



Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care

HIGHLIGHTS FROM “RESEARCH BRIEF: RESEARCH IN ECEC MATTERS”

Why does research in ECEC matter?

- Growing enrolment rates in and increased expenditure on ECEC increases the importance of policy makers and other stakeholders being informed of programme effectiveness.
- Political and public support for investing in ECEC can depend on research evidence that ECEC programmes produce desirable benefits on a large scale.
- Research can provide insights into why some programmes succeed and others fail as well as what improvements might make ECEC services more effective or more cost-beneficial.
- Research informs ECEC practice and policy design and contributes to evidence-based policy making and practices, which can enhance the quality of service for children, staff and parents and lead to greater policy effectiveness and efficiency.

What types of research are being conducted in ECEC?

- **Country-specific policy research** investigates policy questions for national administrators and can provide information on programmes or policies relevant to a specific country, often including recommendations.
- **Large-scale programme evaluations** assess the effectiveness of a programme for accountability and programme improvement purposes as well as the value for money and utility of particular programme aspects.
- **Longitudinal studies** involve repeated observations or data collections of the same sample over long periods of time with the aim to study the effectiveness of programmes and their long-term outcomes.
- **Comparative, cross-national research** identifies specific policies and practices from which other countries can draw inspiration and assists policy makers in thinking more broadly and critically. It can contribute to reassessments of domestic policies and provide an impetus for further research on relevant issues, increased funding, etc.
- **Neuroscience and brain research** contribute to a greater knowledge and understanding of how children develop and learn, and indicate that a child’s development process is “experience dependent” and requires high-quality social interactions and structured experiences. Neuroscience also reveals that the capacity to learn is most sensitive during a child’s first years of life.

For policy and practice

- **Research on the effects of quality indicators** on child outcomes can greatly contribute to evidence-based policy making, as well as staff practices (e.g., through setting minimum standards for staff-child ratios), and benefit child development.
- **Comparison of different effect sizes by different intervention types** can help make informed policy choices and contribute to increased knowledge on the effects of different kinds of programmes (e.g., programmes with a focus on nutrition or early education).
- **Comparing different instructional strategies and programme approaches** encourages rethinking about practices and approaches and broadens perspectives which can be useful for redefining quality in ways that guide practice.
- **Research on practice and process** is a valuable mode of research that enables staff to reflect on their own practice and links pedagogy, staff practices, reflection and quality improvement processes.

Policy implications

- Governments should create and financially support research frameworks to support long-term policy goals. Systematic research programmes designed to collect data over time on policies and programme features are particularly useful.
- By more carefully choosing the design and methodology of research, and better co-ordinating different research initiatives, the quality of studies can be advanced.
- Policy design and decision making should rely on an entire body of reliable research. To ensure that there are enough high-quality studies that can be useful for policy makers, the number of rigorous studies that are (financially) supported must be increased. National support for, e.g., practitioner research can facilitate local, participatory research that can improve practice.
- Research and practice can be integrated by adopting an experimental approach to policy and programme development where innovations or new programmes are systematically pilot tested before being adopted system wide.
- Expanding research agendas to include other disciplines, such as sociology or anthropology, and methods currently under-represented is needed, as this broadens knowledge and perspective on early development.
- It is important to train policy makers, administrators and ECEC staff in the interpretation of research and in explaining research results in non-technical language. Research can guide practitioners' behaviour only if the research is well understood.
- Research should be widely disseminated in order to aid access to new findings, facilitate constructive criticism and feedback, inform stakeholders, and improve methodologies and future research design.
- Advancing co-operation in an international context regarding research can contribute to useful findings for different countries and guide practice.

Research gaps

- Further research on how to optimise ECEC effectiveness, and not just merely the effects of quality or quality indicators, can greatly contribute to improving policy and practice.
- Additional research on the benefits and rates of return of targeted versus universal ECEC interventions could clarify the more useful approaches to stimulate early development and general societal development.
- Research on effective ECEC interventions for children with diverse backgrounds is important and needed; for example, research on how to integrate diverse populations or the best approaches to language development of immigrant children could be very useful for policy makers and ECEC professionals.