogical frameworks focusing on children's holistic development across the age group can support quality practice.
- *Appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision*: quality ECEC depends on strong staff training and fair working conditions across the sector. Initial and in-service training might be broadened to take into account the growing educational and social responsibilities of the profession. There is a critical need to develop strategies to recruit and retain a qualified and diverse, mixed-gender workforce and to ensure that a career in ECEC is satisfying, respected and financially viable.
- *Systematic attention to monitoring and data collection* requires coherent procedures to collect and analyse data on the status of young children, ECEC provision, and the early childhood workforce. International efforts are necessary to identify and address the existing data gaps in the field and the immediate priorities for data collection and monitoring.
- *A stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation*: as part of a continuous improvement process, there needs to be sustained investment to support research on key policy goals. The research agenda also could be expanded to include disciplines and methods that are currently underrepresented. A range of strategies to disseminate research findings to diverse audiences should be explored.

Countries that have adopted some or all of these elements of successful policy share a strong public commitment to young children and their families. In different ways, these countries have made efforts to ensure that access is inclusive of all children, and have initiated special efforts for those in need of special support. Quality is high on the agenda as a means to ensure that children not only have equal opportunities to participate in ECEC but also to benefit from these experiences in ways that promote their development and learning. While remarkable efforts in policy development and implementation have been achieved in all 12 participating countries in recent years, there are still several challenges remaining. It is hoped that this report will contribute to future policy improvement efforts in the field.